oh don't you dare look back, just keep your eyes on me
by suzikiblu

Summary

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“Jesus Christ,” she groans in frustration, then follows her alpha instincts (and, more easily and importantly, her nose) to go track them down. They’re in the middle of New York City; middle of the day or not, not checking on somebody who smells like that is, like, the ultimate dick move.

Notes

Completely unrelated to that other ABO fic.
LOOK I NEEDED ALPHA DARCY AND THE INTERNET WAS NOT GIVING IT TO ME, OKAY. And as for the fandom Buckycle, well, duh. Anyway someone went and recced me as a good Wintershock author a while back and I really felt I owed the fandom more Wintershock after that, soooo hope you guys are into alpha ladies! Lots of alpha ladies. *All the alpha ladies.*

God, this really was just supposed to be like 10k of cute idfic, not the past three months of my life. Whoops?

See the end of the work for more notes.
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She also pulls out her taser and cell just in case there are less altruistically-minded alphas doing the same as her, because Darcy Lewis is a realist and also let’s not even play, right now her alpha hormones wouldn’t mind the excuse for a fight. That is hindbrain-thinking, though, and she doggedly ignores it even if it’s been six months since they left Ian and his delicious melty marshmallow and milk chocolate pheromones back in London to finish his--


Sticky-sweet yummy messy gooshy omega--not helping, hindbrain.

Ugh.

Three blocks and infinite weird twisty turns later Darcy ends up in a skinny dead-end alley with crummy lighting even this time of day and boarded-up windows on all its buildings, which is not a smart choice for either her or this omega to be making, she thinks. There’s a few other alphas already there, one crouched down and talking real quiet to the omega and two standing a little further away, so Darcy conceals her taser and hovers her finger over the emergency call button on her cell just in case, hanging back automatically.

The omega she’s just chased down is about her age and huddled up in the darkest and least safe-looking corner of the place, a male with long dark hair wearing thick jeans, heavy boots, a good three layers of shirts, and a denim jacket, all topped off with a baseball cap. It is genuinely terrible heat clothing--okay, well, any clothing is pretty terrible in heat, but even if he’d slept in those clothes last night the guy must’ve at least been in pre-heat when he got dressed, how the hell he’s standing being grated on by that much rough and heavy fabric is completely--

His hair’s kind of greasy, Darcy realizes. He hasn’t shaved in a few days; at least long enough that even an omega jawline is showing stubble. The clothes are a little dingy, and under that yummy cinnamon-bun scent he smells more like antiseptic wipes and public bathroom soap than the kind of lush and lovey bath products and lotions most omegas Darcy knows pamper themselves with in pre-heat, making themselves all soft and pretty and yummy-smelling, with scents deliberately chosen to complement their heat pheromones.

“Antiseptic wipe and cinnamon sugar” is definitely not a complementing combination.

Okay. So he’s homeless, or at least thoroughly temporarily stranded--a tourist who missed a flight and couldn’t afford a hotel or a local who got kicked out of the apartment by a dick roommate or who knows, really. Either way he clearly didn’t have the resources to be nice to himself in pre-heat and looks like he’s paying for it now; he smells like he’s pretty early in his cycle and already looks unhappy as hell. Which is kind of a shame because he smells sweet as hell even with the antiseptic and yeah, her clit’s already sitting up and taking notice enough to make her pants a little
uncomfortable, but she’s not the actual scum of the earth and under the circumstances can’t really enjoy it.

The omega looks up at the alpha crouched in front of him then, and his expression is absolute misery. Darcy loses her chub entirely at the sight and it takes everything in her to suppress the instincts that want to go kill, like, a mastodon for the guy and also everyone who’s ever been rude to him in his life. Jesus.

The alpha looks alarmed, and his fingers twitch towards--

His gun. He has a fucking gun on him. He has a fucking gun on him and just aborted the instinctive grab for it after making eye contact with a distressed omega, what the fuck. What the fuck.

“Hey now, sweetheart. Don’t be like that,” the alpha says, just the edge of wariness in his voice. “Don’t you want to come home with us? You know we’ll take care of you good.”

“What the fuck,” Darcy says incredulously, and all three alphas stiffen at the sound of her voice, but none of them take their eyes off the omega on the ground. And not in the pheromone-drunk way she’s used to, either the sweet or creepy version; more like they’re waiting to see if a vicious-looking dog is inclined to try biting.

Darcy immediately wants to stick her taser in all their fucking crotches. A heated-up omega isn’t a threat, not to anybody who’ll take “no” for an answer and isn’t trying to drag them home with a bunch of their buddies like a damn party favor.

“I’m calling the cops,” she announces loudly, holding up her phone, and that makes the other alphas glance over to her. And also reach for their guns.

Well, this explains how she could scent this guy for three blocks but no other alphas are hanging around in New York, she thinks briefly in the terrifying second before the omega starts growling. The alphas all go white-faced, and one even more terrifying blur later all three are smeared across the ground with multiple broken bones and the omega is standing over them and snarling with blood splattered on his fists, one bare and one gloved.

“Shit!” Darcy blurts, wondering if she should be calling the cops. The omega bares his teeth at her.

“Fuck off!” he snarls viciously, hackles up. “I’m not going back!”

“Dude, believe me, I am in no way trying to take you anywhere you don’t wanna go,” Darcy says feelingly, half-hiding behind the probably-not-that-much-protection mouth of the alleyway. She should really be either running or tasing him or tasing him and then running, and is fairly sure that if she were an omega or beta she would be.

But yeah, fuck everyone’s romanticized view of them, the protective alpha instincts are shit. Even after watching the guy take out three other dudes like they were nothing, Darcy’s instincts are still parsing like he’s in distress and needs her. Her useless-ass hindbrain is reading this big asskicking dude’s pheromones like he’s a fawning virgin in a period piece bodice-ripper.

A delicious fawning virgin, for the record. Like, it’s embarrassingly hard not to salivate right now.

Jesus, like it wasn’t bad enough that Captain freaking America’s spent the whole week scenting up the tower with his apple pie pre-heat--seriously, not even a joke, literally apple pie, what even is that man--but now she can’t even go out for lunch without tripping over the only omega she’s ever
met who smells better than that did.

Darcy is control of her head and her hormones and her stupid greedy knot, okay, but this is just mean.

“You’re--not?” The omega hesitates, shifting back a step. His eyes stay fixed on her but his head ducks a little. Darcy does not think about putting her teeth in the bared back of his neck at all. Not even a little.

“Definitely not,” she says. “Also, pretty sure I couldn’t even if I wanted to, you are like a force of freaking nature over there. Also, stay over there. Like . . . very firmly there.”

“I--why?” the omega asks, looking lost.

“. . . because you’re scary?” Darcy says, staring at him a little. She’d figured that one would be pretty self-explanatory, under the circumstances. “Look, do you need, like--I have my phone, I can call somebody for you. Do you need me to call somebody for you? Like a friend or--”

“I have a friend!!” the omega snarls, instantly looking terrifying all over again.

Well. Okay then.

“So that’s a yes on the call?” Darcy manages weakly, holding her phone up. The omega stares at her. One of the alphas on the ground groans, and the omega flinches, curling in small on himself, which is . . . quite a feat on a guy that size, frankly.

And fucking awful to watch.

“Jesus, come on, let’s at least get you out of here,” Darcy says, scowling down at them. “Like I’m not trying to make you come anywhere with me, I just don’t feel right leaving you with them.”

“They wanted to take me back,” the omega says abruptly. “I don’t--I don’t hurt people that don’t deserve it. I’m--am I in trouble?”

“You’re not in trouble,” Darcy says, carefully pocketing her phone and even more carefully reaching out a hand towards him, because the alphas on the ground are still stirring and the omega’s looking increasingly nervous and small. He must be way deeper into it than he seems, if he’s asking questions like that--hell, omegas don’t usually get this sensitive about an alpha’s opinion until they’ve actually fucked, and Darcy would definitely remember this guy locking her knot. “C’mere though, okay? I think you’re in it pretty deep.”

“Yes ma’am,” the omega says, wearing that miserable face again as he steps over the alphas on the ground to come to her. Darcy kind of wants to throw up at the sight, and also cuddle him until her arms go numb. He drops his head and pushes it into her hand, and he’s tall enough that the gesture means he’s got to duck low enough to bare the back of his neck to her eyes, even with the shirts and jacket in the way.

The universe is a terrible place, Darcy decides while she’s busy reining in her hormones.

“Do you have a heat partner?” she asks. Mercifully, the omega straightens up. Less mercifully, he still looks miserable.

“My friend,” he says. “My friend and I used to help each other out, I think, but . . .”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Darcy says, trying to sound soothing as she digs for the wet wipes in her purse
and passes one over. She’s not that great at the soothing thing; Ian was always flattered when she tried, even if she screwed it up, but this guy doesn’t know her well enough for that so she really hopes she’s pulling it off. “I can walk you to a clinic, okay? In case any other assholes like those guys come sniffing around, I mean, not--uh, you know.”

“I can’t go to a clinic,” the omega says, his fingers twisting roughly around the wet wipe. Darcy frowns.

“They’ve got a free one over on--” she starts, but he shakes his head.

“There’s cameras in the waiting rooms,” he says. “And out front.”

“And cameras are bad,” Darcy says, voice slow. He nods, but doesn’t explain why. He cleans his hands very carefully with the wipe, though, and Darcy realizes belatedly that the glove is not a glove. That . . . that is metal, yes. All the way through, as far as she can tell. Holy crap.

Okay. Cameras are bad. Which also rules out the hospital and the cops and really even just standing around on the street, so they’d better think of something quick.

“What are your feelings on semi-sentient buildings?” she asks, glancing back into the alley to make sure no one’s on their feet yet.

“Uh. What?” the omega asks blankly.

“Walking and talking, buddy, let’s go,” Darcy says, reclaiming the used wipe and not quite putting a hand on the small of his back to guide him along but strongly telegraphing the intent to. He follows it even without her making contact, so that’s . . . good, probably. He flinched at the “buddy”, though, so maybe it’s six of one, half a dozen of the other. Or . . . something.

She might actually be using that phrase wrong, but whatever.

At least he didn’t punch her into a wall for trying it, she muses as she tosses the wipe into a convenient trash can. She’s already doing better than those creeps in the alley. There’s actual people on the street proper and the omega gets a few appreciative sniffs, but he keeps letting Darcy guide his steps as they head down the sidewalk and no other alphas or betas come up to challenge her claim. Which, well--why would they? It’s the middle of the damn day in an expensive neighborhood and these people have no way to know the guy’s not her boyfriend or fiance or even her mate outright.

“. . . you smell like apple pie,” the omega mutters, distracting Darcy from her thoughts. She blinks. She took a shower this morning and Steve hasn’t been on any of the common floors since yesterday--he and Sam have been on the road for months, no one was surprised he’d wanted to nest heavily this round, especially while preparing for the luxury of having an extra heat partner in Natasha--and she knows damn well there’s been no actual apple pie around. Apparently Steve’s pheromones are even more ridiculous than she’d thought.

“One of my friends is heated up this week,” she says. “His heat scent’s a lot like apple pie, you’re probably smelling him.”

“My friend . . . I don’t remember what he smelled like,” the omega says, staring at the sidewalk. “But--I liked it.”

“I have met very, very few people who do not like heat scent,” Darcy tells him, wondering if he’s trying to admit to being a little queer. Or a lot. She wouldn’t judge, she’s gotten a little swoony over Jane’s rut pheromones before. “Anyway, like I was saying, normally I would not be doing this
and I swear I’m not a creep, but my building is kind of huge and amazing and if you don’t want to
go to a clinic, I will gladly give you a heat’s worth of protein bars and water bottles and let you
barricade yourself into our guest room. Hell, I’ll even barricade my side of the door too, if that
helps.”

“How?” the omega asks, frowning.

“We’ve got, like, chairs and shit, I’ll stick one under the doorknob or push the couch in front of the
door,” Darcy promises.

“No, I mean--how would you do that from inside the room?” he asks, still frowning.

“. . . well, we can skip that step,” Darcy says, because duh she is not telling a super-hot cinnamon-
sticky sugar-iced omega that she won’t have his back for his heat. Literally. Uh, that is unless--“I
mean, if you want me to be your heat partner. Like, I’m willing, but it’s not like you can’t crash if
you don’t, the place is basically a hotel anyway.”

“You challenged for me,” the omega says, looking confused. “The last alpha standing gets me.”

“That’s, uh . . . old-fashioned,” Darcy says carefully, more than a little nauseous at the thought.
Okay, maybe it’s not just a bad heatdrop throwing this guy off his game. In retrospect, his eyes are
clearer than they should be for that anyway, so . . . yeah. She has no idea, really. “Also you seem to
be remembering the events of the alley going a lot more favorably for me than they actually did.
You’re the only reason I was the last alpha standing.”

“Yeah,” the omega says, his eyes darkening as he looks her over. “I am.”

. . . well then.

“Well, in that case,” Darcy says, clearing her throat as she settles her hand properly on the omega’s
back. The muscles under her palm are tense as a drum for all of a second before going pliant and
sweet as anything, and then he somehow manages to look up at her through his lashes while also
looking down at her, which is a pretty impressive feat for anybody and probably an invaluable one
for an omega who’s got to be a good six feet tall, considering.

It definitely does things to her hindbrain, either way.

God this omega is attractive. Like, both the amount and quality of random ass-kicking omega
hobos in her life is much, much more impressive than she was led to believe growing up.

“I’m Darcy Lewis,” she says. The omega mumbles something back, sounding weirdly uncertain
for an introduction; Darcy just tries as hard as she can to catch it. “Uh--Thacket?” she thinks she
picks out accurately from the tangle. He hesitates, but nods. “There a first name with that?” she
tries. He mumbles again, and the best she can get is--“Jamie?”

He hesitates before nodding again, but at least it’s a name. Maybe not his real one, but whatever,
Darcy’s not going to blame him if it’s not.

“Okay,” she says, stopping across the street from Avengers Tower and gesturing with her free
hand. “Well, Jamie, here we are. Home sweet . . . uh, skyscraper.”

Jamie looks, and goes weirdly pale.

“I can’t go in there,” he says.
"No, it’s totally cool, you absolutely can," Darcy assures him. “I’m a live-in, there’s a bunch of residential floors and the whole place is already running on heat protocol for the friend I told you about anyway. All the floor-to-floor vents are filtering and nobody can get on anyone else’s floor without being buzzed up.”

Not that that particular protocol is necessary in *Avengers Tower*, of all places, but it does prevent people from accidentally tripping over each other at a bad time in their hormonal cycles, so Darcy’s definitely not complaining. It was embarrassing enough the time she accidentally walked in on Jane rutting Thor over the--well, it’d been an education in addition to the embarrassment, definitely. But the embarrassment had also been a pretty big thing.

Seriously, though, like her clit is not already stirred up enough without her remembering what the alien god-prince looks like in heat. Jesus.

“But it’s . . .” Jamie trails off, hesitant, and Darcy strokes the small of his back really carefully. He goes soft under the gesture, mercifully, and ducks his head again.

“It’s okay,” she repeats, because obviously there’s more than one reason an asskicker with a metal hand and a phobia of cameras might be nervous about going into Avengers Tower. “It’s safe, I swear, and the security cams black out on anybody with heat or rut hormones coming off them. I mean, we can get a hotel if you want, but--”

“Cameras,” Jamie says, expression miserable again. That look should not make Darcy want to knot, but on an omega whose hormones are crying out to be knotted? Yeah. Yeahhh, it really does.

“I can--” she starts, but he’s already shaking his head.

“It’s okay,” he says. “Just--you’re sure it’ll black me out?”

“At this rate it’s going to black us both out,” Darcy says, biting her lip. “Seriously, I’m this close to the beginning stages of sympathy rut, man.”

“. . . promise?” Jamie asks, his eyes getting glittery and dark in a very distracting way.

“Oh yeah, for sure,” Darcy says, trying not to stare too hard. Jamie ducks his head again and gives her that sweet under-the-lashes look with those glitterdark eyes and yup, yup, her clit is definitely with that program. Her clit is signed up and on board and majoring in that program.

Then he ducks his head a little lower and bares the back of his neck to her as he leans in to press the softest little kittenish kiss to the shoulder of her coat, and--okay, yes. Yes, Darcy is totally going to sympathy rut for this guy. No doubt at all.

“Nargh,” is about all she actually manages to say about that before she grabs him by the sleeve and drags him across the street, and Jamie follows her easy as anything, like a lamb on a leash. Darcy tries not to think very hard about that because she is never living it down if she blows her knot before she even gets the guy to her floor.

She runs her keycard and tells J.A.R.V.I.S. she’s got an emergency heat partner she’s bringing up, and he helpfully directs her to the backmost elevator and promises to warn Thor and Jane and Erik to keep their heads down while she gets her omega settled in. He uses that phrasing, even-- “your charming young omega”, all prim and proper in his synthetic accent. Darcy can’t help the shy little grin at hearing it, and when she glances over at him Jamie’s staring a hole in the floor and blushing pretty as a fucking picture.

“Of course, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says graciously, as clearly the best wingman ever.

They hit the Thor floor--Darcy is never getting sick of calling it that--and Darcy leans out of the elevator to double-check real quick, but true to J.A.R.V.I.S.’s word there’s no sight of anyone else, although she can smell faint traces of Thor’s mead and metal-tinged scent. He might be early this cycle, actually, and come to think Steve was a little late; she wonders if they’re synching up. That would be . . . amazing, and also terrifying. And amazing.

Prooobably not good for the free world, though, since if Thor and Steve synch up with each other then Tony will almost definitely get dragged in too and that’s half the Avengers right there. At least Bruce and Clint are betas, thank God, because someone’s going to have to save the world if something comes up, and Natasha is going to be really fucking scary if she misses the chance to knot Steve because of AIM or HYDRA or whoever. They won’t be getting any support from Sam or Pepper, though. Maybe Rhodey, if the Air Force actually lets him and he doesn’t synch up with Tony, but--

Come to think of it, Darcy reflects, she’s an unmated alpha with next to no use in a firefight; there’s every possibility Steve might ask her to be his heat partner if there’s an emergency and Sam and Natasha get called out.

She glazes over briefly at the thought, then remembers that she literally has a heat partner right here and turns bright red, immediately looking over to him. Fortunately Jamie seems distracted by staring out the apartment’s huge windows with a half-awed, half-traumatized look on his face. Darcy steers him away from them politely because the stress is showing a little--the view’s gorgeous any time of day but from the look on his face she’s pretty sure he’s scared of heights.

Also, he is smelling increasingly cinnamon-sugar-perfect, and there’s definitely some stuff they have to do before their pheromones hit the tipping point.

“My room’s this way,” she tells him as she leads him down the hall. “Is that okay, or do you want to use one of the guest suites?” She knows some omegas don’t feel comfortable in an alpha’s den for heat--Ian didn’t, and Steve mentioned similar feelings over breakfast last week when heat-planning with Sam and Nat. And that’s omegas who know their heat partners. Jamie just shakes his head, though.

“Yours is fine,” he murmurs. Darcy suddenly wishes she’d cleaned it any time in the past month, but it’s a little late now. She takes him into her room and shoves last night’s pajamas off the bed sheepishly, kicking them into the closet quick. He laughs a little, which is . . . fucking gorgeous, frankly, and Darcy nearly glazes over all over again.

“I have stuff!” she blurs. Jamie looks confused, and she bolts for the bathroom door in an attempt to preserve her dignity before he starts thinking she’d meant sex toys or something. “I mean, I have omega-grade bath products, if you want,” she clarifies, leaning against the door and pointing at the cute little emergency gift basket of them she keeps in the back corner of the tub, just in case. It’s vanilla-scented, fortunately, and should go fine with Jamie’s warm cinnamon bun scent. Definitely better than the antiseptic wipes, anyway.

She hasn’t really met an omega who wouldn’t want one last pampering session before true heat set in, honestly, asking is really just a formality in--

“I’m--allowed?” Jamie asks, looking uncertainly at the little basket. He’s in so close his heat-scent almost makes her stupid, but nothing could make her stupid enough that the bottom wouldn’t drop out of her stomach at that question. What kind of fucked up heat partners has he had?
“You are totally allowed, go nuts. Like, absolutely nuts, to your heart’s content,” Darcy tells him fervently, because the alternative option is tracking down all his exes and tazing them in their fucking knots and she really doesn’t have that kind of time right now. “There’s bath bombs, even. Um, slightly glittery ones, fair warning, but they smell really good.”

“What’s a . . . uh, ‘bath bomb’?” Jamie asks, sounding a little skeptical.

“They’re awesome, trust me, just toss one in when the tub’s full up,” Darcy says, leaning over to start the water since Jamie’s still hanging back uncertainly. “Unless you like bubble bath. Do you like bubble bath?”

“I don’t, uh . . . I don’t know,” Jamie says, glancing nervously at the bath basket. Maybe she’ll track down his exes and taze them in their fucking knots after this, Darcy thinks.

“There’s instructions on everything,” she tells him. “Use as much hot water as you want, it’s literally limitless. I’m gonna go grab some supplies while you get cleaned up, okay?”

“Understood,” Jamie says, eyes flicking to the water. “How long do I have?”

“As long as you want,” Darcy says, thinking longingly of her taser. “Like . . . that’s the point, you know? So you can relax and feel good and get all clean and pretty?” It’s actually a little embarrassing to say out loud and with all her clothes on, but that’s probably just because most of her early ventures into softcore porn involved omega-on-omega action in a shared heat bath, sooo . . . yeah.

“I’m not pretty,” Jamie says, just barely frowning at her.

“Okay, well . . . the relaxing and feeling good part, at least,” Darcy says, not even knowing how to address that level of disconnect. Jamie is definitely pretty--or, well, maybe a little closer to handsome than the omega ideal, but still, there’s alphas who are into that. Her, for example. She is definitely into that. “I’m gonna be a bit anyway, just take your time and enjoy it, okay? Hell, try out the whole basket while you’re at it, I bet it’s awesome.”

“. . . yes, alpha,” Jamie says, frown deepening in confusion. Darcy can’t decide how horrible a person it makes her that she wants to sit on the edge of the tub and pull him down across her lap right now, but is pretty sure it’s unnecessarily horrible.

“Awesome, good, excellent,” she says instead of actually doing that, fleeing the bathroom past him out through her room, pausing only long enough to ditch her hat and coat before heading straight into the hall. Jane and Thor are in the living room now and cuddled up all cute on the couch, and Darcy was right, Thor does smell like he’s coming up on his cycle, which makes it really hard not to picture those old omega-on-omega softcores she used to get so into when she was a kid with no idea what to do with her knot. Like, Thor could be washing Jamie’s hair for him right now, maybe help him braid it all cute, that’s a thing that could feasibly be happening--annd yup, yup, her hindbrain is definitely working overtime, awesome, good, excellent.

Jesus.

“The hottest omega in the world is in my bathtub right now,” Darcy announces, speaking of her hindbrain.

“I’ll accept that statement only because Thor is technically not of our world,” Jane replies primly, cuddling closer to him, and Thor laughs.
“You are too kind, my Jane,” he says. “Congratulations on being chosen by such a fine omega, Darcy! I’m sure they will appreciate your attentions.”

“You guys don’t even know, he literally beat up three other alphas right in front of me,” Darcy says, cracking open the emergency heat supplies closet and grabbing two of the reusable shopping bags off the back of the door to fill with snacks and bottled drinks. She’s got a mini-fridge parked next to her bed courtesy of Tony Stark, he of the infinite-clean-energy/no-power-bill, but it’s empty right now. Fortunately the heat closet is well-supplied with high-protein snacks and bottled drinks and yummy little sweets for pampering, although she’s gonna have to hit up the big fridge in the kitchen for some actually fresh fruit and not just the dried stuff.

“He beat them up?” Jane repeats, blinking. “What, literally?”

“Literally,” Darcy confirms, grabbing water bottles and then eyeing a few different kinds of juice before just tossing one of each into the bag. She forgot to ask Jamie how long his heats usually run and if he’s on the longer side of the spectrum they might need the extras. Hell, they might need the whole closet; dude’s the size of a truck, he probably eats like one too. “Hand to God, Jane, I have not seen an omega kick ass so thoroughly since Thor delivered the dark elf smackdown. He keeps going all super-shy on me, too, it’s like . . . the most destructively hot dichotomy, seriously.”

“I don’t know, there’s something to be said for an omega who’s confident in bed,” Jane says, giving Thor a little smile as she reaches up to pet his hair, and he preens into the contact with a pleased smile of his own.

“He also flat-out told me he beat them up because he wanted me to take him,” Darcy says, grabbing trail mix and granola bars from the top shelf and beef jerky from the one below it. Jamie definitely looks like the type to appreciate beef jerky.

“. . . well then,” Jane says, fanning herself with her free hand as her eyebrows shoot up. Thor laughs again, head tipping under her petting and eyes going half-lidded like they always do when Jane’s pheromones spike. Darcy’s are definitely spiking, so she’s sure Jane’s are.

“I know, right?” she stresses disbelievingly, tossing a box of condoms into the bag and then rifling through the selection of lube just in case. Jamie’s clearly had some shit heat partners, she wouldn’t blame him if he had a little trouble getting wet even heated up. “It’s awful. And by awful I mean amazing, oh my god, and he’s so hot, did I mention that? He smells like iced cinnamon rolls and sex.”

“We noticed,” Jane says, extremely politely. Thor’s laugh is heavier this time, and he curls up around her with it. Definitely responding to pheromone spikes, Darcy decides, trotting over to the kitchen for fruit and at least one actually cold water bottle for Jamie to have if he wants while the others chill up in the mini-fridge. She also gets a few bottled smoothies, some veggies and hummus, and the box of chocolate cheesecake truffles she was saving for this weekend, because of course she gets the chocolate cheesecake truffles, what kind of terrible alpha would have chocolate cheesecake truffles lying around and not give them to their omega?

Those shits in the alley, probably, and also all of Jamie’s asshole exes who still need tased, which frankly is all the more reason to give him the truffles.

“We need more truffles,” Darcy decides.

“Wow, Darcy, you really like this guy,” Jane says, looking surprised. Darcy frowns in confusion, then looks down at her bags and realizes both are full to bursting and she’s still holding a bag of baby carrots and the truffles.
“Um,” she says, turning pink. “Look, it’s not . . . he’s had shitty heat partners in the past, is all, and when I found him there were these asshole alphas creeping on him and it was--I just really want it to be nice for him, you know?”

“We’ll get truffles,” Jane promises.

“You’re my hero,” Darcy says fervently, then stomps on the urge to flee back to her room and double-checks the heat closet for anything she might’ve forgotten instead. For all she knows Jamie hasn’t even gotten into the bath yet, much less gotten anywhere near “relaxed”. “God, Jane, he doesn’t even think he’s pretty. And he’s so pretty! Fuck all his previous heat partners, those fucking knotheads--well, almost all, he had an omega friend he used to be synched up with, they might’ve been decent. But all the alphas, definitely fuck them. Are you sure you don’t mind getting the truffles?”

“We don’t mind, Darcy, it’s not like you’ve never done it for us,” Jane reassures her. “And we’ll get Erik to carry them so they won’t smell like a challenging alpha or rival omega while you two are distracted, if he’s had bad partners. Is there anything else you need?”

“Truffles,” Darcy repeats, gesturing with both arms as best she can with the bags weighing them down. “Just--he deserves so many truffles, Jane. Although I don’t even know if he likes truffles so maybe some other dessert options would be, uh, a good idea. Chocolates? Pecan clusters? Fuck, I have no idea.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Jane says, smiling at her. “Don’t worry about it, all right?”

“All right,” Darcy says, definitely worrying about it.
Darcy makes one last lap between the closet and fridge, grabs one more box of protein bars, and then accidentally leaves without actually saying goodbye to Jane and Thor. Which is . . . well, she’s been more clear-headed in her life, put it that way. She mentally gives up on herself and just slips back into her room as quietly as she can dragging the bags, meaning to get everything set up and tucked away without disturbing Jamie.

That plan is torpedoed when she immediately smells distress rising over the scent of vanilla bath bomb. She can hear water lapping at the sides of the tub, but not much else.

“Jamie? You okay?” she asks warily, hovering outside the bathroom doorway in concern without moving to see inside. Ian had liked her to hang around for his heat baths, but she’s also dated a couple omegas who hadn’t, so she really doesn’t know what to expect from Jamie.

“I’m not--done,” he says, uncertain.

“That’s okay, me neither,” Darcy says. She thinks longingly of her taser for the umpteenth time. “Take your time with everything, I’m gonna set up in here, okay? No rush.”

“. . . okay,” Jamie murmurs. Darcy thinks about taking a quick peek through the door, but is not actually rude enough to do that to an omega she barely knows and instead gets to work unpacking the supply bags into the mini-fridge and the drawers under her bed. She tries not to rush, but it’s hard to take her time.

She doesn’t change the sheets--any replacements she’s got would just smell like detergent and who-knows-who from the laundry room, which is just not something to make any omega put up with when they’re all heat-sensitive in an unfamiliar place--but she does remake the bed so it at least looks nice and grabs the extra pillows out of the bottom of her closet. She’s met a few alphas and betas who don’t bother keeping nesting pillow around, but Ian was always really big on it and Thor’s borrowed them a couple times when he had a heat where just Jane’s supply didn’t feel like enough.

She also hangs the canopy curtains she usually doesn’t bother with, just in case. She figures Jamie can arrange the pillows and blankets how he likes and draw the curtains if he wants, and if not, having the option never hurt anyone. Probably. Presumably. She’s not sure how it could, anyway.

Darcy manages to kill a little more time with general tidying up and hiding of embarrassing floor-laundry and the like and then sets up a few drinks and snacks on the nightstand before finally glancing back to the bathroom. Every omega’s a little different, obviously, and there’s no way to know how long Jamie wants to take or if he wants to be alone or have company or . . . really, any number of things.

Also, judging by how he acted about it all, there’s no way to know if he even knows those things. Which is its own problem, honestly.

So basically Darcy ends up hovering just past the bathroom door with no idea what to do and no idea what the omega on the other side of it wants her to do. The water’s still lapping a little against the tub, but she can’t hear anything else, and Jamie’s pheromones are delicious, but not very helpful.

“Can I come in?” she asks finally, because she’s sure as shit not going to figure it out one way or
the other without asking.

“Uh--ah-huh,” Jamie says, his voice unexpectedly breathy. Darcy peeks around the corner, opening her mouth to say . . . well. She’d been going to say something, she’s sure, but for the life of her she can’t remember what it’d been now.

The ridiculously huge (thank you, Tony, and also FUCK YOU, TONY, Darcy thinks) tub is full to the top and the bath bomb left the water glittery but also milk-white opaque everywhere the bubbles aren’t covering, which is just cruel. About all she can see of Jamie is his head and shoulders and the one leg he has propped up on the side of the tub, and somehow that’s still enough that she has to readjust her knot in her jeans. Everybody says female alphas’ clits aren’t as big or as up for it as male alphas’ cocks are, but everybody is fucking stupid.

Also, everybody has clearly not had to contend with Jamie Thacket all wet and glittery with his hair slicked back and the dirt washed off and skin all freshly shaved and flushed from the steam.

The metal hand apparently goes all the way up, too.

Fuck. He is so pretty.

“Holy crap,” Darcy says before she thinks better of it, eyes widening and pheromones spiking, and Jamie makes a sharp little noise and tips his head back against the back of the tub, squirming in his seat. For one super, super flattering second Darcy thinks that’s just a reaction to her pheromones, but then she notices the slight flex of his shoulders and realizes--“Oh,” she sighs dreamily, not quite able to repress the shiver as she grips the doorjamb.

He’s touching himself.

Well, that’s officially the most distracting thing that has ever happened to her.

“You said--you said try everything,” he says breathlessly, then bites his lip to muffle a soft little sound. Darcy glazes over briefly at the sight and sound and then actually registers what he just said and remembers that yes, yes she did spring for the heat bath basket with the optional waterproof vibrator, didn’t she, oh God.

“I did say that, yes,” she manages, head swimming with alpha instincts that are all screaming omega! beautiful omega! my beautiful omega, my beautiful omega touching himself for me, touching himself because I SAID! “Oh man, did I . . . did I ever.”

Jamie moans, slipping down in the water as his head tips back further. His toes curl against the side of the tub and Darcy’s brain shorts out a little.

“God, look at you,” she marvels lowly, sitting carefully on the side of the tub. His eyes stay just open enough to watch her, which admittedly might be a threat assessment but is hard to parse as anything but a turn-on. “You look so good. So good for me, Jamie, is that how it feels? Like you’re so good?”

“I . . .” Jamie hesitates, shivering, and Darcy resists the urge to stroke his hair soothingly. He might not feel ready to be touched yet, even if he let her into the bathroom. “I don’t--I don’t know, I . . .”

“That’s okay, you don’t have to,” Darcy says, mostly to chase away the slight pinch of stress creeping onto his face as he tries to figure out how to answer her. Stress is pretty much the opposite point of a heat bath. “I’m super happy you like the basket, though. Like, holy shit, I am so glad I made that investment.”
“It’s--it doesn’t hurt,” Jamie says, head ducked just enough to avoid eye contact. It takes way, way too much effort for Darcy not to alpha-growl at hearing that. And not the good kind of alpha-growl.

“Good,” she says instead. “That means it’s working.”

“Mm.” Jamie ducks his head a little lower and Darcy tries not to stare too much at the flex of his shoulders or the wet split in his hair where the bare back of his neck shows. There’s no trace of bruises or scars there, no proof of him ever keeping a single alpha’s bite. “It . . . it’s warm. Inside me. Makes me feel--feel warm.”

“Is that all right?” Darcy asks, resisting the urge to reach out again. Jamie bites his lip and nods roughly, head dropping back against the tub and eyes finally squeezing shut. He’s shuddering hard enough to make the water ripple. “Okay,” Darcy says, dropping her voice a little lower--putting the soothing in her tone, if she can’t touch him yet. “You’re doing so great, Jamie, you look so good like this. You’re so sweet to let me see you this way.”

“S-sweet,” Jamie repeats slowly, more like he doesn’t believe her than like he’s agreeing. Darcy goes with it; she can’t help it.

“So sweet, honey,” she croons, leaning closer to him but still not touching. “Like I could eat you right up, all sticky and sugary and fresh-baked. I bet you taste amazing. I bet you taste better than anything.”

Jamie doesn’t say anything this time, just screws his eyes shut tighter and starts breathing harder as he sinks down to nearly chin-level in the bath, leg hitching up higher against the side of the tub. Water laps against his skin and leaves fresh flecks of glitter across the pulse in his throat and the exposed inside of his thigh, and Darcy bites her lip, alpha instincts wanting to lick it away so bad.

“Are you close?” she asks. Concentrating on talking helps. “Are you gonna let me see?”

“Y-yeah,” Jamie stutters roughly, burying his face against his flesh and blood shoulder. The metal one is flexing faster and faster and Darcy thinks about just how articulate those fingers seem to be. About just what they might be doing.

“Are you touching your cock?” she asks. She can’t see; asking’s the only way she’s going to find out. “Or are your fingers inside you? If you press the toy against your hand can you feel the vibrations through them?”

“Yes,” Jamie chokes, his eyes snapping back open to stare up at her, big and bright and so damn pretty.

“Do it again, omega,” Darcy says immediately, because she doesn’t know what he’s actually doing to himself but what it made him look like . . . yeah. He should definitely do that again. And he definitely does, the way his eyes widen and breath catches. “There you go. God, look how good you are. Don’t stop, okay? Keep going just like that.”

Jamie nods mutely, still staring up at her with those big pretty eyes as his head rolls back on his neck, shoulder flexing faster and body shivering. Darcy wants to skim a hand down the inside of his thigh and dip it under the water to find out just exactly what he’s doing down there, but not doing that might be even better than actually doing it would be.

She also wants to kiss him, but that kind of comes from a different place.

“There you go,” she says again. “Keep it up, honey, you’re doing so good. I want to see how pretty you are when you come. Can I see? Are you gonna show me?”
“I--I can’t, I--” Jamie chokes off, then snaps his mouth shut and grits out pleading noises through his teeth instead. Darcy croons back soothingly, tracing a hand in the air over his temple but not moving to actually touch him. He hasn’t invited her to yet.

She repeats the tracing and Jamie turns towards it, the noises he’s making getting a little softer but no less pleading.

And okay—*that*. That’s an invitation.

“Yes you can,” Darcy murmurs, and smooths the damp hair back off the side of his face. Jamie makes a strangled, *gorgeous* sound and tenses up all over, then goes slack and soft and shuddery underneath her hand, blinking up at her with wet, dazed eyes. She doesn’t have to ask if he’s come.

He is just--God, but he is just the fucking *prettiest* thing.

“That was so good, Jamie, I’m so *proud* of you,” Darcy croons, stroking a hand back over his hair again. Jamie noises weakly in response, staying slumped against the back of the tub and watching her through heavy-lidded eyes. The expression is looking less and less like a threat assessment and more and more like he’s starving for the attention. “How do you feel?”

“Warm,” Jamie says quietly, leaning into her hand. He shivers one more time, then very carefully lifts his flesh and blood arm out of the water and sets the turned-off vibrator on the far edge of the tub. Darcy resists staring at it, but just barely. She definitely does *not* resist salivating, because even with the water and bath bomb perfume the thing *reeks* of Jamie’s pheromones and slick.

God, he smells so good. Forget apple pie, forget mead and metal, forget marshmallow and chocolate: this one, *this* is the scent.

“That’s awesome, Jamie,” she murmurs, scratching her nails just a little against his scalp. He presses harder into the contact, nuzzling into it like a cat, and Darcy obliges, dragging her nails again. “You did really good. Does the water still feel nice?”

“It’s warm,” Jamie says quietly, leaning into her hand. He shivers one more time, then very carefully lifts his flesh and blood arm out of the water and sets the turned-off vibrator on the far edge of the tub. Darcy resists staring at it, but just barely. She definitely does *not* resist salivating, because even with the water and bath bomb perfume the thing *reeks* of Jamie’s pheromones and slick.

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“It’s warm,” Jamie says, glancing up at her uncertainly. Darcy smiles at him partially because he’s pretty as hell and partially because he looks like a person who really, *really* needs smiled at more often.

“Yeah?” she asks. Jamie’s silent for a moment, then nods. Darcy busies herself drawing her fingers through his hair, wondering if he’s always this quiet when he’s in heat. “Your hair feels really nice. Can I comb it for you? Would you like that?”

“. . . yes,” Jamie says slowly, tipping his head.

“Thank you. You give me such nice things, omega, you’re so good to me,” Darcy praises, and Jamie bites his lip, sinking low in the water again. Darcy strokes his hair back one more time and then gets to her feet and gets her comb off the sink, coming back to sit next to his shoulder. Another omega she’d probably have sat behind without thinking, but Jamie . . . yeah, no. Not so much.

She telegraphs her movements very carefully as she rolls up the sleeves of her sweater, then starts combing through his hair even more carefully than that, wanting to avoid any pulling or yanking. Jamie tucks both legs under the water and stays still and quiet, not moving at all. The tangles aren’t too bad, especially not after the conditioner, and they don’t take long to get through at all. Jamie is slowly relaxing again under the slow pulls of the comb, though, so Darcy keeps it up until he slumps back completely against the back of the tub and starts making soft noises that *almost* sound
“Look at you, so pretty,” Darcy hums quietly, combing Jamie’s hair back over his nape. The teeth of her comb drag against the back of his neck and he makes a soft, startled little noise and—God, pushes back into it. Like it’s real teeth; a proper alpha’s bite.

Like he might if it were her teeth, maybe.

“You’re so sweet, omega,” she sighs, pressing the teeth of her comb down again lightly. Jamie breathes out hard and drops his head forward, skin flushing again. “So sweet, God, just look at you. You moved into that like I was already knotting you.”

“You’re going to knot me,” Jamie says, biting his lip again.

“Uh--unless you don’t want me to,” Darcy replies awkwardly, a little confused. She’d thought they’d worked that out, but she’s not operating on total hindbrain here, if he’s changed his mind she’s not going to complain. Well, maybe she’ll mourn at Jane later, admittedly, but not at him.

“No, I--” Jamie hesitates, then tips his head back to look up at her. “You’re going to knot me. Right?”

“. . . yes,” Darcy agrees slowly, not entirely sure what he’s--

“Just you,” Jamie says, expression guarded.

. . . Darcy fucking hates people.

“Just me,” she confirms, pulling the comb through his hair again. “I’m the one you picked for for last alpha standing, right? And you made yourself all sweet and pretty for me, and you did so good coming for me. So I’m going to take care of you. If you want me to knot you, I will; if you don’t, I’ll just help you get nested and check in every couple hours to make sure you’ve got everything you need ‘til your heat’s up.”

“But I’ll be in heat,” Jamie says, his expression turning confused.

“Um. Yeah?” Darcy says, trying really hard not to mirror said expression. She’s the alpha, she’s supposed to at least pretend to know what she’s doing when an omega’s showing her their vulnerable spots. “That’s, uh . . . kinda the point?”

“If I’m in heat you won’t be able to stop yourself,” Jamie says, uncertain again. “That’s--how it works.”

Darcy pulls the comb through his hair. Pulls the comb through his hair again. Her furious protective pheromones won’t end well in this situation, if she lets them flare up.

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Darcy pulls the comb through his hair. Pulls the comb through his hair again. Her furious protective pheromones won’t end well in this situation, if she lets them flare up.

She really wants to let them flare up.

“That’s really not how it works,” she says finally, gathering his hair all together and gently squeezing the water out.

“. . . right,” Jamie murmurs, his voice going a little vague. He slips lower in the bath and Darcy twists his hair up against the back of his head and holds it there to keep it out of the bubbles. The water’s still warm, but not steaming anymore, and Jamie’s pheromones are getting stronger, sticky cinnamon and sugary icing delicately accented by the vanilla oils from the heat basket.
He’s also still covered in glitter, which is doing it embarrassingly hard for Darcy.

Really, though, she just wants to do right by the guy. Whatever he wants, he deserves it, and she wants to do the best she can to give it to him. She’s just not sure how to get that across.

Then again, she reflects, there’s always the direct approach.

“Jamie,” she says, letting the teeth of her comb just barely brush against the back of his neck. “I want to do right by you, okay? You just tell me what that is, and I’ll do it.”

“I want to get out of the bath,” Jamie says quietly. It’s not exactly an answer, but Darcy’s not judging. She gets up and puts the comb away, and Jamie stands up before she can clear out to give him privacy. He’s . . . he’s very pretty, still.

And the glitter definitely got everywhere.

Well, if he isn’t feeling shy about her seeing him naked, she figures that means she should be taking care of him. In a more immediate sense, she means.

Her robe won’t fit him, unfortunately, so instead Darcy waits until he’s used the heat basket lotion and then wraps him up in her biggest, fluffiest towel and dries his hair with her second-biggest, fluffiest towel, trying to be gentle about it without coming across as patronizing. The “gentle” part still doesn’t really come naturally but Jamie seems to think anything not outright awful counts for that, so . . . yeah, no, she really can’t even look at that like it’s a positive. Not even a little.

She leads him into the bedroom, hoping he’ll be all right with her emergency heat set-up, although he doesn’t give her anything to go on once they get there. He doesn’t really seem to know what to do about the bed at first, but Darcy waits quietly in the corner chair until he finally starts arranging the pillows and blankets with a precision that’s almost painful to watch.

No, Darcy thinks as she watches Jamie hesitantly stack pillows against the headboard, “almost” is not the word. Very painful. Desperately painful. Agonizingly painful. An omega Jamie’s age should have nesting down to an art, even with unfamiliar supplies; this is like watching a little kid who’s still learning how to play with blocks try to build something. She leaves him to it without comment, though, and eventually the bed takes shape as a nest. It’s a bare bones one, more function than form, but it looks sturdy as fuck and smells like needy omega, so she’s sure as hell not complaining.

Her whole room smells like needy omega now, actually, which is . . . which is definitely a thing, yeah. Even if Jamie decides he doesn’t want her knot she’s pretty sure he’s going to be influencing her spank bank fantasies for a damn long while, not in the least because it’s gonna smell like him in here for a damn long while.

Also, there is going to be glitter literally fucking everywhere, Jesus.

She watches him lean over the bed and tries not to fixate on the back of his neck. It’s not like there aren’t plenty of omegas who go through heat without bonding with the alpha helping them out--often enough it’s a beta or another omega with them anyway, and ninety percent of the time bond-bites only stick between alphas and omegas. Every now and then a particularly aggressive or receptive beta manages to either give or get one, but that’s about it as far as she’s ever heard. Even alpha and omega pairs have a hard time maintaining them outside of heat, since heat’s really what they’re for--a proper bond bite soothes and settles the omega and directs the alpha’s pampering and protective instincts, even if just for the length of the heat.
But Jamie’s neck is bare. Darcy can’t tell if that’s because he wasn’t receptive to his last alpha or beta or was with his omega friend or just toughed out his last heat alone. The latter’d make the most sense, unfortunately—a lot of omegas get depressed when they haven’t had a heat partner in a while, same as a lot of alphas get erratic when they’ve spent too many ruts alone. But being depressed is no doubt preferable to putting up with asshole alphas like the ones that have gotten at Jamie.

She just wants to know what he wants.

She just wants to give him what he wants.

“Good?” Darcy asks as Jamie finally steps back from the bed, his expression uncertain.

“I--yes,” he says, frowning a little despite the answer.

“Missing something?” she guesses. Jamie rubs at his face, looking frustrated.

“I don’t remember,” he mutters. “It’s not--I don’t know. I used to . . . I used to do it different, I think.”

“We’ve still got more pillows,” Darcy suggests, glancing at one of the ones Jamie dropped on the floor. He only used about half of her supply. “You could add stuff.”

“It’s not--my friend,” Jamie interrupts himself, like it’s just occurring to him. “My friend and I nested together.”

“Yeah? How’d you do that?” Darcy asks, trying not to glaze over inappropriately. Again. Look, it’s not her fault if omegas nesting together is an extremely popular subject in softcore porn, okay? Okay.

“Our hands,” Jamie says, curling his fingers distractedly as he looks at the nest again. “Heat can’t tell the difference between that and a knot anyway.”

“Uh--not exactly what I meant,” Darcy manages, turning bright red. Oh god, this omega is going to kill her. In a really, really good way, but--yeah, oh god. “Here, uh, why don’t we try it out and see if you like it. You can always do it over if it’s not right.”

“Oh,” Jamie says, looking at the bed again. He doesn’t move towards it, so Darcy does instead, carefully crawling between the pillows. Jamie follows her a second later and draws the curtains half-closed around the bed, then puts a hand on her hip to guide her and put her where he wants her in the nest, which would be super fucking distracting even if he didn’t smell so sweet and ripe and like the bath products she gave him.

Also, he’s officially abandoned the towel. Speaking of super fucking distracting things.

Well. She’s definitely not complaining.

He’s the only thing around that deserves her attention right now anyway.
Jamie settles Darcy into the middle of the bed with her shoulders against the pillow-covered headboard, swinging a leg over her thighs and carefully positioning her like he thinks maybe she’ll slide right off the bed if he doesn’t. For a moment Darcy wonders if he might be about to unzip her pants and sit down on her clit just like that, which as a thought process is definitely getting her clit in condition to get sat on.

The intent look on his face is also playing pretty heavily into that, mind. Darcy’s been stared at less fixatedly by people who were trying to kill her.

“Look at you,” she says breathlessly, mouth quirking up at the corner as she settles comfortably into the pillows. They’re already at basically the perfect angle, which is both pretty great and yet another turn-on. “You did good, sweetie, we fit in here just right. Super nice nest.”

“It’s close enough,” Jamie murmurs quietly, shifting back. He puts his hands on Darcy’s stomach and pushes her sweater and the shirt underneath up to her ribs. She growls softly in satisfaction, letting her fingers skim up his mismatched forearms. Both are still warm from the bath, the biological one soft and sweet-smelling and the metal one gleaming bright. Jamie holds still for the contact for a moment, then shifts as his posture changes, moving backwards. For a moment Darcy thinks he’s going to kiss her stomach, but instead he goes right for her fly. Mind, she’s all for that too—or at least, she’s all for that right up until she notices his shoulders are starting to hunch.

Yeah, that’s . . . that’s not very subtle, Darcy thinks.

“Hold up,” she says as inspiration strikes. Jamie pauses, glancing up to her face with a little frown. “Just--c’merе, come back up here for a sec,” she tells him, squirming onto her side so she can reach the little box of chocolate cheesecake truffles on the nightstand. “No rush, right? We’ve got your whole heat, might as well take our time with things. And you were so good for me in the bath, you deserve something for that.”

“. . . I deserve something?” Jamie repeats slowly, shifting back up to straddle Darcy’s thighs again as she opens the box. He’s frowning, just barely, but she has the cure for that.

“Say ‘ahhh’,” Darcy instructs, picking out the prettiest truffle and holding it up. Jamie’s frown turns confused.

“Ahh?” he repeats uncertainly, and Darcy beams up at him and pops the truffle into his mouth. He looks startled for all of a second—a second that she spends thinking of tasers—and then looks startled in a completely different way, his hand flying up to his mouth.

“You like?” Darcy asks, grinning wider as she picks out another.

“Mmm,” Jamie manages, still covering his mouth and clearly unwilling to actually swallow yet, his eyes wide.

“Go on, there’s more,” Darcy encourages him, skimming her free hand up his thigh. A hot little thrill goes through her as he listens and actually bites down on the truffle, splitting the chocolate outer shell to the cheesecake, and she smiles at the disbelieving little noise he makes around it. “There you go. So goоd for me, sweetie, you listen so well.”

“It’s--what was that?” Jamie manages, touching his mouth. His face is flushed.
“Chocolate cheesecake truffles,” Darcy says, holding up the next one and not quite able to keep the grin back. “Want another?”

“. . . yes, alpha,” Jamie says, his eyes flicking down between them. Darcy wants to kiss him, but maybe not yet.

“Lay back, okay?” she says instead. He’s too tense for being on top of her; he’s suppressing his own pheromones with the stress, and she wouldn’t wish a pheromone-crush hangover on anyone, most especially not an omega she’s promised to take care of. Calming him down is definitely for the best.

“Okay,” Jamie replies as he shifts to the side, hesitating momentarily before laying himself flat against the blankets, head just barely propped up against one of the pillows cradling Darcy’s hip. The position makes Darcy feel very, very alpha and also makes her want to cradle him in her lap. She settles for tapping the truffle against his lips and dropping it into his mouth as it falls open in easy response.

She is definitely not imagining that he flushes again when the chocolate hits his tongue.

“There you go,” Darcy murmurs approvingly, lifting a hand to stroke over his hair. Jamie melts under the contact, eyes going heavy, and she hums in admiration at the sight. “So sweet, omega. Thank you so much for coming with me, I’m so glad you’re letting me take care of you. I know it’s been rough for you out there, you’re so brave to trust me like this.”

Jamie whines very, very softly at the next stroke of Darcy’s hand, and she lets her nails drag just a little on his scalp. The next whine comes out stronger and he tips his head into her fingers.

“Good boy,” she says, and Jamie moans, rolling towards her but not pushing in quite close enough to make contact. Darcy drags her nails as gently as she can and he finally, finally starts smelling properly of his pheromones again, warm and sugar-sweet and cinnamon-sticky in her nose. “Oh, such a good, brave boy,” she sighs, smoothing her hand down to cup the back of his neck. “You smell so sweet getting all heated up for me, omega, it makes me want to dip you in milk and eat you up.”

Darcy’s only sort of exaggerating that; her hindbrain wants to kiss Jamie all over and feed him up fat and sweet on truffles and fruit and then eat him out until he feels as good as he deserves to, make sure he’s as happy and taken care of as he can possibly be.

Actually, her hindbrain wants a lot more than that, up to and including a mating bite and giving the much-neglected omega in her den the bellyful of babies his pheromones are so obviously begging for, but that—that is a whole other thing, is that, and also the reason she made sure to bring the whole box of condoms.

“So sweet,” Darcy murmurs again, letting her nails prick the back of Jamie’s neck. He presses back into them even quicker than he did for the comb, his pheromones spiking, and a hot stab of arousal cuts through her gut as her own respond in kind. Jamie starts panting, his body curling in on itself to better bare the nape of his neck to her nails, and Darcy takes the invitation and presses them in harder. Jamie pants harder in turn, his hands curling in against his stomach, and Darcy rumbles low in her throat; he whines in reply, eyes squeezed shut.

He smells like an entire goddamn bakery right now. And he’s so sweet and responsive that he’s like that just off her voice and nails, all riled up and pretty from nothing more than that.

“God, I’m just so glad you picked me to take care of you, gorgeous,” Darcy rasps lowly, scooting
down the bed so she can lean over to press a kiss against his temple and sliding her free hand down his side. “I’m so glad you’re letting me take care of you. You’ve already been so good for me and you’re still trying to be better, do you know how happy that makes me? How proud I am of you right now?”

“Please,” Jamie mumbles, hiding his face against the nearest pillow. Darcy kisses his temple again, hand resting on his hip.

“Anything you want,” she promises.

“Can I--” Jamie hesitates, turning his head just enough to look at her with one of those big sad eyes again, and Darcy kisses his exposed cheek in hopes of encouraging him. His pheromones spike hard, which is honestly not actually what she was trying to do, but nothing she’s going to complain about either.

“Oh,” she breathes, and he presses in against her side and whimpers into her shoulder. “Oh, sweetie, that’s so--you’re so good to me.”

“Darcy,” Jamie moans, shivering all the way up his spine. She swears fireworks go off behind her eyes just from the way he says her name.

“Gorgeous, you’re so gorgeous, Jamie, you’re such a fucking treasure,” she groans back, her nails digging in on his neck and hip and hindbrain-mouth getting away from her. “I want to put my teeth in you, I want to put my knot in you, tell me what you want, let me give it to you.”

“I want--” Jamie hesitates, his voice going a little strange, and then continues, quieter--”I want another truffle.” It doesn’t occur to Darcy that that’s kind of a weird request for the situation until she’s already basically thrown herself back at the nightstand, alpha instinct to provide well into overdrive, and by then she’s already got the box anyway.

Whatever; Jamie can have whatever he wants from her, far as she’s concerned.

“Open up,” Darcy coaxes as she picks out another truffle and holds it up to him, and Jamie stares up at her for a moment before opening his mouth. She places the truffle on his tongue and he makes a soft noise and tucks his face into her shoulder again as he chews it up. Darcy nuzzles his hair and plants another kiss against his temple, and his pheromones spike again even without her nails against his neck. “Better every time, omega, god. Can I kiss you? Will you let me do that for you?”

“You already--” Jamie starts, frowning, and then seems to realize what she’s actually talking about and stops himself, his eyes flicking down in embarrassment. “Oh. You mean--okay.”

“Thank you so much,” Darcy murmurs, immediately ducking her head to press her lips against his. Dwelling on the embarrassment isn’t going to help Jamie relax. Her instincts are right, for once--Jamie immediately goes soft and pliant under the kiss, head tipping back sweet as anything for her. In this close his pheromones smell even better, enough to almost entirely overpower the vanilla perfumes and the slight hints of chocolate and cheesecake, and Darcy sighs between their mouths and cups his face in her hands.

He is so, so sweet.

“So good,” she praises, and kisses him again. He kisses back, his biological hand coming up hesitantly to curve around her shoulder, and Darcy rumbles encouragingly and flicks her tongue against his lower lip. Jamie inhales sharply, then follows the next flick of her tongue with a
kittenish little lick of his own that makes Darcy’s gut burn all the way through. She cups the back of his neck with her hand and he lets out a little mewl, pushing back into the grip and tightening his grip on her shoulder in return.

Jamie is a really good kisser, especially as he relaxes into it. He keeps his metal hand off her but the biological one he pets between her shoulder blades with, and he stretches needily when she strokes her own fingers down his ribs and over the vulnerable side of his waist, skin soft and smooth over the muscle. He’s so obviously strong enough to pick her up one-handed but he’s so sweet and easy under her hands and mouth, and Darcy’s not going to lie, knowing that does a lot for her.

Not as much as the warm and rising sweetness of his scent increasing with every little brush of her lips, though.

“There you go, that’s it. Just like that,” she rumbles, nipping lightly at his mouth. “So pretty and responsive for me. Just relax for me, sweetie, let me take care of you. You’re so good at letting me take care of you, make me wanna do it for days. And I will, too, I’ll take care of you as long as you let me.”

“Okay,” Jamie breathes out roughly, pressing up closer against her. He’s shivering again, his breath coming fast and his skin a lot hotter than the bath left it. Darcy’s sweater is too heavy and her jeans are definitely too constricting, her clit already pressing too tight against the zipper, but there’s no way in hell she’s moving back to fix the problem. “Okay, I--please take care of me.”

God, listening to him talk fucking hurts, she thinks, burying her face in his hair.

“I will,” she swears, hooking one of his legs with her own and pushing a hand over his hip. “I’ll take such good care of you, honey, I’ll make you feel so good.”

“So hot,” Jamie whines, pushing into her again and digging his fingers in against her back. “I feel--I don’t like your clothes, please, they--they don’t feel--”

“I got you,” Darcy promises, immediately peeling her sweater off over her head. She should’ve thought of that herself; wool and denim isn’t exactly the kindest thing for an oversensitive omega to be trying to cozy up into. The second her sweater and shirt are off her chest Jamie ducks in low and wraps his biological arm tight around her back, hiding his face against her breasts. “There you go. So brave for me, omega, asking for what you need.”

Skimming off her jeans and socks is a little harder to pull off without disturbing Jamie, but she does the best she can and it works out in the end. He’s giving her chest little kisses and kitten-licks the whole time, his hand pressed flat against the bared back of her shoulders, and everything about the gesture makes Darcy want to fuck him through the mattress and also wrap him up in cotton candy and kindness.

She kicks her jeans off her feet and then off the bed for good measure and Jamie noises up at her and tips his head back in mute but obvious request for a kiss, which Darcy immediately obliges.

“I love it when you ask me for what you want,” she sighs, lifting her hands to flick open the front clasp of her bra. Jamie makes a soft little sound of surprise and slips his biological hand underneath the fabric to cup one of her breasts gently--much more gently than she’s been managing to touch him, as hard as she’s been trying, and Darcy bites her lip and wriggles out of her bra quick so she can push her hand down his side again. “I really do, you look so pretty when you get it. I want to see you that way all the time.”
“More,” Jamie manages hoarsely, licking his lips, and Darcy can’t help the growl of pleasure at hearing it. She grabs his face and kisses him again and he whimpers between their mouths, pushing into her pleadingly. His jaw is bare under her fingers, shaved clean of stubble and softened with lotion—from the razor she gave him, the lotion she gave him; done because of and for her—and she wants to put her mouth all over him. His chest’s bare, and when she pushes a hand up it she wonders if he shaved that for her too.

“Where else can I kiss you?” she asks him, flicking a thumb over his nipple meaningfully. Jamie whines again, nodding furiously.

“There,” he says. “Kiss my--kiss my chest, alpha, please.”

Darcy rumbles approvingly and slides down the bed to do just that, guiding Jamie onto his back as she goes. She slides her hands up his sides and he starts moaning the moment her lips brush his chest, before she even gets anywhere near his nipples again. By the time she’s got her mouth against one, he’s already shaking.

God, it has so obviously been so long since anyone treated him right during a heat. It makes her want to make it perfect for him, and also kick some assholes’ asses. She lets the feeling simmer, knowing it’ll help her scent the room with fuck-off pheromones and hoping that Jamie will settle more with the reassurance that she’s not letting anyone else near him. She’s never been so grateful to have a strong scent—everyone tells her it’s spicy and sharp and actually burns a little to breathe in, which embarrassed her right up until she got to college and found out just how many omegas love the clinging, claiming nature of her rut and the way it makes other alphas avoid their dens entirely for days after.

Jamie likes it too, she thinks, from how many times he’s put his face against her throat. She hopes her scent clings to him when he leaves, tells all those creeps on the street to fuck right off and leave him in peace. Tells everyone to fuck right off, that he’s hers, she’s the one he picked and wants, the one he whines and whimpers and bares the back of his neck for.

She hopes that maybe a little too much, considering.

But Jamie—he deserves too much. He deserves everything he can stand.

Darcy curls her fingers against Jamie’s sides and drags her tongue across his nipple in a long, broad sweep, and he gasps sharply and moves up into it, his thighs coming up to squeeze against her sides. She growls in low, rut-brained satisfaction at the pressure and he starts moaning again, head dropping back against the pillows. His skin’s fever-hot under her mouth as she works him over with teeth and tongue and the barest brushes of her lips, and only gets hotter under the attention. He’s so obviously sensitive here—every little nip and flick results in another gasp, another needy little noise, another rush of cinnamon-sweet pheromones, and the longer she touches him the louder he gets.

And the harder she gets. Her clit’s already tenting her panties and no doubt about five seconds from dripping precome. Stopping to take them off would mean taking her mouth and hands off Jamie’s chest, though, and she hasn’t left nearly enough proof she was there yet—and, more importantly, he hasn’t stopped pressing into them yet.

Stopping something he likes is about the last damn thing Darcy is ever going to do, she thinks.

When she looks he’s hard too, his pretty little cock curving up close to the heavy length of her clit where it’s straining the fabric of her underwear. She’d barely have to move at all to let them grind together and ruin her panties between them, and it’d be only slightly further to rub her clit against
his hole instead. She knows he’s wet; she can smell it, sugar-sweet and so much. He’d soak right through her panties like they weren’t there at all. He’s already come once, too--she could just shove them down and slide into him right now without any effort at all.

Except he deserves the effort.

“Jamie,” Darcy groans breathlessly, kissing his chest again and dragging her nails down the flat, broad expanse of his stomach. There’s probably glitter on her tongue. She wants there to be glitter on her tongue. “Jamie, sweetie, what do you need? What do you want?”

“Warm,” he rasps, knocking his head back as she bites at a nipple. “Wanna be, I want to be warm, Darcy.”

“Like before, baby?” she asks, thinking of the bath and skimming her fingers down over the curve of his hip to the inside of his thigh. He jerks underneath her with a cracked whine, legs immediately falling open, and she kisses his chest again. “Yeah, like before. It felt good in the bath, right? Can I make you feel good like that too?”

“Please,” Jamie chokes, face screwed up in a near-pained expression and hands gripping the blankets tight. Darcy leans up just enough to drop a kiss on his cheek, her fingers smoothing up his thigh. She rubs the pad of her thumb down behind his balls and brushes lightly over his hole, earning a moan that’s just as sweet as his pheromones.

“Good boy, so good for me,” she croons. The noise he makes this time is closer to a sob than anything else, and he spreads his legs wider for her pleadingly. She was right, he’s already wet enough to be dripping, and her thumb slides easy as anything in his slick. She’d tease a little with another omega, probably, circle and rub their hole and use it as an excuse to rile them up, but Jamie--no, not him.

Jamie deserves exactly what he wants the damn moment he wants it.

“My good boy,” Darcy croons again, pushing her middle finger into him. His body eats it right up, greedy and needy, and he yelps when she crooks it inside of him. She pushes in another finger without waiting--he’s so soft and wet that there’s no need to--and he slicks up even more under the attention.

Yeah, she definitely didn’t need to bring the lube. She did not need to bring the lube at all.

Darcy rocks her fingers and Jamie moves into them urgently, digs his elbows into the bed and jerks his head up to kiss and bite at her breasts as his slick soaks her hand, and she rumbles low and pleased and pushes her chest into his mouth. He reeks of heat, no sign of stress suppression at all, and he’s so wet and eager underneath her that she thinks she could slide her whole hand into him with hardly any work at all and take care of him just how his friend used to, if he wanted it that way.

“Is it good?” she asks anyway, crooking her fingers again and drawing out another yelp. It’s better to be sure, with everything else. “Is this what you need, gorgeous, am I giving you what you want?”

“Yes, yes yes yes,” Jamie moans into her skin, his shoulders shaking with tension as he struggles to keep himself up. Darcy plants a hand on his chest and pushes; he collapses under it immediately, back hitting the mattress hard. She follows him down and kisses his chest again, free hand pinching one nipple while she closes her teeth over the other and fingers fucking deeper into him as she works in a third one, and he pulls his knees up and keens for her. “Alpha, alpha, oh fuck, oh
“That’s my sweet boy, so good for me,” she praises, crooking her fingers again so he shakes and
whines for them, thrusting quick and steady with them to give him what he needs. “Look how
gorgeous you are, look how much you give me, look how much you let me give you. Are you
warm, baby, is this what you wanted?”

“Alpha!” Jamie wails again as he throws his head back and comes all over himself on nothing
more than that, cock striping his stomach and hole gushing slick over her palm with a pheromone
rush that makes her so dizzy she might just black out a little. The feel of his body desperately
trying to lock her fingers is like a punch to the gut, and the throbbing ache in her clit is enough to
make her groan out loud.

She would definitely taze every other alpha who’s touched him. She would kill that fucking
mastodon, even.

“Oh, omega, that was so perfect,” Darcy husks, stroking his chest as she carefully slips her fingers
out of him. Jamie gives a weak whine at the loss, his eyes slitting open dazedly to stare up at her,
and she shifts up to stroke his face and throat. She wants to lick her fingers clean almost painfully,
but they haven’t even talked about their medical histor--

Jamie catches her wrist in his biological hand and licks his slick off her palm. Darcy’s higher
thought processes short out completely.

“Fuck,” she says breathlessly. He glances up at her face as he sucks her fingers into his mouth, his
tongue not at all kitten-ish this time, and Darcy shudders so hard she feels it in her teeth and lets
herself lay down atop him. His come is sweet and slippery between their bodies and they fit
together just right, his Adonis belt the perfect crook for her clit to settle into and his cock soft and
sugar-sticky against the curve of her hip, his hole dripping wet and warm against her thigh.

Her underwear is definitely ruined.

“You were so good,” Darcy praises, watching him lick her fingers clean with hazy-eyed dedication.
She’s probably looking pretty hazy-eyed herself. “Look how good you are, omega, I love it. I bet
that tastes so good, wish I could taste you too.”

“You could,” Jamie says as he lets her fingers slip out of his mouth, expression slanting hesitant
again. “I can’t--I’m clean, I mean.” Darcy’s clit twitches embarrassingly hard against him at that,
and Jamie bites his lip roughly, his fingers curling a little tighter around her wrist. She moves her
thigh up against him out of reflex more than anything else and he shudders, head tipping back and
exposing the long line of his throat, his sweetly-vulnerable pulse.

God, she just wants to make him feel good. She wants to make him feel better than anyone else has
ever.

“I--” Jamie starts, and Darcy means to listen but her fingers come up to her mouth distractedly and
he cuts himself off as she runs her tongue between them. Or maybe he does say more and she just
doesn’t hear him, because his fucking taste—his slick and his saliva, his pheromones reeking so
strong in both she can taste them all the way down the back of her throat—his fucking taste is
enough to make her growl deep in her chest. Jamie’s pupils dilate and she bares her teeth, and he
brings the leg she’s not straddling up tight against her side.

She could push down her panties and slide right in, she thinks again, and Jamie’s looking up at her
like that’s exactly what he’s thinking too.
“Is that what you want, honey?” she asks instead. “Me to taste you? Lick you out all sweet and warm?” Jamie makes a strangled sound, his eyes hot and huge in his face, and Darcy grabs his biological hand and kisses the back of his knuckles.

“I . . . yeah, but--later?” he manages roughly, already breathing a little hard, his cock starting to swell against her hip and pheromones obviously building up for another heat spike. “Later, I . . . I want your knot first, alpha. Please.”

“Anything you want, omega,” Darcy swears on a hard shudder that makes them both bite their lips, that makes Jamie’s metal fingers tangle in the sheets and Darcy’s knees dig into the bed. He’s flushed and fucking gorgeous, and she’s so hard she might knot before she even gets the condom on. “Gimme a sec, let me grab the rubbers.”

“Don’t need ‘em,” Jamie says, his face twisting, and Darcy stares at him in disbelief. He can’t actually mean--“I can’t whelp.”

“Holy crap, this is what you smell like not fertile?!” she chokes disbelievingly. Jamie flinches and she immediately hates herself for being an insensitive fucking ass. “I--shit, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have--I’m sorry, baby, you can have me however you want. I’m so glad to give it to you either way. Shit.”

“Well, I don’t want it that way,” Jamie says with a weak smile, and Darcy laughs because he obviously wants her to but still kind of hates herself. She moves up and kisses him, shifting over to resettle between his legs, and he gives a cracked little purr into it, like he doesn’t quite know how to make the sound right.

“You’re so good,” she tells him between kisses, one hand working her panties down. Jamie lifts the metal hand to help and it makes these gentle little whirring, clicking noises that make Darcy’s chest hurt. “So good, Jamie, tell me how you want it. Do you want to see my face, do you want me to push you down against the pillows? You want to bend over the bed?”

Jamie furrows his brow like he’s actually thinking about it as Darcy kicks off her panties, vaguely amazed that he can even manage that much concentration at this point. She’s sure as hell having trouble with it, and she’s only in the beginning of sympathetic rut, nowhere near as bad as a full one, much less as bad as a full heat.

Well, maybe getting him off twice already’s helped a bit with that, she admits. And she’s not going to lie, it’s really fucking hot to watch him think when he’s all rumpled and flushed and heated-up looking.

“Like this,” he says after another long moment, shifting underneath her to drop his legs open even wider as his hands catch in the blankets down by his hips. Darcy takes a moment to reboot from the immediate blue screen of death, then kisses him again and grabs the closest pillow.

“Hips up,” she says briskly; he drapes his biological arm over her shoulders as he lifts them and she almost forgets to tuck the pillow underneath him at the contact. Darcy’s seriously concerned about how fast she’s going to come if he keeps holding onto her like that when she’s fucking him, but has absolutely no desire to dissuade his grip. Jamie moans out loud when she puts her hands on his hips and she has to stop to reboot again.

He’s really going to fucking kill her, she thinks.

Darcy doesn’t waste time, though, just lines herself up and pushes in on one long, steady slide, trying not to lose her mind at the hot, unobstructed clutch of him. Jamie purrs deep and throaty and
not cracked at all this time, stretching his body underneath hers and arching up into her clit as it splits him open. Darcy growls in response, fingers instinctively digging into his hips, and he purrs even louder and rolls them up in an easy, lazy movement that nearly knocks the breath out of her.

“Fuck,” she snarls, own hips snapping forward reflexively, and Jamie’s breath hitches but he never stops purring, never stops moving up to meet her. “Fuck, Jamie, god, you really are better every time, can’t even believe how good you’re being for me. Tell me what you need, omega, tell me what to give you.”

“Your knot, alpha,” Jamie sighs dreamily, his head dropping to the side to bare his neck as sweet as all Darcy’s best wet dreams and hands fisting against her back and in the sheets. “So full, please, I want as full as I can get.”

“Anything you want, baby,” Darcy swears, head dropping to breathe in the cinnamon-sugar sweetness at his pulse and ghostly notes of vanilla as she tightens her grip on his hips and braces her knees against the mattress. She rolls her hips testingly deeper and Jamie purrs even louder, heat pheromones thick and cloyingly perfect in the surrounding air.

After that, the “testingly” part isn’t a concern anymore. She already knows Jamie deserves exactly what he wants exactly when he wants it, deserves even more than what he wants, so she digs her fingers in and fucks him with steady, deliberate thrusts. He moves back into her, matches her pace perfectly and reacts instantly to every little change in it, keeping the biological arm flung across her back to pull her down even closer than she already is.

Darcy’d keep talking him through it, probably, but getting her clit seems to have shaken something loose behind his teeth; Jamie’s suddenly noisy as fuck, yelping and whining with every single thrust and letting out hot little curses every time she hits him just right. Her knot’s already half-blown but he’s so wet and receptive she can still fuck him to the root without a problem. The harder she goes the more he seems to want, so she lets go of his hip to brace her hands on either side of his shoulders and throws her weight into her next thrust. Jamie yells, the sheets tearing under his metal hand and his biological nails digging in rough against her back as his eyes screw shut and his pheromones flare violently.

Definitely a good reaction, Darcy thinks distantly, and keeps fucking him just like that until he’s half-shredded the sheets he’s gripping and she’s convinced her back is definitely going to bruise a perfect shadow of his fingerprints. Jamie’s still yelping for it, though, panting and whimpering and spread out all sweet and greedy for her clit, so hell if she cares about her back or the damn sheets. She’ll hang those fucking sheets over the headboard in pride of place if it means Jamie’ll keep up the incoherent pleas and curses and keep unravelling into the gorgeous wreck currently writhing underneath her.

She doesn’t want to stop fucking him. She doesn’t want to ever stop, but he’s so hot and sweet and eager around her clit that she’s not sure how much longer she can keep going.

“Darcy!” he wails somewhere in the mess of sound, and Darcy snarls to hear it, eyes going wide and wild, and she doesn’t actually do anything different on purpose but she does something, she knows, because suddenly Jamie’s outright keening and tearing his nails down her back.

It’s her knot, she realizes a moment later; her knot’s swelling up thick and fat and heavy even as she’s still fucking him with the full length of her clit, and he’s still taking it.

“Oh Jamie,” she groans disbelievingly, staring down at his overwhelmed and desperate face; his gasping mouth and hunched shoulders and pretty flushed chest and tight nipples—all the parts she wants to touch all over again and a dozen times more and just never stop touching. “So perfect, so
sweet, wanna give you everything, wanna make you so warm, make you feel so good, baby. You’re so good for me, take me just right. Tell me if it’s good, is this what you want?”

“I want--Darcy, Darcy, I want--” Jamie chokes, then shoves himself up with his metal arm, pulls her down with the biological one and curls up towards her, dropping his head forward and to the side as he looks up pleadingly from under his lashes. “Darcy, please.”

And yeah, there is absolutely no way she’s denying him that.

Darcy jerks forward, wraps around him and buries her mouth against the bared back of his neck to sink her teeth in. Jamie keens sharply, nails digging in between her shoulder blades, and she growls back roughly and grabs his cock. He fits in her hand just right, a perfect pretty curve against her palm, and it only takes a few hard strokes before he’s clutching up tight and coming around her so hard he nearly bucks her off. He screams with it and it’s fucking beautiful, and Darcy fucks him through it and then thrusts in deep one last time as she comes too, her teeth in his neck and her knot fat and full inside him, his inner muscles clamped down painful and perfect around it as her come fills him up.

She’s almost sure she really does black out this time, because the next thing she knows they’re both collapsed flat in the tattered nest of her bed, her oversensitive knot locked secure inside him. Missionary isn’t the best position to knot in and they’ll both probably regret it later, but it’s worth it, Darcy thinks. She blinks heavily as she reorients and then stretches up to lick soothingly at the deep bite mark she left on Jamie’s neck, and he shifts to wrap both his arms around her with a soft little purr, one of his legs hooking across the back of hers. Darcy rumbles contentedly and skims a hand over his hair and down his cheek before tugging him down into a kiss.

“You did so good,” she murmurs softly, letting her fingers twine through his hair. There’s still glitter in it, soft and pretty and sweet. “So good for me, omega, when they were so bad to you. Are you warm now?”

“Yes,” Jamie murmurs back, his eyes heavy-lidded and sleepy. He looks soft and pretty and sweet even without the glitter, honestly, his cinnamon-sugar pheromones quelled by her knot and come filling him up. The knot’ll go down soon enough and his heat will start gearing up to spike again, but his body’s satisfied for the moment and her hindbrain is blissed out in turn, convinced it’s just bred and bonded a strong, gorgeous mate. Of course, Jamie’s infertile and the bond-bite won’t actually last unless he comes back for the next few heats, but sometimes it’s nice to have stupid biology.

Well, more specifically, it feels nice.

“Good,” Darcy rumbles contentedly, drawing her fingers through his hair again. Jamie purrs quietly under the attention, winding his arms tighter around her and melting even heavier into the nest, and Darcy kisses him. He opens his mouth for her and she nips lightly at his lower lip and uses just enough tongue to make him purr again. “So good. You did great, sweetie, I can’t wait to do what else you want.”

“Mmm.” Jamie squirms just enough to make stars go off behind Darcy’s eyes and she buries a breathless groan against his shoulder, digging her fingers into his hair and the bed. He really might kill her, she muses. Every other omega she’s ever made time with would be an incoherent, too-sensitive mess after three orgasms and finally getting a knot--they would definitely not be squirming consideringly.

Almost definitely going to kill her, she decides, then props herself up on her elbows and smiles down at him probably exactly as dopily as she’s trying not to.
“You are the fucking best,” she informs him. “Also, just in case you were wondering, there’s still truffles.”

“There are?” The hopeful look on Jamie’s face is fucking adorable, and also hearteningly not sad-eyed at all.

“For you, dude, there are all the truffles,” Darcy promises him, reaching for the box.
For most omegas, heat lasts about three or four days--Ian’s was always two and clockwork-regular down to the exact hour, Steve’s are more erratic but average out around three, and Tony’s are just completely all over the place and can run the gamut from twelve-hour micro-heats to a good five days of penthouse-shaking headboard-banging, frequently spent complaining that menopause needs to hurry up and kick in already so he can get some actual work done. Thor, being a weird thunder-god alien prince from time immemorial, usually hits a full six, and everyone is really, really sympathetic to Jane during and after.

Jamie’s? Lasts seven.

Darcy doesn’t actually realize this at the time, mind, since she’s too busy fucking him through the mattress--and against the wall, and into the floor, and in the shower, and one especially memorable time in the closet--although she keeps enough track of time to go out and collect the food and drinks Erik’s leaving in the hall for them on a semi-regular basis. Half the time Jamie’s a pliant and pleading and passive wreck; the other half he’s scrambling greedily on top of her and riding her clit so hard that . . . well, she never liked that headboard that much anyway.

He also literally breaks the bed. That’s not even her, Darcy is totally blameless in this situation, she was just innocently eating him out when he punched out a bedpost and spilled them both all over the floor, blankets and pillows and mattress and the accidentally torn-down curtain all in a huge yelping mess. And if her rutbrain got a little too occupied with shoving him face-first over the side so they could fuck at a new and exciting angle, well, it wasn’t like they would’ve been able to save the bed at that point anyway.

Like, even before Jamie grabbed onto the bed frame to brace himself and splintered it right in half.

So yeah, that aside.

So the heat goes smoothly, aside from some minor furniture casualties. Just the bed, the chair, the dresser, and maybe technically the towel rack, but nothing major. And, well, the bathroom counter might be a little cracked but--

Anyway. The heat goes smoothly. Jamie is mostly just skin and sinew and Darcy probably should not take it as a challenge but really, really does; she feeds him truffles and fruit and smoothies and whenever she’s semi-coherent enough and has a hand free she writes elaborate, lovingly-crafted menus and grocery lists and slides them under the door. Some of them are a little more lust-addled and lofty than she would normally go for, but they’re also in Tony Stark’s building so they still all end up on the other side of the door and she hand-feeds Jamie every bite.

Jane is a saint, honestly, because sometime around day four Darcy is so loopy with pheromones that her shopping list is literally just the words CHOCOLATE SAUCE underlined four times and Erik drops off six different kinds, a fruit platter the size of her face, two gallons of ice cream, and a fondue pot.

Also, whipped cream apparently comes in flavors, which is frankly amazing new knowledge, Darcy has no idea how she did not know this was a thing before. Jamie didn’t either, and between them they go through all four cans inside the afternoon. Both of them end up sticky fucking messes but Jamie also laughs, so fuck if Darcy cares that she has to wash cinnamon-praline whipped cream out of her pubes afterwards.
The glitter doesn’t come out of the sheets the whole damn heat, either.

The morning of day eight, Darcy wakes up to the sound of Jamie hyperventilating on the mattress next to her.

She opens her eyes and looks over at him, and he’s looking back at her with a terrified expression, clutching his chest with the metal hand and digging his fingers in hard. She can see the faded imprint of the latest bond-bite she gave him on his neck and no other markings on his skin at all, aside from the scars. He is beautiful, and also completely fucking terrifying.

“Hey,” she says quietly. “You alright?”

“Don’t make me go back,” Jamie pleads immediately, eyes wide and pained and barely tracking her. “I know--I know it’s a trap, I know, I just, I can’t, I can’t go back to it, I can't, just kill me--”

The heat went smoothly, Darcy thinks.

“Jamie,” she says carefully. “You’re in Avengers Tower. You came with me. Nobody’s trying to take you anywhere you don’t wanna go.” His face screws up even more miserably than it did back in the alley, red and wounded-looking, and she wishes he’d cry because maybe that would look less painful than that expression does.

“I don’t want to hurt people anymore,” he says despairingly. “Don’t make me.”

“I won’t,” Darcy says, because she has absolutely no clue what else to say. Jamie’s expression crumples. He’s naked and gorgeous and fucking heartbreaking to look at, his scent reeking of distress and grief even past the last traces of heat pheromones, and she wants to take the weight off him like she has maybe never wanted anything else in her life.

She has no idea how to. This--whatever it is--isn’t something she can solve with a bath bomb and a smoothie and her knot, isn’t some small and sweet immediate need. This is why he’s afraid of cameras and hiding in skinny dead-end alleys smelling like antiseptic wipes and public bathroom soap, why those guys stared at him like he was a threat and why he balked when he saw the tower. Why he’s got that arm and those scars, probably, and definitely why it’d taken so long for him to relax for her even all heated up.

“Jamie,” she says, reaching out to grip his biological hand--she has no idea how the metal one processes things, if her grip on it would feel reassuring to him at all. “I swear, I won’t make you hurt anybody. But you should definitely hurt anyone who tries to.”

“Nnn.” Jamie squeezes his eyes shut, fingers digging in harder against his chest. Darcy really, really hopes there’s a safety limit on the grip strength in that arm.

She’s pretty sure there’s not.

“Jamie,” she repeats earnestly, squeezing his hand tight in her own and putting as much “alpha” in her voice as she can without feeling like one of those fuckers back in the alley. “You’re so good, baby, I know you try so hard. I can tell you try so hard. I can tell you try so hard. You’re not--”

“Stop,” he gets out through gritted teeth, looking even tenser and more pained. “Just--I’m not, I can’t, just stop.” Darcy falls silent; she thinks about taking back her hand, letting him go, but he’s gripping back like he wants her to stay so she doesn’t.
She kisses his cheek, because if he won’t listen to her words she doesn’t know what else to do, and a pained shiver goes through him.

But his fingers tighten in hers.

Darcy kisses the corner of his mouth this time and he lets out a little whine. He’s not really in heat anymore, she can tell, but there’s just enough leftover pheromones still in his system that he’s probably more sensitive than he’s used to being. She puts a hand on his chest, sneaks it under the painful-looking grip of his metal fingers, and he whines again.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” she says, because he’s already told her he doesn’t want to hear anything about being good. There’s other things she can say, though. “C’mon, omega, just relax. You’re fine. Nobody’s taking you anywhere. Nobody’s making you do anything. Hell, you don’t even have to relax if you don’t wanna.”

“I don’t,” Jamie says, his breath coming too quick. “I don’t--want to.”

“What do you want?” Darcy asks.

“Not to . . . not to hurt people,” Jamie manages to get out, eyes squeezing shut. “Not to go back. To be--to be--” His teeth lock together; his fingers grip Darcy’s hard enough for it to hurt, but not hard enough to make her want to let go.

“To be what, omega?” Darcy asks, tone as careful as she can make it.

“Good,” Jamie says painfully, wet eyes snapping open to stare at her.

“You were good for me,” Darcy tells him, squeezing his hand again. It’s not what he wants to hear, maybe, but he’s also the one who brought it up again, so . . . “You were great for me, baby.”

“No, not--” Jamie’s face crumbles, and he shakes his head. “A good person.”

“What’s that mean?” Darcy asks, her eyes tracking his expression as she pushes her free hand up his chest. He picked her for this--to take care of him. She’s going to do it. Jamie just shakes his head, though, curling towards her. “It’s okay, c’mon. Tell me what that means. Not hurting people, right? What else?”

“I don’t know,” Jamie chokes, audibly pained. Darcy grabs his shoulder and tugs at him without thinking in response to that miserable look, and he goes with it before she can think to regret the impulse, pushing in tight against her side and curling in on himself even smaller, his face tucked away against her neck. “I want . . . like my friend. My friend’s good. I want to be like that. But he has . . . he’s got other friends now. And they’re already . . . they’re already good. Not like me.”

“Who cares?” Darcy asks, squeezing his shoulder--the biological one. The metal one, again, she really doesn’t know what he can feel through. It’s too responsive for him to have no feedback in at all, but she still hasn’t been able to figure out if there’s anything else. He kept it away from her enough that she’s not even sure if he’s ashamed of it or concerned it’ll break her back if he tries to wrap it around her.

“Me,” Jamie says roughly, tensing up against her. “I care.”

. . . well. Can’t argue with that, really.

“Okay,” Darcy says, stroking a hand through his hair. “What about your friend?”
“. . . uh?” Jamie pulls back just enough to blink wetly at her, confused.

“Your friend,” Darcy says, because while she doesn’t know for sure . . . well. The way Jamie seems to think about himself, it’s a question worth asking. “Does he care?”

“Yes,” Jamie says quickly, tensing again. “My friend’s good.”

“No,” Darcy says, shaking her head but careful to keep her eyes on him. “Does your friend care if you’re good?”

“He doesn’t . . . he doesn’t like bullies,” Jamie says, his eyes going distant like he’s someplace very definitely not here. “He doesn’t like bad people.”

“Okay,” Darcy says still more carefully, giving his hand another little squeeze. “But you’re not bad, Jamie. You wouldn’t want to be good if you were bad, right?”

“Lots of bad people say they’re good,” Jamie says, eyes refocusing into dull, glazed things. Darcy’s heart sinks a little at the sight.

“But you told me you weren’t,” she says, determined to convince him anyway. It can’t be any harder than keeping Jane going in London was, she thinks, even though yes, of course it can. It could be so much harder. “You don’t think you’re good, you’re trying to be good. Isn’t that different?”

“No. Yes.” He hides his face against her neck again; for the first time, it occurs to her to wonder if it’s the reassurance of her alpha pheromones he’s looking for when he does that. Somehow it hadn’t occurred to her before. “I don’t know.”

Her pheromones are helping him, she hopes. *His* pheromones . . .

“Hey, it’s okay, you don’t have to,” Darcy husks, wrapping her free arm around him tight, using the other to bring their locked hands in close between their chests, cradled there protectively. Jamie smells like he did in the alley, sad and hurting and *lost*, and her alpha instincts want . . . a lot of things, really, but mostly for him not to smell like that anymore. “It’s fine if you don’t know. But think about it for me, okay? And for your friend.”

“Mm.” Jamie tucks his face in even tighter, the biological hand gripping hers tight, and Darcy wishes there was more she could do, and not just because the scent of an omega in distress makes her hindbrain kick up.

The protective instincts are good, usually. Admittedly sometimes they get her into shit down a blind alley with three armed assholes and a hurting omega and sometimes they fuck up her day or her life--tasing Thor in New Mexico had made her want to *puke*, and if Erik hadn’t been there she’s not sure she could’ve done it at all, and then of course SHIELD had sent in a bunch of omega agents to steal all their shit so she and Jane couldn’t even protest properly--but in general, she can’t really complain about feeling a compulsion to help an omega (or occasional beta) in distress.

The problem with those instincts, of course, is that they’re *instincts*, and the solutions they offer are generally “hit that other alpha with a brick”, “tase the problem until it goes away”, or “this omega is sad, they need *babies*”.

Even if she could actually give Jamie that, of course, it would not actually be a solution to his problems. Pretty much the opposite of one, in fact. The best she can really do is pet down his back with her free hand, keep a grip on his with the other one, and croon nonsense platitudes into his hair while he breathes too harsh against her throat and stays in close. Her heart’s aching;
meanwhile her fucking useless *clit* wants to slot in between his thighs and feed him her knot as sweet and easy as she fed him all those truffles, keep him right here and fatten him up on sweet little treats and good healthy food and good healthy *babies*--

Ergh. Darcy can control her hindbrain, really. Really. Almost definitely.

At least a *little*.

“You’re hard,” Jamie mumbles against her throat, and Darcy hates *everything*.

“It’s not--” she starts guiltily, but doesn’t get very far.

“Put it in me,” Jamie interrupts in a murmur, crooking his knee just enough to make space for her and tilting his hips to make himself accessible. Darcy tries not to choke.

“Baby, are you sure?” she manages, skimming her free hand down his side, and he tightens his grip on the other one and nods mutely against her shoulder. This isn’t heat talking, Darcy can tell--can *smell*--and she’s not sure if it’s really the smartest idea when Jamie’s so obviously feeling unstable.

But she’s also the alpha who told herself she was going to give this omega whatever he wanted as soon as he wanted it.

“Okay. Anything you want,” Darcy promises as she presses her mouth into his hair, dropping her hand down to hook behind his knee and tug his leg across her hip. Jamie digs his heel into the back of her thigh and she runs her fingers back to his hole to make sure he’s slick and receptive--he doesn’t smell quite right with that lonely scent overlaying his pheromones, she needs to be sure.

He’s not as wet as he’s been, but he’s definitely wet, and he whines softly at the touch. He moves down against her fingers and tightens his grip on her hand again, and that reassures her well enough to take herself in hand and push into him. He nuzzles into her shoulder with a low moan as she slides in, and she grips his hip to keep them close to each other.

“Darcy,” he says, voice hitching.

“Jamie,” she murmurs softly, rocking into him in slow thrusts. “You okay? Is this what you wanted?”

“Yeah,” he mutters back, hopefully breathing heavily from how it feels and not the hints of distress she can still smell on him.

“Good,” Darcy says as soothingly as she can, petting his hip reassuringly and pushing her mouth into his hair. She hopes it’s soothing. She *hopes* it’s reassuring. Sam would’ve probably been better for this. Or Pepper, Pepper would’ve been *such* a good alpha to Jamie, he’d have loved how hot she runs. “Thank you for telling me, baby, that was really brave. I know it’s hard for you, but you’re doing so good with it.”

“You make it feel good,” Jamie says tightly, not lifting his head.

“I like that you let me do that,” Darcy tells him quietly, rolling her hips in a little harder. Jamie makes another hitched noise against her shoulder, his heel digging in higher up her thigh, and she chases the exact angle that made him react like that until he’s outright whimpering on every thrust. She’s almost positive her ass is going to bruise from how hard he’s digging his heel into it now--which she’s saying from experience, mind, because there’s at least another four to match it from the past few days.
The thought makes her growl and dig her nails in, thinking of Jamie’s nearly unmarked skin. The only marks that stuck were the bond-bites, and even they’re a lot more faded than normal. It makes her feel like she’s not doing enough. She’s doing everything she can, she knows she is, but Jamie is sad and alone and needs to remember that he isn’t, that he doesn’t have to be, that people will take care of him if he just—if they just—if--

God, she doesn’t even know.

“Alpha,” Jamie whimpers, and Darcy bites down over the latest bond-bite. He yelps, head dropping to the side to expose more of his throat, and Darcy growls again against his skin and gnaws at the bite, her nails digging into his hip. Marks are the only thing she can give him, but she could mark him up like nothing else and it still wouldn’t stay, wouldn’t last for proof or evidence or—or anything, anything at all. He’s hurt and he’s lonely and she can’t do anything for him but this, and this isn’t going to last.

It makes her hindbrain fucking crazy.

She wants to keep him in her closet with the nesting pillows or in her tub with an endless supply of bath bombs and truffles. She wants to fuck him straight through this mattress. She wants to feed him up and help him make a den resilient enough to survive his arm out of her bedroom and let him curl up safe in her bed and stay where he will never, ever have to face another camera or hurt anyone again, even if they deserve it. Jamie doesn’t deserve having to do it, either way.

Really, though, what Jamie deserves is a lot more than anyone’s given him, and definitely a much, much better alpha than any other one he’s had so far.

“You deserve so much better than this,” she mutters roughly, not actually meaning to say it, and he makes a pained sound, shoulders hunching.

“Don’t stop,” he rasps when she reflexively pauses, then wraps his metal hand around her shoulder and pulls her on top of him. Darcy goes with it easily, shuddering as Jamie digs his knees into her sides and squirms into a more comfortable position underneath her.

“Not too much?” she murmurs as soon as he’s settled, already rolling her hips into him again--he asked for it, of course she’s giving it to him. Jamie shakes his head restlessly, metal hand back in the blankets and biological one letting go of her hand to wrap around the back of her shoulders. Darcy braces herself with both hands for the leverage and kisses the bond-bite, and he stares up at her with heavy, hazy eyes. “You want my knot, omega?” she asks breathlessly, just to be sure.

“Yes, alpha,” he replies, voice quiet and knees squeezing her sides again. Darcy gives it to him--of course she does--and he noises unhappily until she realizes what’s wrong and puts her teeth back in his neck. She’d wonder more about what he wanted out of this if she could string a few more coherent thoughts together.

Jamie comes without much more than that--she doesn’t even have to touch his cock, her teeth in his neck and a few more well-placed thrusts are all it takes. He makes a hoarse, breathy sound and his come spills all over his stomach, and part of her wants to laugh because the fact either of them has any come left at this point is frankly just . . . fucking amazing, really.

After that she grinds more than thrusts and he noises breathlessly up at her, fingers dragging against her back and the mattress. She comes slow and shaky inside of him and it feels so fucking good but still not enough, not enough for him, and Jamie clutches up tight and sweet around her and pushes his neck up into her teeth.
How many days of this and they still haven’t learned better than to knot in missionary, Darcy thinks wryly in the afterglow, giving serious consideration to never moving again.

They stay like that for a while—just about exactly as long as it takes Darcy’s knot to go down, in fact—and then Jamie nudges at her shoulder and Darcy rolls off him gingerly. She kisses his cheek and his eyes half-shutter, and then he gets off the bed and heads into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. The shower starts up immediately, and she sighs and drops her head back against the mattress to stare up at the ceiling.

Well. That wasn’t heat sex.

Darcy considers getting dressed and also maybe thinking certain life choices she’s made this week through a little more, then decides that’s a terrible idea and just lays there and listens to the shower run. She’s been in it with Jamie a few times now—neither of them was really patient enough to draw a proper bath again, except for when they were too exhausted to get off the floor/bed/chair/wherever to actually make it there—but every time she was the one scrubbing him down, so she has no idea what he’s like doing it for himself.

Probably not as kind as he should be, she can’t help but suspect.

Five minutes later the water shuts off and Jamie comes back out clean-shaven again and wearing the clothes he showed up in, which Darcy vaguely remembers washing sometime around day three and which the sight of makes her wince. She can’t imagine them being any more comfortable for an omega fresh off heat than they would’ve been for one going into it, and Jamie already appears to be at the normal baseline level of misery he seems to operate on outside heat.

That isn’t really comforting, for obvious reasons.

“You need to wash the sheets and take a shower,” Jamie says shortly, standing stiff and straight with his mismatched hands hidden in his pockets. “And do—something about the mattress. You can’t go out smelling like me. You can’t go anywhere smelling like me.”

“Oh,” Darcy says, just looking at him. He doesn’t look any less miserable than he did the first day. He doesn’t even feel safe enough to go out with her scent on him; she can’t even give him that. “You want something to eat before you go?” she asks, for lack of any better ideas.

“No,” Jamie replies uncomfortably, shoulders tensing. “I need to—leave. I’ve been here too long.”

“Yeah,” Darcy says uselessly, still just looking at him. He looks back helplessly and is still the six foot tall human wrecking ball she watched tear apart three huge alphas like they weren’t shit, still the uncertain omega who didn’t even know if he liked freaking bubble bath when she asked. Still the guy who’s going to be alone the minute he walks out the front door.

And who’s still going to walk out the front door.

“Here, just—c’mon for a second,” Darcy says finally, rolling to her feet and reaching for his baseball cap. Jamie lets her take it off him and she sets it on the miraculously intact and upright nightstand, then ducks into her closet and comes back with her softest beanie and scarf, then pauses and goes back for the matching gloves, because duh, of course the gloves. They might not do so great with the plates on his metal hand, to be honest, but at least they’re stretchy as hell.

“What—” Jamie starts, frowning, and Darcy tugs the beanie over his head. It’s comfy and warm and got to be an improvement on that cheap-ass baseball cap with the plastic band in the back, she figures. It’s cold out, anyway—it’s no wonder he’s wearing all those layers, just . . . fuck, it can’t
actually be _comfortable_.

“Gloves,” she says firmly, putting them in his hands and then throwing the scarf over his shoulder. “Not sending you off to freeze to death in New York winter, that’s a shit idea right there.”

“I wouldn’t die,” Jamie says like he very definitely knows. Darcy grits her teeth and turns back to the closet. She grabs her backpack out of the back--she hasn’t used the thing since Culver, anyway--and then yanks the drawers out from underneath her semi-intact bed frame. It’s a little harder to do than it should be, but it works, so whatever. She dumps every heat snack they didn’t get through into the bag along with the two neglected cans of juice she finds in the back corner, then heads into the bathroom and gets soap and toothpaste, a double-pack of toothbrushes and a pack of razors, and the emergency first aid kit from under the sink, and packs all that too. She doesn’t know if the meds in the kit will be any use but there’s at least a flashlight and bandages and a casualty blanket, and if they don’t work on him he can always swap them for something.

She _doesn’t_ think about what he’s so worried about. She doesn’t. There’s no way her instincts will let him out the door if she does, and she is _not_ that kind of knotbrained asshole. Jamie knows what kind of shit he’s in and he’s a fucking adult; he gets to decide what he does about it.

Besides, what the hell would keeping him in her closet actually _do_ for him anyway?

She stops, hovering uncertainly over the bag and not sure if she has anything else useful to add--there’s her taser, but that’s assuming Jamie’d have anywhere to charge it and, more importantly, that it wouldn’t have a _really_ bad reaction with the metal arm if something went wrong. Some damn snack food and toothpaste and band-aids doesn’t feel like _enough_, though, it’s not--it isn’t--

“Darcy,” Jamie murmurs, catching her wrist with a gloved hand, and she’s the one giving him the miserable look this time.

“You don’t have to go,” she says.

“I really do,” he says.

“If you need--anything, really, literally _anything_, a heat partner or money or a freaking _alibi_--” she starts, and then he looks miserable too and she shakes her head uselessly, hands fisting. It’s not enough. There _is_ no enough. “I just . . . I’m not moving anytime soon, okay? I’ll be here.”

“Wash the sheets,” Jamie says. “Take a shower.”

Darcy’s shoulders slump. She picks up the bag and hands it to him. He takes it, which is probably the most trusting thing she’s seen him do so far, up to and including turning his back on her in bed and coming with her to begin with.

“Kick their asses, omega,” she says finally, forcing herself to sound flippant as she pushes up on her toes to kiss his cheek. If she sounds flippant then--then she doesn’t know. It’ll help, won’t it?

“Yes, alpha,” he replies quietly, head ducking just enough to show the faded bond-bite on his neck. She kisses that, too.

Then he leaves and she goes to take a shower.

Best place to cry anyway, right?
Darcy spends an embarrassing amount of time in the shower trying not to snuffle too loudly, then
recovers just enough to see that Jamie took the heat basket soaps and shampoos in and belatedly
realizes that he smelled like vanilla when he left. Then she sits down on the bench and outright
sobs for a good five minutes.

Then she washes her hair and scrubs his scent off her and does not cry any more than that, and then
she puts her hair up in a towel and puts on a robe and drags literally everything washable out of her
room to the washing machine in the back of the floor. Technically there’s a laundry chute, but
they’ve also got their own machines and Darcy’s fairly sure if she’d asked Jamie would’ve said to
wash it all herself.

She never really got the whole story out of him about just who he’s avoiding--there’s enough chaos
going on right now, it could be anybody from AIM to HYDRA to the government to some
completely new disaster. Hell, he might even be avoiding the Avengers, for all she knows.

Whatever had him so convinced he couldn’t stop running, though . . . yeah. She can’t blame him
for it, not when he was so scared, not after all the shit he’s so clearly gone through; especially not
when those assholes in the alley were trying to coax him away like they thought they were talking
down something rabid instead of a person. Darcy has no idea what Jamie Thacket did or is going to
do, but she’d shove anyone trying to lay a hand on him off a roof without guilt.

That might be the alpha instincts interfering with her judgement again, unfortunately, but either
way she’s sticking to the sentiment all the same.

She leaves the laundry in the machine and heads back to her room to get dressed and put on her
glasses so she can start cleaning up, and more importantly start writing an itemized list of shit they
trashed. Well--Jamie trashed, technically, but it’s not like she’s blameless.

God, she’s pretty sure that counter was marble, too. She really hopes Tony didn’t spring for
something ridiculously expensive.

. . . more ridiculously expensive than normal, she means.

Then the exhaustion catches up and she ends up passing out dead asleep no more than ten minutes
into the effort.

The mattress still smells like Jamie.

Darcy sleeps for twelve hours, give or take, then wakes up starving and miserable and unhappily
sprays the mattress with a shit-ton of Febreeze, showers again, and switches her damp, neglected
laundry into the dryer. She also considers never doing anything again in her entire life and maybe
crying some more too. Instead she eats absolutely everything in the fridge and goes back to actually
finish cleaning her room this time, checking carefully for anything that might’ve kept a trace of
Jamie’s scent and Febreezing the hell out of all that, too.

He left his hat on the nightstand.

Normally she wouldn’t do this. Normally she’d bask in the leftover scent of heat, roll around in it
for days and allow it to dissipate naturally, like pretty much any other alpha would. But Jamie
asked her to do it, so she does, even though it makes her instincts panicky like she lost him, like
something happened to him, like--
She breathes in. She breathes out. She Febreezes the damn hat. Then she goes back to bed.

In the morning, Darcy gets properly dressed for the first time in nine days, finds out it’s been nine days, and then puts on Jamie’s baseball cap and tucks her hair through the back of it. It’s pretty much exactly as uncomfortable as she suspected it would be. She goes down to the common floor to eat, because she’s seen literally no one since Jane and Thor on day one of Jamie’s heat. They’re not there--Thor’s probably in heat now himself, come to think--but Clint’s sitting on the breakfast table with coffee and a bowl of cereal and he greets her with a little wave. She hasn’t been so glad for the calming balm of beta pheromones in years.

“Hey,” he says. “Thor said you had an emergency heat partner?”

“Yeah,” Darcy sighs, claiming literally the entire box of Eggo waffles and bringing it, the butter and syrup, the entire gallon of orange juice, and the toaster to the table. She sits close so she can breathe him in and stabilize a little more, because hell if she’s looking this gift horse in the mouth.

“Guess that went well,” Clint says, raising his eyebrows as she sets up her pile. “When’d they leave?”

“Yesterday morning,” Darcy replies moodily, plugging in the toaster and dropping Eggos into all four slots.

“Damn.” Clint looks impressed. “Isn’t that like, five days?”

“Seven,” Darcy says, shaking her head disbelievingly. She doesn’t know how she actually survived it. Normally an omega would take the better part of a day both pre and post heat for nesting and recovery, too, so she doesn’t blame Clint for the misassumption. “He was already going into heat when he got here and he left, like, immediately after he was out of it.”

“He did? Why?” Clint asks, baffled. Again, Darcy does not blame him.

“Because all his previous heat partners were scumlords, basically,” she mutters darkly, glowering at the toaster. It’s not toasting fast enough. She might just start eating the frozen ones. “God, I felt so bad for him. And I wanted to find all of them and kick their fucking teeth in.”

“Yeah. Don’t suppose he named names?” Clint inquires, tapping his spoon against the side of his bowl with a mild expression.

“I wish,” Darcy groans, slumping forward against the table. “I’d give them all to you and Natasha and just let nature take its course from there. And then I’d take him home and feed him everything.”

“The guy’s that good in bed, huh?” Clint asks wryly, raising an eyebrow at her.

“That good,” Darcy says feelingly, fingers curling against the table. Clint gives her a thoughtful look, but before he can say anything else the toaster pops, and then Sam and Natasha shuffle exhaustedly into the kitchen, both making a beeline for the cupboards. Darcy is genuinely impressed by the amount of food they manage to gather between them, but also partially distracted by burning her mouth on the hot waffle she’s currently trying to swallow whole without so much as stopping to butter, because priorities, okay.

“Jesus,” Sam groans, collapsing at the kitchen table and nearly spilling everything in his arms. Natasha manages to sit down like a mostly normal person, but is staring off into the distance with a blank expression. Like, not her usual “it’s a trap!” blank, just, like . . . blank-blank. Darcy blinks at them stupidly past the orange juice, mouth still full and honestly probably still half-asleep.
“Nyaf?” she manages around the waffle, even almost coherently.

“I just spent eight days rutting the American Dream,” Sam announces, slightly wild-eyed.

“Holy shit,” Darcy chokes, her own eyes widening as Clint whistles disbelievingly. As hard as it was keeping up with Jamie at least he’s not a super-soldier. “Since when does Steve’s heat run that long?”

“Since never, literally never, this has apparently not happened since World War freaking II,” Sam groans, then fixes Natasha with an accusing look. “You know what the longest heat he had with just me was? Four days! Four!”

“Don’t look at me, Wilson,” Natasha retorts dubiously, tearing open a box of granola bars. “He never went over two before you showed up.”

“Are you guys . . . uh, bonding?” Darcy asks warily as she glances between them, not quite sure which way the wind is blowing here. Natasha barks out a loud, abrupt laugh, then looks very suddenly alarmed.

“No,” she says, looking at Sam. He looks back, and awkward silence falls. Darcy wonders if she should regret asking.

“Cut the guy a break, he’s been on the road for his last three heats,” Clint sighs, taking a sip of his coffee. “Of course he’s gonna have a long one the first time he gets to den down how he likes again, even without knowing he’d have two heat partners. Poor bastard probably hasn’t actually had a decent knot since the forties.”

Darcy imagines that briefly. Imagines all too well, in fact, which is pretty charmingly optimistic of her hindbrain but not going to do shit. She’s pretty sure her clit will legit break if she gets horny again anytime in the next week. Or month.

Peggy Carter was hot as hell back in the day, though, and although the super-pretty Howard Stark had been an omega, Darcy knows at least two or three of the Howling Commandos were alphas too, and it’s been a while since World History 101 but she distinctly remembers that none of them were exactly slouches in the looks department either. They’d have been the most logical heat partners under the circumstances, even if Steve hadn’t already been trusting them with his life in the field; she’s got no doubt they were shacking up on the regular.

Unless Bucky Barnes was an alpha? Darcy’s not actually sure, she was never super into WWII stuff in school and even when she was a kid she ignored the old Howling Commandos cartoons—they were on against Dragonball Z and Sailor Moon, okay, damn right she ignored them. She remembers assuming he was a beta at some point, she thinks, because if he’d been an alpha why wouldn’t he and Steve Rogers have been bonded—she heard the weapons facility rescue story, okay, they would’ve definitely been bonded—but she’d picked Jim Morita for her actual written report because hello, the Japanese-American Howling Commando whose every family member back in the States was all in internment camps, of course she’d picked Jim Morita.

Morita was an alpha. Morita probably knotted Steve. Morita probably knotted Steve through multiple heats, along with . . . well, whoever wasn’t Barnes, she guesses. She vaguely recalls there was a pretty even split in the unit—another notch in its belt in the history books—so there would’ve been . . . what, there’d been six Howling Commandos, right? So two omegas, two betas, and two alphas, and then Steve. Maybe? Yeah, that could make for some pretty decent heats.

Darcy glazes over a little trying to work out the logistics, somewhat impressed with the recovery
time of her own libido, considering.

“Good morning,” Steve greets from the doorway. Darcy starts guiltily, then stares. Everyone stares. He’s fucking glowing.

“Daaaaamn, you guys,” Darcy says, impressed despite herself (upset despite herself; Jamie didn’t leave yesterday looking anything like that). Natasha gets this cat-who-fucked-the-cream look in her eyes and smirks at Steve, and Sam gives him a crooked, satisfied grin. Steve turns pink and grins back at them, and it occurs to Darcy she’s never actually seen him grin before.

Come to think, she’s not sure she’s ever seen him smile at all outside of war bond posters. Admittedly they haven’t spent that much time together, but . . .

“C’mere,” Sam says, pushing his chair back, and Steve laughs at him but does, letting Sam pull him down into his lap and Natasha scoot her chair close enough to pull his legs across her lap. They both kiss him and there’s this disgustingly adorable moment where Sam tries to feed him an orange slice at the same time Natasha’s trying to feed him a granola bar and they get ridiculously in each other’s way, and Steve laughs again and scoops an apple off the table instead. “Oh, it’s like that.”

“Mmm, it’s like that,” Steve agrees around a bite of apple, still grinning. His hair’s a mess and he’s got bonding bites layered on both sides of his neck, dark and loving bruises stacked up all pretty like kaleidescope patterns, and Darcy can’t tell which are Sam’s and which are Natasha’s. “Not too heavy for you, am I?”

“Yeah, yeah, you enjoy that breakfast,” Sam snorts, poking his cheek with the orange slice, which Natasha parries with her granola bar. Steve laughs again and it’s actually kind of amazing, Darcy has to admit; she didn’t even know he could laugh. Well--obviously he could, she didn’t think he was physically incapable or anything. She just didn’t know he would.

God, even Captain America is all smiley and lovey post-heat. Poor fucking Jamie, she thinks, breathing Clint’s pheromones in a little deeper.

“You could’ve waited in bed, we’d have brought you food,” Natasha tells Steve as she breaks up the granola bar to feed to Sam instead, who seems pleasantly surprised and returns the favor with the orange segments.

“You did that yesterday,” Steve says, giving her an amused look.

“You say this like that would somehow decrease our desire to do it today,” Sam says, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Actually I thought the part where neither of you noticed me get up for a run and come back an hour later was doing that,” Steve replies mildly, taking a very smug bite of apple.

“. . . I noticed,” Natasha says, surprisingly unconvincingly for Natasha, then fixes Steve with a suspicious look. “I would have noticed.” He smiles back all blithe sweetness and takes another bite while Sam and Clint muffle snickers. It’s freaking adorable, but also makes Darcy’s chest ache a little--someone should be doing this for Jamie, too, cuddling and coddling him back to status quo, and she knows no one is.

“So how was everyone else’s week?” Steve asks gamely. Natasha’s still giving him the eye.

“Thor’s nested up with Jane, Tony blew up his new suit, Rhodey and Pepper locked him out of the lab, and Bruce locked himself in his lab with Selvig,” Clint replies, taking a sip of his coffee. “And
I fought the mafia. Well. A mafia.”

“I had an emergency heat partner,” Darcy puts in, dropping another set of waffles in the toaster. Very tellingly of their lives, the other three only perk up curiously at that.

“Tony’s luck with Pepper being in the country finally run out?” Natasha asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Naw, just met a super-yummy stranger who needed the hand,” Darcy replies, shaking her head. She’s pretty sure if she tried to rut Tony it would fast devolve into a sass-off anyway, he’d probably be better off with an AI and a knotting vibe. She’s not sure he hasn’t spent a few heats like that, actually. “And, y’know, we were already on heat protocol anyway, not like it took much extra out of J.A.R.V.I.S. or anything.”

“I think it took it out of you,” Clint says wryly. Darcy gives him a sheepish grin.

“I regret nothing,” she says. Nothing about the heat, anyway. Nothing she could actually have done anything about.

“Good, ‘cause that’s seven days of your life you’re not getting back anytime soon,” Clint replied, amused.

“Damn, woman,” Sam says, impressed. Natasha high-fives her, possibly not even ironically. “Welcome to the club, Lewis. Since week-long heats are apparently a thing now. Thinking of starting a support group, actually, maybe something involving crutches.”

“I didn’t know!” Steve says, blushing bright red. “I haven’t had a heat that long since . . . well . . .”

“1945?” Clint guesses. Steve winces, but nods.

“Yeah, uh . . . my cycle was pretty erratic before the serum but during the war I had real long heats,” he murmurs, not looking quite so glowy anymore. “Bucky used to whine at me for days after, complaining how he was going to throw his back out one of these days.”

“I thought Bucky Barnes was a beta,” Darcy says, frowning. Seriously, why would they not have bonded if he were an alpha?

“Omega,” Steve says, shaking his head. “There was more than one reason I worked pretty exclusively with the Commandos--when Bucky synced up with me after we got back to base his heats lasted twice as long as they used to. But Dernier only ever had micro-heats and the rest of the Commandos were all alphas and betas, so at least then it was just Buck and I useless seven days out of ninety, as opposed to half the camp. Used to drive Phillips nuts planning ops around our cycle, though.”

“You think you went longer because you guys got close enough to sync up again?” Clint asks carefully, taking another sip of coffee.

“No.” Steve looks upset. “We never got anywhere near him. Couldn’t have missed him--he smells different, now. This awful chemical and copper mix, like . . .”

“Bleach and blood,” Sam supplies, and Steve grimaces, nodding again.

“Spent the better part of nine months chasing our tails and never caught a hint of it,” he says resignedly. “Who knows where he actually was, probably halfway across the world doing terrible things to terrible people.”
“Not actually the worst option, mind,” Sam points out.

“Arguably an improvement, in fact,” Natasha puts in neutrally. She’s petting Steve’s calves in tiny little strokes; Sam’s nuzzling into his neck. Darcy wonders if either of them’s actually noticed what they’re doing; bonds hit like that, sometimes, even if they’re not planning to keep it up. Awkward silences aside, Steve didn’t have a bond-bite when he and Sam first slouched in from the road, so she can only assume they’re not.

Unless they were waiting for Natasha, maybe, or . . . who knows, actually. And she really doesn’t want to ask again.

“What did he smell like before?” she asks instead, which, in retrospect, may actually be a worse question. Steve’s face goes soft, though, and he smiles again. It’s sad this time, unfortunately.

“Like iced cinnamon cake,” he says. “The others complained every time we went into pre-heat, said putting up with rations was hard enough without the two of us smelling like a damn bakery.”

“Gotta tell you, I would take the bakery over the damn metal arm,” Sam says, shaking his head. “My poor wings, man.”

“Cinnamon cake, huh,” Darcy repeats as Clint and Natasha snicker under their breaths, something twanging oddly in the back of her head. That’s a weird coincidence, a guy with a metal arm who smells like a cinnamon-based baked good operating on the same heat cycle as Steve while trying to avoid both cameras and the tower--oh who the fuck is she kidding. She digs her phone out of her pocket and searches bucky barnes, blows up the first non-blurry image that comes up, and . . . yup. Yuuuuuup.

Fuck.

She is in so much trouble.

Darcy stuffs an entire waffle into her mouth while silently panicking and the conversation continues without her, back to focused on Sam and Natasha doting on Steve and him giving them shit for it while Clint eats his cereal and makes smart remarks. What’s she supposed to do here? What exactly is the etiquette for I fucked your MIA POW bestie who you spent almost a year trying to track down ‘til he saw stars and probably also stripes and then let him walk out the front door without so much as giving him my phone number, anyway? Is there etiquette for that?

It probably involves getting deservedly slapped by Captain America, she can’t help but suspect.

Except . . .

Well, what the hell is she supposed to do here? Jamie--Bucky--Bucky’s still a grown-ass man, that hasn’t changed just because she’s found out exactly which grown-ass man. It’s not any less his choice to walk out of the tower just because Steve Rogers would give his right arm to get him back in it.

. . . god, she just used that idiomatic expression with a straight face, didn’t she. All right, she’s definitely not telling Steve, if only because she’d fuck it up and ruin the little smiles he keeps giving Sam and Natasha even after talking about Bucky and their failed manhunt. She can sit on it, wait a couple days and tell him then; tell him she’d waited because of Bucky or that she hadn’t made the connection until then or . . . something.

Darcy waits a couple days that she spends reading the worst files in the entire SHIELD datadump, then goes to the elevator to go find Steve and promptly realizes there’s no way she can rat Bucky
out. He’s gotten to do so little, gotten to choose so little—how the hell is she supposed to take one of the only decisions he’s gotten to make in seventy years away from him?

Besides, for all she knows he’s avoiding Steve because he’s got some kind of latent programming he’s trying to avoid triggering or is angry about the train mission or—or fuck, it doesn’t matter anyway, it doesn’t matter if he’s avoiding him because he owes him five bucks. He’s avoiding him, and he has the right to. In an ideal world he could’ve, like, said goodbye or left a letter or something, but this sure as hell is not an ideal world.

Darcy can’t sell him out, even if the only thing she’d really be telling Steve anyway would be “he was in New York and on your heat cycle”. Bucky has nothing, last anyone knew, and what kind of asshole would she be to give away one of the few things he does?

She can’t.

So she doesn’t. She takes the elevator downstairs instead and goes to the nearest chocolatier and buys two chocolate cheesecake truffles. She eats one in one bite and tucks the other’s little box into her pocket because . . . yeah, because. Then she hits up the pharmacy and buys a new spare toothbrush and new first aid kit and new heat basket and then goes to a department store and gets a new backpack too, which is admittedly a questionable decision on her part, but it’s not until she’s putting the pack of men’s T-shirts into her basket that she realizes what she’s actually doing.

“God I’m stupid,” Darcy tells herself, then goes to find socks and jeans and pretends it’s not weird that she remembers Bucky’s size. Or that she ever checked his size to begin with.

She buys juice, a reusable water bottle, two boxes of granola bars, and a bag of beef jerky, withdraws two hundred bucks from the nearest ATM, and then packs everything into the backpack and stares blankly at it. She doesn’t know what the hell she thinks she’s doing. There’s literally no way he’s going to find it; some other homeless person is going to pick it up.

Admittedly, she’s done stupid things with worse potential consequences than feeding and clothing a down-on-their-luck stranger.

She puts the truffle box on top, zips the bag shut, and heads off thinking very strongly about how many people she wanted to tase for Bucky Barnes over the course of the past week. By the time she gets back to the alley she first met him in, the backpack fairly reeks of her protective pheromones: that clinging, claiming scent that burns other alphas’ and betas’ noses and that omegas drink right up. Or so everyone tells her, anyway.

She figures even if he finds it he’ll just ignore it if it’s not safe for him to take it, so . . . so yeah. She halfheartedly hides the bag under some stray cardboard mostly just to keep it from getting rained on if the weather decides to be shitty, stares at it for a while, then gets up and leaves. She makes it almost all the way back to the tower before she starts crying, which is pretty good, actually.

Darcy knows she’s acting kind of stupid about this, but normally she’d have gotten to say goodbye to a heat partner properly, even a stranger; they’d have spent that last day together coming down and recovering from the intensity of the experience. She’d have gotten to feed him up a little more and he’d have cozied up to her and they could’ve just relaxed and just been for a while and then very gently coaxed themselves apart at the end of it.

Especially after a bond-bite heat.

Without that . . . yeah. She’s gonna be a little irrational for a while, without that.
There’s literally no reason he’d even go back to that alley. She just wasted a ton of time and money and—God.

Darcy goes back to the tower and back to the Thor floor, which isn’t making her smile for once, and collapses face-first onto the couch in the common room. She can smell mead and metal from Jane’s room, but only faintly—Thor’s heat is probably over, and they’re probably cuddling up and petting each other all sweet and lovey like she and Bucky didn’t get to.

She wonders if that’s why he wanted one more round before he left, even after the pheromone rush was over—if that was just the closest thing to the aftercare he could justify to himself. The idea doesn’t make her think any more highly of those past alphas.

. . . he probably did used to have good alphas, actually. Jim Morita and whoever the other Howling Commando alpha was and maybe Peggy Carter, and hell, the army was probably spoiled for alphas who were dying to rut Captain America’s right-hand man. And that’s not even counting back in Brooklyn when he was a handsome newly-enlisted soldier with a uniform in wartime or even before that, running around with that pretty face and that heart-pounding under-the-lash look.

He just doesn’t remember any of them.

So literally everyone he was talking about before . . .

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.* Darcy squeezes her eyes shut and buries her face tight against the couch, hands fisting against the cushions. All those alphas Bucky alluded to—they were all HYDRA. Those bastards in the alley trying to coax him to come with them, everyone who told him it was his fault they were hurting him when he was vulnerable, everyone who made him treat heat like something strange and confusing and *dreadworthy* . . .

They were HYDRA. They were the people who had him in a cell, in that chair, on a fucking *choke chain*—

“Darcy,” Jane says, sounding alarmed. Darcy shoves her face deeper into the couch, every muscle tight and pheromones running so hot her skin feels like it’s burning up. She’s probably scenting up the whole damn floor with impotent rage and grief.

She doesn’t give a *fuck*.

Jane tries to touch her and Darcy snarls at her and then hates herself for it but just buries her face again instead of doing anything actually *adult* about the situation. Jane goes away, and a few minutes later Thor comes in and sits on the floor next to the couch and purrs like a lion would, if lions actually purred. Darcy’s pretty sure they don’t, although she doesn’t actually know for certain.

But he sits there, and he purrs soothingly and pushes in close so the cushions squish underneath her, and it’s not . . . he doesn’t sound like he needs her. He *doesn’t* need her, obviously, he’s an alien god-prince from time immemorial who also has Jane anyway.

Bucky needs her. *Jamie* needs her. Whoever he wants to be, he needs *someone*. His pheromones were crying out for it, so sad and hurt and lonely, so clearly starved for anyone decent to do anything decent. He asked for her knot and her teeth and let her in against his vulnerable back and he *needs someone*.

That’s what all that meant, right?

“Darcy,” Thor says gently, and Darcy drags the nearest throw pillow over her head. “Speak to us,
my friend. Tell us what troubles you so.”

“Heat-bond hangover,” she mutters bitterly, not lifting her head. “He had to leave too quick, it’s--I don’t know if he’s okay.”

“Oh, Darcy,” Jane says from the other side of the room, crestfallen. “And it’s still going?”

“Uh-huh,” Darcy manages, nodding uselessly under her throw pillow. Thor purrs and rubs his face into her shoulder, getting the scent of mead and metal everywhere. It helps a little, but not nearly as much as she wishes it would.

“You should have told us,” Thor tells her. “We would alleviate your discomfort, if you will allow it.”

“. . . okay,” Darcy mumbles, because--well. He’s right. The hangover’s bad and what it wants is Bucky Barnes or Jamie Thacket, whichever one he wants to be, but another omega’s pheromones can still help alleviate the depression and sadness.

As long as she doesn’t think too long about how Bucky doesn’t have an alpha on hand to do this for him, anyway.

Yeah.

“Okay,” she says again, and Thor lets her pet him for the rest of the evening, and it does help. A little.

It’s definitely better than the alternative, anyway.

So yeah, it seems like a perfectly valid idea right up until the next morning, when Steve shows up at the front door of their floor first thing and gives her a sheepish smile.

“Hi,” he says. “Thor and Tony had something in the lab, so I’m on deck.”

“Nergh,” Darcy manages in sleepy, slow-dawning horror, gripping the door tight. Okay, no, this is fine, this is fine, she can just--come up with an excuse or something, that won’t be--that’ll be--

“I brought doughnuts,” Steve says, and Darcy lets him in.

Wait. Fuck.

Steve sets the doughnut box on the kitchen table and neatly sets out napkins for both of them and sits down, and Darcy sits down across from him and hates herself for lying to him. Well--keeping things from him. She also hates herself for taking one look at him and wanting desperately to confess, no matter what Bucky wants or wanted. It’s . . . it’s simultaneous hate, basically.

God, she is not prepared for this.

She’s also kind of confused, because Steve brought her food. It’s not exactly the behavior she’d have expected from a guy coming over to soothe her heat-bond hangover, seeing as normally it’d be the other way around. Then again, Steve apparently isn’t a big fan of alpha’s dens; maybe it’s a coping strategy for him. Or . . . something.

“Soooo . . . uh, how’s your post-heat going?” Darcy tries lamely, wishing the earth would open up and swallow her even as she says it.

“All right,” Steve replies, carefully extricating a doughnut from the box. “Sam and Natasha aren’t
letting me back in their pants for another two nights, but I can’t really complain, I didn’t think it was going to be that aggressive either.”

“Aggressive’,” Darcy repeats blankly, yearning for a bucket of cold water to upend over her head.

“I get pretty demanding, I guess,” Steve says without so much as a drop of embarrassment, then takes a bite of doughnut. Darcy stares past his shoulder for a long, long moment. Demanding, she mouths to herself, and literally cannot form any coherent thoughts on the subject. “Especially since the serum. Once Bucky told me if I didn’t get Carter to make a mother out of me first thing once the war was over he was clearing out for California to get off my cycle before it killed him.”

“Oh.” Darcy blinks and refocuses, a little surprised that Steve would just mention him like that. She’s never known him that well, honestly, it just seems like the kind of card he’d keep close to his chest what with everything else.

Then again, he’s probably spent the past near year practicing for convincing the free world that James Buchanan Barnes is not the Winter Soldier, so yeah. Maybe not that unexpected after all.

“So do you want to tell me about him?” she asks tentatively, because she is just the worst fucking person alive, apparently. Or second-worst, maybe, after every living soul that ever laid a hand on Bucky Barnes in anything but self-defense. Steve gives her a sad smile and she immediately regrets asking even though he’s the one who brought Bucky up to begin with.

“He’s my friend,” Steve says. “Not sure if he remembers that right now, but he’s always been my friend. Known him since we were kids. Hell, I knew him before we were even old enough to scent proper, back when everybody took one look and assumed he was some little knothead lunk trying to sniff around my skirts a couple years early--uh, no offense.”

“None taken,” Darcy manages, still feeling nauseous.

“We still used to shack up together when we heated up, mind,” Steve adds, smirking briefly at her. I know, Darcy doesn’t say, although she does picture it--and of course she’s only got one mental picture for both of them, so of course what she pictures is Bucky shivering in the bath with the vibrator and Steve . . . yeah.

Well, she already knows that she’s a horrible person. Picturing Steve helping his lifelong best friend come in from the cold as literally as freaking possible is not the worst thing she’s ever done. That special distinction is reserved for not telling him about said lifelong best friend spending a week on her knot and then asking him about him over doughnuts.

“Kinky,” she tries instead, and Steve’s smirk turns into this funny little humorless smile.

“I guess,” he says. “We didn’t think it was kinky, we just liked each other better than any of the rutters in the neighborhood. They were always chasin’ Buck’s tail but didn’t think too highly of me, so he’d get all riled up, tell ‘em to screw off, and come bunk down with me. And, well . . . I mean, I wasn’t exactly complaining.”

“Were you guys, uh . . . together?” Darcy asks hesitantly, not sure she wants the answer but asking anyway. Steve shrugs.

“No,” he says. “I don’t know if it would’ve been different if we could’ve been together, but it wasn’t like now, where omegas can, you know, get hitched and adopt or inseminate. Best we could’ve hoped for was being old maids together or finding an alpha who’d keep us both, and even that was a little funny then. We talked about staying in France after the war, sometimes--they
“With Peggy Carter?” Darcy guesses, her stupid mouth apparently deciding she needs to go for the hat trick on pulling shitty moves today. Of course reminding him of a young and healthy Peggy Carter and the life they might’ve been planning together is the thing to do here. Of *course* it is.

“Maybe,” Steve says, his eyes dimming a little. “She and Bucky didn’t always know if they liked each other but, uh, he definitely liked her *knot*. And I mean . . . I didn’t really *want* to be a mother right after the war, to be honest, but Bucky--well, he’d always . . .”

He trails off, and Darcy pictures Peggy Carter and Captain America running around the 1950s with the SSR while Bucky Barnes stayed home to keep house with a sweet little litter of dark-haired pups clinging to his ankles. She kind of wants to cry just thinking about it, and she’s not even one of the people actually *involved* in it.

Bucky couldn’t have that even if he came in from the cold right now. He’s never going to get to have that.

“I’m sure he’s okay,” she says finally, helplessly, because what else is she going to do? She wants to convince herself just as much as she wants to convince Steve. “I mean . . . like, he’s this master covert-ops assassin, he can get by. He’ll be all right alone.”

“Yeah,” Steve agrees with a nod, voice quiet. “But the thing is, he doesn’t have to be.”

Darcy doesn’t really know what to say to that.

Steve stays all morning and between the two of them they demolish the whole box of doughnuts. He lets her make him hot cocoa and take him into the living room to sit him on the floor in front of the couch and give him a shoulder massage, and he tells her stories about the Commandos and Peggy Carter. A couple about Bucky too, but not very many, and absolutely none at all about SHIELD or the STRIKE team, which yeah, Darcy does not blame him for skipping over. He doesn’t seem to mind that she’s awkward in the conversation, and she guesses he’s assuming it’s because of the heat-bond hangover.

It is, a little.

But definitely only a little.

Steve hugs a few of the throw pillows and rubs his face and pheromones all over them before he leaves, which is weirdly adorable and also weirdly gratifying and somehow sort of hot at the same time because now she knows what Captain America would look like as a pillowbiter. And if she hugs said pillows a little herself while she watches a few episodes of Cake Boss on the couch, well, that’s between her and the surveillance system and also J.A.R.V.I.S. and probably Tony, actually, if it ever occurs to him to check.

Thor comes back at noon and Darcy orders takeout for them, and he lets her brush and braid his hair and pretend like she’s not picking things she’d have done for Bucky if she’d had the chance. That arm can’t sit easy on his shoulder, she’s sure, and he hadn’t brushed his hair for himself once the whole heat. They eat on the couch and Thor talks about stuff that makes absolutely no sense to Darcy and then she talks about stuff that makes absolutely no sense to him and it’s nice, and also awful.

She feels better, but feeling “better” actually makes her feel *worse*. Bucky doesn’t have an alpha doing this for him. She’s *positive* he doesn’t. How is it okay for her to let a bunch of omegas way
too good for the human race pander to her protective instincts while he’s alone?

Then Thor has a training room session scheduled with Clint and Natasha and tells Darcy that Tony said she could come by his lab and hold things for him for his turn, so that takes care of the “way too good” omegas, at least, Jesus.

She goes, of course, and makes him a vengefully delicious smoothie and corrals his robots out of his way when they get too excited and try to help. She cleans up the workshop a bit, but not too much because she’s pretty sure it’s more Tony’s den then his bedroom’s ever been and that’d be weird. It definitely smells like omega down there, at least.

So she does that, makes sure Tony actually drinks his smoothies, and then goes for a walk.

Three blocks and infinite weird twisty turns later, the backpack is gone.
traffic light etiquette

Darcy gets over the heat-bond hangover. It’s harder than it should be, especially knowing that Bucky’s got no one helping him do the same, but no one says anything about how long it takes her. She might spend a little more time hanging around the betas in the tower for the calming effects of their pheromones, but otherwise it’s business as usual by the end of the week. Besides, Erik still occasionally needs the supervision and Clint’s cool, so it’s not like it’s an imposition.

She tries to avoid Bruce, admittedly, but that’s more because she’s worried about the effects of the imposition on him. He survives Tony okay, but she doesn’t actually know how many spoons that takes, so yeah, better safe than epically, disastrously sorry.

She concentrates on work, since she’s been pretty damn useless for a full two weeks now. It’s not like Jane really needs her for the science, but the general paperwork’s piling up and someone needs to make sure she and Erik are both wearing semi-clean clothes and have brushed their hair in the past three days and also, you know, eaten. She E-mails Ian and tells him nothing incriminating, for both their sakes, and does not think about the backpack.

She doesn’t even know if it was Bucky who took it. Statistically it wasn’t Bucky who took it. Even if he’d had any reason to go back to that stupid alley, he’d have had to get there pretty much exactly after she’d left not to get beaten to it by somebody.

So she doesn’t think about it. She does the paperwork, she makes Jane and Erik shower like real people and consume things that are not coffee or Pop-Tarts and occasionally leave the lab, even if only to go to Tony and Bruce’s lab. She commiserates about dumb scientists with no sense of self-preservation with Pepper and Rhodey (and internally screams with giddy fangirl glee like every time because Pepper Potts and Rhodey Rhodes), and tries not to die of jealousy every time she sees Jane scent Thor or Pepper affectionately pat down Tony’s hair or Sam and Natasha converge on Steve to fuss at and put their hands all over him while he tries not to laugh--all the sweet, lovey stuff omegas let alphas they trust do for them, although it really doesn’t clear up the whole bonding/not bonding thing with Sam and Natasha and Steve.

All the stuff Bucky isn’t getting from anyone.

Another couple weeks go by like that before Rhodey starts smelling faintly like ozone and Tony starts reeking aggressively of tequila and motor oil, which is no less weird a combination than it was the last time Darcy smelled it. They have a really loud argument in the lab and then both disappear into the penthouse while Pepper starts looking very mildly stressed and reschedules a lot of appointments. Darcy absentely wonders if they’re synced now and also if this ups the chances of all the omegas in the Avengers ending up on the same cycle, because she’s pretty sure Tony and Rhodey were at least two weeks off each other before, and Tony was definitely a full month and a half off from Thor and probably a good two months from Steve, depending on the direction you count in.

And yeah, it’s literally only going to take one bad guy working out exactly which days out of the usual three-month cycle the Avengers are all mysteriously missing on for the world to end up in a whole mess of trouble. Hell, a blogger will probably do it for them before they even think of it themselves.

Bruce would have to break a lot more than Harlem, in that scenario.

Pepper heads up to the penthouse, Steve and Sam take off on the latest leg of their epic Bucky
hunt, Natasha goes with, and Clint gets moody and bored without his BFF around and starts spending all his free time on the range with his incendiary arrows. Jane and Erik are busy with something complicated involving Asgardian weaponry or possibly Asgardian children’s toys, it’s seriously hard to tell, and Thor runs back to Asgard for something, although he leaves in kind of a rush and Darcy doesn’t actually catch what. Bruce looks blissfully at peace alone in his lab, so she makes a point of avoiding it.

It’s quiet at the tower, is her point. Not much to do.

Then two days into Tony and Rhodey’s shared heat (which Darcy has in no way been picturing any of, for the record), J.A.R.V.I.S. relays a video call to the lab.

“What the hell,” Darcy says in bemusement as a holographic screen with Johnny Storm’s face on it pops up overhead. Erik curses and recoils under his desk, and Jane squints suspiciously.

“Hey there, hot stuff,” Johnny greets, managing to get a genuinely impressive amount of leer through the screen. “See, it’s funny ‘cause I’m–and none of you are Rescue, crap.”

“Iron Man and War Machine went into heat,” Jane says, still squinting suspiciously. “She’s with them.”

“Black Widow?” Johnny asks hopefully.

“In Europe, maybe,” Darcy replies, putting down her pen and frowning dubiously at him. She doesn’t really know the guy, though he’s called a few times on superhero business and she’s seen plenty of him on TV. Another stupidly cocky male alpha despite a surprising resemblance to Steve, although at least he and the rest of the Fantastic Four occasionally skip their latest weird science expedition to help save the day.

Also, Tony checked and he’s not a clone. Or the kid of a baby from a secret wartime tryst. Or the clone of a baby from a–anyway, getting off-topic.

“Possibly South America,” she continues, folding her arms on her desk. “Maybe India?”

“My life,” Johnny says mournfully, dropping his head into his hands. “Okay, great, awesome, I’m officially out of available alphas who owe me favors. Someone please tell me there’s another rutter with the Avengers who owes one of them a favor. Please.”

“Natasha Romanoff owes you a favor?” Darcy asks disbelievingly, raising an eyebrow at him. “Wait, scratch that: Pepper Potts owes you a favor?” Natasha actually trades favors for convenience’s sake sometimes; Pepper generally just steamrollers people with money and blithe smiles. And that’s without counting the occasional fire-breathing episode.

“Well, part of said favor may be contingent on me never explaining how she actually owes me it, but yes, yes she does,” Johnny replies, mouth quirking smugly. “But seriously, anyone? Maybe, I don’t know, a fireproof anyone? Like is Thor an alpha, is that a thing?”

“Uh, what?” Jane asks, giving him a bemused look, and Darcy catches up a little late but does, at least, catch up.

“Wait, you’re an omega?” she asks, kind of bemused. Darcy tries not to judge people by appearances, generally speaking, but Johnny Storm absolutely screams “knothead jock”.

“Is that not a thing everyone knows?” Johnny asks, looking equally bemused. “Okay, look, so the thing is I’ve been kinda seeing this Inhuman girl--her name’s Crystal, she’s amazing, remind me to
introduce you next time the world’s ending--anyway, long story short her sister’s pissed about something and she may or may not be on the moon right now working it out and I just really, really need a heat partner who isn’t gonna freak if the sheets get a little scorched. So . . . got any more alpha Avengers? Any?”

“‘Inhuman’?” Erik repeats blankly as he peeks out from under his desk, which is admittedly a really important question but also not actually the issue that currently needs addressed.

“We’re alphas, genius,” Darcy snorts, giving him a dry look and pointing between herself and Jane. Not that they’re Avengers, of course, and normally she’d be nicer to an omega who’s apparently in pre-heat, but he really doesn’t give even a hint of that vibe. And it’s not like she can smell him or anything.

“. . . really?” Johnny says, face lighting up as he immediately gives her a look like she’s fucking Christmas. Darcy eyes him, then gives up. It’s not like she’d ever leave an omega in the lurch, even one she’s really only communicated with through the occasional sarcastic video call, although the whole looking at her like she’s Christmas thing is admittedly helping here.

But seriously, if he smells even slightly like either apple pie or cinnamon, she’s killing something.

“All right, looks like I’m going to the Baxter Building to make a terrible mistake,” she tells Jane with a sigh, closing her laptop to pack up as Johnny makes a delighted noise. “Try to remember to eat, okay?”

“I make no promises,” Jane says, which . . . well, at least she’s honest.

Darcy packs her messenger bag with heat snacks and juice bottles and condoms and a cute little box of candied fruit slices, then catches a cab to the Baxter Building and gets buzzed up by the doorman. She can smell Johnny Storm’s pheromones the moment the elevator doors open, even with as big and full of dubious-looking science experiments as the main floor she’s looking down on is. They’re surprisingly sweet, a heady hothouse-flower combination that Darcy can’t quite pin down; she gets one whiff of them and literally feels her eyes dilate.

“Jesus, no wonder you got the heartbreaker rep,” she says. Johnny ducks into view from behind one of the machines downstairs and grins up at her for a moment before bursting into flames and throwing himself the thirty feet into the air to land on the catwalk in extremely impressive and probably dangerous fashion. Darcy tries very hard not to be wooed, which is hard because being on fire is a really good look for Johnny Storm.

“I try,” he says with a crooked smirk as the flames disperse gorgeously, then grabs her by the hand and drags her straight down the catwalk past a dubious Ben Grimm and his neutral-smelling beta pheromones, down the hall, and into--presumably--Johnny’s room. He doesn’t nest, apparently, or if he does it’s just by halfheartedly making his bed, and it’s pretty casual and cluttered.

And it reeks like hothouse flowers.

“Jesus,” Darcy repeats, and Johnny smirks smugly at her. It smells like he must’ve scented the damn walls, which normally she would find ridiculous but right now is just really, really hot. “You are just . . . wow, you do not screw around, do you.”

“Nah, not so much,” Johnny says, moving into her space with a little grin and lifting his hands to cup her face in his hands. Darcy’s a little surprised--not by the contact, she’s met pushy omegas before, just by the suddenness of it. Something in her gut twinges as she thinks of Bucky and how much he’d held himself back, but she pushes it away. She’s here with this omega, and he needs
her; he deserves her full attention just as much as Bucky did when he needed her.

. . . okay, maybe slightly less. But that’s less a slight on Johnny and more the seventy-year backlog on the things Bucky Barnes deserves in life.

Thoughts like that are not keeping her focused, though.

“Okay, clearly you’re pretty on it already,” she says, lifting her hands to cover the backs of Johnny’s and giving them a little squeeze. At least he’s confident enough that she’s not worried about putting him off discussing things. “What can I do for you?”

“Well, this is a crazy idea, but I was thinking you could knot me,” Johnny replies, waggling his eyebrows at her pointedly.

“Never heard that joke before,” Darcy retorts dryly, giving his hands another squeeze. She’s pretty sure she’d already be kissing him, usually, but after her last heat partner experience, well--she’d just really rather know what she was doing was working for him from the start. “Come on, I’m behind on my tabloids, I don’t know what you’re into this month.”

“Hey, I’m good with whatever, you know I’m easy,” Johnny laughs, leaning in to go for a kiss.

“No, seriously,” Darcy sighs, putting a hand on his chest to stop him. Johnny leans back a little and ducks his head in maybe the only omega-ish gesture she’s ever seen from him.

“You know I’m easy,” he says again, a little differently. “You could, you know. Tell me that.”

“How?” Darcy asks, relaxing slightly. Okay, now they’re getting somewhere.

“Tell me, uh--” Johnny glances at the floor, his semi-permanent smirk fading a little. “That I’m, you know, a whore or whatever. When you’re touching me. And you can be a little rough, if you want. Slap me or shove me around. Tell me I’m stupid.”

“Okay,” she says, watching him carefully. He doesn’t elaborate, so she guesses that’s on her. “Anything I shouldn’t say? Or do?”

“I’m good,” Johnny replies, shrugging dismissively.

“Uh-huh,” Darcy replies slowly, really not sure she believes that but also not sure he’s going to admit to anything straight out either. Because right, cocky fucking bastard, of course he doesn’t want to admit anything straight out. “What’s your safe word?”

“Wow, talking the talk, Lewis!” Johnny snickers, grinning widely at her. “Don’t have one. Not much of an omega if I need a safe word, am I?”

“That’s . . . a theory,” Darcy says, genuinely wondering if every non-superhero-affiliated alpha in the world is just scum. The possibility is seeming increasingly likely as of late. “I’d rather use one, though. Traffic lights okay?”

“Uh--sure,” Johnny says, frowning a little in a way that immediately convinces her he has no idea what she means.

“Green means go, yellow for slow down, and red for stop,” she says after a moment. His frown deepens, but she pushes on before he can get offended. “Repeat it for me, please?”

“Green go, yellow slow, red stop,” Johnny rattles off impatiently, already looking bored. Darcy’s
not really surprised, given what she knows of the guy, but still irritated with pretty much every other alpha in New York and possibly also one currently on the moon.

“Good,” she says, then moves on. “All right, what about other stuff? Any preferences? Like, do you like being fingered, can I do that before I knot you?”

“Well, if you insist,” Johnny says allowingly, stepping back and smirking at her again with the familiar cockiness back in place before turning around and reaching back to pat lightly against the neck of his suit. “Unzip me?”

“That excited to show me your panties, baby?” Darcy asks with an echoing smirk, running her fingers up the line of his zipper and making a pleased noise when his pheromones spike at the touch. All right, she might need to be a little careful, but she’s pretty sure he’s going to make it worth it. And really, like being careful with an omega is even a real imposition. “Oh, you are, aren’t you.”

“Actually, my last pair went up in flames a couple years ago,” Johnny says, grinning back at her. Darcy glazes over briefly at the revelation that Reed Richards apparently did not see fit to design superhero underwear to go with the skintight suits his ridiculously hot brother-in-law, best friend, and mate run around in on the regular, and for the first time she thinks he might not be a complete dick. Or maybe this just means he is an ultra, ultra dick. She’s not actually sure.

“The fact you guys don’t wear underwear might be the best thing I’ve learned all month,” she muses absently, appreciating the view for a moment as Johnny preens under the attention and then refocusing, because he did ask for—“Or is that just you? Are you just that eager for it?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know, alpha,” Johnny replies, grinning even more smugly.

“I dunno, I think I can already tell,” Darcy says, putting a hand on the small of his back to push him towards the bed. “I mean, you want that off so bad, omega. Can unstable molecules not handle getting wet?”

“I’m not wet,” Johnny says, voice going a little breathless.

“That’s a lie,” Darcy scoffs, dropping her hand to cup his ass instead and giving a pointed squeeze. “I can smell what a lie that is. Your hole started dripping the second you found out Jane and I were alphas.”

“So what if it did?” Johnny says, his eyes half-hooded. He looks halfway to drop already, which makes her wonder if he was holding off his heat symptoms all this time or if he just gets off that hard on being talked to like this. Not that it matters, she supposes, as long as he gets what he needs.

“Bend over,” she orders shortly, sliding her hand up his spine to grip the back of his neck. Johnny goes down immediately and catches himself against the mattress, locking his elbows and keeping his feet planted on the floor. “God, you’re so easy. Wouldn’t Crystal be pissed if she saw you sticking your ass out like this for me?”

“She might get off on it, actually,” Johnny snickers, giving said ass a little wiggle. Darcy slaps it sharply, more loud than actually hard, but he still chokes.

“Fucking greedy,” she snorts, digging her fingers in. The fabric’s slick and alien underneath her fingers, something new and strange to touch. “I know you’re gagging for it, whore, but two knots at once?”
Johnny *whimpers* at that, arms nearly giving out for a second; Darcy keeps an eye on them, watching for signs of the *bad* stress. She doesn’t want to leave him in the lurch but she’s still not convinced he’ll use the safe words unprompted, so she needs to be prepared to do the prompting.

“Well, they do say two heads are better than one,” he manages a few seconds late with a strangled laugh. Darcy slaps his ass again for it, harder this time.

“Can you not control that smart mouth on your own?” she demands, still keeping careful watch on the way his head immediately drops and his arms tremble. “Or is all this lip just because you want me to shut you up with my clit? Well too *fucking* bad, sluts don’t get to whine about getting what they asked for.”

“I *didn’t* ask,” Johnny huffs out breathlessly, which is true. But it not being true is kind of the point, as far as Darcy’s concerned. She runs her fingers up his crack and slaps him with the other hand when he jerks at the contact.

“And there you go fucking wagging that slutty ass at me!” she snaps. “Did I say you could do that? Half of New York’s had that, why are you bragging about being sloppy seconds? Stay *fucking* still.”

“Yes, alpha,” Johnny chokes. Darcy pushes her thumb in tight behind his balls and his arms nearly give out again.

“Put your face in the mattress where it belongs,” she orders shortly, pressing in with just the edge of her nail. Johnny goes immediately and without bending his knees at all, face smashed into the tangled blankets and ass presented perfectly. Darcy rewards him by wrapping her fingers around his balls and squeezing roughly through the suit, and he moans.

“Whore,” she growls, squeezing again, and his pheromones spike pleadingly. “Jesus, doesn’t that hurt? Are you *wet* for this?”

“No, alpha,” Johnny manages. Darcy presses her nail in and he tries to squirm away; she tightens her grip on his balls again.

“Don’t *lie* to me, slut,” she growls. “Tell me you’re wet for this.”

“I’m *not*,” Johnny whines protestingly, voice cracking. The tone is petulant but his body’s responsive and his pheromones still smell sweet, all lush and inviting with no trace of distress, so Darcy figures they’re still good to go.

“How stupid *are* you?” she snorts derisively, cupping his balls in her fingers and grinding the heel of her hand into his perineum. “You don’t really think I’d believe that when you’re already squirming like you’ve got a knot in you, do you? You think just ‘cause you’re wearing your suit I can’t tell you’re fucking *sopping*?”

“Alpha,” Johnny whines, pushing his ass back into her hand. Darcy pinches him and he yelps again, squirming forward uncomfortably. “Not--don’t pinch me, feels weird,” he pants, grimacing, and she immediately flattens her hand against his flank.

“How stupid?” she asks.

“Wh--*green*, Jesus, just don’t *pinch* me,” he says in frustration, squirming turning impatient. “C’mon, don’t *stop*.”

Under different circumstances she might’ve wanted more than that in answer, but *don’t pinch*
“Demanding bitch,” she says, slapping his ass again and earning another jolt and stifled moan in response, which just makes her next hit harder. “When you’re all sloppy and stupid just from a little rubbing, too. You’re not even worth knotting, you’d probably cream your suit before I even got it off you.”

“I wouldn’t!” Johnny blurts, pressing his face into the bed. For a second Darcy thinks he’s still defensive and she went back in too hard, but then she realizes that what he actually means is—“I won’t come before you knot me, okay, I won’t.”

“Yes you will,” Darcy snorts, sliding her fingers up his crack again to work her thumb against his hole. “Easy little thing like you, I bet you could come just like this, just me feeling you up through this glorified Spandex you like to show off so much.”

“No, no, I’ll be good, alpha,” Johnny pleads before muffling another whine in the sheets, his shoulders hunching. “I’ll be worth it, I will. Please.”

“Yes!” Johnny chokes, pheromones spiking so hot Darcy’s not sure the temperature of the room didn’t just jump, and she gives his ass a harsh slap with her free hand. He keens into the bed, tilting his hips into the hit, so she hits him again and presses her finger tighter against his hole.

“No,” she says. “Sluts don’t get it every time they shake their ass, they take it when they’re told to.”

“Alpha, alpha please—”

“When I tell you,” she reminds him, tracing a finger up his crack to rub circles against his hole again. The room reeks so strongly of hothouse flowers that Darcy’s not actually sure her clit is ever going to be soft again. “If a stupid whore like you got a knot every time you asked for it you’d spend your whole fucking life getting passed from lap to lap.”

“Ahh–ahhhhh,” Johnny whimpers senselessly, his fingers white-knuckled in the sheets and his breath coming out steam. Darcy internally freaks out a little because it is going to hurt a lot if he bursts into flames while she’s rutting him, but also glazes over because fuuuuck, she just made an omega steam. That is . . . that is distracting. “I want in your lap, alpha, plea—ah!” he cuts off on a Yelp as she slaps him again, this time just behind his balls.

“What did I say?” she snaps, bringing her hand down across his ass again. Johnny turns his head just enough to smirk breathlessly back at her, and the sheets smoke under his hands. Darcy plants a foot in the back of his thigh and shoves, and he collapses against the bed with a sharp exhalation and another elated pheromone spike. She steps between his legs and drops a knee onto the mattress, pressed up tight between them. He immediately moans for it, hips rubbing back. She leans over and braces a hand on the small of his back. “Did I give you permission to do that? Tell me when sluts take it.”
“When--when we’re told to,” Johnny groans, shuddering against the bed.

“That’s right,” Darcy says, rubbing her thigh against him until he’s squirming. She’s frankly amazed he hasn’t soaked right through the suit, the way he smells right now. “And whose slut are you?”

“Yours, yours, alpha, I’m your slut,” Johnny babbles out quickly, tilting his hips back for her. Darcy smacks him again and he bites down on his own arm to muffle a curse.

“According to fucking who?” she snaps. “Did I say I wanted you, idiot? Would your girlfriend get off on hearing that?”

“N-no, I--I--” Johnny trips up on the words, voice stuttering as his shoulders hunch and distress suddenly bleeds into his pheromones, scent and mood both turning on a dime and the atmosphere around him completely changing.

Fuck, Darcy thinks, tensing reflexively. She opens her mouth to ask him for a color, but--

“Red!” Johnny blurts in a panicked, cracked voice. Darcy jerks her hands back off him immediately, alarmed by the level of upset in his tone, and he just as immediately bursts into tears and covers his head with his arms. “Nonono, I didn’t mean it, I’m sorry, I can do it, I can I’m sorry--”

“Shhhhhh,” she manages, immediately hating herself for saying--whichever thing, the not wanting him part or the part about Crystal, either one probably could’ve done it. She should’ve made him tell her more, fuck. “Don’t be sorry, omega, you did so good for me. You used your safe word just like I asked you to. Can I touch you again?”

“Yes, I--I can do it,” Johnny insists, and Darcy lays down on the bed beside him and wonders what the hell he thinks “it” actually is in this situation.

“Come here, omega,” she soothes lowly, wrapping her arms around him and tugging his head in against her neck so he can scent her. “You did do it, sweetheart, you did just what you were supposed to.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” Johnny chokes wetly, burrowing into her tight.

“You’re all heated up, baby. Feeling sensitive is normal,” Darcy murmurs, nuzzling him gently as she pushes a hand through his hair. Johnny should know that as well as anyone, but she knows it can be hard to recognize from the inside. Rutbrain’s the same way. “You miss Crystal a lot, huh?”

“I--yeah,” Johnny admits, voice cracking as he curls in even tighter against her. “I’m not . . . look, we just started dating a couple months ago, okay, and she said it was okay. I just--I wanted it to be her.”

“Oh, baby,” Darcy says, squeezing him tighter with a stricken expression. An omega with their heart set on their first heat with a romantic partner getting left without them at the last minute--she never would’ve said anything even implying Crystal might be upset with him if she’d realized.

Fuck, she should’ve realized, no matter how he’d been acting about it. She hadn’t even thought to ask.

“Dammit, I swear I’m not usually such a freaking freak,” Johnny groans, rolling away and dragging a pillow over his face. Darcy frowns, reaching out to pet his stomach.
"Anybody'd be upset to lose their heat partner at the last minute," she says, voice as gentle as she knows how to make it. Probably not gentle enough, but . . . well, it is Johnny Storm she's talking to. "There's nothing wrong with how you're being. You were perfect for me, baby. You're still being perfect for me."

“Mmmrgh.” Johnny lifts the pillow, grimacing uncomfortably. “It's stupid. I like that stuff. Usually I love that stuff.”

“It’s not stupid.” Darcy kisses his cheek. “Tell me what I can do for you. What do you want?” Johnny frowns, face turning towards her again but eyes flicking down.

“Just--knot me,” he mutters. “Knot me and tell me . . . tell me--”

“Tell you what?” Darcy asks, stroking the side of his face. He grimaces again, but tilts into the contact.

“Tell me you like me,” he says, still not looking at her.

“I do like you,” Darcy replies immediately, kissing his cheek in relief. This is so much easier than the other stuff. “I like you a lot, dude, you are a badass world-saving astronaut who does extreme sports on the weekends and publically sasses super-villains on the regular. What’s not to like?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he says, still grimacing, and Darcy cups his face in her hands and kisses him again.

“I like you,” she repeats between kisses, pressing in close against him. “I like you, I like you, I like you. I wanna feed you candy and kiss you all over and make you feel fucking great.”

“Okay, okay, I get it already, Lewis,” Johnny says, blushing under the attention before wrapping his arms around her and kissing back. His pheromones are sweet and heady and all stirred up again and she rumbles approvingly, running a hand up his back. He stretches underneath it and starts making soft little noises, his fingers curling in the fabric of her sweater.

She remembers, belatedly, that Bucky was uncomfortable rubbing up on the sweater she’d been wearing before, but Johnny doesn’t seem to mind this one. She strips it off anyway, not sure it won’t end up too much for him later, and then the shirt underneath while she’s at it. Johnny makes a delighted noise and goes right for the clasp of her bra. Darcy rolls her eyes good-naturedly and ruffles his hair, then reaches over his shoulder to finally unzip the back of his suit.

“You’re adorable,” she says wryly, helping him peel it off. Unstable molecules are surprisingly easier to strip out of than she would’ve expected, with the vacuum-sealed look of the actual uniforms, but also surprisingly good at restraining scent, because holy shit, do his pheromones get about ten times stronger with it off. “Jesus, you smell so good I might knot right now.”

Also, he was telling the truth about the underwear.

Fuck.

“I will kick you off the bed if you knot anyplace but in me, I swear,” Johnny grumbles, tugging pointedly at her jeans, and Darcy laughs and wriggles out of them, kissing up his throat as she does. He whines impatiently but by then they’re both naked and end up rolling clumsily around the mattress for a while, hands wandering. Johnny is ticklish, which is fucking hilarious, but unfortunately also leads him to finding out she’s ticklish and--yeahhh, okay, they’re never getting anywhere this way.

“I’m Instagramming this,” she threatens, and he laughs at her and grabs his phone off the
nightstand to take a selfie himself. “Shit, no, not really!” she squawks, and they wrestle for it right up until she ends up sprawled over his back and the brat cheats by rubbing his ass back against her clit. “Ohhhh you--you.”

“Fuck me, rutter,” Johnny purrs, rubbing back against her again. Darcy buries her face in his shoulder with a few stifled curses, then rolls off to fumble for the condoms in her bag. Johnny laughs again as she digs to the bottom looking for just one--stupid--thank fuck.

“Assume the position, sweetcheeks,” she tells him with a smirk as she brandishes the condom, and he keeps laughing but pushes his hips up and pulls his knees under himself to present fucking gorgeously, all wet and sweet and downright mouthwatering.

“You are a weird, weird woman, Lewis,” he tells her, grinning into the sheets.

“Says the guy who lights himself on fire for a living,” Darcy huffs as she knee-walks up behind him and rolls on the condom neatly. He just snickers at her and tilts his ass back invitingly, and she has to take a moment to mentally short out at how fucking hot he is. It’s just . . . it’s terrible, seriously, no wonder he’s incorrigible.

“What’s the hold-up, Lewis?” Johnny purrs, smug and clearly perfectly aware of exactly what said hold-up is.

“You’re hot, deal with it,” she snorts in reply, taking herself in hand and pushing into him. He moans happily, stretching like a cat, and she leans over him and drops a kiss behind his ear. “I like you,” she reminds him in a murmur, and he whimpers. And then she rolls her hips in, and he whines. She wonders if the dirty talk and insults followed by praise is SOP for what Johnny likes, but it doesn’t really matter. It’s what he wants, and her protect and provide instincts have only increased since . . . well, since the obvious.

Darcy really wishes she could’ve done better for the obvious.

Johnny makes a whole mess of happy, horny noises as she ruts him, squirming against the mattress and back onto her clit, and Darcy relaxes into it, sets up a steady rhythm that makes him purr as sweet as anything and sends his hormone spikes spiralling wildly out of control. She was wrong about the room before; now it reeks of hothouse flowers, sweet and bright and deliciously cloying, so strong she can outright taste it when she breathes.

“So hot, sweetie,” she husks, nuzzling the back of his neck but not even teasing her teeth--there’s no way he wants a bond-bite and she’s not sure he wouldn’t get distressed with just the offer. “Crystal’s so lucky, I bet she can’t wait to get back to you.”

Johnny blushes and grumbles and whines for her clit and Darcy keeps the same steady pace, knowing it’ll get them there sooner or later, and Johnny spends most of the “getting there” trying to be mouthy with hit-or-miss success. By the time they actually knot, he’s just a purring mess all curled up in the tangled blankets. Tangled and slightly charred blankets.

Darcy’s not complaining, since she’s the rumbling mess all curled around him and also not the charred part.

“Feel better, sweetie?” she murmurs breathlessly against his ear, tightening her arms around him as her breath makes him shudder and clench up around her knot. “Ooo, spoiling me.”

“Shut up,” Johnny purrs in retort, blissfully sated pheromones rolling off him in waves as he turns his head just enough to nuzzle her. Darcy laughs under her breath and nuzzles back, then kisses
down his throat.

“You were perfect,” she tells him, and gets another grumbly purr in response as she tugs him back tighter against her chest. “Totally perfect.”

“Mmm, quit rambling and gimme some of that candy you brought,” Johnny says, snuggling into her contentedly and reaching back with one hand to make grabby fingers at her.

“And a perfect brat,” Darcy laughs, nuzzling him again but already reaching for the candied fruit, because of course she’s already reaching for it. She feeds Johnny a few slices, he purrs some more, and they cuddle up comfortably in his not-remotely-a-nest, and it’s sweet and comfortable and *is* perfect, so far as heat goes. Johnny is warm and happy and his pheromones radiate contentment, and Darcy’s hindbrain is pleased and smug to have her knot filling up a strong, beautiful omega who reeks of satisfaction and the low-simmering desire for as much contact as she can give him.

Except for how Darcy keeps thinking about Bucky, and the uneasy feeling pricking at the back of her mind that makes her feel like somehow she’s left him out in the cold.
Johnny’s heat lasts about two and a half days, and Darcy spends it doting on him with adoring words and candied fruit while he alternately pretends he doesn’t want the attention and basks under it. Basks under it ruthlessly.

It’s pretty fucking adorable, actually.

They spend the last half day just cuddled up in bed while she pets his hair and he waxes poetic about Crystal and how apparently she’s fireproof, although Darcy may be misunderstanding that part. For Crystal’s sake she kind of hopes she’s not; that’d be pretty convenient for her. Probably wouldn’t bode well for the furniture—even with her Johnny scorched handprints into half the bed—but that’s a different problem.

She tries not to think about Bucky, which during the actual sex hadn’t been hard. It’d been the parts between where it was a problem, knotted and nestled in close and thinking about whether or not he was the one who took the backpack, if he’s okay, if HYDRA’s found him, if Steve and Sam and Natasha have found him, if, if, if--

She breathes out. She kisses Johnny’s temple and pets his hair and extolls all his virtues and makes sure he’s hydrated and well-fed and feels appreciated and very, very gently untangles them from each other, and he lets her crash for the night. In the morning she wakes up, they kiss, and they both shower and get dressed and he lets her make him breakfast in the kitchen and feed it to him bite-by-bite while Ben Grimm grumbles behind the newspaper and Reed Richards ignores everyone in favor of his tablet and whatever his other arm is doing stretched out down the hall behind him. Meanwhile, Sue Storm is eyeing him wryly and apparently waiting for him to realize he’s poured coffee in his cereal and creamer in his orange juice. Darcy suspects they’re going to make it all the way through breakfast before he notices that, much less her.

“He gets really into his work, huh,” she says, peering at the man over her glasses and debating if joining Johnny in flicking little bits of hash brown at him would be making herself a little too comfortable. Then again, she spent most of the past three days fucking Johnny stupid, so “comfortable” is really a wide range here.

“You have no idea,” Sue says ruefully, chin resting in her hand. “We’re still waiting for him to notice I’m pregnant.”

“But . . . you, like, reek of bred. You’ve gotta already have missed at least one heat,” Darcy says, blinking at her in bemusement.

“Mmhm,” Sue confirms with a blithe nod. “Ben and I started building the nursery in the spare room two weeks ago and Reed’s walked by it a good thirty times since and not noticed a thing.”

“The man ain’t exactly known for his observational skills,” Ben says, eyeing Reed, who’s typing rapidly on his tablet and doesn’t appear to be hearing a damn thing any of them say. It’s kind of impressive, actually; even Tony usually notices people who are talking about him by name, if nothing else. “Want me to just drop him off the building, Susie?”

“You’re sweet, Ben,” Sue says, smiling at him appreciatively. “It’s fine, I’ve got a bet running with Crystal that when he finally notices he’ll assume it’s Johnny and try to lecture him about responsibility. I’m saving a confetti cannon for it and everything.”
“You are so cool,” Darcy says, more than a little wooed.

“I try,” Sue replies modestly. Darcy decides to flick the hash brown bits, which Reed completely fails to notice landing in his hair, and Johnny buries his giggles in her shoulder. It’s a really nice post-heat morning, and she leaves smelling like hothouse flowers and with Johnny smelling like spice and heat and without even the trace of a hangover.

She makes it a block before she starts feeling like she’s going to puke and calls Ian, hoping he’s on his lunch break or at least between classes. It’s a five-hour time difference, so at least she knows he’ll be awake, if nothing else; Ian never sleeps in past noon.

Well okay, once or twice immediately post large-scale disasters, but she’s pretty sure Sue or Ben would’ve mentioned if anything terrible had happened to London and/or the world while they were rutting. Probably. Almost definitely.

“Morning, Darcy,” Ian says. Thank God for Tony Stark paying the phone bill.

“Oh thank fuck, you’re alive,” Darcy says in relief, raking a hand over her face. “Are you busy?”

“Um--that depends, should I not be alive?” Ian asks, sounding a little alarmed.

“No, you’re probably good,” Darcy says, then stops and chews on her lip uncertainly for a moment. “Well. I mean, as far as I know, anyway, I was rutting the Human Torch the past few days so I’m a liiiittle behind if there’s been another alien invasion or something.”

“I’m just going to turn the news on for a moment, then,” Ian says with some dread, and Darcy hears the TV go on in the background. She doesn’t blame him for checking, considering what their lives are like. Actually now she kind of wants to check too, to be honest. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, besides maybe being attacked by aliens without noticing?” Darcy hedges, gut twisting uncomfortably again.

“Um--yes. Besides that,” Ian replies awkwardly. “Although if there’s been an invasion I don’t think it was much of one, the news is talking about the Premier League.”

“Maybe wait ‘til they’re done with sports, just to be sure,” Darcy says, chewing on her lip again. It is the Premier League.

“What’s wrong, alpha?” Ian repeats, stressing it more this time. She grimaces and stops on the sidewalk like a stupid fucking tourist and nearly gets knocked over, and then breathes out and forces herself to start walking again.

“It’s stupid,” she says. “It’s really, really stupid. And kind of heartbreaking. Or--really heartbreaking. So heartbreaking, like the kind that is not even fucking fair to fucking anyone heartbreaking--”

“Darcy,” Ian says, and she lets out all her breath again, clutching the phone tight.

“I met an omega,” she says. “I mean, not like--there was an omega, I met him, I didn’t meet him. And he needed a heat partner, like, super last-minute and then needed to rush out again right after he came out of it and it was just . . . shit, I got so hungover even with other omegas in the tower, and I know he didn’t have any alphas he could trust to be around and--and fuck, I just rutted Johnny fucking Storm and I feel like . . . oh my god, am I even coherent right now, is this making literally any sense at all?”
“Sort of,” Ian says, his voice going softer. “Are you okay?”

“The problem is him being okay!” Darcy groans, covering her face with her free hand. “It’s been two months and I have no idea what happened to him and one of the hottest omegas on the planet just asked me to be his heat partner while his girlfriend was literally on the moon, I’m not even joking, that is actually where she is even as we speak—”

“And?” Ian asks.

“And I feel like I cheated on a guy who didn’t even feel safe enough to tell me his real name,” Darcy mutters, stopping in her tracks again and ignoring the people around her. She doesn’t care.

"Darcy? Is . . . is this, uh, a bonding thing?” Ian asks slowly. “Did you bite him?”

“He asked me to!” Darcy protests, gesturing sharply in embarrassment. Of course Ian’d guess. She really did not ever expect him to know her this well but--well, of course he does. Of course. “And it’s not like we’re gonna keep it up, the bite was probably gone, like, by that afternoon.”

“That’s . . . bond-bites never clear up that quick,” Ian says doubtfully. Which--well, yes, obviously, Darcy knows that, she’s not an idiot. But Bucky is a super-soldier, and super does not want bonded, and . . .

Bucky probably wanted bonded, at least the way Steve tells it. And he asked her to bite him. And left too soon. And . . .

Fuck. She doesn’t know what Bucky wants, except for not to hurt people. She’s not even sure he wants to stay away from Steve--he might just be scared or upset or worried or any fucking thing and she has no way to know. She’s never going to know.

But her stupid, rutbrained hindbrain feels like she’s supposed to.

“There were these other alphas creeping on him when I got there. Like, really creeping, real bad vibes,” she mutters, tightening her grip on the phone. It’s not anything damning, she can get away with it. “And--he was a big guy, you know? But I don’t think he even knew he could get away from them, the way he was acting. Like, I had to yell at them before he even reacted, and even then I practically had to lead him away by the hand? It was so bad I thought he was in drop at first.”

“And you bonded him,” Ian says. There's no judgement in his tone, but Darcy winced anyway.

“Look, I know how it sounds but there is not a decent alpha on earth who would not have given that man a bond-bite if he asked them for it, okay?” Darcy says, shoulders hunching uncomfortably. She shouldn’t feel guilty--she doesn’t feel guilty. Bucky’s an adult and a person in desperate need of personhood; giving him what he wanted is not even close to something to feel guilty about.

Even if he was upset and unhappy and probably hadn’t been thinking about the heat-bond hangover at the time and she maybe should’ve taken his compromised state of mind into account. But . . . what had she been supposed to do? She hadn’t actually known he’d been planning to bolt first thing and what, she’d been going to treat him like he didn’t know what he wanted? Like she knew better?

Yeah, no, not fucking likely.

So maybe it hadn’t been the smartest idea for either of them, but Bucky’s suffered a lot worse than a heat-bond hangover in his time and she doesn’t have room to complain about getting a little
screwed over by him doing his damnedest to stay free and fucking human. She’d been the one to have omegas who trusted her around to soften the blow; Bucky’d been alone this whole time, doing God knew what God knew where and--and--

She just wants to know he’s okay, dammit.

Except he doesn’t want her to know.

“Are you okay with that?” Ian asks finally.

“Not really my choice, is it,” Darcy mutters, rubbing at her face in frustration. “It’s not--he wanted to leave, and he wasn’t wrong to. Like--I know why he needed to. I’m an asshole for letting it bother me.”

“Yeah, I . . . I don’t think that’s true,” Ian replies slowly. “You’re not taking it out on him, you can feel however you feel about it.”

“He needs me,” Darcy says automatically, then groans at herself and her fucking useless hindbrain. “No, he doesn’t need me. I just feel like he does. But it’s been two months, I’m being a giant freaking creep about it.”

“Weren’t, um, the creeps those first alphas?” Ian asks uncertainly. “Because it sounds like you helped him out when he needed it and your instincts are just a little frustrated because you’re not sure what happened to him after.”

“I mean--yeah, but no,” Darcy says, frustrated. “I should be over it. I should’ve been able to really help him!”

“You definitely helped him,” Ian says. “He was in a bad situation and you helped him get out, and you helped him through his heat how he wanted. Like . . . I mean, there’s nothing an alpha can do that helps like doing what we ask for. The other stuff’s, uh--the protective stuff, and the knotting, and all the . . . I mean, that stuff’s all important, but doing that’s the most important. You know that, right?”

“I really wish I did,” Darcy says, pushing up her glasses to rub at her eyes.

“Well, it is,” Ian tells her.

She should believe him, she knows. He’d know, after all.

It’s just hard to, when she feels like this about it.

Talking to Ian helps, and doesn’t help. Things can’t really help if you don’t let them, Darcy admits to herself, and she still feels guilty and stupid and like she’s done something wrong, even though she’d felt fine this morning and . . . well, most of Johnny’s heat she’d felt fine for, anyway.

Most of it.

She goes back to the tower, refusing to think about the fact it snowed while she was in the Baxter Building and what Bucky did while it was, because fuck her instincts, he is a master assassin who mostly survived World War II and growing up during the Great Depression, the man knows enough to find someplace bearably warm to crash. Hell, if all else fails he’s still got the casualty blanket from her first aid kit, he’d just need to find someplace out of the way to curl up under the thing and he’d be fine. He’s got her hat and scarf and gloves, too, and hey, if he actually found the second backpack he’s got two casualty blankets, even.
She really feels like throwing up.

Tony and Rhodey’s heat is over, and Steve and Sam and Natasha are back and looking much more tired and much less happy than they were after Steve’s heat. The team has dinner together and Darcy makes the mistake of sitting in on it and listening to Steve treat the story of their latest fruitless search for the Winter Soldier like the world’s saddest mission report. It really does not help with the nauseous feeling. Mercifully, Tony moves the conversation along to inappropriate—but-adoring comments about Pepper’s stamina and everyone else’s groaning drowns out most of the depression and at least a little of the guilt.

Darcy should not feel guilty.

Darcy feels so guilty.

Business as usual resumes at the tower, this time without Darcy even needing to get over a hangover. Johnny texts her a couple party invites and Crystal sends her a thank-you bouquet of weird space flowers that Tony and Jane immediately declare they have to do something inadvisable with Science to keep alive, although Darcy’s pretty sure the weird little pebbles Thor drops into the bottom of their vase with a blithe expression do that more than anything else. The way said pebbles glow in moonlight is a pretty big tip-off, for starters.

The flowers are pretty cool-looking either way, even if it’s weird to get flowers from another alpha. Maybe that’s just the kind of thing apparently-not-human people who go have arguments with their sister on the moon are into, though.

So.

Business as usual. Flowers from a maybe-alien alpha, Pepper running to meetings and Tony avoiding them, Natasha and Clint communicating more in sign than speech, Tony and Jane and Bruce arguing over Science while Erik tinkers with something dangerous and Rhodey tries to keep him from killing anyone while they’re distracted. Sam drops by the local VA a few times, Natasha spends a lot of time with decrepit-looking paper files written in Russian, and they have a truly epic thunderstorm that gets Thor so excited that he blows out a few windows.

Darcy does her work and e-mails Ian and her friends from her Culver days and does some more work and does not think about Bucky Barnes.

And Steve sits around looking heartbroken but resigned in quiet, out of the way corners.

He smells like sad apple pie. Darcy didn’t even know apple pie could smell sad, but apparently if it’s Steve Rogers, yes, yes it can.

“Sorry,” she says helplessly the third or tenth time she’s instinctively tried to feed him something or wrap a blanket around him. He smiles at her, but it’s really not a smile.

“It’s okay,” he says. “I’m just tired this time, I think.”

“Sorry,” Darcy says again, barely restraining herself from petting his hair. Then she properly registers what he means--what she’s smelling right now.

Steve’s heat is coming up.

Her heart catches in her throat and she thinks of Bucky vulnerable and emotional and suggestible and maybe still not someplace safe, assuming there’s any place that could be safe for him. Did he find a clinic without cameras? A heat partner he can trust? A heat partner he can at least trust not to
drag him back to HYDRA, if nothing else?

Is he going to come back here?

Does he even understand he could?

Darcy cleans her room; scrubs the bathtub and shower and bathroom floor, vacuums the carpet, folds or hangs all the clothes, straightens all the extremely sturdy new furniture Tony’d bought her without seeming to notice the sudden spike in her Avengers expense account--look, heat with a super-soldier counts as a work-related expense, okay?--and then stares around her room and feels like an idiot.

And then makes sure there are truffles in the fridge, because yes, she is such an idiot.

Sam and Natasha disappear, Steve starts smelling more and more strongly of pre-heat, and Bucky Barnes does not show up on the doorstep, or across the street, or back in that same alley, or even in Darcy’s bed in the middle of the night, which is actually the one she’d been expecting, when she’d let herself expect.

She hadn’t let herself expect very much, mind. She’s not a complete masochist.

And then eighty-nine days on the dot from the day she’d tracked Bucky down to that alley, the elevator door opens in the middle of her evening Cake Boss marathon.

“Um,” Steve says. Darcy stares at him. He smells like the cusp of heat, warm and gorgeous like apple pie and cinnamon ice cream, and is killingly beautiful.

“Nrgh?” she manages in panicked almost-coherence, resisting the impulse to throw the Cheetos bag in her lap behind the sofa and yank Jane’s mom’s afghan over her terrible hair and ratty-ass pajama pants--she swears she’d been planning to take a shower and put on sexy underwear tomorrow, okay, just on the off chance, but this is cozy time, no alpha should be expected to be all handsomded up during cozy time.

“Sorry,” Steve says, looking briefly embarrassed. “Um . . . I was wondering if I could ask you a favor?”

“Nrgh,” Darcy agrees with emphatic incoherence, still staring at him like an idiot. Jesus, and she’d thought he smelled good last time.

“It’s just, Sam and Natasha went to check out a lead on Bucky quick while I was nesting, but they still aren’t back yet . . .” Steve trails off meaningfully, doing the exact fucking same under the lashes look he probably learned from Bucky. Darcy chokes on literally nothing, not even like breathing wrong or anything, she has absolutely no excuse.

Steve gives her a little smile, flushing unfairly prettily, and Darcy throws the Cheetos behind the couch after all. Fuck the Cheetos. Cheetos are shit.

“Um,” she manages awkwardly, voice only a couple octaves higher than it should be. “Do you mean, uh, like . . . what?”

“Well, we took care of that thing with the Fantastic Four last week--” what thing, Darcy wonders in vague hysteria, most higher thought processes destroyed by Steve’s disgustingly long eyelashes and the sweetly hopeful way he’s lingering in the doorway and his fucking American Pie pheromones--“and Johnny Storm said to tell you hi. And said some . . . uh, other things.”
“Oh my god,” Darcy says faintly, not sure if she’s mortified, flattered, or horrified. She can’t do this. She absolutely cannot do this. Steve Rogers, Captain fucking America, cannot be coming to her to ask if--to ask her--he cannot be.

Two heats ago this would’ve been amazing; right now, it makes her feel like the worst scum on the damn planet. Possibly worse than those HYDRA fucks who’d laid hands on Bucky, because at least they hadn’t made Steve trust them--wait, no, actually that’s a terrible analogy, they’d totally done that, that’d been like their whole entire schtick.

So actually she’s just exactly as bad as the crazy Nazi infiltrators who’d destroyed everything he died for and also his best friend in the process.

Yes. Yes, that’s . . . that’s not remotely comforting at all. Good to know. Great.

Oh god.

“I was just wondering--” Steve starts shyly, and then his phone rings and Darcy genuinely almost cries in relief. And because the universe does have some mercy, it’s Natasha informing Steve that they’re back in New York and will be at the tower in an hour.

Thank fuck, Darcy thinks dazedly, feeling like she might throw up. Thank fuck.

“Sorry about that,” Steve says, flashing her a smile. “Thanks anyway.”

Darcy croaks out some manner of sane-person response and he leaves. The apple pie and cinnamon ice cream smell does not leave with him, lingering sweet and strong in the air.

She waits ‘til the elevator’s long gone, then buries her face in the nearest throw pillow and screams.

The next couple days are awful, both because Bucky does not show up and because Steve’s pheromones continue to linger in the hall and Darcy can’t bring herself to use the scent-scrubbers. The tower’s on heat protocol, but that doesn’t do much good when Steve was literally on their floor, and unlike Jane, Darcy does not have Thor cuddling up to her at night smelling like mead and metal and wait, shit, oh--fuck her life.

“This is the worst,” Darcy swears to herself as she double-checks everything Erik’s put together according to the list Jane slipped under the door this morning. The whole floor smells like a super-soldier war hero and alien god-prince want to be simultaneously fucked through the bed and filled up with pups, and also if someone tries to destroy the world that’s their fearless leader and second-heaviest heavy hitter out for the count and they might be a little screwed. Or a lot.

Also, god forbid someone have to drag Natasha or Sam out of Steve’s den right now, because she is pretty sure that would end in blood and tears and possibly a Widow’s Bite to the face.

Also-also, she’s officially woken up hard and horny three days in a row and it is very, very hard not to spend her morning jerk-off thinking about Steve and Thor maybe helping each other out a little, because seriously, she watched way, way too many of those softcore videos as a kid. Besides, she can’t really get off to Jane and putting herself in the scenario just feels weird and invasive, so . . .

Yeah, no, keep making excuses, hindbrain, she thinks, eyeing the ceiling morosely. Because that is definitely going to work out for her long-term.

Definitely not.
Steve has another seven day heat, not counting the day he spends nesting and the day Sam and Natasha take for fluffy aftercare and presumably their own sanity. Thor clocks in at the usual six, also not counting nesting and aftercare.

Darcy suffers.

“That was terrible,” she says. Clint hums back sympathetically from his seat on the other side of the breakfast bar, more absorbed in doing something questionable to an arrowhead with a very tiny screwdriver, or maybe a paperclip. It’s Clint; probably best to let the mystery stay a mystery. “Really, really terrible.”

“Cheer up, Lewis, we’re going on an ill-advised trip to Australia today,” Clint says, lifting the arrowhead overhead to inspect it in better light. Darcy’s starting to suspect the screwdriver/paper clip might actually just be a very shiny cocktail pick. “Apparently Barnes popped up on a very secret security camera somewhere in Perth last night. Which, interestingly enough, is almost exactly the furthest place from New York City a human being can get without hanging out in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Funny, huh?”

“Uh, no?” Darcy says, blinking stupidly. That is probably the least funny thing she has ever heard in her life, in fact. She doesn’t even want to know how Steve looked when they made that connection.

“Yeah, not so much,” Clint agrees, tweaking the arrowhead with his thumb. Flat magnetic clamps spring out and the whole thing sparks like something electric. Darcy stares at it.

She wonders what the heat partners are like in Perth.

“Why are you going?” she asks, although even as she does she realizes it’s got to be because of Natash--

“I know what it’s like chasing a brother who won’t come in from the cold,” Clint says, expression perfectly neutral as he retracts the clamps and sets the arrowhead aside, picking up the next one in line. “And I know what it does to you when they won’t, so . . .”

“So you’re supposed to be sympathetic,” Darcy says, voice coming out flat.

“Basically.” Clint glances up at her. “Course, in an ideal world, I get to be sympathetic to Barnes over how much mind control sucks.”

“Oh.” Darcy deflates. “Yeah, that would . . . that would be better.”

“Just a bit,” Clint agrees. He finishes up with the arrowheads, packs up, and leaves with Steve and Sam and Natasha an hour later. Rhodey’s already back on base and Pepper’s in Shanghai, so Tony immediately starts to bitch and sulk at the lack of convenient people around when he’s in the mood for them and starts hoarding Jane and Bruce and Erik in the lab. Darcy Sneaks Pop-Tarts to Butterfingers to deliver, and otherwise stays out of the way.

She asks J.A.R.V.I.S. to show her Perth on a map, and he does, along with a fuckton of pictures and video. She doesn’t ask him for the footage of Bucky.

Thinks about it, but doesn’t.

She wonders if J.A.R.V.I.S. just . . . doesn’t remember. If “remember” is the right word to use, anyway. But he must’ve seen the footage, right? And he definitely saw Bucky, talked about him to her, called him your lovely young omega like Darcy actually had a claim on him, like Bucky
actually wanted someone to claim him. But J.A.R.V.I.S. doesn’t record people who are giving off heat or rut pheromones when the tower is running on heat protocol, so . . . is that like forgetting, for him?

She doesn’t even know why she’s thinking about this. She never would’ve before.

Yeah, no. She knows exactly why she’s thinking about this.

“The Man of Iron banished me from his forge,” Thor says as he comes onto the floor, looking disgruntled. “Apparently because I do not know his Midgard-specific vocabulary I would be entirely useless in his dissection of the machines that my Jane has gifted him from Asgard.”

“Cake Boss?” Darcy suggests hopefully, holding up the remote; Thor raises an eyebrow at her.

“I would prefer cake, myself,” he says. “Carlo’s Bakery is located in Hoboken, correct?”

“Thor, you’re my favorite,” Darcy says, immediately scrambling to turn the TV off. Tony and the advancement of humankind’s loss is her gain, okay, and she is not remotely ashamed of that.

Also, she totally knows what machines Thor is talking about and is dearly looking forward to Tony figuring out they’re all cheapo kids’ toys Jane got at the Asgardian version of a flea market. Jane was probably dying trying not to laugh when she gave them to him.

They hop in the elevator and head downstairs, Thor still dubious about the vocabulary issue, and Darcy gives him a consoling pat on the shoulder and promises him a whole mess of cannoli, which pacifies him pretty well. Never let it be said the hindbrain doesn’t have at least a couple good ideas about how to soothe ruffled omegas.

They could leave from the penthouse--it’s usually easier, especially for longer flights--but that has a way of getting noticed and lately Thor’s gotten in the habit of taking a cab out of the city before taking off. Darcy does not blame him, on account of all the times Twitter has gotten him mobbed; he handles it pretty well but apparently people are a lot more respectful about the mobbing on Asgard and also aren’t fucking crazy enough to feel entitled to grope any pretty omega they come across, even the alien god-prince. Like . . . holy shit, Darcy had not even known how to process that the first time it’d happened.

Well, she’d tased the offending alpha, but that’d honestly been at least partially for their own sake. The sky’d been rumbling really, really ominously and Thor had looked about the same way it sounded.

Okay, so it’d been to make sure no one tried to stick Thor with a murder rap. But all the same.

So basically, there are various definitions of the word “easier”, and now they take taxis. Gotta do something with the fancy Avengers expense accounts, really. Darcy, for one, is going to put so much cake on hers today.

“They do delivery for just pastry, right?” Darcy asks speculatively as they step out onto the street, eyeing Thor’s arms. They’re gonna be full of her on the way back, won’t be much room for extra pastry. “Pretty sure they’ll do delivery for just pastries, we’re gonna be buyin’ enough. Although if we have to order a custom cake to get said delivery, well, that’s between God and Tony Stark’s credit card bill, isn’t it.”

“Most certainly, my friend,” Thor says, flashing her an amused smile. Darcy grins back, and then something catches her eye just past his shoulder, and she stares. Thor frowns. “Darcy?”
“Uh,” Darcy manages, swallowing hard. She’s imagining things, right? She is definitely, definitely--

No. No, that is definitely Bucky Barnes staring at her from the opposite side of the street with a panicked, guilty look. He’s clean-shaven and wearing a thick hooded jacket and her hat and gloves and the second backpack, and that would make her feel actually pretty good about life and the universe past the way it cuts into her heart, except again, he looks fucking terrified.

“Thor,” she says distantly, not quite feeling in her skin even as something in her chest that’s been clenched up in terror for the past three months finally eases. And then immediately gets way, way worse, because yeah, of fucking course it does. “I am about to do something super-inadvisable, and no matter what happens, if absolutely anybody tries to lay their hands on that omega I need you to bring down the hammer, okay?”

“Which omega?” Thor asks, glancing back. Bucky tenses, and the light changes with either terrible or merciful timing. Darcy rushes across the street even though that’s probably the stupidest thing she could do, except Bucky doesn’t bolt.

That is . . . actually even unlikelier than him showing up to begin with, she can’t help feeling.

She has absolutely no idea what to say to him.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, that does not turn out to be a problem.

“I didn’t mean to,” he hisses at her as soon as she hits the sidewalk, glancing around anxiously and not very subtle covert ops super-soldier at all. Darcy’s not sure if he’s talking about coming back to the tower or getting spotted in Perth, or--wait. Wait, Steve thinks Bucky is in Australia. Steve thinks Bucky’s in Australia reliably enough that four Avengers went literally to the opposite side of the planet after him. So does that mean he was in Australia last night and then immediately flew out here? For what?

. . . and isn’t it at least a full day to fly to Perth from New York, if not way, way more? J.A.R.V.I.S. sure made it sound that way when he was explaining the quinjet’s flight path.

“Are you okay?” she asks, because none of the rest of that crap actually matters when he’s looking at her like that. Bucky freezes up and stares at her in disbelief, and that’s not an answer and her hindbrain is screaming at her to get her hands on him, make him smell like her, like hers, tell everyone else to fuck right off and--

“I threw up,” he says. Darcy blinks.

“I--what?” she manages. Super-soldiers can do that? Bucky’s mouth thins, his shoulders hunching, and he takes a heart-stopping step backwards. Darcy’s hindbrain wants her to hurl herself after him like nothing else, and she only barely manages not to.

“The pills, I took--I threw up,” he says stutteringly. “They didn’t work. I don’t--I can’t go to a clinic. But they didn’t work.”

“What?” Darcy asks, a lot more alarmed this time and just barely keeping herself from moving towards him. Pills. He took pills that didn’t work. Didn’t work how? “What pills, B--baby? What’d you take?”

“It said it’d help,” Bucky says, staring at the ground. “It said it’d fix it, it’d be . . . it said it’d fix it but I took them and it didn’t work. My metabolism--I took extra, I don’t know what I did wrong.”
“It’s okay,” Darcy promises immediately, fingers twitching to reach out. She wants to hold his hands, cup his face, do—something. Any something. Her alpha instincts are fucking vibrating with it. “It’s all right, omega, we’ll fix it. Just tell me what’s wrong, okay?

“I didn’t think I could,” Bucky says, hunching in even smaller on himself and making Darcy’s protective pheromones spike. “I swear, I wasn’t—I didn’t think I could. And I took the pills but they didn’t work and I can’t go to a clinic and I—and I can’t—”

“Come here,” Darcy blurts without even meaning to, can’t stop herself from saying when he looks and smells like that, fear and despair and a painfully familiar vanilla soap, and cringes when she hears the alpha come out in her own voice. Bucky cringes too, except he also darts in and buries his face against the crook of her neck and shakes against her, and he doesn’t flinch when her arms snap up around him.

“I’m sorry,” he says hoarsely, sounding just short of outright panic, and Darcy hates the part of herself that feels more settled and better just having him against her. “I swear I thought I couldn’t. And I tried to—fix it. I didn’t know where else . . . I didn’t know anyplace else that could and wouldn’t . . . and wouldn’t . . .”

“It’s okay, sweetheart, I got you,” Darcy soothes in a low rumble, tightening her grip on him and pressing up on her toes, trying to let him get in as close against her as he’s trying to. She wishes that meant more. “Take a deep breath, okay? Tell me what you were trying to fix and we’ll figure it out.”

“I can’t . . . I can’t have pups,” Bucky whispers against her collarbone, voice audibly pained and his shoulders locked up and trembling.

Darcy doesn’t understand, for a second--she already knows that, he’d told her that last time, what’s he trying to--

“They’ll take them,” he rasps, and ice pours down her spine.
Darcy hyperventilates a little, and Bucky hyperventilates a lot. The hindbrain kicks in just enough to keep her from having an outright panic attack—alphas have been shrugging off terror and trauma and maiming injuries for the sake of protecting omegas for all of human history, okay, this is one of those few cases where the biology is on her side—and she rumbles and croons and strokes the back of his neck, but the damage from those first moments of panic is already done.

“Darcy,” Thor says carefully from the curb, and Darcy gives him a helpless look, tightening her grip on Bucky, who’s already tensing and shrinking in on himself again.

And probably going for a knife, the way his one arm’s crept down.

Fuck.

“Baby,” she says, tightening her grip again and tightening the hand on the back of Bucky’s neck. His arm goes limp against his side, defeated, and all the air seems to go out of him. Darcy swallows. “It’s okay, baby, that’s Thor. He’s my friend. Thor, this is--Jamie.”

“That’s not my name,” Bucky says hoarsely, breathing only barely under control and eyes fixed on the ground.

“May I ask what is?” Thor asks, gentling his voice.

“Thacket,” Bucky replies, own voice dull, and Darcy frowns. She’d assumed he was admitting his real identity for a moment there, but . . .

“Thacket, yeah, you said that last time,” she agrees carefully.

“No,” Bucky mutters, shaking his head, and then enunciates: “The asset.”

“Right,” Darcy says. Her head doesn’t feel quite right, distant and disconnected, but that’s probably for the best because if she let herself absorb this properly just now her pheromones would go fucking batshit and Bucky would be doing something way worse than hyperventilating. And that’s—and that’s--

That can’t be good for a pregnant omega.

Fuck, Darcy thinks with a faint trace of hysteria, digging her nails into the back of Bucky’s neck through the hood. He goes almost boneless under the contact, but there’s a tremble in his spine.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I thought I couldn’t get--I swear I thought--”

“It’s okay, baby, I believe you,” Darcy hushes him in a low rumble, petting the back of his neck again. Bucky makes a hurt noise and hunches his shoulders tight, and she looks anxiously over to Thor, who’s watching in concern. “I--look, come on, come inside with us, okay, we can help. That’s why you came, right, you want us to help?”

“Please, alpha,” Bucky rasps, his eyes fixed on the ground.

“Okay, baby,” Darcy says, tugging him towards the street. His legs buckle and he stumbles on the curb, and Thor immediately steps in and scoops him up bridal-style. Darcy has a panicked second expecting Bucky to try and put a knife in him or his metal arm through him, but instead Bucky just
makes another hurt noise and then lets out a little keen--the most omega sound that Darcy has maybe ever heard, and one she’s more used to hearing when the omega’s burning up with heat and begging for her to come make it better.

Except worse, because Bucky makes it so quietly that it sounds like he has zero expectation of anyone answering it.

“Shhhh, no, it’s okay,” Darcy soothes, grabbing his arm and breathing really carefully before she can start freaking out again. Bucky’s already breathing too quick. “It’s all right, Jamie, Thor’s my friend. He just wants to help.”

“I’m not injured,” Bucky grits out without looking at either of them, his arm tense under her hand.

“My apologies, but you do not move as a man uninjured. Falling when gravid is dangerous,” Thor says carefully, and Bucky presses his lips into a thin line and refuses to look at him.

“It’s okay, sweetie, we just want to help,” Darcy says again, tone as low and soothing as she can make it without letting her alpha voice get involved. “Just let us get you inside, okay? I know you can let us help you.”

“Mm.” Bucky’s lips whiten and he still won’t look up. It’s not encouraging.

He’s not stabbing Thor and running either, though, so that’s . . . something.

“It’s okay,” Darcy repeats, squeezing his arm. “I just want to give you what you want, yeah? I mean, I did okay at that before, right? Like, that went all right, you seemed to like it.”

“I felt bad after,” Bucky says, still not looking at her. Darcy’s heart sinks and her hindbrain cringes.

“Me too, omega,” she manages, giving his arm another squeeze. “I was--I got really worried about you. Were you okay?”

“. . . yes, alpha,” Bucky says quietly.

For a master covert-ops assassin, he’s a really awful liar.

Darcy takes a breath. Lets it out. Drops her hand from Bucky’s arm and--

Bucky whines, very quietly, and Darcy wants to throw up and also drag him back to her den and put him in her closet and never ever let anyone else touch him.

“Sorry,” she says, lifting both arms this time and trying to figure out if she can reach high enough to hug him like this, maybe let him get a little of her pheromones on--

Bucky practically lunges out of Thor’s arms to latch onto her and if Thor were slightly less ridiculous in the super-muscles department he’d probably have knocked her right over and taken himself with her. As it is she still stumbles and then Bucky lifts her right off the sidewalk. Darcy squeaks in surprise and Thor and Bucky both adjust their grips and balance in ridiculously improbable fashion and then the next thing she knows she’s tumbling into Bucky’s lap in an awkward pile.

Well, if the passerby hadn’t already noticed there was an Avenger on the street, it’s definitely obvious now. Nobody else would’ve been able to pull off that move.
“Little warning next time, guys?” Darcy suggests wryly, although Bucky’s pheromones finally smell less distressed so she can’t really complain. He squirms uncomfortably in Thor’s arms, pushing her hips back so she won’t be sitting on his stomach, and she winces and reorients herself more carefully. That . . . probably is not comfortable for him right now, no. “Sorry.”

“My apologies, Darcy,” Thor says sincerely, then glances at the surrounding pedestrians, who even fueled on New Yorker apathy are having trouble restraining themselves from staring. Bucky tucks his face into Darcy’s neck to better hide, or maybe just to scent her. She’s got no way to know which, under the circumstances. “Perhaps we’d best move on.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m gonna support that idea,” Darcy agrees, already certain this is ending up in the back pages of a tabloid with a weird headline and really hoping that no one’s phone got a clear shot of Bucky’s face. Well, he’s wearing gloves and the hat and hood are both up, so chances are at least not completely terrible. Thor checks for traffic and then steps into the street. Bucky tenses, tightening his grip on Darcy, and Thor gives him one of his big-cat purrs.

“I assure you, Asset, the Avengers abide by the rules of hospitality,” he says. “No harm will come to you inside our tower.” Bucky doesn’t acknowledge him, his pheromones still tinged with that last little bit of distress, and Darcy pets his hair and glances at Thor in concern. He looks troubled, but not bothered, and they head into the tower.

“J.A.R.V.I.S.?” Darcy asks as soon as they’ve made it through the front door and into the lobby, trying very hard to project calm and confidence for Bucky when mostly what she feels is panicked and ridiculous and uncomfortably positioned. “Like, sorry to interrupt the science convention but can you ask Tony and Bruce to meet us? Just . . . wherever’s good for them, it doesn’t matter. Kind of a mini-emergency.”

“Of course, Miss Lewis. Mr. Stark and Dr. Banner can be found in Mr. Stark’s fabrication lab,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says as the elevator doors open for them. Bucky flinches at the word “lab” and Darcy hates herself a little. Or a lot. She really did not think that one through at all.

She really, really wishes she had.

The elevator starts moving. Darcy slips down off Bucky’s lap and nearly falls over, although that’s mostly because he keeps his arms around her neck and again, they would probably all knock over if Thor weren’t built like an alien Mack truck. Thor lets Bucky down carefully and Darcy resists the irrational urge to touch his stomach. He obviously doesn’t want the contact there, for one thing, and even if he didn’t care about that she doubts he’d want the reminder either. He looks sick, and since obviously it’s not literal sickness . . . yeah.

Well. Maybe it is, actually. Morning sickness is a thing, right?

The elevator stops, J.A.R.V.I.S. announces them, and they step out into the fabrication lab. Tony looks exhausted and annoyed and is wearing grease-stained jeans and an impression of the couch upholstery on his cheek; Bruce is sitting in a chair, looking very deliberately calm. She’s not sure if J.A.R.V.I.S. has ID’ed Bucky and warned them or if that’s just because he’s Bruce. Like . . . it is Bruce.

She really hopes it wasn’t actually a warning.


“Uh. Hey,” Darcy says, wincing. “A little?”
“You just recruited two of the finest scientific minds on the planet for a little emergency?” Tony asks, expression dubious.

“...yeah, uh, not at all,” Darcy mutters, grimacing, and grabs a stool to pull over for Bucky. She doesn’t want him stumbling again. She fusses him into it and it soothes her hindbrain enough to help her calm down, and hopefully does the same for Bucky, but ... yeah, no, she’s not really banking on that. “Really not a little emergency.”

“What’s the problem?” Bruce asks, frowning faintly, which is as always super fucking terrifying. Darcy represses the instinctive flinch, then steels herself. And, because she’d told herself she would follow Bucky’s lead no matter where it led--

“This is the asset,” she says, gesturing to Bucky, who tenses at the attention. Bruce frowns (terrifyingly!) in confusion; Tony takes one look at his face and his eyebrows shoot straight up. Okay, so J.A.R.V.I.S. didn’t ID them outright, apparently. She really hopes Tony keeps his mouth--well, not shut, she’s not an idiot, but at least ... muffled. A little. “He’s--we’re having a problem. That we need fixed.”

“A problem. That needs fixed,” Tony repeats, eyeing her dubiously.

“He’s pregnant,” Darcy says quickly, because God knows what Tony’d say given the room to talk in. She tries not to notice Bucky’s cringe. “He tried to have a medication abortion, but he has an accelerated metabolism and it didn’t take. He just ended up throwing up the pills.”

“Riiiiight,” Tony says, still eyeing her. “All right, sure, of course I get woken up in the middle of the--”

“--day--” Bruce interjects, and Tony makes an irritated noise and waves him off. Darcy seems to recall him kicking Thor out of the lab less than an hour ago so he could fuck with Asgardian kids’ toys, but whatever.

“--middle of the whatever for superhuman abortion pills, because that’s definitely my area of expertise all right--”

“When was your last heat?” Bruce asks Bucky calmly, sitting down across from him as Tony continues ranting in the background. Bucky grimaces and retreats into his coat as much as he can.

“Ninety-four days ago. With, uh, Darcy Lewis,” he mutters, staring at his knees.

“And when did you try to abort?” Bruce asks.

“Eight days ago, when my heat didn’t come and I realized I’d missed my last cycle,” Bucky says, still staring at his knees. “I didn’t--remember. Before.”

“Do you remember when your last cycle was before the heat?” Bruce asks carefully, and Bucky lets out an ugly, humorless laugh and shakes his head.

“No,” he says. “Thought I was infertile. They said it was interfering.”

“Interfering?” Bruce frowns, and Darcy’s stomach sinks. She recognizes that tone. That tone is about to make her want to goddamn hurt someone.

“My heats were too long. Cycle was too heavy, pheromones were too strong. And I kept ...” Bucky hesitates like he’s not quite sure, shoulders going tight, then breathes out and goes on. “The third time it happened they said ‘we don’t have time to clean the damn thing out every time you
fucks can’t keep your knots in your pants’, and then they put me under and then I . . . then I didn’t get pregnant again.”

This, Darcy thinks, is the literal worst silence of her life.

“I’ll be right back,” Bruce says after a long, long moment, then gets up and leaves the lab. Tony drops down into his abandoned seat, jaw working tightly.

“Right,” he says brusquely as soon as the door swings shut behind Bruce, planting his hands on his thighs. “So let’s talk superhuman abortion pills, then.”

They talk. Tony asks questions and cross-references with J.A.R.V.I.S. and asks J.A.R.V.I.S. questions, and J.A.R.V.I.S. asks questions too, and Bucky answers every single one with a dead, blank expression and a completely emotionless scent that makes Darcy want to clamber up a wall and fucking fight somebody. Very specific somebodies who with any luck mostly died in DC but of course Bucky Barnes is not that lucky a human being, Bucky Barnes does not get nice things, so yes, yes, there are definitely people out there who Darcy wants to fight right now.

She wonders if that empty-eyed look is what he was like in the HYDRA labs that tortured and wiped him in pursuit of “maintenance” or for the “greater good” or--whatever excuse they gave him, if they even bothered to give him one. To even have one.

She wonders if he screamed and cursed and spat at them and murdered every single one that got within arm’s reach.

That is not the kind of thing she can afford to be wondering right now.

“All right, so what was your cycle like before?” Tony says, fingers tapping impatiently at one of J.A.R.V.I.S.’s projections.

“I don’t remember,” Bucky replies dully.

“Right, of course, that would only be useful information,” Tony mutters. “Fine, somebody call Rogers, ask him. J.A.R.V.I.S.!”

Bucky goes dead-white at that, and Darcy grimaces and closes her eyes. Okay, so they’re not pretending they don’t know who Bucky is anymore. Apparently. That’s . . . that sounds like a Tony Stark-quality plan, yeah.

“Don’t call him,” she says. “They were synced up. Seven-day heats, ninety-day cycle.”

“Jesus,” Tony says, eyebrows shooting up. “Wait, hold up, how the hell do you even know that?”

“I really don’t want to talk about that right now, okay?” Darcy replies, still grimacing. “Look, just--can you guys do it?” She can’t stop thinking about how Bucky looked on the sidewalk, the panic and fear she smelled on him there that still lingers on his clothes. About the empty look in his eyes now, and the fucking stupid way she’d reacted when he’d told her he wasn’t fertile, and . . . and too many other things, really.

“You’re kidding, right? I mean, I’m going to have to learn a whole hell of a lot about reproductive biology I didn’t previously know, but hey this is probably good for me, this is probably information I should have as a proud and definitely-never-breeding breeder,” Tony rattles off distractedly, flipping through another set of projections. “I mean I could just get the ‘regular human’ kind of abortion, of course, but I did get my tubes tied for a reason, after all, that’s--”
“Tony!” Darcy bites off in frustration, teeth gritting.

“All right, all right!” he says, putting his hands in the air and giving her an offended look. “Look, we figured out how to make painkillers that work on Cap and Bruce nearly figured out how to sedate the Hulk, and then Pepper and the Extremis thing—”

“Tony!”

“We can do it. Probably,” Tony says, then frowns. “Well, pretty probably. Semi-probably.”

“Tony, for god’s sake—” Darcy growls in an alpha-tinged rumble, baring her teeth.


Bucky doesn’t look, still, and doesn’t say anything. He strips off his gloves and hat and tucks them into the pockets of his jacket, very careful about the process in a way that makes Darcy want to growl even louder.

He doesn’t look like he did when Tony was asking questions anymore, though, not so lax and blank—he’s tense now, and his eyes keep darting around the room. He’s keeping his line of sight low, though, like he’s trying to avoid any risk of accidental eye contact. Darcy does not imagine elaborate scenarios for why that might be and tells herself he’s just uncomfortable and that is all. She cannot deal with this situation with her hindbrain in murder-mode.

“Baby?” she asks, leaning down towards him--she can’t quite bring herself to call him “Asset”, if that’s even what he actually wants and not just some terrible leftover bullshit from HYDRA. At least not yet; not before she has to. “Are you okay?”

Bucky’s eyes flick up to hers, but he doesn’t say anything. He’s still tense and too pale. He looks like he did in the bath, much too small for someone so big and much too uncertain about something that should be really, really simple. Darcy has no idea how to get an answer out of him.

“Baby,” she says again, voice quieter this time. Tony’s probably going to be an ass about the sweet talk, but she’s got a really limited list of conversational techniques to work with here. “Please talk to us. I know it’s harder when it’s not, uh, physical stuff--I know it’s hard, but you were so good for me last time, I know you can do it.”

“Are you seriously baby-talking the murder machine? Seriously?” Tony asks.

“Shut up, Tony,” Darcy says, teeth gritting again. If he were an alpha or beta she’d be snarling it, and frankly it’s hard enough not to as it is.

“No, no, that’s very cute, it’s actually kind of precious—”

Bucky grimaces, and Darcy’s teeth bare instinctively.

“Shut up, Tony!” she barks, voice harsh. Tony startles, then gives her an incredulous look.

“Did you just alpha voice me, Lewis?” he asks disbelievingly, looking torn between being offended and bursting into laughter. Darcy turns bright red.

“Could we just--I’m sorry, okay, just could we focus here?” she says, grimacing at herself. Accidentally alpha voicing an omega who’s almost old enough to be her mother--yeah, she’s not living that one down anytime soon.
“Hey, don’t look at me, I’m apparently the only one who *is* focused here,” Tony snorts, rolling his eyes. Darcy only barely bites back a growl. God, she is really just way too damn irrational about--this, all of this.

*Bucky*. She’s irrational about Bucky.

She doesn’t even know why, it’s not like she . . . not like she heat-bonded him and knocked him up and then had him run off without even coming down properly first, fuck, of *course* she’s irrational about him, *fuck*. Fuck.

“Look, you would want people checking up on you if it were the other way around, right?” she says in frustration, scowling at Tony. “You’d want someone to make sure you were okay!”

“I’m okay,” Bucky says flatly. It is such a blatant lie that Darcy doesn’t even know how to approach responding to it. Thor lays a hand on Bucky’s shoulder with a low lion-purr and Bucky’s blank expression flickers into confusion. “I’m okay,” he repeats, sounding unsure.

Thor purrs a little louder, steady and soothing, and Bucky’s eyes dart around the room anxiously, still too low for eye contact. Darcy, again, does not let herself theorize on the source of the reaction, and drops into a crouch in front of him, wrapping his hands up in hers. He tenses when she touches the metal one but doesn’t pull away, and she takes a steadying breath to force herself to stay calm. Or the closest approximation of it she can manage, anyway, faced with--with--

She’s not going to process what she’s faced with right now, actually, it’s definitely better not to process this right now.

“Omega,” she murmurs quietly. “You’re not okay. Please tell me why.”

“They’ll take them,” Bucky says, hunching over to hide his face behind his hair. It only sort of works, with her on the floor. “They’ll--I need to fix it. I *have* to.”

“Baby, I swear, Tony and Bruce can figure out just about *anything*. If they can’t come up with a pill to do it they’ll work out something else,” Darcy promises, squeezing his hands, and Bucky cringes. She continues not to think about the kind of medical procedures he’s probably picturing, because she’s clearly having enough trouble keeping her pheromones under wrap as it is.

“*Have* to?” Bruce asks from the door, voice quiet and careful. Bucky nods jerkily, arm whirring distressingly as his fists tighten under Darcy’s hands.

The bottom drops out of her stomach.

“Wait,” she says slowly, staring at him. “Because--you mean because you think HYDRA will take them.”

“I’d fuck up,” Bucky says tightly. “I’d be slow and more noticeable and they’d be able to--I’d need things, they’d be able to *watch* for that. And if I . . . if I had--I wouldn’t be able to--”

Darcy allows herself, for one moment, to picture a HYDRA STRIKE team catching up with a heavily pregnant Bucky. Catching up with a Bucky with *pups*, tiny and sweet and defenseless little--

Her head swims and her hands go white-knuckled around his, nausea rising in her throat. She wants to throw up.

“*Fuck,*” Tony mutters. Bruce lets out a very slow breath, green glinting in his irises, and Darcy . . .
Darcy remembers Steve talking about “after the war”, about . . . fuck. Fuck, she she’s so stupid, Steve flat-out told her and she didn’t even . . .

Fuck.

“Okay,” she says as steadily as she can force herself to. “But what if . . . if they couldn’t, like, if they wouldn’t--would you want to keep the pups then?”

“But they will.” Bucky lifts his head just enough to give her a dull-eyed look that makes her feel even sicker. The certainty in it is some kind of agonizing to see.

“But if they couldn’t,” Darcy repeats slowly, forcing her grip on his hands to loosen before her nails end up digging too hard into the biological one. “Would you want to keep the pups then?”

Bucky’s face crumples and he shrinks in on himself again, shoulders hunching. Darcy’s heart sinks and she lets go of the metal hand to reach up and cup his cheek instead. Bucky stiffens, eyes going wide and nervous as they dart around the room again. He has to know she won’t hurt him, she thinks--wouldn’t let anyone in the whole damn tower hurt him, if that was even a concern--but that just makes it worse that he’s still having this much trouble answering her.

“Baby,” she says as tenderly as she knows how to, trying to pretend the asking isn’t killing her, “do you want to keep the pups?”

“Yeah,” Bucky whispers, eyes on the floor and voice so low Darcy can barely hear it. She thinks she might cry. Or snarl. Bruce and Tony exchange looks over their heads and Thor shifts back, folding his arms over his chest.

“Right,” Darcy says, gritting her teeth and breathing out again. “Okay then. Uh, Tony--”

“Sure, of course.” Tony throws his hands up in the air. “‘Feel free to bring people over’ absolutely included moving in pregnant WWII-era super soldiers on the run from Neo-Nazis, of course it did.”

“Good, because that’s what’s happening,” Darcy retorts tersely, rubbing her hand down Bucky’s neck to squeeze his shoulder. “We’ve got, like, four guest rooms on the Thor floor alone, okay, there’s plenty of room. Hell, we’ll lock down our whole stupid floor if you feel safer that way.”

“I can’t stay,” Bucky says, visibly balking at the idea.

“One with child should not be abandoned to the battlefield,” Thor says firmly. “Most certainly not one who carries the child of one of our house.”

“Also Cap would literally kill us if we let you leave without at least implying you could stick around, stomach parasites or no,” Tony points out meaningfully, mercifully reasonable for once. Well, aside from the “parasites” line, anyway. “Possibly also Wilson and Romanoff, actually, and after this weekend Barton might throw in just for the hell of it.”

“I do not understand,” Thor says, frowning at him.

“Yeah, about that,” Darcy says, wincing as Bucky grimaces. “Remember that guy they’re looking for in Perth?”

“Ah,” Thor murmurs, his eyes flicking back to Bucky and expression softening. “That I do understand.”
“So yeah, new guest on the Thor floor,” Darcy says, exhaling roughly. “It’ll be great, we’ll make up a den and ramp up the security system to eleven. Fun times all around. Actually let’s go for, like, fifteen, there’s a fifteen, right, J.A.R.V.I.S.?”

“Something can be arranged, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. assures her. Tony makes an offended noise.

“Sure, why not, let’s plan around the building owner, that’s absolutely how it works,” he says in exasperation, rolling his eyes.

“Okay, you explain to Captain America why we put his pregnant best friend out on the street, then,” Darcy retorts, narrowing her eyes at him.

“Uh, no, absolutely never,” Tony replies, grimacing at the thought. “You could’ve mentioned needing to upgrade your furniture after the last redecorating, though, since I have now timed that out and realized why you needed it. Now we’re gonna have to buy you new shit all over again.”

“It’s not like he’s going to have a heat anytime in the next six months, Tony, Jesus,” Darcy says in exasperation, shooting him a look. Also, she’d upgraded when she’d bought the new stuff. What kind of alpha did he think she was?

“Maybe that’s a discussion for later,” Bruce says. He looks down at Bucky. “Have you eaten today?” Then he pauses, and rephrases: “When was the last time you ate?” Bucky glances at Darcy, and she winces--she’s the alpha here, she should’ve asked that. She should have thought of that.

“Monday,” Bucky says after a moment, expression uncomfortable. “I think. There was--Monday.”

It’s Thursday.

Darcy breathes in. Out.

“Okay,” she says carefully. Then her hindbrain kicks in with a vengeance and she yanks open her messenger bag and starts digging through it in pursuit of a granola bar or gummy worms or literally anything edible, it doesn’t even matter, he needs to eat something. She finds an abandoned package of Pop-Tarts that were probably intended for Jane at some point and shoves them at Bucky, then resumes pawing through her bag because seriously, that’s not pregnant omega food.

She finds a half-empty bag of candied fruit she’s pretty sure is left over from last month with Johnny and ignores the irrational twinge of guilt--actually not that irrational, now, considering what her hindbrain must’ve been thinking all this time--to push it on Bucky, then goes back to the hunt because that’s only barely an improvement.

“You know I have, like, actual fruits and vegetables here,” Tony mentions, pointedly tipping his head towards the mini-fridge his robots keep the smoothie ingredients in.

“Then freaking get him some, oh my god, Tony!” Darcy snarls, already shoving her bag onto the nearest table so she can hurry over to it and tug open the door. God, of course Tony let her give him Pop-Tarts when he actually had real food around.

“No, no, you seem on top of things, Lewis, you got this,” Tony says contentedly, leaning back to watch. “God, alphas are hilarious.”

“Suck my knot, Stark,” Darcy snaps irritably, arms already full of just about everything recognizable. Some of the crap in here is clearly rich-people vegetables and not to be trusted--God knows what it tastes like, much less how to actually eat it--but there’s enough things that aren’t
ninety percent leaf that they can at least make a start on feeding Bucky something decent. “Do you like kiwi, baby, oh and there’s raspberries—wait what the hell, these are yellow, Stark—”

“Raspberries come in yellow!”

“Oh my God, in what universe?!”

“As a matter of fact—”

“Why don’t you just take him up to your kitchen,” Bruce suggests, voice mild but dry and pheromones pointedly increasing. Bucky’s eyes go half-lidded and he leans a little towards him, then seems to realize what he’s doing and straightens up again uncomfortably, expression wary. Darcy wonders how many beta doctors used to—Darcy does not wonder, Darcy does not wonder a fucking thing.

“Kitchen, yes, kitchen sounds good,” she says, abandoning Tony’s smoothie supplies entirely and looking back to Bucky. He hasn’t opened the Pop-Tarts and it doesn’t look like he’s touched the candied fruit either, which makes her hindbrain nervous. Is he sick? Does he just not like it? Is—she shakes her head, quick, and huffs out a sharp little breath. “Is that okay, baby?”

“Yes, alpha,” Bucky replies slowly, sounding like he doesn’t quite know the answer and is just going with the easiest thing. Darcy imagines him sneaking out in the middle of the night and feels sick all over again.

“Okay,” she says. “I’ll make you something good, all right—um, I mean, I’m not a great cook or anything, but, like . . . something.”

“Yes, alpha,” Bucky repeats, looking uncertain as his eyes flick around the room again.

Tony and Bruce exchange looks, then give Thor the same look, and Darcy ushers Bucky out of the lab. A little of the tension seems to drain out of him once they’re moving again but he stays hunched in on himself, wrapping his coat tight around his body.

Thor follows them into the elevator probably to make sure Bucky’s not lying and going to murder her and get into the vents or something, and Tony and Bruce disappear deeper into the lab, hissing at each other. Thor looks after them, dubious, and then the doors shut.

“Someone must explain to me how the man with next to no hearing remembers the range of his teammates’ senses better than those with perfect ears,” he says. “That is at least the fourth time this week Stark and Banner have made an aside that they meant to go unheard within earshot of the person they meant it to go unheard by.”

“What, did Tony say something dickish?” Darcy wrinkles her nose, confused. Not like that’s new, but it’s not like he usually waits on that kind of thing.

“They’re worried,” Bucky mutters, looking at the floor. “Anybody’d be worried.”

“Perhaps, but I remain troubled that they cannot infer the range of your hearing after all this time spent as Steve’s shield-brothers,” Thor says, unimpressed. “And they forget his as well. Perhaps our training sessions have grown lax if they have such troubles.”

“Yeah, okay, but let’s worry about that particular problem later,” Darcy says. As long as it’s not directly relevant to what’s going on with Bucky right now, she doesn’t really care. They get to the Thor floor and Darcy beelines for the kitchen, only peripherally aware of Thor purring quietly at Bucky, who’s completely silent.
Which is . . . not unexpected, really.

Thor says goodbye--“takes his leave”, more accurately, since it’s Thor--and disappears into Jane’s room, which may or may not be a good thing. He’s probably giving them space while staying close enough to kick Bucky’s ass if it comes down to it, except Bucky is pregnant so Darcy has no idea how that’s supposed to work. She rifles through the fridge, which is tragically devoid of leftovers but at least has vegetables and fruit and yogurt, and comes up with two cups of yogurt, a box of strawberries, and another one of blackberries, all of which she plants on the counter in front of Bucky with a spoon.

“Yogurt?” Darcy asks hopefully as she pulls out a stool for him. “Is yogurt good? Are you having cravings yet, is that a thing yet? I will totally make you, like, a sandwich or something with actual meat in it too, but like, to start is yogurt good.”

“I’m not heated up,” Bucky says uncomfortably, tucking his hair behind his ear as he takes the offered seat--or obeys the implicit order, but that’s a little too much to worry about right now. Darcy doesn’t even know how to answer that, because of course he’s not heated up, he’s pregnant. He still hasn’t eaten the Pop-Tarts or candied fruit, but he’s also still carrying them, so . . .

“So”, she guesses.

“I know?” she tries finally. “I mean--you’re hungry though, right?”

“No,” Bucky says, then pauses. “I don’t think so. Maybe.”

Darcy takes an instant and hates, blindly and without direction, and then breathes out slow before the reaction can poison her scent.

“I want to make you lunch,” she says. Is this a HYDRA-needs-to-die-in-a-fire thing or a the-forties-were-ridiculous-about-omegas thing? Steve’s mentioned a few of those before and they were definitely . . . they were definitely a thing, oh man. Who knows if Bucky even remembers the forties, though. “Like, I don’t care if you’re not heated up, I still want to. Is that okay?”

“Oh--okay,” Bucky says slowly, glancing around the kitchen restlessly. He looks upset and the hindbrain does not like it, but since he’s already bred the best idea it’s got is feeding him. Admittedly, Darcy doesn’t cook much--her parents weren’t that into it and basically her entire litter grew up on frozen foods and cereal--but she can at least handle, like, ramen and Hamburger Helper.

“Beef and noodles okay?” she asks, since she can’t exactly expect him to know the brand names. Bucky gives her a helpless look and shrugs, and that’s--well, it’s going to have to be good enough, Darcy guesses. “All right, then, coming right up.”

She gets the big pan on the stove and heating up, then digs the meat out of the fridge and the Hamburger Helper out of the pantry. It’s not exactly fine dining, but at least it’ll be quick. God knows she’s fed it to Jane enough times.

. . . Jane was never pregnant, of course, so that’s a whole other thing.

A whole . . . a whole big, terrible thing.

Darcy dumps the meat in the pan and breaks it up with a wooden spoon and tries not to freak out about any of the stuff she’s been doing her damnedest not to freak out about the past three months. She doesn’t think about Steve or HYDRA or WWII or even harmless stuff like how Bucky’d looked underneath her, pressed back into her sheets with wet hair and flushed glitter-dusted skin,
the little keening sounds he’d made between pleas for her knot, the--

That is not a harmless thing to think about, Darcy fumes at herself, smushing a chunk of ground beef with the flat of the spoon.

She looks at him. He still isn’t eating, and she tries not to frown. Super-soldier or not, he said he hadn’t had anything in days--how is he not starving?

Then she thinks about it.

“Do you need permission?” she asks carefully. Bucky’s mouth thins.

“No,” he lies. Or--maybe doesn’t exactly lie, but . . . something.

“It’s for you, omega,” Darcy says, still careful. “I like it when you let me take care of you. Remember?”

“. . . I remember,” Bucky replies quietly. He tears open the Pop-Tarts and starts breaking off a bite at a time, chewing mechanically but steadily, and Darcy’s shoulders loosen a little. Although she kind of wishes he’d gone for the yogurt, now, but her hindbrain isn’t exactly complaining about watching him eat the first thing she gave him either. He needs to eat a lot more than that anyway, under the circumstances.

He’s still not looking at her, though; his eyes are fixed on his lap. At least he’s responsive, but . . .

“Is it okay?” she asks, mostly just to keep him talking.

“Yes, alpha,” he says. He doesn’t lift his eyes.

It occurs to Darcy that he may not actually be looking at his lap.

“Are you okay?” she asks, forcing her own eyes to stay off his stomach.

“Don’t know,” he says. It’s a fair answer, all things considered, but really not the one she’d been hoping for.

“Okay,” she says anyway, because what’s she going to do, complain? Not fucking likely. “So, uh. We’ll get you set up after you eat, then, how’s that sound?”

“I can’t stay,” Bucky says, staring into the yogurt. “Capt--Steve won’t want me here.”

“Steve wants you here!” Darcy protests immediately, forgetting completely about the hamburger in favor of jerking her head up to look back to him. “Steve just dragged three Avengers all the way to Australia looking for you, dude, of course he wants you here.”

“No, not . . .” Bucky hesitates, then just shakes his head. “I’m not that person,” he says. “Not who he thinks I am.”

“You sure about that? ‘Cause you look an awful lot like that guy,” Darcy says, cocking an eyebrow pointedly. Admittedly it’s not like they have DNA lying around, but the resemblance is pretty distinct, and something made him not kill Steve when he could’ve. Also, well, maybe they can look up some relatives or something, if it comes to that.

“That’s not what I meant,” Bucky says, still staring into the yogurt. Darcy tries to think of the right thing to say, and for lack of a right thing just keeps going, because, well, sometimes that’s all she’s got. And also she really doesn’t feel comfortable sticking her nose too far in Bucky and Steve’s
personal issues, after everything.

After basically *hurling* herself in them already, she means.

“Okay,” she says carefully. “But I still think he’s gonna want you here. I mean you could, like, at least *ask* him. And even if he doesn’t, uh . . . well. Kinda not up to him?”

“He’s Captain America,” Bucky says. Darcy’s never heard the name said that bleakly.

“Well, yeah, but that’s not the name on the deed? Lease. Whatever Tony’s got. And this place is huge as hell, anyway, you guys wouldn’t even have to see each other if you didn’t want to,” Darcy tells him, although she is damn sure that not seeing Bucky Barnes is the literal last thing Steve is ever gonna stand for.

Unless it’s Bucky not wanting to see him, that is.

“He’s *Captain America,*” Bucky says again, a little desperation creeping into his tone. Darcy hesitates, tightening her grip on the spoon. Steve’s Captain America, yeah, but Bucky is *Bucky Barnes.* Even she knows the story there, the whole spiel from “best friends from childhood” right up until “the only Howling Commando to give his life for his country”.

Bucky Barnes is supposed to be the only guy who can look at Captain America and still see Steve Rogers first.

Or that’s what everybody says, anyway.

“And you’re pregnant and on the run from a bunch of psycho Nazi sympathizers who kept you on a choke chain for longer than most people get to *live,*” she says finally, blunt and brutal and forcing herself to focus on stirring the browning meat. He’ll listen if she’s blunt, right? Or he’ll hear her, at least. “Or, uh . . . Nazi-Nazis, not gotta lie, I’m still not actually clear what HYDRA’s deal is. But either way, you really think Captain America is gonna kick you out like that?”

Bucky doesn’t answer. He stares at the half-eaten yogurt and says absolutely nothing, expression just that little bit too fixed, and Darcy can’t even tell what’s behind it. If he can’t decide, if he’s afraid to say it and then be proved wrong, if he just can’t bring himself to speak.

If he thinks Steve really would, because of what he’s done--what’s been done to *him.*

She breathes in. She dumps the rest of the ingredients in the pan, gives it a quick stir, and cranks the burner up. She sets the spoon aside.

She breathes out. She goes over to him.

“Look, uh . . . Asset,” Darcy starts slowly, laying a careful hand on his biological arm. She still doesn’t know how much the metal one can feel. She still doesn’t know how to look at him and think “Asset” either, though, and that’s probably more important to him right now. “Even if Steve didn’t--and he *does,* I swear he does--but even if Steve didn’t want to see you, that wouldn’t mean you couldn’t stay here, okay? We can help.”

“Do you remember those alphas in the alley?” Bucky asks, his eyes flickering restlessly around the room again.

“Kinda, uh, kinda hard to forget ‘em,” Darcy hedges warily, not sure where he’s going with this.

“They wanted me to go with them,” he says. “They said they’d take care of me. Help.”
“...well, they were HYDRA, right?” Darcy asks helplessly, hating herself for not having anything better. “They’d have said... you know, they’d have said anything.”

“Yeah,” Bucky agrees distantly. His expression doesn’t change and his eyes don’t focus, and Darcy can’t help feeling like what she’s saying isn’t actually that different from what those HYDRA bastards probably said too. Or at least doesn’t sound any different to Bucky, anyway.

Her eyes drop to his stomach unthinkingly, and then she... then she *thinks*.

“You picked me, though,” she says, swallowing hard. “Remember? I was last alpha standing.”

“I remember,” Bucky says, and this time his face softens a little, his eyes dropping into his lap. Probably not actually his lap. He brushes the biological hand over his stomach very gently in just the barest graze of his fingertips, barely enough to wrinkle his shirt. Darcy feels the muscles in his arm flex under her hand and swallows again, forcing her thoughts to stay calm and her pheromones to stay mild.

Bucky picked her. A beautiful and hurt omega with no place safe to go had picked her, trusted her, gone to her--had come back to her. He’d put what few scraps of faith he could cobble together in her and followed her lead: a gorgeous, glittering omega laid back in her bed on her word and nothing else.

A gorgeous, glittering, fertile omega.

“Me too,” Darcy says, shoulders tight and eyes fixed on Bucky’s hand against his stomach. “I remember.”

Fuck.

She’s going to be a dad.
california king

Chapter Notes

This is the point in the story I got super stuck at and super sick of while Rainne was suffering similarly with her own chapter, so we swapped WIPs and she wrote the first draft of this chapter while I took over writing a chapter for the latest installment of her inverse!shrinkyclinks. She had like a page that I basically immediately derailed with all the good hard Bucky-getting-fucked I couldn’t write here and she decided to make me suffer in retaliation, so you can all thank her for any and all impending doom.

Darcy goes back to the stove and stirs the food, then paranoidly double-checks the box instructions even though she’s made Hamburger Helper about a thousand times in her life--she’s not the littermate who went to culinary school, okay, without instructions she could probably burn water. She literally has burned water, which actually amounts to burning the pan and after the third time that happened they stopped leaving her in the kitchen unsupervised, because big surprise, pans are friggin’ expensive and Darcy had three littermates plus their parents had a surprise litter of three when they were in high school.

Like, two years before college high school.

So yeah, they stopped leaving her in the kitchen unsupervised, and yeah, she’s made a lot of Hamburger Helper.

Darcy reduces the meat to a simmer, gives it another stir before covering the pan, and then sets the timer for about ten minutes. She’ll need to keep stirring in-between, but she definitely needs the timer or she’ll overcook it ‘til the pasta’s mush. She swears her litter-sister can tell if pasta’s perfect just looking at it, but yeah, no, she is not that Lewis sister.

She eyes the pan warily for a moment, then sets aside her stirring spoon on a towel and heads to the fridge. Darcy really wishes she knew more about pregnancy; she doesn’t know if whole milk’s too heavy or orange juice is too acidic or the mixed berry smoothie would make Bucky nauseous. She’s pretty sure the Pepsi and bottled frappucino drinks are out--caffeine’s a no-go, right?--but what about chocolate milk, would that be too much caffeine? Like, there's caffeine in chocolate, right?

...they have way too many drink options in their fridge. She doesn’t even know if Bucky knows what he can drink right now.

All right, well, there’s an easy solution to at least that problem, isn’t there.

“Milk okay?” she asks, peering back over her shoulder at Bucky, who startles slightly at the attention and nearly crushes the strawberry he was about to pop into his mouth. “Sorry. Um. Milk?”

...yes?” Bucky says hesitantly. Again, Darcy can’t help worrying he might have as little idea here as she does--who knows if he’s been drinking milk wherever he’s been, and even if he knew anything about pregnancy before, she doesn’t know how much he remembers.
Hell, she doesn’t know how much he remembers about anything. It’s entirely possible he doesn’t know a damn thing about the forties or Steve and just read up on himself in the library.

But that is really not a thought she has room to dwell too much on right now.

“Okay then,” she says, grabbing the gallon out and collecting a couple glasses to set on the counter. She fills one to the brim and the other halfway, and he looks confused when she pushes the fuller one towards him. “Trust me, you need it,” she says firmly. God, super-soldier metabolisms are bad enough, what’s Bucky’s going to be like while he’s pregnant?

She can’t tell if he’s showing yet--he’s wearing too many layers and underfed on top of that. Actually, she’s not even sure if he should be showing yet, maybe she should be asking J.A.R.V.I.S. for some reading material or a timeline or something. She really wants to feed him up, though.

“Yes, ma’am,” Bucky says slowly, tugging the glass closer to himself with a wary expression. Darcy exhales roughly, letting the tension out. She has a hindbrain, yes, she’s very well aware of that fact. It does not need to go off every time he says something that makes her protective pheromones want to light somebody HYDRA-affiliated on fire.

Darcy takes a sip of her milk, then heads back to stir the Hamburger Helper again. When she turns back around, Bucky’s holding his own glass in the metal hand and taking very careful sips, and an irrational part of her panics a little. It’s been a year since HYDRA, right? He’s had meat and dairy since then, she’s not about to make him sick or anything? God, and she gave him yogurt, too--

He’s looking at his stomach.

Fuck. He’s going to be the mother of her pups.

He is the mother of her pups. She’s six months from being a dad. She can’t be a dad, she’s been avoiding being a dad, being a dad was a thing that was going to happen, like, in her thirties. Possibly her forties. Possibly never. Her littermates already have their parents’ demand for grandbabies covered, okay, and their younger siblings are still in middle school anyway, and she was just--she is just not prepared for this.

Darcy breathes out and tries to be calm. She can’t let her pheromones get riled up right now or, well, maybe ever again in her life. She watches Bucky drink the milk a sip at a time and work his way carefully through the strawberries, and she hopes it’s enough.

God. He’s the mother of her pups and she didn’t even watch his damn cartoon.

It takes way too much effort not to make a hysterical noise at that thought, and Darcy forces herself to go stir the food again and then drags a stool up to the opposite side of the counter and straddles it, folding her arms on the counter to lean forward on.

“We need to talk,” she says. Bucky freezes halfway through a sip of milk and she winces. “Okay--sorry, yeah, I could’ve phrased that better. Sorry. Very sorry. Um.”

“Um,” Bucky repeats slowly, his eyes flicking up to her face as he sets the glass down. Darcy tries not to wince again, but it only works so well.

“It’s more I wanted to talk to you,” she says. “In a not-horrible way. Please believe me that I do not mean any of this in a horrible way, okay?”

“Okay,” Bucky repeats again, even slower. He’s still watching her face. It’s probably the best she can expect, Darcy thinks morosely.
“Just . . . I want you to know you can talk to me, okay?” she tells him carefully. Bucky doesn’t say anything, so she keeps going. “If you have any questions or need anything or whatever, really, whatever works. I want to be honest with you and I want you to feel safe to be honest with me too. I maybe can’t tell you everything sometimes, but I’ll say that, okay, I won’t lie to you. And you can do the same for me, if you feel comfortable with that.”

“Why?” Bucky asks. Darcy’s fingers dig into her arms.

“Because--well, you’re gonna have pups, yeah?” she says, hoping that’ll help him understand. “And, uh . . . that kinda means I am too. Because, you know, I’m gonna be their dad. Which is kind of new territory for me, honestly, and I may be slightly terrified about it. Or, um . . . extremely. Extremely.”

“I’m sorry,” Bucky says, wary expression immediately turning guilty. “I thought--”

“No, I know, I believe you!” Darcy says quickly, putting her hands up. “Like, I have no reason not to believe you, and I definitely do believe you. And I’m not, like, mad or anything.”

“You smell mad,” Bucky says tonelessly, eyes flicking down to the counter again. Which . . . yeah. Darcy can’t really argue with that. And she said “honest”, didn’t she?

“Okay, I’m mad,” she admits with a grimace. “But not at you. Not even a little at you. I’m mad at those assholes who--the fucks you told Tony and Bruce about, and all the other bastards who hurt you and put you through all this shit and made it so you don’t even know stuff about your own body.”

She actually still can’t quite get her head around the fact Bucky knows so little about himself that he didn’t know he was fertile. That’s just . . . no, no, pheromones need to stay under control, she is not thinking about that while her pheromones need to stay under control.

“I don’t blame you for getting bred when you didn’t even know it could happen,” she says. “That’s not on you.”

“But I did it,” Bucky says, still not looking at her.

“Dude, we kinda did it together,” Darcy reminds him, having to stifle another hysterical noise at the thought. Maybe it would’ve been a laugh, but she’s pretty sure no matter what it would’ve been unfortunate. “I mean--that’s how it works, yeah?”

Bucky’s silent for a long moment, then glances up, expression assessing. Darcy forces herself to hold her tongue this time, pretty sure he’s not going to talk if she doesn’t keep her mouth shut.

“Is it really okay?” he asks quietly, and Darcy nods so fast she nearly hurts her neck.

“It’s okay,” she swears. “It is more than okay.” She almost says, it’s what you wanted, right?, except she doesn’t actually know if he remembers that and really doesn’t want to be the one to remind him if he doesn’t. Also, this is definitely not how he wanted it.

Bucky’s silent a moment longer. Darcy clamps her jaw shut and waits.

“Okay,” he says finally, then drops his eyes back to his stomach. It’s not perfect, but Darcy’s not picky; it’s still progress.

“Okay,” she repeats. She should probably go stir the hamburger again, but this is a lot more important than that. “I’m--I know you’re worried about the pups. But I’m gonna take care of you,
“Okay? All of you. I promise. I’m not gonna hurt you and I’m not letting anybody else do it either.”

“You can’t promise that,” Bucky says, his expression and scent both sliding towards a blankness that Darcy can’t imagine him actually feeling.

“I--yeah, okay,” Darcy says, breathing out. Her hindbrain’s spitting nails at the thought she can’t, but she’s not delusional; she definitely wasn’t the one who took out those HYDRA fucks in the alley, and she never could’ve been. That doesn’t mean there’s not things she can do, though. “But I can promise anybody who wants to try is gonna have to get through a hell of a lot more than just me before they can. Everyone in this tower is gonna be between them and you.”

“That’s not . . .” Bucky trails off, furrowing uncertainly, and Darcy presses the advantage because . . . well, she needs the advantage. She’s not gonna pretend otherwise.

“I can take care of you, omega,” she tells him, letting her protective pheromones slip out just a little to make the point. “And I will.”

Bucky’s silent again, but his shoulders loosen a little and his face softens into something more reminiscent of how he looked in her bed. Darcy’s hindbrain preens at the sight. She wants to kiss him; her hindbrain wants to rut him. She stifles both urges, which is made much easier when the timer has the mercy of going off and she can get up quick to go take care of it.

She gives it one last stir, burns her mouth taking a bite to make sure the pasta’s not undercooked, then sets the lid aside and turns off the stove. The box said five servings, which is probably a lot even for a super-soldier’s lunch, so she reserves about a fifth of it on a plate for herself and dumps the rest in one of the medium-sized mixing bowls that they literally never use unless Erik’s making pancakes, which only happens once in a blue moon these days.

She transfers the plate and bowl over to the counter and digs up a couple forks, sliding one across to Bucky. Honestly, she kind of expects him to give the food one of the slightly offended looks Steve gets when faced with anything especially processed--preservative-laden food was apparently not a thing poor Irish kids ate in the 1940s, although you’d think the army would’ve gotten him used to the idea. Bucky doesn’t really react at all, though, and she wonders if he doesn’t remember the kind of food he grew up eating or if maybe his family was a little better off or . . . yeah, she’s really got no idea.

She wonders if there’s some recipes Steve could give her, or at least some favorite foods he could tell her to supply. She’s sure he would if he could.

Assuming he’s still talking to her after this, anyway.

Well. At least it’s got to be better than rations.

“Sorry, it’s not great, but I swear it’s filling as hell,” she tells him, pushing the bowl over. “Got my littermates and our younger siblings through pretty much all of our growth spurts, at least.”

“It’s hot,” Bucky says, staring at the bowl like it’s the height of gourmet dining. Darcy’s fingers itch for her taser.

“Hopefully not too hot,” she says, carefully stomping down her hindbrain. “Maybe give it a minute to cool off a little. It’s nothing fancy, pretty much just ground beef and noodles. Is that, like--okay? Do you like that?”

“I don’t know,” Bucky says, just barely frowning. It’s been a year, Darcy thinks, feeling sick.
“Okay,” she says. “Um—what do you like, then?”

“I don’t know,” Bucky says again, looking down at the bowl as his frown deepens.

“Right,” Darcy says, refusing to let her pheromones flare. “Okay, no problem. We’ll experiment.” Bucky’s shoulders tense, and she curses herself viciously. “We’ll make different stuff, I mean. And if you like it we’ll make it again and if you don’t we won’t, yeah?”

“Right,” Bucky says. It sounds less like an answer than just him repeating her, but she’ll take whatever she can get.

“Eat, baby,” she says, glancing down at his untouched bowl. He’s gotten through about half the milk, at least, but he didn’t really eat much of the fruit and yogurt. “You’re hungry, right?”

Bucky pauses, then picks up the fork without saying anything. For a second it’s like he’s never held one before and then muscle memory or something seems to kick in and he’s taking a bite, and it occurs to Darcy to start worrying about brain damage. It’s been a year.

He’s eating quicker now, at least, and looks a lot more invested in the process than she’s used to seeing on anyone not immediately post-mission. Hot food all the way, Darcy notes to herself. When it’s vegetable time they’re skipping salads for stir fry.

Maybe this counts as post-mission, for Bucky. A long, long mission that he’s just come in from.

Darcy takes a few bites off her own plate but mostly just watches Bucky eat for a while, the sight soothing her stressed alpha hindbrain like only proof of providing for a well-bred omega can. She’d always kind of assumed people were exaggerating that effect when they talked about it, but no, it’s definitely getting to her.

And kind of getting to her clit a little too, if she’s going to be brutally honest here.

She takes one last bite of her own plate, then dumps the mostly-uneaten pile into Bucky’s bowl and goes to wash up. It doesn’t take long, but by the time she’s done he’s finished and Darcy takes the bowl and his fork to wash too. Bucky moves onto the yogurt, which is gratifying, although he’s giving the sink some restless looks. Maybe a 1940s omega would be the one doing the washing up or maybe he's having flashbacks to being waterboarded.

God, this is the worst.

He eats both the yogurts but doesn’t go back to any of the berries after, and Darcy gives him a careful look as she takes the cups to rinse out and spoon to wash.

“Are you still hungry?” she asks. Bucky takes a long moment, clearly putting in a lot more effort than the question should really merit.

“I don’t think so,” he says at last, shaking his head.

“Oh-kay,” Darcy says, biting her lip and trying not to think about brain damage. “Just, if you’re hungry you need to eat. And if, like . . . if you’re having trouble telling if you’re hungry, you need to let me know, okay? The pups need fed so they’ll be healthy, like . . . um. I’m not actually sure what they need fed, but I’m gonna look it up, okay? Like--makes sense?”

“The pups need fed to be healthy,” Bucky repeats obediently, staring neutrally at her. Darcy can’t tell if she’s actually explaining something he doesn’t really understand or if he’s just humoring her because she’s . . . because he’s thinking of her as in charge of him, maybe, or something equally
unsettling. “I need to feed them.”

“Well . . . yeah, basically,” Darcy says, biting her lip again. She really hopes she’s handling this right. “Um. So anyway, now that we’ve done that, how about we get you in a room? So you can, like . . . settle.”

“Yes, alpha,” Bucky says, eyes flicking away uncertainly. Darcy hesitates, waiting for him to go on. She can see the moment he realizes he wants to say something just as clear as she can see the moment he decides not to, and it kind of kills her to watch.

She wonders if he used to be able to school his expressions or if he’s always been this easy to read, but HYDRA probably didn’t want to cultivate a poker face in their brainwashed assassin. It’s not like they were using him for infiltration.

“Is that okay with you?” she asks eventually, pretty sure she’s not getting anything out of him without asking for it. Hell, she’s maybe not getting anything out of him with asking for it. “I wanna be honest with each other, remember?”

“. . . I remember,” Bucky replies quietly, eyes flicking around the room again. Darcy tries really hard not to prompt him--to be patient, and give him the room to keep talking on his own--but he doesn’t seem like he’s going to.

“Is there something else you wanted, maybe?” she tries carefully. That seems like an open enough question. Not a leading question, anyway.

She hopes.

Bucky’s quiet for another moment, then nods as he tugs the sides of his jacket closed over his stomach and wraps his arms over it. Darcy barely keeps herself from pressing him for more.

Patience is really not her strong suit; she might actually be worse for patience than she is for gentleness.

That really doesn’t mean shit when it’s what Bucky needs, though.

“Can I . . .” he starts finally, voice uncertain and slow and expression just barely pained. “Can I stay with you?”

“Yeah, of course,” Darcy says in relief, shoulders slumping. “I want you on our floor too. There’s a bunch of rooms past mine, you can pick whichever one you want.”

“No, I mean--” Bucky stops, struggling for a second, and then exhales in frustration. “I mean with you.”

Darcy glazes over briefly, ninety-nine percent certain her hindbrain just tricked her into hallucinating that. Bucky’s expression doesn’t change, though, and he’s obviously waiting for an answer.

“Sure,” she says weakly, feeling a bit faint. Or a lot faint. Which, well, it’s only a request to share a suite from a gorgeous and dangerous omega who picked her over all other contenders and begged her to knot him through a heat he barely knew how to handle and is going to be whelping her pups-

Jesus.

Jesus.
“You can stay wherever you want, baby,” she manages slightly more coherently. “If you wanna sleep alone you can have your own den, but if you want to stay with me that’s fine too.”

“Please,” he says, not exactly helpfully. Darcy breathes out.

“Yeah. Okay,” she says. “C’mon, then, baby, grab your bag and we’ll get you settled.”

“If I may, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. interjects politely as they stand. Bucky tenses nervously, and Darcy blinks and glances towards the ceiling. Sue her, she feels like it’s polite to make eye contact with the security cameras when J.A.R.V.I.S. talks. “I apologize for interrupting, but the chemical pheromone scrub procedures I am currently running are not yet complete.”

“Uh--the what now?” Darcy says, not missing the way Bucky tenses at the word “chemical”, and especially not missing the way he tenses at the word “procedures”. Honestly she’s a little tense about them too, under the circumstances.

“The chemical pheromone scrub procedures, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. repeats. “Mr. Stark requested that the family suites be prepared for your use, and several members of the maintenance and cleaning staff came up the back way to make certain everything was in order. They have completed their tasks successfully, but some pheromones are currently lingering at a high enough concentration to be noticeable. It seemed prudent to warn you.”

“We have family suites?” Darcy asks blankly. “We have a back way?”

“‘Suites’?” Bucky repeats, looking wary again.

“There was also some mention of stress-testing the furniture,” J.A.R.V.I.S. adds delicately, and Darcy buries her face in her hands. She’s going to kill Tony Stark.

“Oh my god,” she groans. “I--you know what, okay, fine, forget it. How long until the scrub’s done, J.A.R.V.I.S.?”

“Final procedures will be completed in four minutes and thirty-seven seconds, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. replies. “I will unseal the family suites at that time.”

“Okay, there you go saying ‘family suites’ again,” Darcy says, frowning. “I mean, there’s the master suite, yeah, but I swear every other suite on this floor’s a single. Like, I checked out the others when we moved in, they’re all exactly the same as mine and Erik’s.”

“On this side of the floor, yes,” J.A.R.V.I.S. agrees. Darcy pauses for a long moment, then thinks very carefully about the size of the tower compared to the size of their floor.

“Christ. I always thought the rest of it went to, like, storage for weird security machines or something,” she says finally, shaking her head.

“The sealed portions of every Avenger’s floor are dedicated to family suites, convalescent rooms, and storage of alternate furniture and decor, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. tells her. “The suites have all been prepared in advance in event of a team pregnancy, adoption, or extended de-aging incident.”

“‘De-aging incident’?” Bucky repeats, looking alarmed. Darcy can’t even touch that right now, she genuinely just can’t. She has no can for that at all.

“Do any of the Avengers actually know this?” she asks instead, feeling suspiciously like she already knows the answer. Jane would’ve told her if she’d known Tony Stark wanted to keep them for the rest of their natural lifespans. Jane would’ve definitely told her if she’d known, and she’s
pretty sure Thor would’ve said something by now too.

“Mr. Stark is fully aware of the construction of the tower,” J.A.R.V.I.S. answers, which is literally the most telling thing he could possibly have said.

“Mr. Stark is the loneliest human being on the planet,” Darcy replies resignedly. Tony doesn’t even want pups of his own, he said it himself. Omega or not, he is just not the kind of person who she would have expected to be thinking about the team whelping, much less actually planning for it. Planning for it before the other Avengers had even agreed to move in, apparently, which is just . . . a thing, definitely a thing.

Note to self: do not let the pups grow up attention-starved. Just do not.

“I’m sure I couldn’t comment on Mr. Stark’s motivations for his choices in construction,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says.

“Jesus,” Darcy huffs in exasperation, blowing her hair out of her face. “Screw it, whatever. Like any of us deal with things like normal people anymore anyway. Please tell me they didn’t, like, ninja my stuff over, I really don’t wanna have to re-scent everything.” It’d been stressful enough after Bucky’s heat.

“Your belongings have not been transferred,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says, and Darcy sighs in relief. “Chemical scrub procedures are now complete, Ms. Lewis. May I direct you and Sergeant Barnes to the family suites?”

“Yeah, okay,” Darcy says, glancing over to Bucky. “I mean, yes please. Thanks, J.”

J.A.R.V.I.S. sends them out into the hall, where the wall that cuts off the opposite end of the hall that leads to the single suites has disappeared seamlessly to reveal a longer length of hallway beyond. Somehow it never occurred to Darcy that the kitchen stretches out past that space on the other side and there should’ve been something there, and now she kind of feels like an idiot.

Then again, Tony Stark built the place. Sue her if she wasn’t expecting perfect economy of space.

Bucky hesitates, giving the newly exposed hallway a leery look, and Darcy glances back to him. She hesitates too, but finally offers him a hand—the left one, just in case. He latches onto it tight, still looking nervous, but follows her down the hall. It’s the same length as the singles hallway, but there’s only about half as many doors. J.A.R.V.I.S. guides them to the first on the left and Darcy opens the door a crack and sniffs warily. There’s no trace of unfamiliar pheromones—it’s all clean and neutral—so she pushes it open and leads Bucky through.

“Holy shit,” she says in disbelief, eyes nearly bugging out of her head. “This is a suite? This is bigger than my parents’ freaking house! And they had two litters!”

“I’m sure you’ll fill the space as you prefer, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says, and Bucky’s hand tightens a little. When Darcy looks, he’s staring straight at the floor with a full-on blush, and she reddens too.

“Let’s, uh, let’s get through the first litter first, J,” she hedges, mortally embarrassed and trying to distract herself by looking around. The suite really is huge—the design is a Spartan, open-plan thing with a full wall’s worth of windows that Darcy can only assume are made of the same one-way bulletproof glass Tony’d bragged about when they’d first moved in. Darcy’s always kept blackout curtains over hers anyway, personally, but she’s not actually sure they make blackout curtains long enough to cover these windows; even the ceiling in here’s higher than in the single suites.
Or, more accurately, the floor is lower, sunken like the floor’s main living room and kitchen—it’s a few steps down from the doorway. There’s an individual living room and kitchen here, unlike in her old room, and even a dining area with a table big enough to seat both of them and half the Avengers besides.

There’s even a damn washer and dryer, she finds as they head further into the place and she starts opening doors and discovers the laundry room, which is surprisingly cozy for a laundry room. Darcy’s not gonna lie, after all the months she and Jane have spent bickering over whose turn it was to wash their clothes when they didn’t have time to wait for the laundry service, she’s kind of pissed to find out they apparently had multiple machines on the floor the entire time.

The kitchen’s gorgeous, way bigger than they’ll ever need with actual granite countertops and shiny new appliances and cupboards full of cookware and kitchen gadgets she wouldn’t know how to use for anything but a blunt instrument if her life depended on it. The living room is similarly overlarge and has a fireplace, a pair of couches that are practically nests in their own right, and a pile of beanbag chairs stacked up in the corner. Darcy was not previously aware you could get beanbag chairs made out of leather, much less in that size, but apparently that is in fact a thing.

Learn something new every day, she guesses.

There’s a really nice bathroom next to the laundry room and a door that leads to a surprisingly large office on the opposite side of the room—God knows why either of them would need an office, but it’s there—and in the very back, there’s a short hallway that leads to the bedrooms. Two of them are obviously meant for pups, the closest bare except for bunk beds and the next one sporting a little row of bassinets against the far wall. There’s a Jack and Jill bathroom connecting them, which cements Darcy’s certainty that a man with no concept of how actual litters behave built the place, because there is no way two separate litters would ever share one bathroom without ruining their parents’ lives. Darcy distinctly remembers the long slow meltdown that was getting ready for school every morning even before her family’s junior litter was born, and they’d only been toddlers when she’d left for college.

The last bedroom is the master bedroom, which is basically a suite all its own because Tony Stark was clearly not hugged enough as a child. The bathroom looks more like a spa, jacuzzi and alarmingly large rainfall shower and all, and the mini-fridge by the bed is twice the size of her old one. The bed itself is at least a California King—it might be bigger than a California King, actually. Darcy’s not sure they even make anything bigger than that, but if they’d do it for anyone they’d do it for Tony, so yeah, she probably shouldn’t be surprised.

Seriously, though, the thing is even bigger than Jane and Thor’s bed. Why would--Darcy stops, looks at the bed again, and thinks really hard about how lonely Tony probably was as a kid.

Yeah, okay. Never mind.

Of course he’d give the family suites beds big enough for the pups to climb into without disturbing their parents.

Darcy exhales, then moves on to checking out the closets. There’s two, both walk-ins nearly bigger than her entire dorm room back at Culver, and a little of the tension goes out of the hand Bucky’s holding hers with. She glances back to him, but he’s looking at the closets.

“Big enough, you think?” she jokes.

“Yes, alpha,” Bucky says, biting his lip. “Can I--can I have one?”
“Whichever one you want,” Darcy says, hindbrain screaming violent and hateful things at various Nazi-affiliated persons and organizations.

“Thank you, alpha,” Bucky says, then hesitates for a moment before reclaiming his hand, his eyes flicking low as he does. Then he leaves. Darcy stomps down on the irrational instinctive panic and follows him out into the living room.

“Do you like it?” she asks. “Like, uh--you want to stay here?”

“I want to stay where you’re staying,” Bucky says, his expression tinting into uncertainty.

“All right,” Darcy says, and well, it’s way too much, but her suite doesn’t exactly have room for pups as-is, so she’s not going to look the gift horse in the mouth. “I’m going to go start bringing over my stuff then, all right? If you wanna get settled.”

“All right,” Bucky says, watching her intently. Darcy feels a sharp and sudden urge to stop and kiss him as she walks past him to leave, but doesn’t. They haven’t really talked; she doesn’t know what he wants yet. She doesn’t know if he knows what he wants yet.

Hell, she’s not sure what she wants.

When she gets out into the hallway again there’s an impressively large rolling bell cart outside the elevator door with a stack of flattened cardboard boxes on top. It smells very faintly of Bruce’s familiar and soothing beta pheromones, but no one else, so she grabs it for its presumably-intended purpose and takes it back to her den to load up. It’ll be a hell of a lot easier than making however many trips taking everything over by hand would’ve been, if nothing else.

She sets up the boxes and starts packing the bathroom first, since there’s not really much in there. It all fits in one slightly overfull box, anyway, although she buries the vibrator from the heat basket Bucky used at the absolute bottom, turning bright red again just over touching it. She still feels a little weird about having kept the thing, but the idea of throwing it out had felt weird too, and it’d all just--

Yeahhhh.

She finishes packing up the bathroom, closes the box, and moves on to stripping the bed. It’s not like there’s a rush to move in, no one’s waiting on her room, but she definitely wants Bucky to feel safe in the tower and the best way she can think of to do that is to get her scent all over the sterile blankness of the new suite. Well, both their scents, obviously, but she’s betting Bucky wasn’t allowed to scent-mark anything for a long, long time, and even if he was . . . yeah. Either way his own scent might not be reassuring for him anymore. The scent of an alpha that he picked hopefully will be, though.

Even if it’s not, honestly she needs to scent the place up, so taking over her own blankets is pretty high priority even knowing they won’t fit the new mattress. Maybe she’ll be able to hang her bed curtains around it, at least; they’re pretty long, there’s always been a lot of leftover curtain bunched up in one place or another.

The curtains go into the box with the sheets and blankets and she throws her pillows in too, because no omega ever complained about an alpha bringing extra pillows, and then she goes for her clothes and empties her dresser and closet in short order, which takes up pretty much all the space she’s got left on the cart. All the moving around the past few years has made her quick at packing, if maybe not as tidy as she could be.
Darcy puts her laptop and tablet on the pile, then gives the room a last check. Most of what’s left is nesting pillows and all her knickknacks and books—all the furniture came with the room, and the new suite’s similarly furnished. There’s a lot of nesting pillows and knickknacks and books, mind, but only in comparison to the amount of everything else she owns. Again, she’s been moving around a lot the past few years.

She takes the bell cart back out into the hall and heads back towards the family suites. Thor’s still in the master and Jane and Erik don’t appear to have come back from the lab, so it’s a straight shot back to the new suite.

There’s no sign of Bucky as she maneuvers the cart in through the door, which is actually easier than expected because Tony clearly can’t build anything normal-sized. Darcy spends about two seconds trying to figure out if she can get the cart down the steps into the sunken living room, and because she is not an idiot immediately dismisses the idea and just grabs the top two boxes of clothes and heads back towards the master bedroom. She doesn’t see Bucky in any of the other rooms as she passes, but that doesn’t actually worry her until she gets to the bedroom and he isn’t there either.

Darcy’s heart jumps into her throat and she’s just about to rush out and check the rest of the suite again when she hears a soft sound of impact from the second walk-in closet. The sense of relief is physically painful. And really dumb, honestly; what did she think? That he’d cleared out? So what if he had?

Well—“so” a lot of things, obviously. But it’s still not anybody’s place to stop him, least of all hers. . . now there’s the pups, though.

“Omega?” Darcy calls, setting the boxes down next to the bed uneasily. Bucky immediately sticks his head out of the closet to give her another one of those too-intent looks.

“Alpha,” he says neutrally. There’s a blanket in his arms— from the linen closet, maybe? Do they have a linen closet? Darcy’s not sure why he had that in the walk-in of all places, that’s . . . that’s . . .

God, she’s dumb.

He’s nesting.

The approving rumble that escapes her chest at that particular realization makes Bucky’s eyes widen and his grip on the blanket tighten, and Darcy’s about to wince and apologize when she sees the rapid rise of color on his cheeks and catches a whiff of his also-rising pheromones. Right, she thinks vaguely past the hindbrain. She’s not the only one with a hindbrain here; a bred omega’s breeding partner making sounds like that while they’re nesting . . .

Yeah.

Darcy breathes out, forcing down the instincts that want to go pin him down in the middle of whatever he’s building and rut him ‘til he whelps. But to be honest, if it was up to her hindbrain Bucky’d spend the rest of his life wrapped up all soft and sweet in a nest built just to his liking eating truffles out of her hands and getting her knot whenever he asked for it, so . . . yeah.

Anyway. She’s not the literal scum of the earth, so she doesn’t actually go over to him. Just—thinks about it, a little. But only a little.

“Do you need more blankets?” she asks carefully, tipping her head back towards the door. “I
brought the ones from my bed.”

Bucky’s eyes widen a bit again and he nods roughly, immediately dropping the blanket he’s holding. For a second she thinks he’s about to hold his hands out for the other ones or maybe go grab them himself, but he doesn’t do either, just stays very still and keeps watching her with those too-wide eyes, looking . . . looking like he is just completely incapable of schooling his feelings at all, really. Overwhelmed and confused and just a bare touch of anxious, too.

Talking to someone who projects so blatantly really should not upset her so much.

It really, really upsets her.

“Do you want them?” Darcy says after a moment. She’s not sure what’s keeping him in the doorway.

“I--yes please, alpha,” Bucky says, eyes slanting down to the floor. “Thank you.” He still doesn’t move, though. She wonders if he was like this before. She doesn’t think so, from what little Steve’s said, but again, Steve’s only said a little. Not enough to be making any sweeping generalizations on, much less enough to be making any assumptions about a specific reaction.

“Can I bring them to you?” she asks. Bucky’s face flushes and he nods quickly, and Darcy relaxes a little--okay, so he’s anxious, but at least he’s not upset. She heads back out into the living room and scoops up the blankets and comforter, grabbing the bed pillows while she’s at it.

She sort of wishes she’d brought the nesting pillows over on the first go. She definitely would’ve if she’d known he was going to be nesting, but she’d kind of assumed he’d start by unpacking his backpack--assuming he would’ve done anything at all.

Darcy brings the pile back with her and holds it out, and Bucky accepts it gingerly, biting his lip. He still looks anxious and she really wants to reach up and touch his face or stroke his hair or something similarly soothing, except she doesn’t know if he’ll find it soothing. A lot of omegas like completely different things in and out of heat, and that’s even assuming he wants her taking any liberties at all now.

She could ask, but she’s not sure he wouldn’t lie.

She’s not even sure he’d know the answer.

Bucky stares at her for a moment, then wraps his arms tight around the bundle and ducks his head, mouth just barely opening as he inhales. He flushes darker as he does, and Darcy looks down to the blankets and then she thinks about it and breathes in too and . . . and oh. Right.

Hindbrain thoughts.

She stares back at him, strong and gorgeous and smelling like hers, about to take blankets covered in her scent to make his nest, and definitely understands the flush on his face and maybe even the anxiety, too. His nest will smell like her. He’ll smell like her, as sure as if she’d scented his clothes by wearing them around the house or his skin by rubbing up against him or as if they’d split that huge ridiculous bed that she’s still not sure she isn’t leaving to him while she crashes on one of the couches in the office or living room, actually.

“Is it okay?” she asks, eyes flicking back up. “Do you want a nest that smells like me?”

“Okay. I’ll get you the pillows from my closet too,” Darcy tells him, and he nods jerkily and then vanishes back into the walk-in. She stands there for a second, wondering exactly how long it’s been since he’s had an alpha scent him in any way that wasn’t . . . wasn’t degrading or abusive or . . .

She breathes out. She stifles her hindbrain. She ferries in everything off the bell cart and leaves it on the floor to take care of later, and then goes back for all her nesting pillows.
Darcy loads up the bell cart with the neatest stack of pillows she can, making sure to hug each one and also breathe on and rub her bare hands and face all over them in the process, because obviously she does, of course she does. She doesn’t even look at the knickknacks and books--whatever, she’ll make a third trip.

She hopes the pillows smell enough like her. She hopes Bucky actually wants that and that she’s not reading him wrong or he doesn’t just think he’s supposed to want that. She just . . . she wants to give him what he wants, whatever will make him feel safe. She’ll make his whole nest stink of her pheromones if it’ll give him that.

She still doesn’t know how long it’s been since he got to keep an alpha’s scent in any way he wanted. Maybe it’s been since Morita or Carter or that other Howling Commando--she should probably look up the Howling Commandos now, that is probably a thing that she should do. Or maybe that’s too invasive, and hasn’t Bucky been invaded enough, really, and Steve sure as hell isn’t going to--to--

Steve’s going to hate her for this, something small and hysterical inside her thinks, and Darcy squeezes her eyes shut and presses her forehead against the pole of the bell cart and breathes. She did wrong by an omega. She did it trying to do right by another omega. Steve can hate her all he wants to--if he even wants to--and she’s still not going to be sorry.

Bucky trusted her enough to come back to her when he needed help. That’s . . . no, fuck no. There is no way she would ever be sorry about that.

She takes the pillows to the master bedroom--the bell cart’s light enough to get down the steps this time, so that’s convenient--and pushes the cart up in front of Bucky’s staked-out nesting closet, and he comes to the door and peers out again. Darcy can’t quite get over how big the damn closets are, but she’s not complaining because Bucky picking one out for himself and actively claiming it is . . . she’s really glad he could do that, is all. Maybe Tony had nesting in mind when he designed them, or maybe Tony just really needed a hug the day he designed them.

“Delivery,” she says, quirking an awkward little smile at him, and Bucky ducks his head and gives her that killer under-the-lash look she’d nearly forgotten about while simultaneously being unable to forget. Darcy has a minor heart attack and shoves the lime green marshmallow pillow she made in high school home ec into his arms. “Um.”

“Thank you, alpha,” Bucky says, hugging the pillow like all her high school wet dreams and still wearing that same look. Darcy might choke.

“Okay, I’m just . . . I’m gonna go see what we’ve got for dinner,” she says, because he needs all the food she can possibly feed him but also and more importantly because if she doesn’t leave this bedroom right now she might do something really inadvisable. Bucky blinks, the look on his face
shifting into confusion, and Darcy is a coward and *flees*.

She is just--she is just not properly prepared for this. This morning she was going to go on a dumb and frivolous trip to *fucking New Jersey* just because she and Thor were bored and the Science Sibs were ignoring them, and now she’s going to be a *dad*. Dads don’t go to New Jersey except maybe to *live* there. Dads pretty much don’t go anywhere, as far as Darcy can tell.

There is, miraculously and mercifully, food in the refrigerator. It actually doesn’t even occur to Darcy that there might be until she’s halfway out the front door and suddenly remembers the size of the walk-in closets. She goes back and looks, then stares in disbelief at the amount of groceries literally *overflowing* the damn fridge. The fridge that, for the record, is probably big enough to supply the whole team’s groceries.

Seriously, she doesn’t think even a pregnant super-soldier could eat all this. She’s gonna have to invite somebody over. Several somebodies. *Everybody*.

“Okay, clearly dinner is on us this week,” she mutters to herself, checking the freezer and really hoping Erik knows how to cook some of this stuff, because she definitely can’t be trusted to do it. Well--Thor can handle the meat, at least, he’s killer with a grill, and maybe they’ll just try their luck with the vegetables.

Luckily for Darcy’s level of cooking skill, there’s a frozen lasagna in the freezer--about twelve of them, actually, half veggie and half meat. She grabs one of the veggie ones and flips it over to read the instructions, figuring that after the Hamburger Helper it’ll be, like, balanced. Hopefully.

*God*, she’s really got to look up pregnancy nutrition.

The lasagna’s apparently going to take a while, so Darcy sets the oven to preheat and then rifles through the rest of the freezer in pursuit of side dishes, figuring whatever’s in there is likelier to work out for her better than whatever’s in the fridge. There’s plenty to choose from, most of it in large portions, and a lot of weird-looking bags of “vegetable medley”, which is . . . kind of like a side dish, she guesses? More of one than Belgian waffles or apple dumplings, anyway.

She drops a medley bag on the counter, debates briefly, then grabs a second one just in case. The lasagna is already twelve servings but she *really* doesn’t know how much Bucky needs to eat, and if he’s still weird about food then hopefully having as much of it as possible will make sure he eats until he’s full.

. . . assuming he even knows what “full” feels like.

*Fuck*, she is in so far over her head right now.

Darcy hides behind the kitchen island and does not let herself freak out because she is almost positive Bucky would notice. Super-soldier senses--yeah, he would definitely at least smell her pheromones. She’s also kind of concerned that if she did let herself freak out, it’d turn into a full-blown panic attack, and that is *really* not something she can do right now.

Seriously, she hasn’t had a full-out panic attack since somebody mailed her iPod back after Tromso, no way she’s breaking that streak when it’s an anxious and *pregnant* omega who’d suffer for it. Just--no, she is really not doing that, not at all.

So she doesn’t. She stays crouched down behind the island and breathes very carefully and thinks about Bucky making a nest that smells like her and Thor suggesting they fly to New Jersey for cake and Jane and Erik taking the notes she shoves under the door when she’s got a surprise heat
partner and getting her everything she needs for them. She thinks about Bruce’s eyes going green over what Bucky told him and Tony’s stupidly huge family suites and closets and Ian on the phone telling her she’d helped and Crystal’s weird flowers and . . . and yeah.

She breathes out. She breathes in. The oven dings, and she pushes herself to her feet and puts the lasagna in and reads the vegetable medley’s instructions. It is definitely not going to take as long as the lasagna, so she sets the timer and abandons the kitchen, assuming she’ll hear it when it goes off. J.A.R.V.I.S. will give her a heads up if she doesn’t, she’s sure.

She really doesn’t know what to do about Bucky. Dinner seems like an easy enough place to start, at least.

. . . actually.

Darcy backtracks and heads out of the suite and to the common kitchen after all, because there is at least one thing the common kitchen definitely has that this one doesn’t. It takes a moment’s searching--she’d bought it wishing Bucky would come back for another heat, but not optimistic enough to be hoping--but she finds it undisturbed in the back of the fridge: a pretty little gold box with a bit of black satin ribbon tied around it in a pretty little bow.

It’s truffles, because of course it’s truffles.

Darcy heads back to the suite and finds Bucky still in the walk-in closet, surrounded by every pillow and cushion and blanket she gave him and probably the contents of the entire linen closet too, going by how thickly he’s managed to cover the floor and build up around the walls. It’s the same as last time, a little rudimentary and a little clumsier than most omegas would make, and something small and tight inside Darcy aches looking at it. She wonders what it looked like when he used to den down before.

It occurs to her that if she knew how Steve nested, she might be able to extrapolate.

“Back,” she says, lifting her free hand in an awkward attempt at a wave. Bucky looks up at her. He’s pressed back into the far corner, his arms wrapped gingerly around his stomach and her marshmallow pillow tucked in under his knees. It’s for support, Darcy assumes, but seeing it there just makes her hindbrain want to push his legs apart and tuck the pillow under his hips so she can--

Anyway.

“Alpha,” Bucky greets quietly.

“Um. Dinner’s gonna be a bit. I mean, I guess we did just have lunch but I don’t know what your metabolism’s like right now and I don’t even know if you know, considering, and--” Darcy cuts herself off, wincing, then holds up the truffle box. “I mean. I brought you something?”

“You brought me something,” Bucky says, fixating on the box. He doesn’t look outright wary, which Darcy counts as a victory. She got him through a heat without fucking him over or trying to force him to do anything he didn’t want to do, and she’s trying to give him what he wants, to take care of him as best as an alpha like her can take care of an omega like him, and . . . and he believes that, she thinks. He’ll maybe even trust that, if she doesn’t fuck up too bad.

She really doesn’t want to fuck up.

“Yeah, uh . . . I bought them last week, actually,” she admits. “I thought maybe you’d come back for . . . I didn’t know if you’d need a heat partner again.”
Bucky’s expression changes, going intent and intense, and Darcy’s hindbrain has to be violently smothered before it has her pinning him into the corner.

“You thought I might come back,” he says neutrally, his pheromones spiked up sharp and not remotely neutral. “So you got me something.”

“Yes,” Darcy says, forcing herself to relax a little by pressing her shoulder against the doorframe and glancing around the nest. It looks soft and inviting, even imperfect and incomplete-looking as it is. It also smells like it belongs to her, between the blankets she’s been sleeping in and the nesting pillows she scented.

It smells like Bucky belongs to her.

“May I come in, omega?” she asks, exhaling slowly. Bucky stares at her.

“Yes, alpha,” he says after a moment, shifting back like he thinks he needs to make room. She’d worry he was uncomfortable, but . . . well. He’s not very subtle when he’s uncomfortable.

“Thank you,” she says, kicking off her boots before slipping into the closet. She doesn’t close the door behind her, and she makes sure to come in far enough that the doorway’s clear if Bucky wants to leave. He hasn’t turned the light on, so it’s a little dim inside, but Darcy notices that less for the minor vision impairment and more for the way it makes the closet feel smaller and more intimate than she’d been expecting.

It’s nice.

She’s not sure she’s not going to hell for liking it, though.

“They’re not the same flavor as last time. I got a mixed assortment,” she tells him, opening the box to show him the truffles. There’s six--she’d almost bought a full dozen but hadn’t wanted the universe to think she was, like, presuming or something. Or jinx herself. Or . . .

“You got me truffles,” Bucky says as he stares into the box even more intently than he’d stared at her face, his voice a little uneven. Darcy’s hindbrain wants to fucking fight somebody, and her pheromones bleed out a little stronger than she means to let them. Bucky’s shoulders slump and his eyes go heavy, and for a second she remembers Bruce and the lab and expects--something. Except Bucky doesn’t lean in or lean back, he just . . . stays.

“Yeah, I did,” she says. “You liked them before, right?” Bucky nods soundlessly, then shifts forward onto his hands and knees and creeps up to her corner of the closet. Darcy smothers her hindbrain viciously and picks up a truffle to show him. “This one’s, uh, I think strawberry champagne, I’m not--”

Bucky leans in and takes the truffle out of her fingers. With his teeth.

Darcy’s brain shorts out completely. Her hindbrain does not, and rumbles low and approving. Bucky’s eyes go heavy-lidded again and he bites down on the truffle looking like the perfect soft and sweet picture of the omega ideal, his pheromones warm and overwhelming. Darcy’s brain refuses to resume normal function and her hindbrain has her rumbling at him again; he swallows and then opens his mouth a little, like he’s panting.

Darcy can’t quite parse why, for a second, but the hindbrain is on it and has her putting another truffle on his tongue, although hell if she knows what flavor this one is. Bucky makes a soft little sound as he closes his mouth again and looks up at her through his lashes, and her clit throbs. She’s actually kind of surprised to realize he’s not on his back when her brain starts to catch up,
because she’s pretty sure he was literally on her knot the last time he looked at her like this.

“Is it--” She stops, swallows; breathes. “Is it good, omega?” Bucky swallows too, the sight making Darcy’s clit throb again, and nods.

“Yes, alpha,” he says, practically purring, and then very deliberately licks his lips. Darcy remembers glitter on them and what kissing them is like. She’d like to meet the alpha who wouldn’t. “Please, alpha?”

“Yeah, okay,” she breathes, and goes for another truffle. Bucky’s pheromones are as sugar-sweet as ever but there’s something different there now, something deeper and richer and thicker that means bred, that means bred by her, and she’s really, really . . . it’s really . . .

He takes the truffle with his teeth again, his sweetly dampened lips just barely brushing her fingers this time, and her pheromones spike so hard in response they both shudder. If she didn’t know better--

Bucky doesn’t bite down. He tilts towards her and into that picture-perfect presentation of the ideal omega again, face tipped up towards her and head just low enough for submissive sweetness, neck stretched out and exposed for an alpha’s hand or teeth. His eyes are heavy and dark and his pheromones are even thicker and sweeter and the offer is not remotely subtle.

Hindbrain takes over again, just a little, and Darcy takes the offer. She leans in and bites the other half of the truffle out of Bucky’s mouth and he immediately moans into hers. It’s not at all the way it was when he was heated up, nowhere near as urgent or restless, but that doesn’t make it any less affecting.

And more than that--anything he wants, she’d promised herself.

They kiss. He tastes like fruit and chocolate and sugar and the barest hint of champagne and omega. He tastes right, like something she’s been waiting three months and three lifetimes for. Like--

“Alpha,” Bucky pants between them, sounding shaken. Darcy grips his face in her hands and kisses both corners of his mouth and underneath his eyes, and he shudders again and digs his fingers into the blankets beneath them as he presses into the contact with a little keening cry. His pheromones are the only thing she can smell, sweet and full and ripening; a strong and gorgeous and thoroughly bred omega pleading for his alpha’s touch.

Darcy kisses him again, tongue and teeth in it this time, and he purrs into it and then whines unhappily when she breaks off for a moment to remind herself to breathe. She groans in defeat and immediately pushes back into the kiss, and the sounds Bucky makes this time are heated and hazy and hell on her higher thought processes.

“Fuck,” she rasps at some point, rough and breathless, and he whimper. She kisses him even harder and he pushes back into it and tips his head under her hands as her fingers push back into his hair and cup the back of his head. She remembers him on her bed and in her bathtub and on her floor and her hindbrain thrums and thrives on the feeling, the memories, all caught up and glutted on his kiss and his pheromones and its bone-deep certainty of claim.

Bucky’s body is sweet and pliant against hers and he took her knot and her come inside him so eagerly and he has her pups inside him--he’s hers, her omega, sweet and pliant and bred and going to get all big and full and beautiful with her pups and she will kill anyone who even dreams of laying a hand on him.
He’s hers. He picked her, he’s hers, he’s hers because he wants to be hers. He wants to whelp her pups in a nest that smells like her, he wants her mouth on his mouth, her hands on his body, her knot in his--

Darcy breaks off the kiss and gasps for air, and Bucky makes a strangled noise, nearly overbalancing for a moment. She presses their foreheads together tight, gripping the thick sides of his hood and breathing through her mouth in an effort to clear her head. It . . . doesn’t exactly work.

She can fucking taste his pheromones.

“Jesus,” she wheezes weakly. Okay, that’s—that felt so good and he smells even better, but she’s got to stop now, she needs to--

“Alpha,” Bucky says pleadingly, pressing closer, and she kisses him again.

She promised.

Darcy’s not sure which of them either knocks or drags the other over, but Bucky’s back hits the cushions and she lands on top of him, slotted in-between his legs just right. She growls and it comes out possessive and pleased and he purrs up at her, squirming up for more contact, another kiss. Her next growl comes out deeper and he keens back softly, and they kiss again. Darcy can’t say exactly when she decided to put her hands on his chest, but his pecs are hard and strong when she cups them and her hindbrain’s thinking about pups and milk and how full they’ll be soon.

Bucky purrs roughly, pushing his chest into her hands, and she presses her lips to his jaw and pushes the pads of her thumbs up over his nipples through the layers of his shirts, earning yet another keening noise for it. It is the hottest fucking thing she thinks she’s ever heard, and goes straight to her hindbrain and every alpha instinct she’s ever had.

Mine, it says, they say, my omega, MINE, sweet and perfect and all for--

“Staff Sergeant Wilson would like to speak with you, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says; Darcy’s heart stops and she jerks upright in instinctive panic, eyes wide.

“They’re back?!” she blurs in disbelief. Bucky goes paper-white, freezing underneath her.


. . . wait. “Relief” is really not what she should be feeling right now.

“Uh, no, yeah, that’s okay,” she manages, adjusting her glasses before they fall right off and--

One of J.A.R.V.I.S.’s holoscreens pops up with Sam’s face on it directly in front of her, and Darcy stares at him and curses literally everything ever.

“Uh,” she says stupidly.

“Hey, Darcy,” Sam greets politely, then glances around. “Barnes there?”

Darcy exerts some truly superhuman self-control and does not glance down to where Bucky is still flat on his back beneath her wearing that paper-white face, hair splayed on the pillows and legs on either side of her hips and hands . . . prooobably palming knives right now, actually, she would be if she were him.

“Yeah, he showed up outside,” she says instead. “So I’m guessing Tony called?”
“Someone had to,” Sam says, expression pointed. Darcy winces; it’s a fair cop. Yeah, she’s been fussing over Bucky, but she definitely had opportunity to slip them an update or five. Or anything.

Sam’s obviously on the quinjet--she recognizes the bulkhead behind him--and she can see Clint’s shoulder pressed against his, although Clint himself doesn’t seem to be interested in the call. It looks like Sam’s holding a StarkTablet and that’s the camera; god knows how J.A.R.V.I.S. is getting the feed of her to send back.

And please, _please_ let it not be widescreen.


She really doesn’t have anything better for that.

“Uh-huh.” Sam raises his eyebrows at her, expression dry. “Where are you? I don’t recognize the room.”

“Family suite,” Darcy says, and _that_ gets Clint’s attention. He leans into the screen, eyebrows popping, and Sam blinks.

“What?” he asks.

“Family suite,” she repeats, touching the corner of the holoscreen to turn it so Sam can see the room outside the closet. Or hopefully that’s how it works, anyway. Bucky takes the opportunity to slip away into the back corner again very carefully, which she both does not blame him for and hugely appreciates. “Apparently all the Avenger floors have ‘em, they’re just locked down until someone needs them. J.A.R.V.I.S. popped the ones on the Thor floor while we were eating lunch.”

“. . . Darcy, why does the super-assassin showing up mean somebody needs a family suite?” Sam asks slowly.

“Uh.” Darcy glances back to Bucky uncomfortably; he presses back tighter into the corner, staring warily at the back of the screen. “So Tony didn’t . . . mention that part, then?”

“*What* part?” Natasha’s suddenly there, having grabbed the tablet and turned it to stare suspiciously. Darcy is suddenly excessively aware of the fact she probably has makeout hair and her shirt is definitely rumpled. She does her best to fix both, leaving the screen facing the wrong way for the moment.

“He was in heat last time,” she says, trying not to think about the fact that Steve must be able to hear this. “He, uh . . . he thought he couldn’t get pregnant.”

Natasha’s eyes narrow, and Clint snorts.

“Didn’t your dad ever teach you better than to listen to an omega who said that?” he deadpans wryly. It’s a joke--Darcy knows Clint’s sense of humor, obviously it’s a joke--but Bucky flinches.

“It wasn’t like that!” she snaps, teeth reflexively baring. Clint’s eyes widen in surprise, and she grimaces and takes a breath through her teeth in an attempt to calm herself. “It’s not like . . . look, I didn’t know who he was and he didn’t know who _I_ was, okay, he was just a guy who needed a heat partner and--” she could mention HYDRA, definitely, but she is not _completely_ suicidal so no, just no--“I happened to be around, okay? It’s not like he came up to me, I found _him_.”

. . . found him surrounded by HYDRA goons he could’ve taken down at any time but didn’t even touch until she showed up.
Darcy feels sick for a second, then grits her teeth and ignores it, clambering out of the closet and moving the screen up through the air to stay at face-level for her. No. They hurt him, they didn’t give him a choice in anything, and she’s not going to assume he’s—that he--

She’s just not going there.

“Your lipstick is smudged,” Natasha says, perfectly neutral.

“I ate a truffle. Must’ve happened then,” Darcy says flatly. “Look, I’m sorry I didn’t tell anybody when I figured it out--”

“You knew before?” Sam interrupts, eyebrows shooting up again; Darcy grimaces.

“Yeah, well, ‘metal-armed dude who smells like cinnamon-based baked goods and is on Captain America’s heat cycle’ is the kind of description that makes an impression, okay?” she says. “I worked it out after he left. Like, he was already long gone and what was I gonna do, tell on him? He’s a grown-ass super-soldier, if he wanted to come in he would’ve come in. He wasn’t hurting anybody.”

Except Steve every time he avoided him, anyway.

“He could have,” Natasha says.

“He didn’t,” Darcy says, teeth baring again. Nobody who didn’t deserve worse, anyway. “He wanted--seriously, what the hell, what did Tony even tell you?”

“Banner was the one who called, actually,” Hawkeye says, quirking an eyebrow at her. “He said it was a personal thing. Which sounds about right, from what you’re saying.”

“He tried to give himself a medication abortion,” Darcy says, lips thinning. She’s not going to make Bucky explain this again just because Bruce couldn’t be assed to--and she knows that’s unfair, it’s Bruce, he probably thought it was better this way, but she doesn’t care. “It didn’t work, he just puked up the pills. He only came back because he didn’t know anyplace else that would help him abort without, you know, the obvious.”

“Aw, fuck.” Clint winces, raking a hand back over his scalp. “Bruce and Tony on that?”

“Not so much,” Darcy says. She doesn’t look at Bucky--she doesn’t want to confirm he’s here, even though they’re probably already assuming he is. Considering how far back into the closet he is . . . yeah, no. She definitely doesn’t want to confirm he’s here. “We asked him if he’d want to keep the pregnancy if it was safe to. He said yes, so we’re moving him in.”

“So that’s the family suite coming in, I’m gonna assume,” Sam says. Darcy turns the screen towards the bed and the boxes she left stacked up by it.

“Yuuuup,” she says, popping the “p” at the end. Natasha frowns at the boxes.

“You’re moving in with him,” she says.

“Yeah,” Darcy replies, not clarifying past that. They don’t need to know the exact decision-making process right now. “The suites are pretty big, actually, there’s like three bedrooms in this one alone. Like, bassinets and bunk beds and everything and . . . um. Is it just me or is Tony really lonely?”

“Not just you,” Clint confirms, glancing off-screen. Darcy tries not to think about what Steve’s doing right now. Out of sight and out of mind is just about the only thing keeping her head on
straight right now in regards to her instinctive revulsion at the idea of hurting or upsetting an omega.

“I made him Hamburger Helper,” she says, her voice going a little smaller than she wants it to. She keeps talking anyway, because . . . because yeah. Steve at least deserves to hear . . . something. “And he had some yogurt and fruit and Pop-Tarts. And there’s, uh, I put a frozen lasagna in the oven for dinner. Uh.”

“And then you went into a nesting closet with him. And ate a truffle.” Natasha raises her eyebrows, expression mild. Darcy reddens, turning the screen away from the bed. Okay, so it sounds bad.

“Yeah, I did,” she says anyway. “Well, technically they were his truffles, I bought them in case he came back for this heat. We split one.”

“Man, the one time I go on the retrieval mission,” Clint says wryly. “Saved us any of those, Lewis?”

“No. They’re for Bucky,” Darcy retorts, still red-faced. “Get your own, Barton.”

“Rough,” Sam says, looking amused.

“Whatever, if you guys were better at this he wouldn’t have needed to sneak in behind your backs and I’d be eating cannoli with Thor right now,” Darcy huffs, making a face at him. “And bringing some back for the rest of you, but now you’re gonna have to get your own.”

“Hey now, hold up, you can’t deny a man cannoli just because he got outmaneuvered by the covert expert,” Sam says, holding a hand up in mock-offense. “That’s just cold.”

“Wow, you had to make the cold remark, look who’s talking,” Darcy snorts. Sam grins and Clint and Natasha both smirk.

“Darcy,” Steve says, his voice very quiet and very low. The other three immediately fall silent and look up from the tablet, all zeroing in on the same off-screen point as Darcy’s heart sinks. “I’d like to talk to Bucky now.”

Darcy pauses, glancing towards the closet. Bucky hasn’t moved, but his pheromones flared harshly at Steve’s voice and his face is . . . his face looks . . .

His face makes her want her taser.

Her empty fingers twitch against her leg. Bucky stares up at her and shakes his head mutely, eyes big and pained. Darcy swallows, and breathes out. She looks back at the screen.

“No,” she says. Natasha tilts her head; Sam’s eyebrows go up.

Steve takes the tablet, and looks down at her. He looks so tired and so sad and so hurt. Darcy’s hindbrain is cringing from the sight.

She breathes in. Out. She holds eye contact with him, and hopes he’ll understand. Hopes he’ll forgive Bucky, at least, if not her.

“He doesn’t want to,” she tells him, keeping her voice as steady as she can. “And I’m not making him do anything he doesn’t want to. You wanna talk to him when you get here, I’ll ask him again, but if he doesn’t then--then you have to get through me first.”
Steve keeps looking at her for a long moment, then just nods once and passes the tablet back to the others. Darcy’s knees go weak with guilt and she concentrates really carefully on just . . . not.

After that Sam says some stuff, and Natasha very pointedly does not say some stuff, and Darcy just nods along and tries not to grimace the whole way through it. Steve looked so . . . Steve’s been so . . .

They’ll be back in twelve hours.

The screen blips out, and Darcy breathes out. She does not let her stupid fucking hindbrain obsess over the distressed omega on the other end of that phone call. The distressed omega right here gets precedence. She decided that already. That was a decision that she made.

So that’s how it’s going to be.

“Okay,” she says aloud, then looks back to the closet. Talk about a fucking moodkiller. Part of her wants to go back into it anyway, but that part is her stupid-ass hindbrain that didn’t know better than to go into it in the first place. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, alpha,” Bucky says quietly, not moving from the corner. Darcy wishes she could do . . . something. Anything. Any useful thing at all.

“I’m sorry I called you Bucky,” she says finally. She doesn’t really know what else to. “Or . . . I’m not sure if I’m sorry. Do you really want us to call you ‘Asset’?”

“. . . no,” Bucky mutters, looking down. “Not really.”

“Do you know what you do want called?” she asks. Bucky bites his lip, shoulders pressing back into the corner.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I don’t--I’m not used to things like that.”

“Do you not want a name?” Darcy asks after a moment, frowning a little. It’s not like . . . well, she’s worked around weirder stuff. She could keep calling him “omega” or “baby”; Tony’s probably got a million nicknames to cycle through; “hey you” would work in a pinch. “I mean--I get it if you don’t, I can see how that would be . . . a lot, maybe.”

Being called the name of a man he doesn’t even seem to be sure he is . . . yeah, she can see how that would be a lot of pressure. Even if that man weren’t Captain America’s long-lost war hero BFF.

“I don’t care,” Bucky says, still looking down. “Bucky’s as good as anything. Better than--” He stops, and doesn’t say anything else. Darcy wonders what the end of that sentence was going to be (“the asset”? “nothing”? some awful insult or ugly claiming thing?), and has to crush the impulse to ask. She doesn’t think her hindbrain could handle the answer right now.

Possibly not at all, depending on what it is.

“Okay,” she says, putting a hand against the doorframe. Bucky keeps staring down—not at his stomach, this time. Darcy’s not sure what he’s looking at. “Can I call you Bucky? Or do you like it better when I call you other stuff?”

Bucky’s quiet. He’s probably more concerned about Steve coming back than what anyone’s calling him, honestly, but Darcy doesn’t want to push him on it. There’s . . . there’s a lot she doesn’t want to push him on, really, but Steve is probably the thing that worries her the most.
Steve’s the thing she thinks would be most likely to make him run.

“I don’t mind when you call me other stuff,” he says after a long moment, and Darcy snaps her attention back to him. “Omega and sweetheart and that stuff. And I liked . . . I liked before, when you called me Jamie.”

Hindbrain fucking *loves* that. Darcy exhales.

“Do you want me to call you Jamie?” she asks carefully.

“You can,” Bucky says. He’s still not looking at her.

“Nobody else?” Darcy asks, still careful. Bucky nods, then picks up the marshmallow pillow again and wraps himself around it. Darcy hesitates, not sure if she should say more or leave him alone, then glances towards the door. The “medley” might need to start cooking by now; she didn’t really look at the instructions that closely. She’s still not even sure if he’s going to be hungry, but . . .

There is a very limited list of things she can do for Bucky right now. Calling him pet names he likes and feeding him up as much as possible after he hasn’t eaten in four days is not even the *start* of what she wants to do for him.

At least it’s a *start*, though.

“I’m gonna go check on dinner,” she tells him. “If you want a shower I can go grab you a change of clothes?”

“I have clothes,” Bucky says, frowning.

“Um . . . cleaner clothes,” Darcy says, grimacing a little. “I mean, not to be a dick or anything, I’m just assuming you didn’t have much laundromat time on the run and all.”

“. . . ‘laundromat’,” Bucky repeats like he’s never heard the word in his life. Darcy represses a cringe. Really he’s a lot cleaner than she would’ve expected a homeless fugitive to be managing, but she doesn’t actually know what he’s been doing all this time; for all she knows he’s got an apartment or has been in a hotel or motel.

“I brought over my bathroom stuff already, you can use whatever you want,” she offers. “And I can do your laundry after dinner, I need to throw in a load anyway.”

Bucky goes quiet again, looking away. Darcy has to resist the urge to duck back into the closet and pet him, although that would definitely be a terrible idea—the whole thing still smells like him, like him being *hers*, and she’s pretty sure if she touched him again she’d end up back between his legs with his pheromones overwhelming her and her hindbrain running the show.

And probably with her *clit* in him, the way they were going earlier.

That’s not . . . she would happily give Bucky her knot again, she would fuck him *exactly* how he asked her to and kiss him anywhere he liked and touch him just how he wants. It’s not like it would be a hardship. It’s not like she doesn’t want it too.

She’s just not sure he *actually* wants it.

“And we need to talk,” she admits. His expression immediately turns wary. “It’s not bad, I swear, I just—there’s some stuff I want you to know, okay? That’s all.”
“What kind of stuff?” Bucky asks, guarded. Darcy sighs and blows her hair out of her eyes, then gestures at the closet.

“Well, for starters, that you don’t have to pheromone-bomb me like that,” she tells him. “You don’t have to play up to me to get taken care of. Or . . . whatever you’re thinking. I’m going to take care of you no matter what. Doesn’t matter where you sleep or what you want called or if you never let me touch you again, as long as you need it and want it, I’ll do it.”

“. . . ‘let you’,” Bucky says the same way he said “laundromat”.

Darcy thinks awful things.

“Yes,” she says tightly. “You picked me. I was last alpha standing. That’s--I take that seriously, okay? It meant a lot to me, that you trusted me like that. I want you to keep being able to trust me like that.”

“Yes, alpha,” Bucky says tonelessly, and Darcy grimaces again, pressing her shoulder against the doorframe.

“You’re the mother of my pups, Jamie,” she says, because he might understand that. Or at least it might buy her some time until he can understand the idea that she might be concerned about him, anyway. “I’m never going to ditch out on you. Not if I can help it.”

“Yes, alpha,” Bucky says again. He doesn’t sound any more convinced. Darcy grits her teeth, head ducking. She just wants--she wishes there was something she could say to convince him. She wishes there were something to prove it right now.

She wants him to actually say her name again, and not just “alpha”.

“I understand if you don’t believe me,” she tells him quietly. “We can talk more later, and maybe that’ll help. And if it doesn’t--well, I’ll understand that too. But I’m gonna do everything I can, and if you can trust me in the meantime . . . I’d appreciate it, if you could trust me.”

Bucky doesn’t say anything, his eyes flicking sidelong uncertainly. Darcy stifles three different responses, forcing herself to wait for him to respond.

“I don’t know if I can,” he says eventually. Darcy flexes her jaw.

“Okay,” she manages. “Can you try to?”

“. . . yes,” Bucky replies slowly, eyes flicking back to her. He is gorgeous and sad and she still doesn’t know if he actually wants her to touch him. “I can try to.”

“Thank you,” Darcy says, because there’s not much else she can say to that. She pushes herself back from the door, forcing herself not to get caught up on the uncertainty in his scent. It’s normal. It’s fine. “I’m gonna go check on dinner. The bath stuff’s by the bed if you want it.”

Bucky nods, ducking his head, and Darcy clenches her jaw again and then makes herself leave without doing anything else. She’s got no idea what she would’ve done anyway.

She wants to help him. She wants to do right by him.

She just wishes she knew what that really was.
“Vegetable medley” is the fucking devil, Darcy decides morosely, eyeing the limp and watery and kind of gross-looking results of her attempts to cook it. It looked a hell of a lot prettier on the bag, that’s for sure. Hell, it looked prettier when it was still frozen.

Just . . . what the hell? She followed the stupid instructions. She followed the instructions to a fucking T, or tee, or . . . whatever, she doesn’t even know how that expression actually goes. It’s pretty old-fashioned, maybe Bucky does.

Probably Bucky does not.

Ugh.

Darcy tries a bite of medley, regrets everything, and scrapes the whole mess into the trash. Fuck it, they’ll eat fruit. Fruit’s a thing. Probably a thing. She wonders if there’s garlic bread in the freezer. She checks and no, no there is not. Infinite amount of vegetable medley, though, goddamn it Tony. Seriously, wasn’t his dad Italian? She's probably rolling over in her grave, the poor woman.

Rich people vegetables, Darcy seethes to herself. She doesn’t actually want to give Bucky fruit because the fruit is all in the fridge or freezer and after the way he looked when she put that Hamburger Helper in front of him and he realized it was hot . . . yeah. She definitely does not want to serve him anything cold.

Well. Thank god for microwaves and breaded green bean fries, she guesses.

Bucky comes out of the bedroom while she’s wrestling with the green bean fries. He’s totally silent and gives off basically zero presence, but Darcy smells vanilla-sweet soap and the ghost of cinnamon pheromones, and when she looks up he’s sitting quietly on the other side of the counter dressed in the sweats and T-shirt she’d ganked from Thor. He’s barefoot, which is . . . super fucking distracting, honestly, and his metal arm looks like he stopped to polish it.

She wonders if he actually did, and what he used. She’s pretty sure just soap couldn’t get a shine like that, but it’s not like she knows anything about whatever alloy it’s made out of or any sealants that might be on it.

She wonders why he bothered, if he did.

“Um,” Darcy starts. Bucky straightens in his seat and looks over at her, and she forgets what she was about to say because—“Oh,” she says stupidly, staring at his stomach. If she hadn’t—if she hadn’t seen him shirtless before, she probably wouldn’t be able to tell, but without all the layers . . .

It looks like he’s showing, without all the layers muddying everything up.
Hindbrain is about to fucking lose it.

“Alpha?” Bucky says uncertainly, and she exhales.

“Sorry. Uh--sorry,” she manages. “It just looks like . . . are you showing already?”

“I think--a little?” Bucky shifts uncomfortably, bringing his biological hand up over his stomach and pressing his shirt to it. He pauses, then pulls it up and looks down at himself. “Maybe.”

Definitely, Darcy thinks. She spent a lot of time both touching and staring at that stomach, okay, she can tell. He’s sure as hell not been eating well enough for it to be ordinary weight gain.

“You’re, uh--you look pretty big compared to last I saw you,” she says, biting the inside of her cheek. “I mean, you were already pretty thick but . . . god please don’t take that the wrong way, I don’t mean you’re fat or anything, obviously you’re not fat.”

“I’m supposed to be fat,” Bucky says, tightening his grip on his shirt with a worried expression.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Darcy says, wincing. Okay, she just needs to . . . she definitely needs to watch her phrasing here, what idiot part of her instincts decided to say literally any of that? Probably one that watched way too many sitcoms as a kid when it should’ve been paying a lot more attention to actual real-life people. “I just meant you were pretty big, and now you’re bigger. I--it’s probably harder for you to tell, I guess, but since I haven’t seen you in a while it’s kind of obvious.”

“That means it’s a few,” Bucky says, expression uncertain. Darcy frowns.

“A few what?” she asks; his eyes flick down to his stomach again.

“Uh . . . pups,” he says carefully. “If I’m . . . if I’m showing already, then . . .”

“Oh,” Darcy realizes, flashing back to her teenage years. Her mom had started showing before she’d even missed a heat, she remembers. “You think it’s a big litter?”

“I don’t know,” Bucky says, looking unnerved. “It’s probably not--not a single.”

“Yeah,” Darcy says. She wasn’t expecting just one pup anyway; there’s a disproportionate amount of only children in the Avengers, but that’s really not SOP. Most people have littermates, and most litters have between two and four pups in them. Something about saying that out loud, though . . .

“Does that . . . uh, does that sound okay to you?”

“Barnes grew up the oldest child of a litter of four,” Bucky says, sounding more like he’s reciting something than like he’s actually answering her. Darcy pauses, then just--files that, and keeps going.

“I was the third of four in my litter,” she tells him. “Then my parents had a second litter of three. My littermates--uh, I’ve got two litter-brothers and a litter-sister, and the brothers are both mated. The alpha and his mate already have two litters of three and the omega and his had a litter of four last year. So, you know, I wouldn’t be shocked if we had three or four too.”

“Three or four.” Bucky looks . . . distracted. Darcy watches him for a moment, waiting for . . . something. He doesn’t say anything else, though, and his expression doesn’t change.

“Well. We’ve got enough bassinets if we do, at least,” she says finally, not sure what else to say. “I guess we’ll find out soon enough either way.”
Bucky doesn’t look any less distracted, but the timer goes off and Darcy has to grab the lasagna out of the oven and leave it to sit for ten minutes because . . . well, she’s not actually sure, but the instructions say to so yeah, she’s gonna. The vegetable medley was already a big enough disaster, okay, she is not fucking up the entrée.

She puts the green bean fries in the microwave and tracks down the plates and silverware, setting places for them at the counter. The dining room table is a little too intimidating right now, at least for her. The counter’s a little more intimate, too, and she’s hoping it’ll make it easier to talk.

Because they really do need to talk.

The microwave dings. Darcy dumps the green bean fries into a serving bowl with some tongs and puts them on the counter, then brings the lasagna over too. She cuts a Steve-sized serving for Bucky and a more normal human-sized one for herself, plants both on their respective plates, and then sits down and quietly panics. She really doesn’t have the room to do that for real right now, unfortunately, but--

“Drinks!” she blurs, shoving herself up again; Bucky startles, then stares at her in confusion. “Um- -sorry. Did you want something to drink, I mean. Like, there’s water and milk and weird fancy rich-people fruit juices and . . . uh. Stuff.”

“. . . no thank you, alpha,” Bucky tries carefully, expression guarded. Darcy feels like an idiot and retreats to the fridge in favor of regaining some dignity. She grabs the first thing she sees, which turns out to be one of the weird fruit juices--Yubari melon, which is just . . . she has literally never even heard of this, what kind of person even stocks melon juice? Is that even a thing or is Tony just fucking crazy?

Is she fishing for excuses to not have to start this conversation?

Darcy groans to herself, grabs another can of juice just in case Bucky changes his mind, then brings them both over to the counter. If he doesn’t want it, she’ll drink it. She sits down and only then realizes he hasn’t touched his plate.

She really, really wants to not assume the worst, but . . .

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but . . . you know you can eat without waiting for permission, right?” she tells him carefully. “Or . . . me.”

“Yes, alpha,” Bucky says as his eyes flick away, pretty obviously lying. He still hasn’t called her by name again yet. She’s starting to wonder if “alpha” is some kind of replacement for “ma’am”, the way he’s been talking to her.

Yeah. They definitely need to have this conversation.

“You can,” Darcy says, very deliberately taking a green bean fry and popping it into her mouth. She’s not sure, but if it might make it easier for him . . . “Like, you can eat any food in here, it’s all just as much yours as it is mine. I mean, you should tell J.A.R.V.I.S. if you eat the last of something so he can put it on the next grocery order, but that’s it.”

“Yes, alpha.” Bucky stares at the green beans. Darcy resists the urge to dump some of them on his plate, but only barely. Her hindbrain is whining like a kicked dog over him not eating the food she’s provided, but her hindbrain can suck a knot.

“Are you hungry?” she tries.
“. . . I think so,” he says. Darcy grips her fork tightly and takes a slow breath.

“Okay,” she says. “Just--take a bite, please? And check?”

“Yes, alpha,” Bucky says, picking up the fork. She may actually end up hating that phrase by the end of this, Darcy thinks. Bucky cuts a corner off the lasagna gingerly, a little too awkward with the fork, and she concentrates on not snarling at people who aren’t even here to get tased.

Bucky takes the bite, expression turning considering for a long moment, and Darcy pretends to care about her own dinner so he can work it out. Judging by how fast he tucks back in, she’s pretty sure the mental coin toss came up “hungry”.

“There’s more if you want,” she says when he’s made it through the piece in record time and stopped after practically licking the plate, the look on his face gone a little strange.

“. . . there’s more,” Bucky repeats, eyes flicking guardedly towards the lasagna. Darcy takes a vengeful bite of green beans, then cuts him another two slices and dumps them on his plate along with a couple scoops of the green bean fries. She doesn’t want to treat him like a kid or assume he can’t handle shit for himself, but if she doesn’t feed him right now she may actually scream.

“There’s more,” she repeats firmly. “So. I’m guessing HYDRA had some fucked-up rules about food?”

“I . . . yeah,” Bucky says, staring at his overfull plate like he’s never seen anything like it. “There were rules.”

“You know those are bullshit, right?” she asks.

“Yeah,” he says, but looks uncomfortable. Darcy takes a minute to figure it out, but--

“Do you know which rules are theirs and which ones are normal?” she asks carefully. Bucky grimaces, then shakes his head. Darcy sees red, but--it’s fine. She can handle this. “Okay. Give me a second,” she says, then gets up and heads back to the office to dig up a pen and paper. Tony being Tony, there aren’t any, but there’s a tablet with a stylus so fuck it, whatever.

She brings the tablet back to the kitchen, booting it up as she goes, and is entirely unsurprised to find it not only already set up but also linked to all her profiles and files, Jesus Christ, Stark, get a puppy. Bucky’s plate is already empty again, and from the look of it Darcy thinks he might’ve actually licked it this time.

God, this is testing her faith in humanity. And she never had an overwhelming amount of that anyway.

“Okay,” she says, setting down the tablet to cut another serving of lasagna for Bucky and spoon more green beans onto his plate. “So I was thinking we could make a list, and those could be our rules. Like, not just food rules, if there’s anything else you’re not sure about we can cover that too. It might make it easier to keep everything straight.”

“Rules,” Bucky repeats, a brief flash of misery passing over his face and making her nauseous to see.

“We don’t have to,” Darcy says as she sits back down. “I just thought it might help.”

“Maybe,” he mutters, looking away. “We could try . . . we could try rules.”
“Okay.” Darcy watches him carefully, picking up the tablet and opening the notepad app. “Want to start with food?” He nods mutely, and she writes *the food in our suite is for both of us,* he watches her do it, and she glances up when she’s done.

“The food in our suite is for both of us,” he says. There’s a flatness to his tone Darcy really doesn’t like, but . . . if it helps, she’s not complaining.

*if you eat the last of something, tell J.A.R.V.I.S. so he can replace it,* she writes. It’s simple stuff, but simple seems like the best place to start.

“If y--if I eat the last of something, I have to tell J.A.R.V.I.S. so he can replace it,” Bucky repeats, response a little more awkward with the pause to rephrase but no less flat.

“Yeah,” Darcy says, glancing up to him again. “Okay, so, uh . . . do you want to tell me some of the rules you’re sure were HYDRA and go from there?”

“Nothing sweet,” he says, eyes flicking away for the umpteenth time. Answer enough, Darcy guesses. She kind of wants to laugh and kind of wants to *cry,* hearing that.

“Well we blew *that* one straight to hell,” she mutters wryly, writing *all the sweet stuff you want,* seriously.

“All the . . . all the sweet stuff I . . . I want,” Bucky reads off, tone turning uncertain. Darcy kind of hates the part of herself that prefers it to the flatness. “Seriously.”

“Seriously,” she agrees firmly. “What else?”

“No eating without permission,” Bucky says.

*eat when you’re hungry,* Darcy writes.

“Eat when I’m--hungry,” Bucky repeats, voice dropping into a murmur for a moment before he goes on without prompting. “Eat whatever I’m given.”

Darcy pauses at that, frowning for a second and wondering how that was even a rule HYDRA felt like they needed to give a guy they apparently made a habit of withholding food from. Then she comes up with a couple of possibilities and immediately wishes she hadn’t.

*if you don’t want to eat it, you don’t have to,* she writes very slowly, lips pressed together tight. Bucky rephrases and repeats, again, and then hesitates in a way that makes nauseous dread pool in Darcy’s stomach.

“Food is--a privilege,” he says, voice stilted. He’s repeated *all* these phrases, Darcy realizes slowly, fingers tightening on the stylus. That’s why he’s reading off what she writes like that; they told him all this poisonous, ugly shit and made him say it until he believed it.

And the “privilege” line isn’t the one he was going to say. She can tell just from the look on his face.

*food is A RIGHT,* Darcy writes, underlining it a couple times because she needs the moment to deal with the fact there is actually something worse than this coming. Bucky repeats it lowly, his voice weak. It’s a good thing, Darcy tells herself. The flatness, that was how he coped before, right? If he’s not flat, if he’s not repressing every little thing he feels, that’s *good.*

God, she hopes it’s good.
“Anything else?” she asks after he’s been silent twice as long as he was the last turn, taking a
second to push her glasses up as she glances at him again. Bucky’s expression flashes back to
miserable and Darcy’s gut clutches up, and she opens her mouth to say never mind but--

“Good bitches get treats,” Bucky says, flat as the goddamned floor.

Darcy snarls. The stylus cracks in her fingers, and Bucky goes dead-still on the other side of the
counter. She can’t make herself put her teeth away, and her fingers feel like they might just cramp
around the mangled stylus. Bucky shrinks in on himself, head ducking until he’s looking up at her,
curled forward into a submissive posture as his pheromones turn cloying and pleasing, and Darcy
feels sick at the sight. It’s probably as much a reflex as her snarling was.

“Don’t,” she forces out. “It’s not--don’t.”

She’s not one of them, she’s not that kind of alpha, she’s not one of those fucking monsters who
put a choke chain on an omega, on anyone, who made him fucking--made him fucking scrape and
bow and suffer--

She drops the stylus and presses the heels of her hands to her temples and breathes, in and out and
in out and calm, slow, steady, easy. Just--breathes. In and out, calm and slow, steady and easy.

Bucky whines. Darcy takes one look at him and gets a vivid, horrible flash of him back in the
fabrication lab and an even worse one of how those HYDRA fucks back in the alley had probably
been planning to “take care” of him.

She snarls again. She can’t help it. She goes tense all over, hands fistig in her own hair, and she
knows her pheromones must be going fucking crazy right now, she knows. She knows, but her
hindbrain is strung out on her omega’s hurt little noises and pleading pheromones and the pain and
wariness and memories of fear that she can smell in them, on knowing how much he’s been hurt
and how little she can actually do about it. On knowing she’ll never actually know how much he’s
been hurt, even if Bucky tells her himself, because even he doesn’t fucking remember.

He’s not even her omega.

“Alpha--” Bucky starts slowly.

“Don’t call me that!” Darcy shrieks. He recoils, and she flinches back and fucking despises herself.
“I’m not--I don’t--I’m sorry, I’m sorry, fuck. Call me whatever you want, it’s not . . . I’m sorry, I’m
so sorry. I didn’t mean . . . it’s not your fault, it’s not because of you, I swear, I just need . . . a
minute, I’ll be okay, just I need a minute.”

She is not going to be okay in a minute.

Bucky whines again, softer and quieter and suddenly around the counter and in close against her.
Darcy didn’t even notice him moving, but, well, blackout rage will do that for you, won’t it, she
thinks with morbid not-even-close-to humor, staring down at him. He’s on his knees, which is
something she can’t let herself process if she ever wants to calm down again. He leans in and gives
her side a kittenish little nuzzle, then presses his face in against her ribs.

Fucking textbook alpha-soothing behavior. If it was Ian doing this after a fight she’d be hard as a
rock right now and forgiving just about anything. Of course, if it were Ian, it would’ve actually
been a fight and not just her yelling at some poor blameless bastard whose head is barely screwed
on, and there might’ve actually been something that needed forgiven.

God, what is she even doing? This isn’t about her. This isn’t even a little about her. Bucky’s on the
fucking floor. Bucky’s on the floor trying to placate the alpha that he thinks his sanctuary and his pups’ lives depends on.

And she’s the one who can’t keep a lid on her damn pheromones.

Darcy picks up the stylus again, fingers trembling with adrenaline. It’s . . . semi-intact, at least. It works when she puts it on the tablet, so whatever, who cares past that.

She writes the only rule she can in response to what he just said, gritting her teeth and trying to force herself to calm down the entire time. Bucky stays on the floor beside her, still nuzzled in close in a way she’d love under other circumstances and hates right now. She rumbles low in her chest to get his attention, then tilts the tablet so he can read it. He goes still against her side.

Darcy . . . Darcy waits, because there’s no other option.

“You do not . . .” Bucky trails off, visibly struggles for a moment, and then starts over: “I do not . . . I do not have to have sex with anyone for any reason unless you . . . unless I . . .”

He stops, expression twisting strangely, and Darcy forces herself to stay silent and her own face to stay neutral. It almost works. She thinks it almost works.

“Unless I want to,” Bucky blurs out in a rush, then immediately tenses up, visibly shaken. Darcy breathes out, setting down the tablet.

“Right,” she says.

“But . . . if it’s my heat, you won’t . . .” He trails off, hesitant, and Darcy exhales roughly again.

“Won’t be able to help myself?” she guesses, remembering their first meeting. “Yeah, you said that last time. I promise you, man, I can and I goddamn well will. If you want to ride your next heat or the heat after or a heat five years from now or literally any heat you ever have again out either alone or with somebody not me, I’ll make sure you’ve got everything you need and clear the hell out for as long as you want. That’s got nothing to do with whether you’re allowed to stay here or not.”

“But,” Bucky starts uncomfortably, and then doesn’t say anything else. He’s still kneeling, which isn’t helping Darcy focus, but she’s not going to interrupt the strange look on his face, some naked cross between guilt and frustration and fear. She wants so bad to smooth it away, but she doesn’t know how and her instincts are useless in this situation; her stupid goddamn instincts would have her pushing his head down or dragging him up to bend over the table or biting his neck ‘til he fucking cried, the useless, brutal things they are. Like that’s some kind of comfort, like that would really make him feel safe like it might for another omega, after all the other shit.

She wants to touch him. She wants to put a hand on his neck and press her nails in like he liked in heat, but she has no way of knowing if that’s something he’d want when he’s out of it.

No way of knowing if he really wants to be touched by her at all, and doesn’t just think he has to let her.
“Are you still hungry?” she asks finally, not wanting to just leave him there. If Bucky were Ian or Johnny or literally any other omega she’s dated or partnered, she’d be offering him a bite off her own plate. This isn’t either of those things, though, and god knows what that’d invoke for him. She doesn’t want to give him fucked-up signals, especially not right now.

“I don’t know,” Bucky replies quietly, not looking up at her. Darcy wants to pet his head; brush his hair back out of his face and kiss his forehead and cheeks and mouth. She wants to hand-feed him all the best bits, draw a hot and relaxing bath full of scented oils and bubbles for him, lay him back in bed and eat him out slow and sweet until he loses track of how many times he’s come and the stress lines around his eyes disappear.

She wants to do what he actually wants, whatever that is.

“Okay,” she says, pushing herself up out of her seat. She’s barely eaten half her meal, but her appetite’s pretty much shot at this point. “Try eating, please? I’m gonna put the leftovers away and do the dishes.”

“Yes,” Bucky says, the end of the word breaking off a little too suddenly. Darcy can hear where he didn’t say “alpha”.

“I mean it,” she tells him as she picks up her plate, looking down at him where he’s still kneeling like . . . like she doesn’t want him to be, basically. “You can call me whatever you want.”

Bucky doesn’t say anything, Darcy doesn’t push it.

She packages up everything that isn’t on Bucky’s plate and puts it all in the fridge, throws out the disposable pan the lasagna came in, and then starts scrubbing her plate and silverware and the serving bowl and pan. She doesn’t look back at Bucky, and he doesn’t make any sound she can hear over the running water.

Ignoring him’s maybe not the best idea, but she doesn’t think the privacy’ll hurt. Or she hopes it won’t. Or--

Forget it.

Darcy dries the dishes and puts them away and wipes out the sink with a dishtowel that probably cost more than her last pair of glasses, then turns back around just in time to nearly collide with Bucky, who’s standing behind her with his empty plate. They both startle, and she grabs the plate when he fumbles it.

His biological hand is warm under hers. The metal one’s closer to room temperature.

He smells sweet.

They’re both still for a moment, then Darcy takes the plate and turns around to scrub it clean and dirty up the sink all over again. Bucky’s silent behind her, and she repeats the ritual of drying and putting the plate and fork away and wiping out the sink again, and when she turns back around he’s barely moved.

“I need to unpack,” she says. It’s a stupid and pointless thing to say; it’s a stupid and pointless thing to do, at this point.

But it’s something.

Bucky nods, and Darcy dries her hands on her jeans, tucks the tablet and damaged stylus under her
arm, and heads back to the master bedroom. He follows her and immediately tucks himself away in
his nest, and she sets the tablet on the nightstand and starts unpacking her haphazard collection of
boxes. It’s something to do, anyway.

Also, she really wants to sleep before Steve gets here and hates her. Just . . . she is going to need
that sleep, is all. Having a bunch of boxes lying around isn’t going to make that any easier.

God, she’s only got ten hours to figure out how to convince Captain fucking America she’s not
doing anything shitty to his best friend and that she’s just trying to do her best by the guy by not
‘fessing up to having seen him and not making him talk to Steve.

Yeah, she’s definitely spending that time asleep. There’s not shit she can actually do besides pray
for super-soldier mercy.

Her life would’ve been so much easier if Bucky weren’t so good at covert ops, she thinks
resignedly as she opens a new box.

“Where have you been all this time, anyway?” she asks a few boxes in, glancing towards the closet.
Bucky’s mostly hidden by the doorway, but she can see him, and he can see the other door and
windows. “Steve and Sam never even got close to you.”

“They were close to me,” Bucky says. He’s looking at the door, not her. Darcy frowns, shaking out
a shirt to hang up.

“When?” she asks. Steve’d said they hadn’t scented him even once, and she can’t see why he
would’ve lied about that. Bucky must’ve pulled off one hell of an escape.

“The whole time.” Bucky’s eyes flick up again, and he tenses a little at seeing her startled
expression.

“Oh--you’re gonna have to clarify that one for me, Jamie,” she says, struggling to clear her face.
What the hell? “Like . . . they weren’t even following decent leads half the time, just looking for
leads.”

“I know,” Bucky says, still tense. “I was following them.”

Darcy pauses, then reevaluates the conversation and maybe also some of her life choices. He just--
for a fucking year? The whole time?

“When?” she asks eventually, not really knowing where else to go with that. Not really knowing
what to think of that.

“I knew any place they’d been would be safe,” Bucky replies.

“Are you kidding me?” Darcy demands in disbelief as she drops the shirt altogether to stare at him,
her hindbrain instinctively horrified. “You’ve got to be kidding me, Jesus Christ, Jamie, they ran
through a laundry list of half the most dangerous places on the freaking planet looking for you!
That is like the opposite of safe!”

Bucky frowns, his head ducking. Darcy tries not to wince. Okay, she didn’t just alpha-voice him or
anything, but maybe that was a little too . . . shouty. Or something.

“No,” he says. “That was safe.”

“Because they were close by in case you needed backup?” she asks carefully, trying to keep her
pheromones down.

“Because any place they’d gotten to first wouldn’t have anyone HYDRA left in it,” he replies, shaking his head. Darcy blinks. That’s . . . not exactly what she was expecting to hear.

It occurs to her that Bucky may have actually spent the past year of his life doing literally nothing but hiding. Everyone’s always talked like he was clearing out HYDRA safehouses or looking for bloody revenge in Russia, but that wasn’t actually everyone talking, that was everyone assuming. Which she knew, obviously, because if they’d had actual proof of what he was doing all that time they would’ve had a trail to follow, but . . .

But.

“You’ve just been hiding,” she says slowly. She can’t imagine how miserable his heats were; how lonely he must’ve been. Well--some people can go a few cycles without getting the side effects, she knows. Maybe Bucky’s like that.

She hopes Bucky’s like that.

“Yes,” Bucky says, shifting back a little further into the closet. “I’m not--they thought I was doing stuff, right? Recon or hunting down HYDRA cells or . . . or something.”

“Was kind of the general consensus, yeah,” Darcy agrees carefully.

“Yeah.” Bucky’s mouth twists. It looks like a smirk, but there’s no humor or amusement in it. “I told you. I’m not the guy he thinks I am.”

“You look like him,” Darcy says, knowing she’s already said it but not sure she’s got anything better. They’re really not anywhere near where she expected the conversation to go. Bucky’s mouth twists again.

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “I was never that guy. I didn’t even--I didn’t even enlist. I don’t remember very much but I . . . I remember I didn’t enlist. But I told him that I did. And then after he got us out of the facility I was going to take the transfer and go back to the States, get the hell away from the front and get a life again. I only stayed because . . . I only . . .”


“I’m not that guy on the museum wall,” he says. “I didn’t ‘give’ my life for my country, my country fucking took it. I didn’t want to be there. I don’t want to be there now.”

“Okay. What do you want?” Darcy asks, her higher thought processes gently hazed over with white noise. There’s not much else she could ask, under the circumstances.

“Not to fight anymore,” Bucky says, his eyes flicking down as he lifts a hand to curl over his stomach. “I want . . . I want to not fight anymore. I know that’s--I know I have to--”

“‘Have to’,” Darcy echoes, voice blank. Bucky nods roughly.

“I’ll be a good asset--I mean--I can do the work. I’ll get back into form as soon as possible after the . . . after,” he says, own voice gone a little pleading and hand fisting in the front of his shirt. “I heal fast, it won’t take long. I’ll need to re-condition, but I’ll be mission-ready in a month.”

“Okay, well. That sounds like a terrible plan,” Darcy says carefully, and Bucky immediately looks alarmed. Darcy represses a frustrated noise and grabs the tablet and what’s left of the stylus up
again. She writes a new rule, *you do not have to fight for any reason unless you want to*, then holds it up pointedly.

Bucky stares at the screen, then her face. She doesn’t ask if he can read it; he’s a super-soldier sniper, of course he can read it.

“That’s not true,” he says. Darcy’s mouth thins. Like--she’s really glad he can contradict her, don’t get her wrong, but this is not a particularly reassuring thing for him to be contradicting her on.

“It really is,” she says. “Like, if you want to I’m sure the team’d take you, you could get them their ex-assassin hat trick, but you don’t have to. Definitely not five minutes after you go through childbirth do you have to, like, give yourself a break there.”

“That’s not right,” Bucky says, shaking his head.

“According to who?” Darcy asks, frustrated. “Jesus, Jamie. You don’t need to fight any more than you need to put out, okay? It’s the same freaking thing, nobody’s gonna force you to do stuff you don’t want to. The Avengers aren’t HYDRA or the government or even SHIELD anymore, it’s literally just a bunch of crazy people who are only slightly more useful than than they are dangerou--”

She stops. Listens to what she’s actually saying. Bucky’s still staring at her, visibly struggling for a response.

“Useful,” she repeats slowly.

“I am,” Bucky says, immediately jumping on the word. Because that’s what he meant, isn’t it. That’s what he’s been meaning.

“You don’t--” Darcy starts, then stops herself, raking a hand back through her hair on a rough exhalation. Is he even gonna hear her if she tells him he doesn’t have to fit some probably-HYDRA standard of “useful” to get to stay here? Steve would literally eat his shield before he let them kick Bucky out, no matter what, and that’s assuming any of the others would be sociopath enough to throw out a pregnant ex-POW omega anyway. Hell, even if any of them were, Thor would still take him to Asgard at the drop of a hat.

Bucky doesn’t know that, she reminds herself. He’s got no way to know that.

How does she say it so he will?

. . . she’s going to hate herself for this in the morning, isn’t she.

“Omega,” Darcy says firmly, letting just a touch of alpha influence into her voice. Not too much, just--she’s partnered him, she’s bred him, she’s been there for him, at least as much as he let her. She just wants to remind him he’s safe with her. “You’re already useful. Who else is going to take care of the pups?”

“I mean--after they’re born,” Bucky says, frowning. He looks confused, which is--well. Confusing, honestly. “I wouldn’t go out in the field while they might get hurt.”

“I meant that too,” Darcy tells him, not letting herself frown too. “Who else is going to do it?”

“But I’m . . .” Bucky trails off, looking even more confused. She doesn’t even know what part of that’s tripping him up, but it’s still pretty painful to watch. “You want me to take care of them?”
“Who else?” Darcy repeats, definitely not thinking about anything Steve told her about what Bucky wanted after the war. He looks so fucking lost, like . . . like what, what is he even thinking right now?

“But I’m--what I am,” Bucky says lowly, sinking back deeper into the closet. Darcy swears the whole damn thing gets darker. “I don’t take care of people.”

“If you say so, but honestly?” she asks, watching him carefully. “I’d rather our kids be raised by a fucking terrifying political assassin/human tank than, like, whatever ex-SHIELD nannies Tony’d hire otherwise. And personally I have very little childcare experience, okay, and even less ‘maiming bad guys’ experience. They’d be way safer with you.”

“‘Our kids’,” Bucky repeats, tone a little distant.

“. . . yeah,” Darcy replies, own voice still careful. She picks up another shirt and pretends to be super-invested in getting it on the hanger that, knowing Tony, is probably made of something super-expensive and rare as hell. “I--Jamie. Omega. I’m not gonna take them from you. You get that, right?”

“I’m an asset,” Bucky says in that flat, dead tone that makes Darcy’s hackles rise and her fingers twitch for her taser. “I’m a murderer. Not even a soldier anymore.”

Darcy exhales, then abandons the shirt and hanger and remaining boxes and heads over to crouch at the mouth of the closet. Bucky looks at her silently and doesn’t move either away or in closer. She tries to pick the right words, tries to be gentle like she’s so terrible about being, but she doesn’t think it’s going to come out right.

She tries, because that’s all they’ve got right now.

“You’re the mother of my pups,” she reminds him, letting a trace of alpha stay in her voice but repressing the urge to reach out and touch his stomach to make her point. She wants to, just--she doesn’t want to take the liberty. Especially not today. “And you came in from the cold when that is so obviously the last thing you ever wanted to do.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Bucky snaps, tensing.

Darcy looks at him half-hidden in the closet and half-curled around his curved stomach, a full-grown omega and thoroughly blooded killer and not-quite-soldier trying to make himself look small and not worth targeting instead of big and dangerous like he actually is. Who licked her kittenishly when he was in heat and tried to pheromone-bomb her in this same closet when he wasn’t and doesn’t want to talk to Steve and does want the pups inside him.
“I really, really think I do,” she says.

Bucky doesn’t say anything, and he’s not looking at her anymore. Darcy wonders if this is just too much or not enough or . . . or she doesn’t know, really. She just knows it’s not right.

She wishes he’d say something. Or that she could do something. Or . . .

Darcy exhales, dragging her fingers through her hair. Bucky continues not to look at her. She still wants to do something, but she’s done everything she can think of; at this point she’s out of ideas.

“I’m going to get some sleep before Steve and the others get back,” she tells him finally, because maybe some time to let it all sink in will help Bucky, and also because she’s just—she’s tired. Way more tired than she should be. “If you get hungry again there’s plenty in the fridge, and—like, if you wanna sleep too or need something or whatever, just help yourself, okay?”

Bucky nods silently in response, and Darcy takes a deep breath and then lets it go. She’s done everything she can, she reminds herself, at least for right now. She stands up and heads back to the bed, taking off her glasses and dragging the stupidly nice blankets down so she can squirm in under the covers, and then curls up and forces her brain to shut up.

Her hindbrain, unfortunately, is still obsessing over the scent of sweetly bred omega in her den.

That . . . that is really hard to ignore.

So instead she just closes her eyes, drags the blankets over her head, and doesn’t make herself.
I recently commissioned [annasketches](https://www.annasketches.com) for an illustration of a scene you guys might be interested in, which for the record came out [freaking gorgeous](https://www.annasketches.com). …

“Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says politely. Darcy mostly wakes up, then squeezes her eyes shut tighter and hides her head under the pillow with a protesting groan. Someone makes a quiet noise in response right next to her, and she bolts upright in alarm, heart jackhammering in her chest and teeth instinctively baring to--

Oh, right, she remembers as she stares down half-blindly at Bucky, who’s lying on top of the sheets in the other half of the bed and looking up at her with a startled expression.

Well. It’s not like she thought he was gonna sleep in the closet, she guesses, fumbling for her glasses.

Although honestly, the way he’s been acting? She kind of *did*. She just hadn’t wanted to push it and give him the wrong idea. Again.

. . . Thor’s shirt is really thin and really does not hide much, Darcy can’t help noticing as she slips her glasses on and her eyes refocus to track the long length of Bucky’s body stretched out next to hers. He’s still wearing the same soft white T-shirt and loose cotton pants, the line of his hip bared where they’re both disarrayed, where the new curve of his stomach melts into and softens it. She remembers how that line had been the perfect tight place to cradle her clit, before, and how she’d rocked down against him and he’d made soft little noises and gone passive and pleading and spread his--

“Ngh,” she manages stupidly, vaguely aware that she is a horrible person. Also her hair is every freaking which way and she kind of needs a shower and her eyes are all gummy and sleep-gross in front of one of the hottest omegas she’s ever met in her life, much less had in her bed.

Yeah, that sounds about right.

“Alpha,” Bucky says quietly in a tone of voice that just might kill her, looking passive and maybe-pleading and--

“Good morning, Ms. Lewis. The quinjet’s ETA is forty-five minutes,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says. Darcy makes a strangled, panicked noise and throws herself out of the bed.

“Quinjet! Yes! Right! Yes. I remembered that. I’m, uh--gonna,” she starts awkwardly, hands gesturing uselessly, then gives up and flees to the bathroom. Bucky doesn’t follow her, and she doesn’t glance back to see his reaction.

Honestly, it feels unfair to. He’s just so *bad* at schooling his face.

Darcy runs the shower hot and rifles through the box of bathroom supplies in search of shampoo. Bucky, she can’t help re-noticing, used the leftover heat bath products when he was in here. She doesn’t follow his example, mostly because A) she has some sense of self-preservation, and B)
well, they’re his, aren’t they? Or they’re sort of his.

She’s not sure what Bucky’s personal boundaries are like. She might as well act like he has some, though. If nothing else, maybe it’ll help him get used to the idea. And yeah, it’s only soap and shampoo, but that’s beside the point: training wheels are training wheels.

Darcy turns the water on and lets it run to heat up as she shucks off her clothes and dumps them on the floor. She absently wonders what Bucky did with his--she’ll have to ask later, she’s not sure he wouldn’t just assume he needed to wash them in the tub or hide anything dirty somewhere weird or God knows, really.

She kind of feels like an asshole thinking that, though, since it’s just as likely they’re in the hamper or the washing machine. It’s not like he turned up some kind of wreck--well, emotionally, yes, and he’d needed to brush his hair and was a few days behind shaving, but both times she’d met him he’d clearly been getting by in one way or another. Underfed and skittish and tired as hell, but getting by.

Also, you know. He’s alive right now. That’s a lot better than just “getting by”, under the circumstances.

Darcy leaves her glasses on the counter and gets in the shower. She makes it fast, scrubbing up quick and washing her hair before she’s even fully rinsed off her skin, then cutting off the water and leaning out to grab a towel off the rack. She definitely does not use the vanilla soaps at any point in the process.

Normally she’d take a lot longer in the shower, especially when feeling this awkward around her shiny new roommate, but she needs to look like a human being when Steve shows up. She’s already going to be a disaster dealing with denying a distressed omega the one thing he wants most in the whole damn world--maybe the one thing he’s wanted most in the past century, for all she knows--but she can at least have her hair dry and put on some lipstick and just--look presentable, basically.

Because that’s totally relevant in this situation.

Darcy sits down on the lid of the toilet with dripping skin and hair and buries her face in her towel and does not cry, but really wants to. Bucky would almost definitely hear her, though. Because yeah, super-soldier senses, of course he’d hear her. And that’s to say nothing of whatever pheromones she’d probably end up giving off; even someone completely unenhanced would be able to smell that.

Hell, she’ll be lucky if he can’t already smell something.

Darcy breathes in. Darcy breathes out. Darcy is fucking sick of fucking obsessing over her fucking breathing. She rubs the towel back over her hair and up her arms and legs and wrings the water out over the bathmat and very carefully does not think about Steve Rogers, America’s Sweetheart Soldier--about Captain America with the fake smile and flirty little showomega outfit on all the trading cards and lunchboxes and those weird as hell propaganda comics.

. . . although, speaking of those comics, she probably should’ve always known Bucky Barnes was an omega; they would not have drawn a beta or alpha in cute little short-shorts and stockings in the forties. Especially not a fictionally-teenaged one. Fashions change and all--Darcy could count on one hand the amount of unbred male omegas she’s seen wear a dress outside of a movie or formal event in the past week, for example--but yeah, that would’ve been a questionable decision on anyone’s part.
She gives her hair a quick and dirty blow-dry for the sake of not looking like a total schlub and thinks very thoroughly about changing fashion trends and not very thoroughly about how Sergeant Barnes with the pretty slicked-back hair and under-the-lash look might’ve looked in a real-life version of those shorts and stockings and not at all about how Steve must feel right now, forty-five minutes out from the long-lost and long-tortured best friend who’s spent the past year avoiding him. Who’s spent the past year avoiding him and just tricked him into going to the literal opposite side of the damn planet so he could sneak in under his nose and beg an alpha he barely knew for the help Steve’s been trying to give him since DC.

Yeah. She doesn’t think about anything like that at all.

“Quinjet ETA: fifteen minutes, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says. Darcy thanks him as she puts her glasses back on and shrugs into her bathrobe, then heads back into the bedroom to dig through her half-unpacked clothes. Bucky’s made the bed and is sitting still and quiet on the edge of it, which is both more and less than she would’ve expected if she’d let herself expect anything. She’s not sure what to say to him.

There’s a lot she could, just . . . yeah.

Is it weird that he knows how to make a bed when he barely even knows his own name? Or does he just know more than she’s been thinking?

Darcy lays out jeans and a T-shirt and underwear and spends way too long mentally debating between sweaters like picking the right one is somehow going to cut her a break here, then gives up and swaps the T-shirt for a long-sleeved shirt instead and throws a big button-down flannel leftover from Thor’s first visit to Earth on over it at the last minute. Well, no, maybe the button-down’s too much, she might as well--

Bucky hasn’t moved an inch. He’s sitting right where he was when she came out of the bathroom and has stayed so perfectly still that the bedspread hasn’t even wrinkled. Darcy just . . . looks at him, for lack of a better idea.

He’s looking at her, too, but something about the way he’s doing it doesn’t make her feel like she’s what he’s actually seeing.

“Do you want to talk to Steve when he gets here?” she asks finally, voice slow and careful. That at least gets Bucky’s attention, and his eyes refocus into something sharp for a second before he shakes his head. They look dulled again by the time he’s done, which would be concerning even without her hindbrain stirring restlessly.

Her hindbrain is remembering the closet, of course, and thinking that Bucky needs pushed down on that neatly-made bed and fucked ‘til he goes all soft-eyed and shaky like he was in heat and sobs for her.

The hindbrain is a fucking idiot, of course, and not remembering what was actually going on in the closet.

“Okay,” Darcy says, rolling up the sleeves of the button-down. It gives her hands something to do that does not involve Bucky Barnes. Or Bucky Barnes’s shirt, or sweatpants, or . . .

Anyway.

She ruffles a hand through her hair and checks the lay of her clothes and grabs her makeup bag so she can apply a little eyeliner and some lipstick in the vanity mirror, and when she straightens up
Bucky still hasn’t moved at all. Darcy wants to go over to him, wants to at least say something to him, but she has no idea what. He’s not like he was in heat, all needy and uncertain and pleading, but she sure as hell wouldn’t call him confident or put-together either.

“He’s gonna have questions,” she says finally, checking her makeup in the mirror and pretending not to be looking at Bucky’s reflection behind her, although she’d be really surprised if he missed her doing it. “What do you want me to tell him?”

“. . . I don’t understand,” Bucky says slowly, his eyes flicking up to hers in the mirror. Yup. Definitely didn’t miss it. Darcy turns around to face him and leans back against the vanity in an attempt to look casual, like talking to Steve about this is going to be something easy and clear-cut and not something that’ll tear into both of them. Bucky doesn’t deserve the complications—it’s not his fault. He’s just been trying to feel safe.

“Like, about where you’ve been, why you’re here, what you’re gonna do,” she clarifies as she caps her lipstick. “About anything.”

Bucky puts his metal hand on his stomach, which wasn’t even what she was talking about but distracts her for a moment anyway. Mine, hindbrain thinks, so strong and brave and thinking of our pups first and MINE--

Darcy shakes the thoughts off and puts her makeup away, zipping the bag up neatly and shoving it into the back corner of the vanity.

“Is he your friend?” she asks after another long moment in which Bucky doesn’t say anything. He frowns, head tipping up. “The one you were talking about before,” she clarifies belatedly, realizing that may be a way more loaded question than she’d meant to ask. “The one you used to nest with? Who was, uh--good?”

“No,” Bucky replies, his expression going vague. “My friend was different.”

“Different?” Darcy asks, her stomach feeling a little sick at the sight of that expression.

“Different,” he repeats, his expression even vaguer and her stomach even sicker. “I knew him.”

As a response, it doesn’t make much sense. Darcy’s not sure if she should push it, though. It’s so hard to know what to push.

“He was--I don’t remember what happened to him,” Bucky continues, voice uncertain as he just barely curls in on himself. Darcy’s hindbrain itches to push in against him and soothe away hurts that it can’t even touch. “I saw him the last night before I . . . there was a car, and a real pretty omega with a bunch of alpha gals showin’ it off. I saw my friend that night. With the car. And after that I didn’t see him again.”

“. . . right,” Darcy says carefully, because Bucky definitely talked about his friend in the present tense last time. Even on the off chance that the friend who didn’t like bullies and has new friends now isn’t Steve, there’s a disconnect there that’s kind of worrying. And by “kind of worrying” she means “kind of freaking her out”.

“. . . right,” Darcy says carefully, because Bucky definitely talked about his friend in the present tense last time. Even on the off chance that the friend who didn’t like bullies and has new friends now isn’t Steve, there’s a disconnect there that’s kind of worrying. And by “kind of worrying” she means “kind of freaking her out”.

“He’s so good,” Bucky says, almost despairing and doing nothing to placate her worries. “He can’t see me like this. What I--what I let them do to me, what I did for them--”

Okay. Definitely the disconnect, Darcy thinks, striding over quick and hitting her knees in front of him to cover the back of his hand with her own.
“Hey, hey, no,” she hushes him soothingly. “He doesn’t care. I know he doesn’t, okay, he misses you so much. He just wants to know you’re okay.”

“I’m not,” Bucky grits out, staring at the floor past her. “And I ain’t that guy he misses, neither. Ain’t never been that guy.”

“Yeah,” Darcy says, just looking at his crumpled, miserable face for a moment and ignoring every stupid-ass suggestion her hindbrain has. “You said. I don’t know if he’d say the same, though.”

She’s positive he wouldn’t: Steve Rogers, Captain freaking America, truth and justice and not the American way but the real, down to the bone ideal that the American way claims to be, that the American way can only goddamn aspire to--

Yeah. She’s positive.

Bucky turns away, though, not pulling back but not making eye contact, and she can’t really blame him for doubting. Steve is a damn rock and shield, unstoppable force and the immovable object, but what HYDRA did to turn a normal human being into the Winter Soldier . . .

She squeezes the back of Bucky’s hand, not sure if he can feel it. His eyes flick towards her again, though, so--maybe? She’ll ask later, she promises herself.

“I gotta go meet the others,” she tells him. “I’ll put the suite on lockdown while I’m gone, okay? Nobody but me’ll be coming in unless you tell J.A.R.V.I.S. they can.” Tony could, obviously, but after the fabrication lab she’s pretty sure that’s not going to be a concern.

“. . . okay,” Bucky replies slowly, still looking at her out of the corner of his eye. Darcy resolves to try one last time, because . . . because.

“Is there anything you want me to tell him?” she asks. Bucky’s silent, eyes dropping again, and he shifts in his seat. Darcy tries to be patient, even though her head and her hindbrain are both buzzing restlessly.

She can be patient, she tells herself. It’s not even as hard as being gentle.

“I . . .” Bucky hesitates, and Darcy forces herself to bite her tongue. He leans in a little, like he’s about to murmur something into her ear, and she tips her head for him automatically.

He doesn’t murmur anything into her ear.

“Oh,” Darcy says, startling slightly at the soft small touch of his tongue to her pulse, and Bucky makes a strange, strangled little noise and buries his face in her neck, biological hand grabbing the back of her shirt. She wraps her arms around him in return automatically, circling his waist tight, and he squeezes the arm across her shoulders roughly and presses his face in tighter. She feels his tongue flick out again in the same kind of kitten-sweet lick burned into her hindbrain from his heat, and his pheromones roll over her.

It’s not like the closet--not a small enclosed space like that, and not even that strong a pheromone rush--but it still sends an aroused shudder through her gut and makes it hard to breathe.

“Hey,” she tells him, gripping his hips and pulling back a little to remind him he doesn’t need to do this, he’s safe here no matter what, he doesn’t need to--

Bucky looks up at her from under his lashes and tilts his head forward to expose the vulnerable side of his throat with a pleading little keen, and she chokes. And completely forgets what she’d
just been thinking, too. She’s fairly sure it’d been important, but omega. Omega with the too-loose collar of his too-loose T-shirt sliding to the side to show off his naked, unmarked neck and asking for her teeth. Omega needing her and bred by her and--

“Ngh,” Darcy manages hoarsely, and Bucky leans in just enough to give her shoulder another shy little kitten-lick. If she has any conscious thought process between that and ending up with her teeth around the tendon in the crook of his neck, well, fuck knows what it was.

Bucky whimpers the second her teeth dig in, another pheromone rush rising up off his skin, and Darcy shudders almost as hard as he does. She could pull him into her lap, she thinks, tug those soft sweatpants off and tug him down off the bed and all she’d have to do then would be unzip her jeans and guide him right onto--

Darcy exhales raggedly against Bucky’s skin and he shudders harder, and when she breathes back in everything in her nose is cinnamon-sticky pheromones and sugar-sweetness. She digs her fingers into his hips and her teeth into his neck and he makes a soft, hitched noise against her shoulder in return.

“Good boy,” her hindbrain has her rumbling into his throat before she thinks better of it, and Bucky muffles another keen against her shirt, his hand fisting tighter against her back. “There you go, omega, so good.”

Then her actual brain catches up, and she realizes what her hindbrain is actually talking about.

Oh.

Oh.

“Such a good boy,” she murmurs again, wrapping her arms tighter around him. “So brave for me.” Bucky tenses, and she loosens her grip and lets him slip away. He stares at her for a second and she looks back, and then he gets up and walks into the closet without a word.

Darcy aches a little, but not necessarily in a bad way. What he just did, coaxing her in close to bite him and making those little noises and clinging to her like that--all that triggered her hindbrain like fuck, and she smells like protective alpha pheromones now.

But more importantly, she smells like protected omega. The second she put her teeth in his neck Bucky’s pheromones went as pliant and passive as any omega being comforted by an alpha’s bite.

By a trusted alpha’s bite.

She gets up and checks her lipstick in the vanity mirror just in case it smudged, then ruffles her hair into order and forces her breathing to stay steady. If she gets upset, she’ll muddy up the scent Bucky just rubbed all over her, and Steve deserves it as pure and unfiltered as she can bring it to him.

God, poor Steve. Steve who helped her through the heat-bond hangover after Bucky cleared out. Steve who came this close to trusting her with his heat--who would’ve trusted her with his heat, if Natasha and Sam had been held up much longer.

And she asked him to tell her about Bucky Barnes and didn’t tell him a fucking word herself.

“It was the right thing to do,” Darcy tells her reflection abruptly, briefly forgetting that Bucky can hear her. He doesn’t respond, though, and--well, it’s something he should probably hear too, she thinks, no matter what he applies it to.
She thinks.

“Ms. Lewis--” J.A.R.V.I.S. starts, and Darcy shakes her head quick to cut him off.

“Coming,” she says. “Lock down the suite behind me, okay, J.A.R.V.I.S.? Uh--but so Bucky can override it, if he wants to.”

“Of course, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. agrees. Darcy thanks him and then tries to think of the right thing to say to Bucky before she leaves but really can’t think of anything even close.

“I’ll be back,” is all she manages in the end, and slips out without waiting for a response. Bucky probably wasn’t going to give her one anyway, but she doesn’t want to put even the impression of pressure on him right now.

It’s not even that she thinks he couldn’t handle it. She just doesn’t want to do it.

Darcy stops by the door to grab her shoes and stops outside it to slip them on, listening to the door bolt itself shut behind her. It’s reassuring, she tells herself, except it’s really not.

He can get out whenever he wants, she tells herself. He could get out right now and leave the tower completely and never come back again and they’d maybe never know what’d happened to him or the--

Darcy breathes. Breathes. Breathes. She heads down the hall to the elevator and J.A.R.V.I.S. starts it up without her pressing any buttons; yet another convenience of living in a semi-sentient building.

The numbers climb, and J.A.R.V.I.S. takes her up to the penthouse. Darcy tries not to wince. That’s not gonna be private at all. Not that she’d really thought it would be, just . . .

The door opens, and she hears Steve choke.

Yeah. Just that.

She must reek like Bucky right now, especially to super-soldier senses. Hell, she probably smells more like Bucky than Bucky did himself, the last Steve saw him. Like . . . so much more.

“He didn’t wanna come,” she announces unnecessarily, stepping out of the elevator onto the landing and looking down to the sunken living room area underneath her. Steve’s standing stiff in the middle of it, jaw tight and eyes fixed on her; Sam and Clint are slumped against the sofa behind him, and Natasha’s perched neatly on the back of it.

Well, that’s only four out of seven currently-in-the-tower Avengers to disapprove of her life choices and ask super fucking awkward questions, Darcy thinks a little hysterically. Yeah, sure, why not; that’s definitely going to work out for her.

“Where’d you leave him?” Natasha asks, her expression neutral but assessing.

“Family suite on the Thor floor,” Darcy replies as she leans forward against the railing, tucking her hair behind her ear and biting her lip. She doesn’t think she should get closer, right now. “I put it on lockdown for him. Thought he’d feel, you know. Safer. He’s got authorization to disengage it if he wants out. Um.”

Natasha cocks an eyebrow, and Darcy grimaces. It’s not--it doesn’t feel like enough. Although she can’t imagine what would, under the circumstances.
“I fed him,” she says. “I think enough, he wasn’t really ... uh, he’s not really sure how ‘hungry’ feels, I think. But we ate lunch and dinner and I think he slept while I was. He, um--he built a nest. In the closet.”

“Already?” Clint asks, nose wrinkling. “Isn’t he only three months?”

“I wasn’t gonna argue.” Darcy shrugs. She would’ve let him turn the whole fucking suite into a nest if he’d wanted. “I, uh ... I asked him if he wanted me to tell you anything, and he ... this,” she says, gesturing to herself meaningfully and not quite looking at Steve. “So. He’s not hurt or anything, he just doesn’t wanna ...”

“See me. Yeah,” Steve says tonelessly. Natasha and Sam both zero in on him. Their pheromones don’t change, but she’s a super-spy and he’s ex-pararescue and a counsellor, so ... yeah. Darcy wouldn’t have expected them to, obviously.

They definitely look like their pheromones want to change, though.

“I think he remembers you,” she says, because she doesn’t know if she should tell him the other stuff--the parts about being a good person and talking about who he had and hadn’t been and his confusion about his “friend” and just--just all the rest of the complicated things that’d clearly been confusing Bucky even as he’d been trying to explain them to her. “Like, he’s kind of mixed up about some stuff, but he said some things. Um.”

“What things?” Steve asks. He is not a super-spy or an ex-pararescue VA counselor, and Darcy tries not to grimace at the intense distress in his scent even though it’s enough to make her feel nauseous with guilt. Her hindbrain’s already on enough of a rollercoaster with Bucky and the pregnancy and the guilt she already had over lying to Steve.

“I don’t know if I should say,” she hedges, fingers squeezing the railing a little tighter. Bucky’d said a lot in front of Tony and Bruce and Thor and even more to just her, yeah, but Bucky’d been the one saying it, and she’s not sure she should be filling in details on hearsay. “He just--he told me he had a friend. I’m pretty sure he meant you, from how he was talking, but he was switching tenses and, like ... I don’t know if he knew he meant you.”

“But he said he had a friend.” Steve’s just looking at her, but his pheromones--god, his pheromones.

“He doesn’t want to see you yet,” Darcy manages, cringing even before she scents--misery, yes, misery and regret and longing and god, poor Steve, just . ... “Or maybe at all, I dunno. He didn’t tell me anything aside from the scenting thing. I swear, he’s as close to okay as I can get him, just--he’s maybe also not in the best place.” She doesn’t mention how he tried to pheromone-bomb her into rutting him in the closet or even how he manipulated her into the scenting instead of just asking, because while those are both kind of dodgy moves, well . . .

He’s had so much worse. The fact he can even be that gentle with another human being instead of just going right to breaking bones--that means something, she has to think.

And Bucky maybe wanted to retire to France with Steve and Peggy Carter and raise a little dark-haired litter, Bucky wanted pups, Bucky wanted . . .

Darcy breathes out. Breathes in. Steve’s still looking at her.

“He’s confused and he doesn’t feel safe,” she says. “I don’t wanna make him feel like coming in means we’re, like, in charge of him or something. I mean--I’m pretty sure he only came with me...
the first time with because he was thinking with his heatbrain, and he only came back because he was desperate.”

“Because he’s pregnant,” Steve says quietly. Darcy winces.

“Yeah,” she says. She really does not want to know what it’s going to do to tiny developing people to know not only that they were total accidents but that their mom only stopped running from the Avengers because he got knocked up by a knotheaded grad student on the world’s longest extended internship. Like . . . that can’t be good for kids’ self-esteem, she’s sure. “He didn’t think he could--anyway. We fucked up. Go team didn’t-mean-to-make-a-baby. Way to . . . way to fail, us.”

“He thought he couldn’t get pregnant,” Steve says in a tone of voice that encompasses just . . . just everything wrong with this situation, and with what’s happened to Bucky, and oh God, Darcy thinks, still more than a little sick to her stomach, life is not fair. Like, she was not misguided on this fact before, this fact is not a new fact, just . . .

God.

“It’s not you,” she says instead of addressing any of that, because she’s not crazy enough to try addressing any of that. “He doesn’t feel--it’s not because of you.”

Steve might be the only reason Bucky’s ever felt safe at all in the past year, all things considered. But she’s not sure she can tell him that right now.

“It’s all because of me,” Steve says, very calm and quiet and also downright reeking of grief. Darcy may actually throw up if this keeps up, except she absolutely can not throw up if this keeps up, because omega. Because Steve’s upset and needs something she can’t give him, something no one can give him, probably not even Sam and Nat together or even Bucky himself, and her stupid fucking useless instincts don’t even have anything as helpful as “rut him” to offer this time. Which, okay, is probably for the best--because that worked so well with Bucky, for one--but isn’t helping either.

“So’s him being here now,” Clint points out, and Darcy startles a little. She’d forgotten he was here, just a bit; beta pheromones just don’t stick out like alpha and omega do, and she hasn’t been able to take her eyes off Steve since he started talking. “He didn’t drag you out of the Potomac and run away from HYDRA because seventy years of brainwashing spontaneously cracked.”

“I got him into it,” Steve says quietly, not quite looking back to Clint. Darcy could cry for multiple reasons, not the least of which is Clint just existing right now. “I put him with the Commandos, I put him on that train, I didn’t get him off that train, and I didn’t find him after.”

“You also let him beat your ass black and blue instead of putting him down,” Sam says. “And now he’s free and in the tower, because somebody in it made him feel safe enough to come back and hole up here. I’ve heard worse stories, man.”

“I know,” Steve murmurs quietly, not looking at anyone now. Darcy can still smell Bucky’s cinnamon-sugar pheromones on herself; she wonders how much more nuance super-soldier senses might be picking up out of them. She wonders if there’s anything she can actually do here.

She’s pretty sure there’s not.

“He’s contained and protected,” Natasha says neutrally. “The tower is secure. Couldn’t ask for much better, under the circumstances.”

“I know,” Steve repeats, his jaw tightening.
“There’s nothing else to do,” Natasha says.

“I know,” Steve grits out, turning his back on the group. Darcy bites the inside of her cheek so hard it nearly bleeds, just from how he looks.

And how he smells . . .

“Thank you,” Steve says, still not looking at any of them. It takes Darcy a second to realize he’s talking to her, and she stares at the back of his head in disbelief when she does. He just thanked her? For what, lying to him? Knocking up a vulnerable omega at just about the worst possible time? “Please tell me if there’s anything you need from me.”

She opens her mouth to answer, but he’s already headed for the nearest door and disappearing down the stairs. Sam curses under his breath and Natasha’s face is very blank; Clint just sighs a little and slides down in his seat as the other two push themselves to their feet. For a second Darcy thinks they’re going to follow Steve, and she’s pretty sure they think the same.

They don’t, though. They just stand there, having some kind of silent conversation based in eye contact, and then both turn to look up at her.

“Maybe check on Barnes,” Sam says, his voice careful. “If you’ve got the time.”

“I can do that,” Darcy says, hands tightening on the railing. The whole penthouse probably smells like Bucky by now. God knows where Steve’s going off to, and god knows if he’ll let Sam and Natasha anywhere near him, and god knows if--

She breathes out, and retreats backwards into the elevator without saying anything else. Clint watches her go even as the doors slide shut, but the other two are already having another conversation with their eyes. Steve’s alone. Bucky’s alone. Steve’s alone and Bucky’s alone, bred and alone and--

“J.A.R.V.I.S., is Bucky still in the family suite?” Darcy manages from the floor of the elevator, not exactly remembering when she dropped into the crouch and wrapped her arms over her head, but just--not questioning it, not for the moment. It’s not important.


“And Steve?” she asks. It’s a little invasive, but--but J.A.R.V.I.S. wouldn’t tell her anything she couldn’t find out in a public hallway anyway. Well . . . the Bucky thing, yeah, but to be fair, that bedroom’s both of theirs. Maybe. Kind of.

. . . she should probably tell Bucky that J.A.R.V.I.S. can watch him in the bedroom.

“Captain Rogers appears to be on his way to the gymnasium, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. replies, and Darcy breathes again. It’s not like she thought he was injured or something, just . . . her hindbrain. Her stupid, stupid fucking hindbrain.

“Okay,” she says, trying to pretend she’s not this close to going total basket-case on the situation. “Steve’s going to the gym and Bucky’s in his nest. And Thor’s--where’s Thor? And Tony? They’re both okay?”

“Yes, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. assures her. “Prince Thor is watching Ace of Cakes with Dr. Foster and Dr. Selvig on your floor and Mr. Stark is discussing metahuman prenatal care with Dr. Banner in their shared laboratory.”
“Metahuman prenatal care,” Darcy repeats blankly.

Oh god. Super-soldier babies. Oh god.

The elevator stops, and Darcy stands up a little too quick and braces herself with a hand on the wall before the doors slide open. She can hear the Ace of Cakes opening theme from the living room, which for some reason is just fucking hilarious right now, although she doesn’t laugh because it probably wouldn’t come out as a laugh if she did.

She steps off the elevator and out into the hall to stare blankly at Erik settled contentedly into his favorite armchair and Thor and Jane curled up in an affectionate pile on the couch, Thor purring in contentment as Jane strokes his hair and all of them glancing up at her arrival. Her usual space on the loveseat is empty, and for a second, she pictures Bucky waiting in the other half of it, then shakes the image off quick. That’s—that’s not a “now” thought. Probably not an ever thought.

“Is everything okay?” Jane asks, concerned.

“Um,” Darcy says, resisting the irrational urge to go over and pet Thor. Thor’s fine. She can see Thor’s fine. “Yes, but I need to go freak out a little right now,” she confesses with a wince. “So. You guys wanna come over for dinner tomorrow? Maybe?”

“With you and Bucky? Yeah, sure,” Jane replies, still looking concerned. About her, Darcy thinks, not about the idea of having dinner with a brainwashed super-assassin. So at least Jane’s still Jane, bless her rainbow-bridge-obsessed heart.

“Great,” Darcy says, still grimacing herself. Dinner’s like . . . dinner’s an appropriate thing to do, right? Introducing them to Bucky over a quiet meal that he can escape for his room at any given time?

Well. Their room, maybe. She should probably double-check about that. They’re all living on this floor, though; it’s probably better that they actually get used to each other and that Bucky feels comfortable around everyone else. That’s . . . that’s a rational concern to be having.

God, she just really, really needs to know someone’s going to be available to help him if she can’t for some reason. Like--Erik’s a beta, surely that’ll come in handy. And Thor’s Thor.

She has no idea what Bucky’s thinking. She just needs to be sure he doesn’t assume that he, like, belongs to her--or something even more fucked up--and if he doesn’t want to see Steve yet . . .

Although considering he doesn’t even wanna see Steve, she really should’ve asked him before inviting people over. Fuck.

“If he’s up for it, I mean,” she amends quickly, glancing towards the suite. “I don’t know if he will be, I gotta check. I just--I dunno, it sounded like a better idea in my head.”

What hasn’t, lately.

“Well, we’ve had worse ones,” Jane says with an amused little quirk of her mouth. Darcy kind of wants to hug her, and kind of wants to hide behind her and never come out again.

“Is the asset well?” Thor asks, just barely frowning.

“He said we can call him Bucky,” Darcy replies, biting the inside of her cheek. “Okay, actually he said you guys can call him Bucky, he likes, uh--I think he likes me calling him the pet names. Or he said he did, anyway. So yeah.” He’d said that when he’d still thought he was supposed to be
servicing her or something, so . . . so.

“Is Bucky well, then,” Thor says, which—yeah, that’s obviously the important part of the question, and Darcy winces at herself for ignoring it.

“He’s okay,” she says. “Like . . . not good, but he’s nesting? And he’s eaten. He’s just, you know—kinda confused. I think.” She flashes back to the awkward way he’d gripped his fork at dinner and the perfectly-made bed back in the suite and how hard a time she’s having figuring out what he knows and doesn’t know and tries not to wince again. Thinks about the rules, and the look on his face, and the way he’d said “let you” . . .

“Confused” doesn’t even begin to cover it.

“It’s not his fault,” she says, even knowing how ridiculous it is to say—Thor’s already nodding, no surprise. But really, as if Jane or Erik or Thor would ever think that, even for a minute. Bucky’s probably the only person in the whole damn tower who’d blame himself for any of this.

“He has been long at war,” Thor says. “We lay no blame at his feet for that.”

“Yeah,” Darcy says, feeling a little helpless and a lot like she should be feeding Bucky again. Or . . . something. At least like she should be in the room with him again, so he’s not alone.

Unless he wants to be alone.

Was he ever alone with HYDRA, she wonders. Like—ever? They’d probably been watching him all the time; he’d probably never been by himself at all. Maybe if they’d put him in isolation, but never by choice. Never like the past year.

He didn’t have to be alone. He could’ve come back to Steve at any time; could’ve walked right up to the tower at any time. Could’ve gone someplace else entirely and set himself up in some tiny-ass town or huge, anonymous city that no one would ever have thought to look for him in. He never did any of that; he might’ve stayed by himself the whole time, as far as Darcy knows. Probably did, from the way he’s been talking.

But he followed Steve the whole time, too.

Was that just because he was scared, or . . .

“I have to go,” she says, because the alternate option is standing here and thinking in circles like a crazy person and probably going back to Bucky stinking of nerves and stress and nothing useful. Being, basically, the exact opposite of what he needs.

Putting everything else aside, all she can be right now is what Bucky needs.

Somebody’s got to.
breakfast, lunch, and dinner

HELLO AGAIN, FRIENDS. IT’S BEEN A LONG, LONG TIME.

A really long time.

Good news: I am back on the fic. It is definitely an alternate timeline post-TWS and still needs a lot of work, but I’m gonna do my best to finally finish it. Thanks to everyone who’s been patient and everyone who reviewed despite the essentially-abandoned status of the story and how much time’s gone by; I appreciate it greatly.

This chapter (finally) brought to you by a combination of weirdlet’s generous nature, Rainne, ZepysGirl, some very kind comments, and the way Infinity War made me go “SERIOUSLY CAN BUCKY BARNES GET A SINGLE BREAK??”. Some of you may have read the first draft of it on my Tumblr once upon a time; there’s been a little bit extra added since then.

. . . now I just gotta go back and answer all those old comments I neglected back in the day, hahawhoops.

Darcy goes back to the suite and asks Bucky about having dinner with Jane and Thor and Erik--this is not gonna be one of the “Skype Ian in while he has a sleepy midnight snack” dinners, she’s already decided; there’s gonna be enough going on as it is. Bucky doesn’t seem to understand the question, unfortunately. Or maybe he just doesn’t understand why she’s asking him it, which is, depressingly enough, the better option in this scenario.

Sort of.

She tells him why, but he still doesn’t really seem to get it. He agrees probably just because he thinks it’s what she wants him to do, but she reminds herself she can’t question everything he does and so just accepts the answer and moves on. It’s really, really fucked up that she has to do that, Darcy knows, but what else is she supposed to do?

Like . . . seriously, what else. She could use some tips here.

Working out who’s sleeping where is about as awkward and upsetting as every other conversation’s been, and Darcy is genuinely never going to recount what happened to any other living being, for Bucky’s sake and her own. Very, very long story short: she goes to sleep in the bed while he’s in the closet. She wakes up and he’s lying next to her on top of the sheets, awake and looking at her, same as last time she slept.

She’s not sure if that’s a good thing, a bad thing, or just . . . a thing, she guesses. Who knows.

He’s still looking at her. She looks back, sleepy and stupid, and can’t think of what to say.

Bucky solves that problem by pushing a plate of buttered toast across the covers at her.

“What the fuck?” Darcy asks, staring down at the plate in bafflement, but Bucky’s already
retreated backwards off the bed and vanished into the nesting closet. *His* nesting closet. Darcy is never going into that closet without an explicit invitation for anything short of a medical emergency.

The toast is barely above room temperature, too dark at the corners, and has hardly any butter on it at all. Darcy, for lack of any other reasonable response, eats the whole plate’s worth and mostly manages not to get crumbs in the bed.

“Thanks,” she tries uncertainly when she’s done, but Bucky neither responds nor moves back into her line of sight. He looked frustrated when he went into the closet, so Darcy doesn’t push it.

Okay, not that she would’ve anyway, all things considered, but still. She *definitely* isn’t gonna now.

She takes the plate to the sink and rinses it off, then sticks it in the dishwasher for later and tries to wrap her head around this strange new *insane* universe in which beautiful super-soldiers make her mediocre breakfast-in-bed and then hide from her, and then decides there’s no point trying.

For about two seconds, she assumes him feeding her means he’s already eaten, but what is she, *new*? She really doesn’t wanna make him think she’s pulling some passive-aggressive bullshit about the toast, though, so she just makes three servings of plain instant oatmeal and dumps some blueberries and brown sugar on top like her mom used to make it and sincerely hopes Bucky doesn’t hate either of those. Or *oatmeal*. Just toast is not gonna be enough for any pregnant omega, though.

Maybe if she toasted, like, the whole *loaf*.

Darcy heads back into the bedroom with the oatmeal and a cup of hot chocolate—milk or orange juice would be cold, and coffee’s out for the obvious reasons—hesitates, and then drags the nightstand from the half of the bed that’s sort of Bucky’s over to the nesting closet door and sets the bowl and mug down on top of it. Better than leaving stuff on the floor when she doesn’t wanna push into his space, she figures.

It’s pretty safe to say he doesn’t *want* her there if he’s literally *hiding*, so . . . yeah.

“I’m gonna finish moving my stuff over and setting up. There’s oatmeal if you want it,” she tells him. He doesn’t answer. She makes herself step back anyway, even though her hindbrain wants nothing like it wants her to put her teeth in his neck again and make him smell *safe*.

Because that’s how he smells, when he smells like her.

But that’s just how he smells to *other* people.

Darcy grabs the bell cart and goes back for the last of her things. As she passes, she glimpses Jane and Erik arguing over the common kitchen table and Thor carefully pouring pre-mixed pancake batter out of a jug. Tony spotted one in the rubble of a convenience store once and paid the owner two thousand bucks to cook every single bottle on his break room hot plate, because Tony always does weird shit when he’s hungry and they’re still doing damage control. Darcy wasn’t there for it, obviously, but she’d helped Thor track down the brand again later and he’d beamed at her like he’d just saved the world again.

It’s not really an important thing, but it’s a story. The tower’s full of them. Like the scant few stories Steve told her about Bucky, and the million more he probably has on top of those. Like the stories Bucky might not remember at all.

Darcy loads up the bell cart with the last of her things and looks around the empty bedroom after.
It’s not really empty—the furniture’s all still here—but it smells like hers, and she’s sure this time tomorrow it won’t. The cleaning staff’s pretty on it around here.

She still isn’t sure this is the right thing, or even the best thing, but it’s the thing she’s promised to do.

She takes the cart back over and unpacks everything, leaves the cart and the unfolded boxes by the elevator where she’d found them to begin with, and then gets to setting stuff up to her liking. It’s hard, partially because there’s so much space but mostly because she’s trying to leave space for Bucky, too—taking over the whole office, okay, she’s the one who’s got a job, but taking over the whole coat closet or living room or bedroom? Not so much.

Bucky doesn’t have much to put in the suite, obviously, but that’s not the point. Darcy just wants it to be obvious that she’s leaving room for him, and not just have it look like she didn’t have enough stuff to fill the space. Which is hard, since she doesn’t, but she’s done harder.

Maybe they can, like, look at some swatches. Buy a rug or something.

Darcy loses track of time finding places for all the random little knick-knacks that’ve somehow survived all her moves and in arranging all her notes and notebooks in and on the desk—she prefers working digitally, personally, but Erik and Jane both still like paper, the bastards—and only comes out of it when Bucky sets down a plate of leftover lasagna and green bean fries at her elbow. She jumps so hard she nearly knocks her chair over, but he grabs the back of it and it holds rock-solid.

Not even with the metal arm, god.

“Uh,” she says, staring blankly at the plate. Bucky sets a can of the same weird melon juice she drank at dinner last night next to her. The situation does not magically begin to make sense, and Bucky doesn’t explain himself. Or even look at her, really; he’s already on his way out of the office without having said a word. Darcy stares after him in confusion, then looks at the plate again. The leftovers from the dinner she made, and the juice he saw her drink with it—which can not be a coincidence, there’s like a good five or six other flavors in there. He remembered what she drank and he made a point of bringing it.

This is . . . this is not doing her hindbrain any favors.

Darcy buries her face in the nearest notebook and does everything in her power to hold back the groan. If it’s a horrified sound or a lustful one, she really doesn’t know and really doesn’t want to find out. She eats the food because there is literally no way she could not, even though the lasagna’s still kind of cold in the middle, then pushes the empty plate and can to the side while she goes through the last of the files. She’ll take care of the dishes and make sure that Bucky’s eaten too in just--a--

She glances up twenty minutes later and the plate and can are both gone without a trace.

. . . okay, Darcy thinks, and carefully closes the file in her hands. She abandons the desk, gets up, and goes into the kitchen. The dishwasher’s empty, the sink is dry, and all the dishes she’s used or given to Bucky are back in the cupboard where they came from. When she checks the leftovers in the fridge, more than what she ate is missing.

The tablet with the rules on it is on the counter, she realizes. When she wakes it up, the file she wrote them in is open, although she can’t remember if she left it open herself or not.

It’s something. Or she just wants to believe it’s something, maybe.
There’s no trace of Bucky.

She decides not to go looking, and instead goes back to the office and finishes up, and then checks out the non-leftover-related contents of the fridge. All good intentions aside, Jane and Thor and Erik coming over for dinner was seriously a terrible idea on her part. Seriously, what the hell made her think she could feed an alien god-prince, a brainwashed super-assassin, and two scientists who frequently forget to eat altogether until they’re sat down in front of a meal? Really, what made her think she was equipped to do that?

At least Tony’s over-compensation’s going to come in handy somewhere, she guesses. She could fuck up six attempts at dinner in a row and still have more than enough food left over for Erik to take pity on her and make it himself.

She sticks four different frozen lasagnas in the ridiculously big oven and all the green bean fries she can find in the microwave and also discovers bagged salad in the back of the veggie drawer, so that’s pretty nice, actually, thank fuck for that, that’ll be nice and--wait, no, salad’s cold. She’s not feeding Bucky anything cold. Hell, at this point she’s not feeding him anything room temperature if she can help it. Truffles, sure, but absolutely nothing else whatsoever.

The vegetable medley does not come out any better the second time around, unfortunately. Nor do the broccolini or the frozen baked potatoes or even the goddamm mac and fucking cheese, oh god, she can’t even make goddamm mac and cheese, how is she supposed to ever feed anybody, much less a pregnant super-soldier. She is going to completely fail at this, she is going to starve her own pups, she is--

Darcy stops and takes a breath. Holds the breath. Lets the breath out. Takes another breath.

She goes into the pantry and finds Rice-A-Roni and puts it on the stove, and breathes out. Then she goes to find Bucky.

“Dinner’s almost ready, if you’re hungry,” she tells his closet, not coming in quite close enough to see him. She can see some of the pillows, though--they’re in different places than they were this morning. She wonders what he’s been doing. “Um--Thor and our friends are coming over, in case you forgot. Like, I don’t blame you if you forgot, I should’ve said something this morning, just--uh. Yeah.”

“Yes, alpha,” Bucky says quietly, stepping out of the closet. He’s wearing one of the newly-washed T-shirts and jeans that she bought him back when she was stocking the second backpack--a pair of the socks that she bought him back then, even--and she nearly keels over right there.

“Jesus,” she chokes, turning bright red.

“I don’t have anything nicer to wear,” he says, looking uncomfortable.

“Jamie, that is the nicest thing you could wear,” Darcy swears feelingly, not even caring that her stupid hindbrain’s the one doing the talking. Bucky blinks, then ducks his head and looks down at himself, smoothing his T-shirt over his stomach in a way that makes Darcy’s pulse skyrocket and pheromones flare up protectively. She wants to put a hand on it too; press her mouth against it and rumble soothing sounds into it so Bucky feels safe and the pups know her voice right from the start, like she remembers her dad doing for her mom and the second litter. She wants to do a lot more than that.

She doesn’t, obviously.
“You made me lunch,” she blurts instead, abrupt and awkward. “I, uh--and breakfast, I mean, obviously you made me that too. Which, uh, thank you. I forgot to, I was kind of spacing out.”

“You’re welcome,” Bucky replies uncertainly, tugging at the bottom of his T-shirt. It fits much better than Thor’s shirt, Darcy can’t help noticing. Much tighter than Thor’s did, too. The way it pulls across his pecs alone is driving her to distraction.

“Do you want dinner?” she asks finally, not sure what else to say. Bucky nods silently and follows her to the kitchen, which doesn’t do much to settle her hindbrain. She almost leaves him sitting at the kitchen counter while she runs over to give Jane and Thor and Erik the head’s up but thinks better of it and asks J.A.R.V.I.S. to tell the others dinner’s almost done instead. He does, and she remembers to set the table at the last second and has to rush it. Whatever, though, she manages not to stab herself with a fork in the process, so who cares.

Bucky sits quietly at the counter, not moving at all. It worries Darcy a little, but doesn’t put much of a dent in her hindbrain’s desire to scent him up again. He showered at some point before she woke up, apparently, because every trace of her scent on him is secondhand. That just reminds her that his whole nest smells like her, though, so it’s not exactly quelling the more inappropriate hindbrain urges either.

She puts a lot of concentration into setting the table.

“Thor’s coming,” Bucky says out of nowhere; Darcy nearly drops a plate. “And--your friends. Jane and Erik.”

“Friends, bosses, weird peril-sharing partners, whatever you wanna call it,” Darcy confirms, setting the plate down very carefully. It’s probably worth more than her student loan payment. “Jane is Thor’s alpha. Erik’s a beta. They’re scientists.”

“You said before,” Bucky replies vaguely. Darcy doesn’t remember, with everything else that’s been going on, but she’s relieved past-her decided that particular piece of information shouldn’t be an eleventh hour reveal. That was definitely the right decision on past-her’s part. “I don’t know them.”

“Uh--no, you don’t,” Darcy says, trying not to frown. Even if that hadn’t been a weirdly obvious statement, well, it’s kind of the point. Bucky needs to know people. He needs to be able to feel comfortable with other people. He needs to not think she and Steve who he can’t even handle seeing right now are the whole damn world.

Like . . . that would end very badly very quickly, Darcy can’t help but suspect. The closet incident and him kneeling for her at dinner like that last night were both bad enough.

“They know about me, though.” Bucky’s looking at the counter, and something clenches in Darcy’s chest.

“Yeah,” she says. “They don’t, like--Erik’s been brainwashed before. And Thor’s gotten tricked and lied to and done some fucked up stuff while in his right mind. And Jane . . . well, she’s gotten screwed over by SHIELD a few times, at least, not really the same thing there but yeah. Did sort of accidentally get possessed by an Infinity Stone too but that is a long, long story and not really, like, a comparable thing. Um. Just, they know how shitty stuff can be, sometimes.”

“Do you?” Bucky asks, his eyes flicking over to her. Darcy blinks.

“Uh--what?” she says.
“Do you know,” he clarifies, still looking at her. Darcy thinks of every shitty thing that has ever happened to her and every shitty thing she’s ever seen happen to other people and every shitty thing she’s so much as heard about and--

“Honestly? Not like you do,” she says, shaking her head. “Not even close.”

“Good,” Bucky says, looking back at the counter, which is . . . not the response Darcy would’ve expected, honestly.

He’s so good, she thinks helplessly, just looking at him. He trusted her with his heat, trusted her with his pups, made her gross toast for breakfast and brought her that stupid melon juice with lunch because he thought she liked it, probably, and now he’s saying something like that just because? That’s not like the closet at all.

She wonders if he knows that, though.

Jane and Thor and Erik show up before she figures it out, and Darcy lets them in. Jane exclaims about the size of the suite and Erik faceplants into the first beanbag he runs into, and Darcy ends up showing Jane around more out of self-defense than anything else. They avoid the bedrooms, obviously--that is the last place Darcy wants another alpha’s scent right now--but Darcy shows her the office and kitchen and living and laundry rooms. She avoids the linen closet too, just in case--she doesn’t want Jane to accidentally scent something Bucky might decide he wants for his nest.

She realizes, belatedly, that neither of the omegas followed them, and when they get back from the laundry room Erik’s slithered blissfully underneath the beanbags and Thor and Bucky are sitting side-by-side at the counter, Thor looking patient and Bucky looking nervous. Darcy wants to rub her face all over his face until that look goes away, but settles for getting dinner off the stove and onto the table.

They eat. Bucky doesn’t seem to want to talk, so everyone else talks around him and occasionally gives him openings to say something that he doesn’t respond to unless they’re from Darcy or, to Darcy’s surprise, Thor. Or maybe that’s not really surprising, considering Jane and Erik are both scientists.

And considering Thor was the one who figured out something was wrong back in the fabrication lab.

So yeah, okay. Not really surprising at all.

He still doesn’t say much, either way, and anything even remotely resembling personal questions stays firmly off the table for everyone except Erik, whose social skills have suffered in the past couple years. He’s easily distracted from the awkward stuff, at least.

Usually. Mostly.

Look, this is just not a group that’s naturally inclined to small talk.

“So how do you pop the hood? What’s it run on?” Erik asks Bucky, reaching across the table to poke curiously at his metal arm with a green bean fry and nearly getting it smushed between the plates. “There’s not another Tesseract in there, is there, that seems extremely unsafe. We should check.”

“Um,” Bucky says, giving Darcy a brief look of alarm. She instantly bares her teeth at Erik in reflexive response, but he doesn’t even notice.
“Oh, hold on, does it come off--”

“WHO’S READY FOR DESSERT,” Jane blurts loudly. Erik makes a disappointed noise; Bucky frowns in bemusement. Darcy just immediately jumps on the opportunity to flee to the bakery boxes that Thor brought when he came over, which turn out to be full of cannoli from Carlo’s. Darcy’s both super-touched by the gesture and super-doomed by the sight of Bucky licking cannoli cream off his mouth, stop the presses, fuck everything ever, she is the worst.

Oh man, though, it might be worth being the worst.

She is definitely never allowed to watch Bucky eat cannoli again, Darcy decides, pretending to be really, really interested in her own. She probably shouldn’t even be in the room with him when he’s eating cannoli. Or the building. Or the state.

“It must be damned inconvenient in the rain,” Erik says conversationally, breaking a bit of the shell off his cannoli and nodding at Bucky’s arm. “I’d never go outside, myself.”

. . . she’d said about the small talk, hadn’t she? She knows she said about the small talk.

“I’m not allowed--” Bucky starts, then pauses and glances over to Darcy with a faint frown. She genuinely does not have the emotional resilience to hear him ask what she knows he’s about to ask, except goddammit, she’s an alpha. So she’s going to.

She is.

“What are the rules about going outside?” Bucky asks, which is . . . actually, less horrible than she would’ve expected, honestly. She was expecting AM I allowed to go outside? She still flashes back to the HYDRA agents in the alley, though, and barely manages not to grimace.

“Someone has to go with you,” she says quickly, going a little pale at the thought of them finding him again when he’s confused or unsure and doing--something.

“Yes, alpha,” Bucky says with a short nod, folding his hands in his lap. “Who are my authorized handlers?”

That’s not what I meant, Darcy opens her mouth to say, except . . . well, honestly, it kind of is. Not handlers like HYDRA would’ve given him, obviously, but somebody to have his back, at least. If he wanted to leave and not ever come back, that’d be one thing, but as long as he does want to come back, as long as he’s trusting her to take care of him--if something happened because he was alone and confused and she wasn’t there--

“Anybody,” she blurts, rattled by the thought. “You can have--anybody you want, okay?”

“Okay,” Bucky says, then looks at his hands for a long moment. Jane takes the opportunity to make crazy “WTF?!” eyes at Darcy, who sends back “JUST GO WITH IT OKAY” the best she can with her own. Then Bucky looks back up and they both have to pretend to be wearing neutral expressions, which only kind of works.

Maybe.

“I’d like to request Thor and Natalia Romanova,” he says quietly. “Please.”

Darcy’s heart about fucking cracks.

“I’ll ask them,” she says, even though she’d really just meant anyone would do. “Um--Thor?”
“I would be proud to be your escort, Bucky,” Thor replies immediately, inclining his head to Bucky. “I am honored that you would place such faith in me.”

Bucky gets an uncertain look but just nods uncomfortably after a moment. Darcy, meanwhile, can’t figure out a thing he’s thinking. Thor she can follow the logic on--she told Bucky he was her friend and he’s helped him out already--but Natasha? Wouldn’t Bruce have made more sense, or hell, even Tony. At least someone whose actual name he knows?

Admittedly, Bruce turns into a giant green rage monster and talking to Tony frequently makes people want to turn into a giant green rage monster. But still.

“I’ll ask Natasha tomorrow,” she says anyway, because if Bucky’s asking for something she’s going to do her damnedest to make it happen for him. If Natasha makes him feel safe or at least less in danger or even if he just likes her, then okay, she’ll ask Natasha.

“Thank you, alpha,” Bucky says, then very briefly touches the back of her hand underneath the table before getting up and starting to clear the dishes. Darcy starts to protest, then realizes she’s being ridiculous. She made dinner, there’s nothing wrong with Bucky clearing the table. Frankly it’s a miracle he even thought to at all and--with any luck--might even be a good sign in the long run.

Also, he touched her hand. That happened, right? That was not a freaky neurotic hallucination brought on by all the emotional upheaval currently taking over their lives?

Right?

Jane makes crazy eyes at her again, and Erik gives everyone his actually crazy eyes, and Thor eats another cannoli. Darcy--Darcy cannot decide which route to go, although if she could pull off all three at once she just might split the difference.

Darcy fails to come up with the right thing to do. Bucky does the dishes and then brings her another one of those damn Yubari melon juices, which she is pretty sure she is gonna have to start pretending is her favorite if he keeps this up. Thor gets the gallon of chocolate milk Darcy’d only half-noticed in the back of the fridge, Jane and Erik both get bottled frappucinos, and Bucky doesn’t bring anything for himself. Darcy wonders if this is a crossed-wires thing or maybe just Bucky having exactly as little clue how to handle the situation as she does.

She pours him half of the melon juice, for lack of a better idea, and pushes the glass towards him carefully. He doesn’t drink it, but he holds it very carefully and with a very strange expression as they all keep talking. Erik says about six more weird and/or fucked-up things and Bucky says about three, which is frankly a lot better than Darcy was expecting from either of them under the circumstances. She hadn’t expected either perfect results or unmitigated disaster out of the evening, but she’d definitely braced for unmitigated disaster. Nobody’s bleeding, kidnapped, or electrocuted, though, which is frankly amazing given the state of their lives. Nobody’s even especially cranky.

It’s pretty much a miracle.

“My apologies for interrupting,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says. Darcy is pretty sure growling at him would be a bad impulse, but man is it a strong one. “There is a message for you, Ms. Lewis.”

“Hit me, J,” Darcy says, covering her face in self-defense. This is definitely the other shoe dropping, whatever it is.
“Dr. Banner would like to inform you that he and Mr. Stark have all the equipment they need, whenever your young omega is comfortable with coming down for tests and an ultrasound,” J.A.R.V.I.S. tells her.

Well, fuck, Darcy thinks. Bucky puts his glass down. Very, very carefully.

“J.A.R.V.I.S.,” Darcy says, a little horrified with his phrasing. Or actually, no, a lot horrified, god dammit, Tony.

“Tests in the interest of the pups’ health, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. clarifies patiently. “Dr. Banner is concerned that typical prenatal care will not prove adequate for potentially enhanced fetuses.”

“Maybe you could’ve led with that, you think?” Darcy says, trying not to grimace. Bruce is probably right, considering the failed abortion and all the years and years of horrible experiments, but she was really hoping to make it through a full day without triggering any horrible associations for Bucky. Like--that was the dream, anyway. The naive-ass hope.

“My apologies, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says. “Should I inform them the tests will be unnecessary?”

“I--” Darcy hesitates, glancing over to Bucky. He’s looking at the table and his face is completely blank, which considering how easy he usually is to read is more than a little disturbing. But she sure as hell doesn’t know anything about metahuman pregnancy, and what if something’s wrong? What if something goes wrong because they don’t do this?

It’s really not up to her, though.

“Yeah, no, that’s Bucky’s decision,” she says. Bucky keeps looking at the table, expression no less blank or unnerving. It does absolutely nothing to reassure her, but she didn’t really expect he was gonna. “Maybe give him a little while to think about it, okay? Dude’s kinda got enough goin’ on this week.”

“No, we don’t have all day!” Tony demands as his voice cuts into the line, a holo-screen with his impatient face on it popping up over the dinner table and startling Erik half out of his chair. If Bucky’s not palming a knife right now, Darcy will legitimately eat her hat. “You and Little Boy Blue coming down here anytime this generation or what?”

Yes, okay, growling is sounding like a better and better idea right now.

“If you wished to dine in Darcy and Bucky’s hold tonight, Stark, you should have announced your impending presence in advance,” Thor says disapprovingly, frowning at Tony over his sixth (or eighth?) cannoli. “Imposing on their hospitality is highly disrespectful.”

“I have science to do!” Tony protests indignantly, waving around a wrench. Darcy seriously does not want to know how that’s relevant to Bucky getting a checkup. “And I’m not even there, Thunder Thighs, don’t give me that bull. Excuse me for being concerned about the baby supersoldiers we are all praying to God aren’t gonna be baby-Blonskys.”

“What?” Bucky asks abruptly, complexion paling. “What’s a blonsky?”

“Uh--” Tony winces, although Darcy’s mostly sure that’s just because of the murderous look he can probably feel Bruce burning into the back of his head. “Never mind. Look, we’re just--”

“Never mind?!” Bucky repeats, looking like he might be sick. Or stab someone. Darcy--kinda doesn’t blame him. Yeah.
“Blonsky was a dude who got a corrupted version of the serum and mutated, then went fuckball nuts. Or maybe went fuckball nuts and then mutated, or maybe was just always kind of fuckball nuts, who knows,” Darcy cuts in shortly, eyes shooting daggers at Tony. She’s kiiind of not supposed to know that, she’s pretty sure, considering the files she found the information in, but oh well, maybe SHIELD should’ve sucked less about their computer security in Tromso? Just a bit? “He and Bruce broke Harlem.”

“Broke Harlem,” Bucky says stiffly. He’s got a hand under the table. There is definitely a knife in it, Darcy is sure.

“Badly,” Bruce confirms with a neutral expression, stepping forward to make himself more visible on the screen. He stays behind Tony, though, because duh--it’s Bruce. “But Blonsky’s mutation was triggered by an infusion of my blood. Believe me, if HYDRA’d put any of that in you, you would’ve noticed by now. We just want to be sure the pups are developing normally and getting the correct nutrition.”

“I’m eating,” Bucky says, tensing defensively. “Darcy fed me.”

“We were more thinking supplements and prenatal vitamins,” Bruce says delicately.

“And making sure you aren’t going to goddamn miscarry and bleed out,” Tony puts in not even a little delicately. Bucky flinches. Darcy jerks up out of her chair and snarls.

Tony, being Tony, rolls his eyes. If he weren’t an omega, Darcy would go downstairs right now and tase him in the face.

“Yeah, okay, why don’t you come and talk to me when your hindbrain is done getting pissed off at the people who are trying to make that not happen,” he says dubiously, raising an eyebrow at her. “Look, Barnes, this isn’t some Frankenstein-assassin bullshit, we actually want to help, all right? We’ve got enough Avenging to do on your behalf, at least this whole mess we can maybe play defense on.”

“You’re a fucking asshole, Stark,” Darcy seethes, teeth still bared.

“Amazingly, that has nothing to do with my ability to run an ultrasound machine,” Tony retorts dryly, waving an entirely different wrench at them this time. Darcy wants to drop his entire toolbox down an elevator shaft. “Well, my ability to figure out how to run an ultrasound machine, anyway. But what, like it’s hard?”

“Do you want another cannoli?” Jane asks Bucky, pushing the closest box towards him with a sympathetic look. Darcy blames his upset pheromones for that, because she’d be doing the same thing if she wasn’t still this close to going downstairs to grab Tony’s toolbox and do terrible things to it. So many terrible things.

“I had one already,” Bucky says, frowning at the box and then glancing uncertainly at Darcy.

All desire to go vengeance-seeking on Tony is immediately buried under the desire to go vengeance-seeking on all of HYDRA and then some, and she immediately abandons the table for her tablet and comes back with the rules pulled up, passing it over to him. He re-reads all of them silently, not looking up from the screen once in the process, and Darcy very firmly ignores the process to resume arguing with Tony, who is entirely unimpressed but also perfectly happy for the opportunity to insist he knows best.

Which--seriously, Bucky can’t even believe he’s allowed to eat what he wants without
reassurance; what exactly does Tony think dragging him into a lab two days into moving in is
going to do? It’s bad enough they already took him to the first one. Even if he is right about the
check-ups. That’s a whole other thing at this point, okay?

The fine line between taking care of an omega who needs her and accidentally convincing that
omega that she’s his new owner is not a line Darcy’d been expecting to be walking in her life.
Ever. She would sooner go and piss off the Destroyer than fuck this one up.

Bucky eats another cannoli, at least. That’s a thing that happens. Kind of, uh--distractingly, but
yeah.

So unfortunately, splitting her focus goes . . . weirdly.

“Fine!” Tony yells.

“Fine!” Darcy yells back.

“We’ll get the equipment around while you’re in the elevator,” Bruce sighs, and the feed cuts out.

“Wait, what,” Darcy says blankly as J.A.R.V.I.S. opens the suite door. What the hell did she just
agree to, now? She mentally reviews the parts of the conversation she’d spent paying more
attention to Bucky than the actual talking, then cringes. Yeah, yeah she did just demand to see all
their shit before she’d let it anywhere near him, didn’t she. Jesus.

“It’s okay, Darcy, we’ll finish cleaning up,” Jane assures her.

“Thor will,” Bucky says, standing up quickly. His shoulders are stiff, eyes flicking around the
room erratically. “Thor’s an authorized handler. You’re not.”

“Um--” Jane blinks, glancing briefly at Darcy, then puts on a smile for Bucky. “Good point. Thor
can do it,” she says. “Er--gently, Thor. I think this stuff’s a lot more breakable than ours.”

“Don’t remind me,” Darcy mutters, eyeing the plates Bucky left stacked up neatly next to the sink.
They’re almost definitely real china.

Tony needs a damn puppy.

“I won’t be long, probably,” she tells Bucky finally, glancing back to him. He dips his head into a
nod, but doesn’t say anything. She waits long enough for Jane and Erik to see themselves out and
for Thor and Bucky to become absorbed in the dishes in a weird wordless way that seems to work
for them but makes zero sense to her, then heads out into the hall and towards the elevators,
forcing herself to ignore the part of her hindbrain that’s already way too paranoid about leaving
Bucky. Like, what? What the hell? She’s left him alone before--she let him leave the tower alone
thinking she’d never see him again--so how exactly is leaving him with Thor setting her off?

Because she knows more now. Because she’s had more time to think--to process.

Because this time he didn’t scent her before she left.

J.A.R.V.I.S. takes her to the labs--to Jane’s labs, specifically, which Darcy finds weird right up
until she steps into the main room and nearly trips over the paperwork she’d left stacked up by the
door to file after lunch two days ago, before all this happened. Before Bucky came and let her know
all this was happening, more accurately.

Every single sheet of it smells like her. Obviously.
God, she’s really off her game, not figuring that one out first thing. The place smells like Jane and Erik and a little bit of Thor too, but so does she, usually--this is the only place in the whole tower that smells this much like her off the Thor floor. Hell, she probably spends more time here than the Thor floor, at least when Jane’s deep in a project. So--all the time Thor’s not in heat, pretty much, barring the occasional date day/night for them or heat/rut partner for her.

. . . this is totally the longest she’s been out of the lab since Johnny’s heat, isn’t it. Jesus, that’s depressing. Maybe she should’ve taken a couple of those party invites after all, even if at the time she’d been sure she’d have spent half the night snarling at any alpha not Crystal who even looked at Johnny and probably also giving Crystal a secret crash course in How Earth People Alpha just to be safe.

Come to think of it, maybe she should still do that. Johnny’s obviously not that responsible with his boundaries and he’s gotta be due again soon, since with him at least they were smart enough to use condoms. Which, thank fuck for that, New York would probably not survive Sue and Johnny Storm both being pregnant at the same time in the same building, and Darcy would not survive two probably-metahuman litters.

God, there’s a thought. Something in her hindbrain likes the idea--big surprise--but the rest of her kind of wants to puke even thinking about it.

Darcy clears her head, avoids the towering stack of paperwork, and heads towards the back of the lab while very firmly not thinking of soft, fat little super-soldiers and human matchsticks cuddled up all warm and sweet with their mothers in a nest. Possibly the same nest--god dammit, hindbrain.

Tony and Bruce are on the far side of the main room, halfway into Erik’s personal office and inspecting a bizarre-looking machine Darcy doesn’t recognize. Tony’s head-and-shoulders into the machine and Bruce is watching with a mildly stressed expression. Stressed beta pheromones, for the record, smell . . . interesting.

Freaky.

Yeah, okay, she gets the knee-jerk terror response to the Hulk. A beta who smells like that . . .

“Yo,” Darcy greets in her normal voice, repressing her discomfort to the best of her ability, on account of she’s not an asshole. Mostly. “That thing looks super fucking weird, why is it here?”

“Good question, since it was supposed to get delivered upstairs two days ago,” Tony says from inside the machine, voice muffled. It looks like he’s doing something with a wrench, but when is he not?

“It’s not for Barnes,” Bruce assures her. “Unrelated experiments.”

“He wants called Bucky,” Darcy corrects automatically. “Definitely not ‘experiment’.”

“We are going to need to run some, whatever we call them,” Bruce says, only half-apologetic. If anyone gets to half-ass the “experiment” apology it’s probably him, though, so Darcy lets it go.

“Like what kind?” she asks, unable to keep her lip from curling at the thought.

They tell her. To be honest, half of it goes over her head. The words “non-invasive”, “painless”, and “you can be in the room” come up a lot, though--she definitely catches those. Somehow, though, they don’t comfort her much when she’s also hearing “experiment”, “blood sample”, and “definitely medically necessary”. Bruce shows her some statistics and medical information on his tablet, and J.A.R.V.I.S. shows her some more smeared across the entire room while Tony’s
Distracted with his machine.

Darcy holds Bruce’s tablet and looks at the Tesseract-blue data glowing overhead, feeling helpless and useless and a lot like puking again. She knows enough scientific jargon to follow along when Jane and Erik and Ian get talking—well, until Jane and Erik really get talking, but since Ian and most of the scientific community also get lost at that point she doesn’t really care about that part—but biology and reproduction? Genetic engineering? Long-term effects of unknown genetic engineering? That’s all about as clear as mud and she doesn’t understand a damn word.

How is she supposed to explain what two guys who are supremely bad at dumbing themselves down for the audience at home are doing when it’s Bucky who needs to understand?

“J.A.R.V.I.S.?” she eventually cuts Tony off mid-spiel with, because this is seriously only stressing her out. “Can I get the Cliff’s Notes version and maybe, like, some undergrad-level diagrams translating all this downloaded to my tablet, please? And, uh, a new stylus sent up. Please. Unless there’re already spare ones somewhere.”

“Of course, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. replies pleasantly. “You will find extra styluses in your home office’s storage closet, first shelf, and I will upload the necessary information as soon as I have compiled it. Which is now. You may access it at your leisure.”

“I literally just explained it all,” Tony says, looking offended. “Is there something wrong with my explanations, now?”

“The office has a storage closet?” Darcy asks incredulously, staring at Tony and ignoring the question as one with an extremely obvious answer. “Jesus, Tony, what did you not put in those suites?”

“The saunas are only half-size,” Tony replies with a brief scowl, immediately distracted. “Pepper and Rhodey nixed the full ones.”

“There are saunas?!” Darcy demands. “Where even--no, no, I don’t even want to know, forget it. Just show me the equipment you guys are gonna need to use. And send me pics of it, please, J.A.R.V.I.S.”

“Of course, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. agrees. Darcy sits through another few minutes of Tony and Bruce arguing about something she doesn’t understand as they run her through a list of fairly not-terrifying looking equipment, most of which looks like the Iron Man suit crash-landed in a gynecologist’s office but at least does not look like anything she saw in the SHIELD data dump files she looked at after Bucky left. So...that’s something, hopefully.

Once the arguing takes over the conversation completely, she figures that’s the best she’s getting out of them right now and takes the opportunity to escape without being told where the sauna is or having to commit to bringing Bucky down to the lab. It’s definitely better that way, she thinks.

She thinks.

But she’s been wrong before, she remembers as J.A.R.V.I.S. starts to say, “Ah, Ms. Lewis, perhaps--” and the elevator doors slide open.

“Uh,” Darcy manages as she stares up at Steve. He stares back.

Yeah. She’s been wrong before.

“No, no, I’ll take the next one!” Darcy blurts at almost exactly the same moment, waving her hands in surrender. Fuck. *Fuck*. He’s already out of the elevator, though, and he doesn’t stop to talk as he heads down the hall towards where she left Bruce and Tony. Part of her wants to chase him; part of her wants to leave him alone for the rest of his life.

*None* of her wants to get into an elevator that smells like the flash of distress that tore through his pheromones upon seeing her.

“My apologies, Ms. Lewis. I did not consider that you and Captain Rogers might prefer not to cross paths until the elevator had already arrived,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says quietly from the elevator speakers. She wonders if he’s doing something similar for Steve.

She really wishes Bucky had scented her again before she left.
The next morning, Darcy wakes up to lukewarm oatmeal and dry eggs on her pillow, mostly by rolling into them face-first. It is exactly as gross as it sounds. Actually, grosser.

“Aghgodjesuswhatthehell,” she chokes incoherently, nearly flailing off the bed. She probably would’ve if it were any smaller, which really just makes the whole rolling directly into the oatmeal thing even worse.

There are eggs in her hair. In her hair.

Bucky’s not in the bed this time, which is good for her dignity but probably contributed to her dumb sleep-brain thinking it had all the room in the world to thrash around. Darcy glances around the room as she picks egg out of her hair and finds bits of shell in it, so, well--bullet dodged there, maybe. And at least the oatmeal wasn’t hot, so small favors all around. And oatmeal facials are a thing, right?

Yeahhhh. Well.

There’s no sign of Bucky in the rest of the bedroom, but when she cranes her neck just so, the nesting closet looks lumpier than it did last night. When she cranes her neck just enough to nearly fall out of bed, she can see Bucky curled up around his stomach and half-buried under pillows and blankets. It’s both heart-crushing and crushingly adorable, and her hindbrain wants to barge right in there and weigh him down even heavier into the nest.

Since she is not an asshole, she just goes to shower the rest of breakfast off. About three minutes in, she registers Bucky was sleeping in one of Thor’s shirts. Specifically, the shirt Thor was wearing last night.

. . . okay.

Right, well. Today is “Talk To Natasha” Day, which is sure to go super-great after last night’s incredibly awkward elevator non-encounter with Steve, but at least Thor’s up for backup duty when Bucky needs it. That’s something.

She really wants to know if he gave Bucky that shirt or Bucky stole it, though.

Darcy scrubs up quick, then goes back to the bedroom to get dressed and clean up the smushed breakfast. Mercifully and miraculously, none of the sheets got dirty. Bucky doesn’t appear to have moved, which makes her positive he’s awake, but since he’s not engaging she might as well give him his space. She assumes that means he wants space, anyway.

She heads to the kitchen and eats the surviving oatmeal--what, it was her face in it--but goes to scrape the eggs into the trash on account of having no desire to eat shells, no matter what her hindbrain has to say about it. And she does not feel super-guilty doing it, okay? Okay?

She feels super, super guilty doing it.

“. . . goddammit,” Darcy mutters to herself, and eats the stupid eggs. They are awful. She swallows every bite, then leaves the dishes for later to make a double serving of oatmeal for Bucky and take it back into the bedroom to leave on his nightstand. He still hasn’t moved. Her hindbrain still wants to burrow in with him, and even her regular brain would at least like to scent him up a bit, but she keeps moving out of self-defense.
That is definitely Thor’s shirt from last night, she can’t help confirming.

“J.A.R.V.I.S.?” she asks once she’s back in the living room, although her actual destination is the office--that’s where she left the tablet last night, and where the spare styluses allegedly live. “Is Natasha in the tower today?”

“Yes, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says. “Agent Romanoff intends to remain in the tower all day, barring assembly of the Avengers.”

“Okay. Uh. Can I, like . . . make an appointment?” Darcy asks after a moment’s doubt, frowning to herself as she pops open the supply closet and starts looking for the styluses. Normally she wouldn’t ask that, but normally she also wouldn’t be the only thing standing between Natasha’s maybe-omega and his favorite human being, so . . . yeah. Erring on the side of deference does not seem to be the worst idea in this scenario, she thinks.

“An appointment, Ms. Lewis?” J.A.R.V.I.S. sounds mildly puzzled. Which, yeah, okay, maybe she’s erring a little farther than necessary, but again: only thing standing between Natasha’s maybe-omega and his favorite human being.

“Like, to talk,” she says. She found the styluses, at least. “About Bucky. Um . . . to ask her for a favor about Bucky, specifically.”

“A moment, please,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says. Darcy spends said moment--several moments, to get technical about it--testing styluses on the tablet, even though they’re all exactly identical to the one she broke. They’re not even in different colors.

She can’t help noticing that someone added if you go outside, someone has to go with you to the rules.

Well. It’s pretty obvious who, really. Thor would’ve used much flowerier language, for one thing.

“Agent Romanoff is available,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says. “She is currently located in the upper gymnasium and will remain there for the next forty minutes.”

“. . . is there actually an upper gymnasium, or does that mean ‘the roof’?” Darcy asks warily. They’ve been in the tower for a while now, but for obvious reasons, she hasn’t had much occasion to look into the gym setup.

“The roof is part of the exterior gymnasium, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says, sounding either mildly offended or mildly amused. Darcy decides to just let that one lie for the moment, although she’s definitely bookmarking it to come back to later. “Will you be available, or would a later time be more suitable?”

“Now’s fine,” Darcy replies, shaking her head as she grabs her bag off the office chair and tucks the tablet into it. She probably won’t need it, but she’d rather have it on her right now. If nothing else, she can hide behind it while Natasha’s . . . Natasha-ing. “Uh--might need some directions, though, if that’s cool. And can you tell Bucky I went to talk to her about, um, handler things. And don’t let anybody else into the suite unless he says it’s cool first. And if he needs to check the rules while I’m out can you remind--actually, like, can we get another tablet for him, I don’t know why I didn’t think of that--”

“Would you like a shared private server for the two of you to use as needed as well?” J.A.R.V.I.S. suggests. “I would be glad to set one up while you are at your appointment.”

“You are always the best idea I hear all day, J,” Darcy says feelingly. “Yes please.”
J.A.R.V.I.S. gets on with things, and so does Darcy, at least after resisting the stupid hindbrain urge to go back and check on Bucky one last time. The urge is mostly manifesting in *we could rut him awake*, so it’s clearly a useless one. She adjusts the tablet in her bag and packs herself some granola bars mostly because if she meets any omegas right now she *knows* she is gonna need to feed them, then heads out the door and follows J.A.R.V.I.S.’s directions in pursuit of the appropriate gym.

Hopefully Steve is not in this one. Hopefully J.A.R.V.I.S. is gonna remember to *warn* her about Steve being in places, or at least warn Steve about *her* being in places. Like, she’s not picky, she’ll take what she can get on that.

The upper gymnasium is definitely “upper”, even without taking the roof into account--Darcy has to go up eight flights, and when she actually steps into the place, a good two-thirds of the equipment is either bolted to the upper half of the walls or hanging from the ceiling, and the room’s at least twice as high as she’s used to the tower’s floors being. Which, actually that makes sense, she thinks--Tony, Rhodey, Thor, and Sam are all aerial fighters, Clint’s main goal in any situation is to get the high ground and shoot people from it, and Natasha and Steve both like to clamber up *and* throw themselves off high buildings. Apparently there’s been some parachute incidents, also--said incidents being *no parachute*.

It doesn’t look fireproof enough for Pepper, though, honestly.

She wonders if Bucky will ever want to come here. Probably not, and she definitely never wants to make him feel he *has* to, just . . . she wonders. Although mostly she’s just wondering if he’ll come here to see anyone who’s usually *using* it, she guesses.

As far as “using it” at the moment, the place is almost completely empty. Natasha is forty feet off the ground on the rings, doing some circus-quality moves, and Clint is laid out flat on a cramped ledge just underneath the ceiling shooting moving targets on the far side of the room. How Natasha has the arm strength to pull that off and Clint has the room to draw the bow are both totally beyond Darcy, but they both pause and look down to her when she steps fully into the gym. Safe bet they knew she was there before, probably, but she guesses that was either them figuring it couldn’t be that important if she wasn’t announcing herself or their way of offering her an out. One or the other.

Yeah, though, maybe coming to see Natasha when she was all sweaty and radiating unrestrained pheromones all through this huge gym while doing really impressive feats of strength was not the *best* start to an awkward conversation. Darcy’s not that kind of alpha and she’s never even been interested in trying to be, but the hindbrain is still the hindbrain. Like--keeping her own pheromones tamped down is a fucking *struggle*, put it that way.

“Heyyyyy,” she says slowly, staring warily up at the other two. “So, uh. How’s it hanging? And no, I’m not sorry for how obvious that joke was, you are in fact *welcome* that I took care of it.”

“Barton already made it twice,” Natasha replies dryly, then swings back bodily, the rings she’s hanging from making a long, graceful arc through the air in the instant before she lets go and flips backwards off them. She hits hard against the wall in a crouch, seeming to nearly hover there for one long, extended second, then rebounds off it and rapidly ricochets through three separate pieces of equipment before landing right in front of Darcy. She also grabbed a water bottle at some point, because of course she did, and her hair is perfect.

“Jesus,” Darcy says, staring at her. Natasha takes a sip, raising an eyebrow at her.

Right, so--when she was thinking about Bucky maybe liking Natasha, maybe what she actually should’ve been thinking about was Bucky maybe *liking* Natasha.
“You wanted to ask me something?” Natasha asks.

“Um. For something,” Darcy says. “Like, just to make sure that got communicated clearly. And all. Uh.”

“For something,” Natasha repeats agreeably, although the intent look in the back of her eyes runs contrary to the casualness of the reply. She smells like--Darcy doesn’t usually get much out of other alphas’ pheromones aside from “aggressive” or “neutral” or “friendly”, generally speaking, and she’s never paid much attention to Natasha’s before beyond a vague awareness, but like this Natasha’s scent is sharp and clear and cold. Not in a cruel or distant way, just . . . sharp and clear and cold, like walking outside on a cloudless day in the dead of winter. She’d say it was more appropriate a beta-scent than an alpha’s, except it also smells like if she stays out too long her fucking blood will freeze.

That’s--yeah, that’s probably not just the workout doing that to Natasha’s scent.

“Bucky asked me for rules about going outside,” Darcy says, because this is really not the time to hem and haw about shit. “I told him he had to take somebody with him, in case--like, I don’t remember if I told you guys this, but when I met him there were HYDRA guys on him so, like . . . yeah. I kinda figure he shouldn’t be by himself outside of the tower right now. He, uh, thought I meant more like handlers than chaperones, but yeah. He asked if you and Thor were approved, um, handlers.”

“‘Handlers’,” Natasha repeats in a neutral tone that is really clearly not being used in a neutral way.

“He almost thought he wasn’t even allowed to go outside, okay, I wasn’t gonna push it,” Darcy sighs, shaking her head. She wouldn’t blame Natasha if she punched her right now. Wouldn’t like it, but wouldn’t blame her.

“I suppose he wouldn’t have,” Natasha says, her head just barely tipping. There’s no inflection in her voice at all. Clint’s still shooting targets like this conversation isn’t even happening. “Why did he ask about me?”

“I don’t know,” Darcy admits with a shrug. Maybe another alpha would know, but honestly not pushing it is working pretty well for her so far. Like, all things considered. “Maybe because of DC? Or Steve? Although I dunno why he picked you and didn’t pick Sam, in that case. But he’s confused about some stuff, maybe he doesn’t remember him. I mean, I’m not even sure how well he remembered you, like, he called you Natalia--”

“He remembered me very well, then,” Natasha says. Her expression doesn’t change. Her voice doesn’t change. Nothing changes.

Clint misses the bullseye on his next target.

“. . . um,” Darcy says, staring at said target out of the corner of her eye and suddenly very, very aware that Bucky maybe did not make a mistake.

Natasha takes another sip of her water bottle, never looking away from Darcy’s face. Her expression shifts into casual boredom somewhere in the middle of the motion, but the room still smells like an icy, cloudless day.

Darcy . . . Darcy is gonna stick with not pushing it, she thinks.

“You don’t have to,” she says. “Thor already said he would, I mean, so that’s, like . . . somebody. As an option. You know.”
“No, I’ll chaperone him,” Natasha says easily. “Why not? I take one more fossil to the Smithsonian and I get a free T-shirt.”

“Uh--thanks?” Darcy tries, feeling like she’s missing the joke. Probably; Clint ducked his head like he was hiding a laugh. She’s still sticking with not pushing it, though. Honestly, if Natasha was between Bucky and something he wanted and came to her for a favor, she doesn’t think she’d be half this calm about it. And Natasha and Steve have known each other for years--Natasha and Steve have killed people for each other. Natasha and Steve have killed people because the other one told them to.

Yeah. She’s not gonna get her hackles up over inside jokes.

Natasha shrugs dismissively and takes another drink. “Anything else, or can I get back to my workout?” she asks. Darcy glances down at her bag, thinking about getting the tablet out to explain the rules to her, but that just feels too private to be going into detail about. At least not without talking to Bucky about it first, anyway. In the end she just shrugs too, and Natasha looks at her bag for a moment--okay, so she projected, sue her--then turns on her heel and walks back towards the wall. Clint gives Darcy a little wave and she waves back, then leaves the gym, briefly and selfishly wishing that she’d been able to scent him while they were in there. Erik’s pheromones are all over the place and Bruce’s just don’t reassure the same way. Maybe Clint’ll have lunch with her later this week, assuming he’s still willing to socialize with her.

Ugh. God, she’s getting pessimistic today. Or maybe just in general.

Darcy takes the elevator back to the Thor floor. No one’s in the common room, although there’s a small butcher paper-wrapped package with BUCKO BEAR scrawled on it in Tony’s messy writing on the kitchen counter.

“Tablet?” she guesses as she picks it up.

“Correct, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. confirms agreeably. “The private server you requested has also been arranged and is locked to your respective biosignatures. You may access it from any computer in the tower or either of your tablets or cell phones.”

“There’s a phone in here too?” Darcy asks, looking at the package curiously. Well, it does have Tony’s handwriting on it; for all she knows the thing’s got a laptop, communicator, and freakin’ metal polish in it.

“That is correct, but there is also a cell phone in Sergeant Barnes’s backpack,” J.A.R.V.I.S. replies. “He appears to be in possession of three separate phones, in fact, although only one is a smart phone. I presume the other two are ‘burners’, as they are commonly referred to.”

“Huh,” Darcy says, weirdly comforted by that fact. It’s not like it’s not obvious Bucky’s been taking care of himself--well, not eating enough, which even remembering makes her want to feed him six meals a day every day, but otherwise, yeah, obviously. HYDRA never got ahold of him, or if they did he got away, and he found the backpack and survived a whole year following Steve and Sam’s footprints through a thousand different dangerous places.

It’s just nice to hear proof, she guesses.

“Did he finish eating yet?” she asks as she leaves the common room and heads for their suite, seriously considering going with the urge to get around second breakfast for him, or elevensies or something equally Tolkien-esque. Maybe both.
“Yes, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. confirms. “He also requested that I inform you that he is with an approved handler and will return before dark.”

“He went out?” Darcy asks, more than a little startled. That’s—she really did not think he’d be doing that soon, honestly. She wonders why he didn’t tell her before she left—he was awake, right?—but maybe Thor swung by while she was gone and kinda took over the day. He’s got a way like that, sometimes. Or maybe Bucky just hadn’t wanted to tell her. Or was—testing? Maybe? If he has to tell her things like that.

No lie, she’d really rather he would, but it’s not a hill she’s gonna die on either. Wherever he went he took Thor with him (or got taken by Thor, she guesses), unless Natasha recently learned to teleport (which admittedly yeah, okay, maybe he did go with Natasha), and that’s all she’d asked him to do when he’d asked her for rules.

That’s still pretty quick, though. She’s just surprised he decided to go out again this soon with how he’s been about cameras and—

There’s a knock on the door. Darcy pauses that train of thought. Well, that’s really good timing, for how long she’s been back.

“You can let Jane in, J.A.R.V.I.S.,” she says dryly, raising an eyebrow at the ceiling. He clears his digital throat, then the front door slides open and Jane smiles sheepishly at her.

“Hi, Darcy,” she says. “Do you need to talk?”

“So badly,” Darcy confesses with a grimace, meeting her at the doorway. They hug. Belatedly it occurs to her that smelling like another alpha might make Bucky nervous, and then she mentally berates herself for the thought. He’s not goddamn five. He ate dinner with Jane just fine last night, and there’s probably tons of other alphas wherever he and Thor are right now.

. . . although he didn’t want her around when Darcy wasn’t, so yeah, maybe they should stay in the Thor floor common room, she decides. She grabs her tablet again and they head there, and Jane puts on DC Cupcakes to give them plausible deniability not to talk if Darcy changes her mind but also so they won’t be missing anything actually interesting while they do.

“Just tell me they’re not bilgesnipe-hunting, please,” she says, because if she doesn’t know where Bucky is for any longer she might have to go find him. Which—no dignity in that situation at all, frankly, she refuses to be that alpha. Even if she really wants to.

“Thor said something about doughnuts and questing,” Jane says, which, yeah, sounds like Thor, and also answers the “can Natasha teleport yet” question, or at least the “is Natasha willing to let people know she can teleport yet” question. Same difference, at the moment.

“Cool,” Darcy says, then puts her tablet in her lap and stares at DC Cupcakes for an hour and a half without saying a damn word. It is exactly as annoying a show as she’s always thought it was. Actually, possibly even worse, now that she’s binging it. Amazing how that’ll bring out a show’s flaws, really.

Ugh.

Jane doesn’t interrupt and doesn’t say anything, not even derisive comments about the blatantly manufactured “drama” running rampant through the show, which is usually pretty SOP for them. Darcy appreciates it. And also kind of hates it. And also kind of hates this show.

“We could be watching Ace of Cakes right now,” she accuses eventually.
“Oh thank god you said it,” Jane says fervently, immediately going for the remote. They spend the next hour and a half on much higher-quality reality TV, and Darcy says exactly as little as she did before but finally feels a little better, at least.

She doesn’t know how to explain all this. She hasn’t even figured it out for herself yet, really. Which, how could she have, honestly, it’s been like three days, but still—she doesn’t know. Just . . . still. She had to convince him he didn’t have to fuck her or fight for them to earn protection for the pups, she had to tell him what he could eat and how he was allowed to, she had to give him permission to lay claim on a damn closet—

She had to tell him they weren’t going to take the pups away from him.

That is just . . . fucking Christ.

Bucky needs someone who has their shit figured out, and Darcy’s hindbrain needs her to be the person who has that. Hell, maybe even Bucky needs it, since he’s apparently not letting it be Steve.

At least he likes Thor and Natasha. Or--she doesn’t know. Likes Thor’s scent and well-timed questions and Natasha’s ass-kicking capacity, maybe. And he mostly believes her when she tells him things. She’s not complaining; she just hopes it’s enough.

She wants to tell Jane all this. She wants to tell Jane none of this. She wants to call Ian and panic or to go freak out on Steve, as the only other person in this building and probably the damn world who is this concerned about what is going to happen to Bucky Barnes in the next few days. Weeks. Months. Years.

She wants to tell Bucky all this too, but she doesn’t even know if he’d understand it. And she feels like shit for thinking he might not, too, like she’s calling him stupid or weak, but at the same time she can’t assume he’ll understand. He told her that himself.

She just wants to fix him. It’s her hindbrain talking, stupid prehistoric lizard-brain alpha instincts--like there’s even such a thing as “fixing” people--but it’s talking really, really fucking loud.

There’s nothing she can do except everything she can do, and her “everything” can’t possibly be enough. Hell, her “everything” already got Bucky knocked up, which, yeah, got him to come in from the cold--but that’s assuming coming in from the cold is better for him. He kept himself out of HYDRA’s hands for this long, and who knows what coming in before he’s ready or wants to could do to him, with his head like it is right now?

Who even knows what his head is like right now? Really. Does anyone. Does he?

There is not enough reality TV in the world to put these problems in perspective. Maybe if aliens invaded again, but if that’s happened lately someone already took care of it without the Avengers noticing. And if HYDRA attacked, well, that wouldn’t be making her feel any better about things.

. . . no, wait, knowing that Steve and Natasha had been unleashed against a bunch of HYDRA bastards actually would make her feel better. And that’s not even mentioning the Hulk being unleashed against a bunch of HYDRA bastards.

Yeah, okay, actually she could get into this line of thought, this is a very nice line of thought. She is all about this line of thought.

Hulk smash.

Heh heh. Heheheheh.
Yeah, she’s definitely into this line of thought.

“Are you . . . cackling?” Jane asks, squinting over at her doubtfully.

“Probably,” Darcy admits. She finally feels less like freaking out, though, so whatever. She’ll take what she can get right now. Really, for the rest of her life she is gonna take what she can get, after Bucky came back and asked her for help—and is actually letting her help. Like, fuck everything else, that is clearly all the miracles she’s gonna get in life and then some. “Frankly we are all lucky I am not in full-on maniacal laughter mode here, sooo . . .”

“Point,” Jane says. The elevator light comes on with a gentle chime and they both look up reflexively just in time to see the door sliding open. Darcy’s hindbrain sits bolt-upright and immediately demands her attention, for obvious reasons.

Thor walks in, Bucky following a few steps behind him, and Darcy is instantly emotionally compromised. Bucky’s carrying a shopping bag and wearing her backpack and more of the clothes she bought him, one of Thor’s button-downs thrown on overtop, and his hair’s pulled back out of his face for probably the first time she remembers since it was all wet and slicked back in the bath during—ahem. Anyway.

Anyway.

. . . oh god, it’s braided, isn’t it. Like, super-well braided, all neat and cute except for a couple stray strands framing his face, because of course. Of course there’s a couple stray strands framing his face. Because this is the world that Darcy Lewis lives in now, this is just going to be her life for the rest of her life.

Okay, so yeah, maybe she’s gonna need to have a bit of a freak-out after all.

“Good afternoon, Jane, Darcy,” Thor greets cheerfully as he walks into the common room. He leans down and Jane leans up, and he kisses her cheek affectionately and she kisses the tendon in his throat in return with a warm, low rumble. Thor purrs in response.

Bucky stops at the edge of the entranceway, not quite making the last step into the room. Darcy can’t decide if she’s relieved, disappointed, or being an idiot who should’ve gotten up to meet him. He also doesn’t immediately retreat to the suite, either, so her hindbrain sits up a little straighter in the back of her head.

“What’d you get?” she asks, looking at the shopping bag. It is a very weird experience. Fuck, did she even give him money yet? Did any of them give him money yet?

“Do I have to tell?” Bucky asks as he finally steps into the room, a question which immediately shoves that line of thought aside for a later time.

“No, I’m just curious,” Darcy replies, shaking her head and making a mental note to add you don’t have to answer questions you don’t want to to the rules later.

“Books,” Bucky says. He reaches into the bag and pulls out two thick, beat-up paperbacks with used bookstore price stickers on their covers. The first one has a picture of two omegas with growing pup-bumps on the cover, one male and one female, and says The Omega’s Guide To Pregnancy; the second is a cookbook featuring a heavily pregnant beta eating an extremely colorful salad and says Eating Right For Your Litter.

“. . . you are already so much better at this than me, wowww,” Darcy marvels as she stares at them. She’d just been going to get J.A.R.V.I.S. to dig up some thoroughly fact-checked websites herself,
but she hasn’t even mentioned it to him yet. Bucky, meanwhile, has already gone to the effort of leaving the tower despite all his paranoia and came back with stuff to get going on.

“It’s my job,” Bucky says, putting the books back into the bag with an uncomfortable expression. Not exactly the response Darcy would’ve hoped for if she’d been letting herself hope for anything, but also not, like, fucking horrible so hey they’re doing pretty good here, she thinks.

Also, seriously. Bookstores have security cameras. Even el cheapo used bookstores that specialize in beat-up paperbacks. And so do all the paparazzi who creep on Thor whenever possible. Her hindbrain wants to go outside and maul somebody for this, and also to kiss Bucky all over his face and bite the back of his neck until it bruises.

“Are you guys hungry?” she asks instead, because that’s a much more reasonable and less creepy reaction to be having. Group consensus is two firm “yes”es and a “. . . maybe?” (no, the first two guesses do not count), so Darcy raids the takeout menu drawer in the kitchen and they order a super-late lunch from the tower’s current favorite deli. Bucky consults the cookbook before ordering, which is the cutest fucking thing Darcy’s had to survive all day.

They eat lunch in the common kitchen and Bucky devours about half as many sandwiches as Thor, which is still twice as much as Darcy and Jane eat themselves—and they don’t exactly have delicate appetites, for the record. Darcy’s hindbrain wants to order more sandwiches or go kill a mammoth or some shit. Instead she nudges the biggest remaining baked potato at him. He eats it in about four bites, which is the happiest her hindbrain’s been all day.

When they get back to the suite Bucky opens the package from Tony and spends the rest of the afternoon in his nest, either setting up the enclosed hardware or ignoring it entirely to read; Darcy doesn’t know which. She tells him about the private server and that Natasha said yes while she’s adding the new rule to her own tablet, then drags that neglected stack of paperwork up from the lab, dumps it in her office, and gets back to work. Slightly smushed leftover lasagna appears on her desk at some point when she’s distracted, and when she checks the fridge on her next coffee run there’s enough missing that Bucky’s obviously eaten too. The next time she runs out of coffee she looks up and there’s a fresh, still-steaming mug already on the desk, which—seriously, this cannot be a normal use of super-assassin skills. She’d ask Steve and Sam, but she’s not sure they’re speaking to her so . . . yeah, not so much.

The coffee could probably be used to tar a road. It’s fucking perfect.

She drinks the coffee and leaves hot chocolate on Bucky’s nightstand. She does her paperwork. She goes to bed alone again and wakes up to a surprisingly good if slightly chewy bacon sandwich and a side of potatoes o’brien that’s hardly burned at all. The plate’s on her nightstand this time, not the pillow, which is both merciful and humiliating. She’d really hoped Bucky’d missed that debacle. There’s also another can of that damn yubari melon juice, which she is now officially resigned to drinking until she dies, she guesses.

The day proceeds not especially differently from yesterday afternoon, Bucky still occupied with either his electronics or his books or something else entirely. She catches enough of a glimpse of him to see he’s wearing the T-shirt Thor had on yesterday, and wonders again how he got it. Obviously Thor is at least aware Bucky’s in possession of his clothes, since yesterday he was literally walking around in that button-down in front of him, but that doesn’t actually clarify how Bucky is coming into possession of them.

Not actually her business, she reminds herself. And keeps reminding herself, three steadily-improving bacon sandwiches, Thor-shirts, and days later.
She could just ask, but she doesn’t.

She could also bring up going to see Bruce and Tony, but she doesn’t do that either.

Bucky keeps messing with his tablet, or keeps reading, or keeps doing who-knows-what in the closet. They eat together and they add some more rules, ones Bucky even kind of helps with—tell each other when we leave the tower, no curfew but text if you’ll be out past midnight, you don’t have to wash your dishes right away as long as they get washed within twenty-four hours—easy stuff, simple things; the kind of conversations Darcy’s had with a dozen different friends and roommates at this point in her life, except not like those conversations at all.

She tells him she’ll dust, mop, and vacuum once a week; he tells her he’ll do the laundry and change the bed sheets every weekend, unless they get dirty sooner. Darcy ruthlessly beats her hindbrain into submission and tries to work out a cooking schedule for dinners, but Bucky gets weird about that one and they don’t decide anything. She gets taking out the trash and doing those alarmingly huge windows; he gets cleaning the bathroom. He tells her she doesn’t have to do any of the chores about ten times during the conversation, which just doubly convinces her of how damn thoroughly she has to do them, even if she has to ask J.A.R.V.I.S. for a ladder.

Halfway through her fifth bacon sandwich of the week--she’d be sick of them by now, normally, but god damn is this one good--Thor shows up with a massive box of lobster tail pastries. She eats two before he and Bucky decimate the rest of the box and then spend half an hour in the linen closet, which Darcy would normally find weird but, well, it is a linen closet designed by Tony Stark, okay, they could probably fit half the tower in there. And she doesn’t mean, like, Natasha and Clint squeezed in tight in casual spywear here, she’s talking like full-on Tony and Rhodey standing shoulder-to-shoulder with their suits on and Pepper still having room to drag her desk in.

It’s a really big linen closet, is her point.

After that she figures out that Bucky’s been rebuilding and rearranging the nest this whole time and promptly feels dumb as hell. Especially because it’s less “figures out” and more “gets told by Thor”. She’s not too proud to admit she’s been avoiding the nest, okay, she really wants to not end up in another situation like last time with the pheromone hotbox near-disaster back when Bucky’d still thought she was throwing him out if he didn’t put out. That just hadn’t been a good idea at all.

Or maybe she just doesn’t trust her stupid-ass fucking hindbrain. Who knows, at this point.

“So Tony and Bruce want to do, like, a check-up,” she says after Thor’s left, as she’s crushing the empty pastry box to throw away. “And an ultrasound--Tony mentioned the ultrasound, right? They set their shit up in Jane’s lab. It’s where she and Erik and I all work.”

“You work in a lab,” Bucky says. Which is something Darcy’s pretty sure he already knew, but the way he says it is just really . . . uncomfortable.

“Yeah,” she confirms anyway. “I’m her intern. It’s a weird story. And we do absolutely zero biological anything in there, unfortunately, so we are definitely gonna need Bruce if you want to see a doctor. And, well--we don’t need Tony, but, like. Related fields. Like the arm. And his dad and the Vita-Ray machine. And, you know. Stuff.”

“You don’t know how,” Bucky says, just looking at her.

“Um--no, definitely not,” Darcy answers, nose wrinkling at the thought. She wishes she did, kind of, but she’s not sure that’d really be that much more comforting anyway. “I mean . . . I really don’t know anything about that stuff. J.A.R.V.I.S. sent me a file with all the tests they wanna run


explained in it, though, I can upload it to the server for you. I thought we could read it together, maybe?"

“Okay,” Bucky says, and they do. The plan isn’t quite as baffling as Tony and Bruce made it sound and the involved procedures are not nearly as invasive as she’d worried they might be, but Bucky stays a steady neutral the entire conversation and doesn’t give her much to go on. Which is saying something, for him.

She doesn’t ask, though she’s really looking forward to the day they make it to a place where she can start feeling like she can, maybe.

“I’ll go tomorrow morning,” Bucky says.

“Do you want me to come?” Darcy asks. He shakes his head without elaborating, and she resists the urge to ask why. They’re doing pretty good on the communication front, all things considered, and if he doesn’t see a reason to tell her, well, okay then. Probably she would also not want an alpha in the room if she were an omega answering invasive medical questions about years and years’ worth of sociopathic abuse and violence either, really. It’s understandable.

... dammit, she broke another stylus.

“Okay,” she says, just pretending the stylus thing didn’t happen even knowing there’s no way Bucky missed it. God damn it. Actually, wait, no, that’s a terrible idea--“That was unrelated to you saying no, for the record. I just accidentally thought of something shitty.”

“You’re not very good with those,” Bucky says, tilting his head a little. “Everybody’s gonna think I’m the one breaking them.”

“In their defense, normally the guy with the badass cyborg arm would be the one accidentally breaking the delicate equipment,” Darcy huffs, making a face at the broken stylus. It is a pretty sorry sight, that stylus.

“The only thing I can’t do with this thing is get myself off,” Bucky says matter-of-factly, holding the metal hand up. Darcy chokes on her mediocre yubari melon juice. “Plates need to move unpredictably sometimes. Not the place you want to get pinched.”

“Nnnnargh,” Darcy manages, spilling more juice all over herself and narrowly avoiding getting any on her tablet. Bucky turns his hand and inspects his fingers in the light, seeming oblivious to her suffering.

Oh Jesus, is he fucking funny? Is that a thing she’s gonna have to learn how to survive? Jesus.

Darcy mostly survives the evening, at least, and in the morning Bucky goes to see Tony and Bruce and she suffers alone in the suite for exactly six minutes before throwing her hands up and abandoning it to pace all over the Thor floor instead. She also calls Ian, because otherwise she’s probably gonna pace herself through the Thor floor.

The thing is, she still isn’t sure how much she can safely tell him, even on a Starkphone--look, even Iron Man is not perfect, okay, she heard about the whole “SHIELD’s every dirty secret” thing on the helicarrier when HYDRA was literally inside them--so the conversation is probably a little bit confusing on Ian’s end. He definitely doesn’t understand why she’s so paranoid that “Jamie” is going to do shit he doesn’t want to for her, but the “oh and he’s pregnant” part he at least, like, can wrap his head around.
Well—as much as anyone’s wrapped their head around it.

“How did *that* happen?” he asks, sounding genuinely surprised. Considering Darcy’s normal, *not* pheromone-stupid approach to birth control, she can’t really blame him.

“We were both clean and he thought he was infertile,” she says. “Also, smelled like cinnamon buns. It was not a *smart* decision on my part.”

She wonders, asshole-ish as it is, if Bucky ever would’ve come in if she hadn’t been so stupid.

“I’d say congratulations, but . . .”

“Yeah, it’s not really that kind of situation,” Darcy says, stopping by the kitchen to stuff an entire bagel in her mouth and *not* think about what’s going on in the lab right now. It’s cinnamon-raisin, because *her* life. “Mmph. I mean, I’m not *mad* or anything, except kinda at myself, but this is a bad, *bad* time for him to whelp and honestly not super-great for me either.”

“World in peril?” Ian asks.

“Not actually, for once.” Darcy grabs another bagel. “Still, there’s *some* sliding scale between ‘I had lunch plans’ and ‘planetary terror’.”

“Wow, your parents took it *really* well, then,” Ian says, sounding impressed. Darcy freezes with a mouthful of bagel, then nearly drops the phone trying not to choke to death. Her *parents*, oh *shit*. She didn’t even *think* about— “Never mind,” Ian says, audibly wincing.

“FUCK,” Darcy says. Her family is basically the “major holidays and monthly phone calls” type, but this? This is “we need to talk” and “I don’t care if you’re in NYC, we’re having Dinner about this” territory. Her mom is gonna kill her. Her dad is gonna be *disappointed* at her.

“Well, it hasn’t been *that* long, right?” Ian asks weakly.

“It’s been longer than thirty seconds,” Darcy says, dragging a bagel-crumbed hand down her face. “And they haven’t even heard he *exists* yet!”

Also, the whole HYDRA POW with serious mental and physical trauma thing. Also *that*. One might even say *especially* that, because what, she’s gonna drag Bucky all the way to Connecticut and make him either trot out all his shit or pretend to have a normal life history over her dad’s dry-as-hell meatloaf? That’s a thing she’s gonna do to him? While he’s *pregnant*?

Jesus.

“Maybe you could start with the telling them that, then,” Ian suggests delicately. Her parents *love* Ian, of course, and still haven’t stopped asking about him despite the fact they know damn well he’s in an entirely different country and have only ever talked to him over Skype. Darcy goes into the living room to collapse into the beanbags with a groan. They smell like beta, which is sort of helpful, although slightly *weird* beta because yeah, Erik is Erik. Or—less Erik than he used to be, maybe. Or--

Wow, she is just making every possible thing depressing these days, isn’t she.

“This is bad,” she says, dragging a hand down her face.

“You’ve handled worse,” Ian says.
“I can’t exactly taste this problem,” she points out.

“You always find a way to taste the problem,” Ian replies wryly.

“. . . okay, fair but still not helpful.”
Darcy is not super thrilled right now. Ian spends fifteen minutes talking her down from a freakout and helping her brainstorm ways to break the news to her parents, for which she gets no good ideas at all, and Bucky is in a lab getting poked and prodded and doesn’t want her there, and who knows what’s going on with Steve--

“Breathe, Darcy,” she tells herself, then gets to doing the windows. J.A.R.V.I.S. has to tell her where the stepladder is. Probably under normal circumstances there’d be a maid--there usually is, with Tony--but fortunately no one has been dumb enough to send some poor unsuspecting housekeeper into Bucky’s territory. Jane comes in about halfway through and just looks at her.

“That bad?” she asks. Darcy kind of doesn’t want to know how she looks.

“I just remembered I haven’t told my parents yet,” she says, and Jane winces.

“Ooo,” she says. “You want a drink?”

“Anything but Yubari melon juice,” Darcy says feelingly. Jane heads to the kitchen and Darcy finishes up with the last couple windows, then puts the stepladder away. Jane has found the wine, bless her.

“Are you going to tell them?” she asks, and Darcy grimaces.

“I mean, how could I not?!” she asks. They’re not the closest family, maybe, but they’re not fucking estranged. What is she gonna do, spend the rest of her life pretending she’s never whelped?

“Well, I guess it depends,” Jane says with a little frown. “What does Bucky want to do?”

“No idea,” Darcy says, shrugging helplessly. “He’s getting checked out by Tony and Bruce, I haven’t had a chance to ask him.”

“Then you shouldn’t worry about it yet,” Jane says. “You can’t really plan until you get his opinion anyway, right?”

“I mean . . . right, I guess,” Darcy admits. Just not worrying about it is easier said than done, though.

They get halfway through the bottle together, and Darcy is feeling pretty loose and good about things, actually, which just proves there is no problem alcohol can’t trick you into thinking isn’t a big deal, thank Thor for the stuff.

“Sergeant Barnes would like me to inform you he is leaving the building with Thor, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says, and Darcy tips her head back to blink at the ceiling.

“Really?” she asks in surprise. She would’ve figured he’d want to stay in after getting poked and prodded at like that. Then again, it’s not like she knows that much about his coping methods, or when he even needs his coping methods. “Okay. Tell him to have fun!”

“Of course, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says.

“Do they have fun?” Darcy asks Jane, biting her thumbnail a little anxiously.

“Well, Thor seems to. At least, he likes Bucky a lot,” Jane says. “I don’t know any better about
Bucky than you do, though, sorry."

"It is a dumb thing to worry about but man am I worried about it," Darcy says with a grimace, taking another swallow of her wine. Bucky needs friends, definitely. Bucky needs literally anyone *not her* to spend time with, especially if he still isn’t talking to Steve, which he still isn’t doing, which Natasha is *definitely* going to kill her for one of these days.

"They’ll probably just go shopping again, maybe get coffee," Jane says, sounding much too reasonable. “You know, omegas’ day out and all."


“Maybe Bucky thinks it’ll dissuade HYDRA?” Jane guesses. “Or maybe he just feels safe with Thor. He *is*, you know. Thor.”

“Point,” Darcy says. They move to the couch and drink the rest of the wine over a few episodes of Cake Boss, and she’s feeling a little less good but still pretty okay, so that’s nothing to complain about. At least Bucky’s going outside and doing stuff and being, like, a *person* and stuff. That’s good stuff.

... stuff.

Maybe she should not drink any more of the wine, Darcy thinks, eyeing the bottle speculatively. Jane proceeds to refill both their glasses, making the point moot, and they watch some more Cake Boss. She wonders if Bucky likes cake. He likes pastries, at least. Or doesn’t hate them? Then again, he’d still probably eat anything they fed him, she should really *ask* these kinds of things. God, does he even like lasagna? Does he even like truffles?

Okay, no, stupid question: *everyone* likes truffles. But she should still ask about the other stuff, probably.

“Hello, my lady, my friend!” Thor greets cheerfully as he walks into the room with a bunch of bags and Bucky walks in behind him with a few more, hair braided again and wearing combat boots and a swishy vintage-looking floral dress, which, as a fashion combination, just might kill her.

“Ngh,” Darcy says, going immediately bug-eyed. She’s seen Tony in a few cocktail gowns and Thor in the occasional Asgardian formalwear, and *everybody’s* seen pictures of Captain America’s showomega costume with the flirty little skirt, but in general the male omegas in Darcy’s life have never been much for dresses. She’s never been either, so she doesn’t blame them, but god *damn*, omegas can pull one off like nobody else. Darcy’s always felt dumb in them--where do her boobs go, where should her *clit* go--but Bucky has clearly already worked out all those problems and moved on with life.

She may be in trouble here.

“Does it look okay?” Bucky asks quietly, turning around. His skirt swishes a little bit around his knees. Darcy’s heartbeat goes double-time.

“Ngh,” she manages again, barely managing to stay in her chair. “It’s. Cute! It’s super cute!”

She is going to *die*. How can something so conservatively cut be *so hot*, dammit.

“It’s, uh--been a while since I wore one,” he says, looking briefly embarrassed.
“That is the most tragic thing I have heard all week,” Darcy swears, clutching the empty wine bottle to her chest. Jesus, he is--he’s a fucking picture. Bucky Barnes is a fucking picture and she is not at all sober enough to be a normal human being about it. Steve is gonna kick her ass so hard her ancestors get deported. Whatever she did to deserve this, she definitely needs to do again. Or never do again, maybe.

_God_, he’s pretty.

Bucky smiles a little bit--just a little--and sets the bags down by the door. Thor drops his own beside them and then practically smushes Jane into the couch. She laughs a little bit drunkenly and wraps her arms around him, and he nuzzles in affectionately in return, rubbing his nose into the scent glands in her throat. Jane rumbles contentedly and rubs the back of his neck.

Bucky makes sure the bags are all lined up neatly, then comes over and sits down nicely next to Darcy, whose worthless excuse for a brain instantly shorts out. She’s almost stupid enough to offer him the wine glass, but is fortunately _not_ that stupid. The skirt spreads all prettily on the cushions as Bucky settles in and Darcy takes a _big_ drink.

“I like the flowers?” she says _almost_ like a normal human being would say something.

“Thor helped me pick it out,” Bucky says, smoothing his skirt carefully over his knees. Darcy wants him to hike it up like she has maybe never wanted anything in her _life_.

“Cool,” she says instead like a lame idiot who is lame and definitely should put down the wine. They all watch Cake Boss until Netflix starts questioning their life choices, Darcy pretending the whole time to be paying attention to literally anything other than Bucky’s body heat beside her, then Jane yawns hugely--and theatrically, as a _terrible_ liar--and sweeps off with Thor, leaving Darcy all alone with Bucky and Bucky’s body heat and Bucky’s _dress_.

She’s going to die. It’s definitely unavoidable.

“I’m kinda tired,” she says, really hoping she’s sobered up enough to sound normal.

“Me too,” Bucky says, the side of his hand just barely brushing Darcy’s thigh as he leans forward a little bit. Darcy’s hindbrain starts doing backflips out of sheer lizard-y joy, which she shuts down quick.

“Yeah I really need some coffee,” she says all in a rush, then flees for the kitchen like a fleeing flee-r who flees. It’d be a great idea, except Bucky follows her and Bucky following her gives her a _great_ view of that skirt swish-swishing around his knees again. It’s--it’s very distracting.

Bucky sits down prettily at the counter. Darcy makes coffee, and also panics a little. She needs to be sober and not weird and not _gross_ about things right now, dammit! Bucky didn’t ask for her to be perving all up on him, he just wanted to wear something nicer than tac pants for once!

“Did you do a lot of shopping?” she manages to ask almost definitely like a normal person would ask.

“Just a little.” Bucky smoothes his skirt restlessly, like he’s not quite used to how it feels yet. “I got a few things.”

“Stuff you like?” she asks, searching desperately for something to say. It _is_ a valid question, with Bucky.

“It’s nice,” he says, tucking a loose strand of hair back behind his ear. “Thor said it looked good on
“That’s good,” Darcy hazards. This is fine. This is okay. Hell, this is practically _small talk._

“Yeah,” Bucky agrees with a nod. “I want to look nice for you.”

So much for fucking _small talk._

“Well—_you_ do look nice,” Darcy manages in a strangled voice. “But I want you to dress however you want, and so does everyone else here.”

“I want to dress so I look nice for you,” Bucky says, just looking at her. Darcy attempts to pour herself a cup of coffee, but it’s hard to do without breaking eye contact. Her hindbrain is _fucking giddy._

“Okay,” she says weakly. Bucky doesn’t smile, exactly, but his face looks lighter. Darcy manages to break eye contact long enough to pour her coffee and even get some sugar in it, but that’s a terrible idea, it turns out, because when she turns back around she turns right _into_ Bucky, who’s gotten up and moved in close without a sound or any hint at all, except maybe for the faint trace of familiar vanilla soap that she really, really should’ve recognized in her personal space.

“Do you need anything?” he asks her, giving her that killer under-the-lash look that makes her hindbrain roll over and play dead every time.

“My parents!” she blurts, and he . . . blinks, then stares blankly at her.

“Your--parents?” he repeats doubtfully.

“Yes! Them!” Darcy tries not to slosh her coffee everywhere. Success is limited. “I haven’t told them yet. I, uh, figured I should ask you first.”

“Told them what?” Bucky asks with a puzzled frown.

“. . . about, you know. _You,_” she says.

“What about me?” He’s still frowning.

“Like--that you exist? That the _pups_ exist?” Darcy glances meaningfully at his stomach. “They are, like, _my parents._ They’d probably like to know this kind of thing. I mean, admittedly it’s never come up before, so maybe not? But I’m still pretty sure they would.”

“Then you should lie to them,” Bucky says. “About me, I mean.”

“I--yeah, okay,” Darcy says, because that sounds like a terrible idea but Bucky doesn’t actually _talk_ about his ideas, so . . . “Lie like how?”

Bucky shrugs, smoothing his skirt again. “Like this,” he suggests. “Like I’m harmless. Or ask somebody else to pretend to be the ma. Might be safer than if anybody found out somebody with the serum was whelping anyway.”

“Dunno how well we’d be able to keep the lid on that one,” Darcy says slowly. Is that the most he’s said to her at once? She thinks it might be. “I mean, when you went out people might notice. Would you really wanna stay in the tower all that time?”

“I’ve done harder things than that,” Bucky says.
“Really?” she asks. “Than pretending your pups aren’t even yours?”

“If it means they’re safe?” He tilts his head. He has a point, but . . .

“I mean--maybe it would, but who else is gonna pretend to be the mom?” Darcy asks. “The only other omegas I know are either back at school or in freaking England. Or, like, superheroes, which wouldn’t really accomplish the ‘safer’ thing. I mean, I guess Tony could hire somebody but that’s got its own set of risks.”

“HYDRA,” Bucky says grimly. Darcy would like to say Tony would not accidentally hire a HYDRA-issue fake mom for their pups, but, well--the SHIELD thing and all the dirty little secrets he didn’t find, and also the fact that he is the kind of guy to give his personal address out on national television while he’s in the middle of dealing with a supervillain, while also living with his non-super girlfriend. There are clearly some personal boundary/safety issues there.

Look, she appreciates the Thor floor and the family suite and all, but she would not trust the guy with her Social Security number. For one thing, he’s probably already looked it up on his own for no other reason than to have it.

“Maybe we should think about it a little more,” she says, biting her lip. “We don’t have to figure out what to tell anybody right now.”

“Okay.” Bucky looks at her like . . . like she’s not sure. Like he’s waiting for something, maybe? Her hindbrain wants her to kiss him. Her hindbrain, as established, is an idiot.

“Okay,” she echoes, because it’s the best she’s got. She drinks the rest of her coffee and Bucky goes back to the counter and sits patiently. She makes him hot chocolate because it’s the most reasonable thing she can think to do, and he drinks it while she stands around like an idiot with nothing to do. They don’t really talk.

When she goes to bed, he follows her.

Darcy’s not shy, exactly, but it’s really hard to keep herself from hiding in her closet while she changes for bed, even though Bucky’s already seen everything several times over and gotten very intimate with said everything. He seems less concerned about modesty.

“Can you unzip me?” he asks, turning his back to her. Darcy’s brain shorts out a bit, but she manages to operate her hands correctly and do so without copping a feel. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” she manages, and Bucky lets his dress fall right off.

He’s wearing a slip underneath.

Darcy is dead. She is dead and she has gone to Heaven, or maybe Hell? It’s kind of hard to tell.

“Ngh,” she manages. He looks back over his shoulder at her, under-the-lash and all, then goes and lays down in the bed. The process of watching him walk over to it is . . . is distracting.

Darcy retreats into her closet to add actual pajamas on top of the tank top and boxers she was originally planning to sleep in. Clothes are suddenly very, very important to be wearing. She seriously considers just sleeping on her shoe rack for a whole fifteen seconds before shaking off the thought and coming back out. Bucky’s already all tucked into the bed, watching the door and waiting for her.

She is definitely dead. Steve killed her and she is dead.
She turns off the lights and lays down in the other half of the bed, and Bucky shifts in close and her hindbrain internally *screeches* with delight, and Bucky just--

Doesn’t do anything, actually, because doing something would be too merciful, she guesses. She’s not even sure he’s planning to actually sleep here or not.

She could ask, she guesses, but in the dark and so close that she can feel his breath . . .

She doesn’t ask, and Bucky doesn’t do anything.

Eventually she falls asleep and dreams some very inappropriate things related to the sweet sticky-cinnamon scent in her bed, and, briefly, that Bucky is holding her hand.

It’s a nice dream.

When she wakes up, the other side of the bed is empty and a bacon sandwich is sitting on the nightstand. Darcy doesn’t really know what to think about either of those things, but obviously eats the sandwich.

It’s a really good sandwich.

Darcy gets dressed, makes oatmeal, and sees no sign of Bucky at any point. J.A.R.V.I.S. hasn’t told her he’s left the tower, though, so she leaves it by the empty nesting closet with a glass of milk and gets ready to go down to the lab for the day. She’s been neglecting it enough, which means Jane and Erik probably haven’t eaten anything but Pop-Tarts in *days*, because bless Thor’s heart but he can’t do anything but make Pop-Tarts and grill entire cows at once, and even Tony usually draws the line at livestock.

Well. Usually.

“See you tonight, Jamie,” she tells the empty-feeling suite, not sure if he’s here or not, then heads out to go fuss over her dumb scientists before they die of malnutrition. They don’t all have Asgardian stomachs.

She spends the morning fetching coffee, sneaking protein bars into Jane and Erik’s radiuses, transcribing a whole hell of a lot of notes, and sneaking in another couple protein bars. Jane and Erik are both happy to see her and just as happy to deny any need to eat despite inhaling all those protein bars before they’re even properly unwrapped. It’s a process.

Then Thor comes by to visit, and Darcy *might* get a little fussy over him. Just a bit. Jane, fortunately, is not the territorial type.

“Feeling a little antsy?” she says wryly. Darcy freezes in the midst of trying to press a fifth Pop-Tart on Thor, who’s giving her an amused look.

“Maybe I should take a lunch break,” she says.

“Mmmhm,” Jane hums, smiling at her. “Go check on Bucky, we won’t burn the place down in the next hour.”

“Well, we might, but Thor will save us if we do,” Erik says, which is pretty reasonable for Erik. Darcy can’t argue, really, but also doesn’t *want* to argue so the point is kinda moot anyway.

“Okay,” she says, and flees for the Thor floor while she’s got the chance. There is, slightly upsettingly, still no sign of Bucky, and she has to resist the urge to turn the place over looking for
him.

For one thing, it’s really not necessary.

“J.A.R.V.I.S.?” she asks.

“Yes, Ms. Lewis?” he asks.

“Where’s Bucky? Like, assuming he’s not trying to get private time somewhere or something,” she says. “I don’t wanna, like, impose, I just wanna make sure he’s okay.”

“Sergeant Barnes is in the lower gymnasium,” J.A.R.V.I.S. informs her. “He appears to be examining the state of the equipment.”

“. . . okay,” Darcy says, not really getting it. That means he’s okay, though, right? “Has he eaten lunch yet?”

“No, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says.

“Okay,” Darcy says, then proceeds to make some perhaps slightly larger than necessary sandwiches to leave on the counter for him and asks J.A.R.V.I.S. to tell him they’re there when he’s done with the gymnasium. She doesn’t want to interrupt him just because she’s itchy without seeing him yet today; that’s on her, not him. It’s not like the suite doesn’t smell like him, anyway, and there’s no hint of distress or concern in the most recent traces of his scent. She can’t say Bucky’s pheromones smell happy, or even necessarily content, but at least they’ve been smelling calm.

Considering how calm they’ve been smelling, it’s actually kind of stupid how itchy she’s feeling. What kind of alpha spends well over a week making sure an omega is safe and taken care of and still can’t calm down about it?

Well, the situation is a little messier than usual, so she’s not really being that irrational. Still. She doesn’t want to get all neurotic on Bucky.

The sandwiches are definitely bigger than they need to be, though.

Darcy waits around a little longer than she should, maybe, and then sighs to herself and heads back to the lab before she gets worried pheromones all over everything. Thor’s gone; Jane and Erik are arguing about science, but stop when they see her.

“Back already?” Jane asks.

“He was busy,” Darcy says with a shrug. “ Didn’t wanna interrupt.”

“And you’re fine?” Jane says, eyeing her suspiciously. Darcy holds up her hands.

“I mean, I could be better, but I don’t wanna make him think every time he leaves the suite I’m gonna be a nervous wreck,” she says. She’s not sure he wouldn’t stop leaving the suite if he thought that, which is obviously the opposite of a good thing. He’s already spent enough time in it as it is.


“I’m fine,” Darcy says, but she does make a point of sitting next to Erik as she works. His pheromones aren’t as soothing as they used to be, but she’s been getting used to them. At least she
can get her work done; if Thor was still here she’d probably be fussing over him too much to do anything else.

She does get her work done, eventually, and even manages to do it without too much fretting or distraction involved. J.A.R.V.I.S. would tell her if anything was wrong with Bucky, she’s sure. Or-mostly sure, anyway. He probably wouldn’t mention him running into Steve or anything like that, though.

Darcy is not worrying.

She gets her work done, makes sure Jane and Erik disengage from their work and leave the lab, and heads out after them to follow them up to the Thor floor. Thor’s on the couch, and purrs at Jane when she goes over and gives him a kiss as Erik takes over the armchair. Darcy would stay and make small talk, but, well, the obvious.

When she walks into the suite, the whole place smells delicious and there’s a little table by the door that wasn’t there earlier with a glass of wine sitting on it on a coaster. Darcy stares at it in bemusement for a moment before picking it up and bringing it in with her. The suite continues to smell delicious, and not in the usual pheromone-based way.

She walks into the kitchen and is greeted by the sight of a set table and Bucky in front of the oven in a housedress and one of Thor’s button-downs, his hair pulled back into a bun. He’s bent over, squinting into the oven, and Darcy brutally shoves down her hindbrain’s first three reactions and tries, “Hi?”

“Hi,” Bucky says, still squinting into the oven and only looking away from it to check something on his tablet. Darcy sneaks in just close enough to catch a glimpse of what appears to be a cooking blog and is appropriately mystified.

“Are you making dinner?” she asks, which admittedly he pretty obviously is but she really didn’t expect to come back to.

“I thought I remembered how to roast a chicken,” Bucky says, then shows her the tablet and the recipe pulled up on it. “I was right.”

“Really?” Darcy lights up, even though it’s such a small thing--remembering small things might mean remembering bigger things, at least eventually. “That’s awesome, Jamie!”

“Only if I don’t burn it,” he says, frowning into the oven. Darcy wants to hug him really badly but that might not be the best thing to spring on an ex-brainwashed ex-POW.

“I want to hug you really badly,” she says. “That cool?”

“Um--what?” He straightens up to blink at her and yeah, that’s definitely one of Thor’s shirts, and that is a really cute housedress under it, and she is entirely smitten. “I--yeah. That’s, uh, cool.”

“Awesome,” Darcy says, then loses the battle with her self-restraint and basically throws herself at him, barely managing not to spill her wine in the process. He’s big and warm in her arms and doesn’t really hug her back, but does tilt down into her and press his nose briefly into her hair. She hopes she smells reassuring to him; like someplace safe. To her, he smells like home, which is a lot to put on an omega who’s barely remembering how to roast chicken but still an undeniable fact. She knows better than to say anything about it right now, at least. Maybe someday, but definitely not right now.

She keeps the hug quick, even though she’d rather drag Bucky over to the beanbags in the living
room and pull him into her lap than anything else. He’s a little stiff, and she’s not sure how
comfortable he is with so much contact without any sextime pheromones or deliberate scenting
involved. She’s never seen him deliberately touch anyone but her, and she’s not sure when the last
time he actually did was.

“The chicken smells really good,” she says as she steps back from him, trying not to smile too
helplessly. This makes all the fretting she did today more than worth it, though; Bucky left the
suite alone and did his own thing and remembered how to roast a chicken and let her hug him
today. There’s not much more she could ask for.

“We’ll see,” Bucky says. His face is a little red, which makes her want to kiss him. She takes a sip
of wine instead and tries not to beam too much. Bucky goes back to the oven and she sets her
wineglass down on the table and sits down to watch him. There’s a pot on the stove and from this
angle she can see another pan in the oven with the chicken, but Bucky mostly seems occupied with
staring at the chicken. She’s not gonna question it.

He’s so good. She gets how he can think he’s not, but he really, really is.

Bucky pulls the chicken out of the oven and leaves it on top of the stove as he starts fussing over
whatever’s in the pot, and Darcy watches him fuss and barely keeps herself from rumbling her
satisfaction at him. He just looks so--so pretty. So pretty and so sweet and so not like all the awful
things that HYDRA tried to make him into.

She thinks about Steve, and a stab of guilt goes through her gut. Steve isn’t seeing this. Steve
doesn’t know anything about how Bucky’s doing at all, except the very, very little she’s told him.
Maybe he’s talked to Thor and Natasha, although as far as Darcy knows Natasha and Bucky still
haven’t seen each other. She’s not sure how much Thor would say, either.

It’s strange to think about this while looking at this sweet-looking, sweet-smelling omega standing
in her kitchen and frowning at a pot of who-knows-what like it’s personally offended him. Bucky
doesn’t look like a dangerous threat or a long-lost friend or anything but a normal omega, if maybe
a slightly old-fashioned one.

Bucky dumps the pot into a bowl--it’s rice, it turns out--and pulls the pan out of the oven to bring
over to the table. Asparagus, which is not one of Darcy’s favorite vegetables, but she’d eat ghost
peppers if it was Bucky serving it to her, sooo . . .

Bucky sets the rice and asparagus and chicken all on the table just-so, then sits down next to her
and looks at her expectantly. She’s smart enough to figure out what he’s waiting for, at least, and
serves them both.

“Thanks for cooking, it looks really good,” she says while debating a fourth scoop of rice for
Bucky and finally deciding that yes, definitely the fourth scoop. The fourth scoop is the best idea
she’s had all day.

“Okay,” Bucky says, which she assumes means “you’re welcome” in cryogenically-frozen ex-
assassin.

The food really does look really good, and she takes the first bite because Bucky’s obviously
waiting for her to. She’s not a huge fan of chicken, but it’s moist and well-seasoned and actually
pretty fucking delicious, which she was honestly not expecting after all those terrible eggs and
mediocre bacon sandwiches. She’d just figured it’d take him a few tries to get it right again.

“It’s so good, Jamie,” she tells him enthusiastically, because of course she does, and he turns pink
and focuses on his own food. She wants to ask who taught him to cook and where he got the chicken and a bunch of other things, but she’s also really hungry and, again, the chicken is delicious. Even the damn asparagus tastes good. There’s, like, a cream sauce or something drizzled on it? She’s not actually sure, but it’s great.

Darcy basically inhales dinner, and Bucky eats a little more carefully but still manages to clean his plate inside a New York minute. Darcy offers him another serving of rice and he nods, and she stabs another couple asparagus spears for herself and gives them both more chicken. Between the two of them, they get through almost all of the rice and asparagus and eat the chicken down to the bone in record time. Darcy has definitely overeaten but knowing Bucky’s stomach is full of good, hot food he made himself and let her serve him is a bit more important to her hindbrain. If he was Ian, she’d already be dragging him to the bedroom.

But he’s not, of course, so she’s not.

“See, this is how I know HYDRA is full of idiots, because they had you killing people when you could’ve been feeding them,” she says instead. Bucky looks startled and for a second she thinks shit, that was a step too far, but then he lets out a soft little laugh, shocky and bright. He almost sounds like the heat-drunk omega who’d licked whipped cream off her face all those months ago.

“I don’t think anybody in HYDRA knew how to cook,” he says. “I ate so many shitty MREs.”

“Talk about terrible weapon maintenance,” Darcy says, and Bucky laughs that laugh again, covering his mouth with a hand. “Seriously! What did they think you were gonna do if somebody offered you, like, a taco?!”

“I’ve never had a taco,” Bucky says, smiling at her with heartbreaking softness, and Darcy immediately resolves to get him one the first chance she gets.

“Unbelievable,” she says, shaking her head. “You don’t know what you’re missing, man. We’re gonna fix that, okay?”

“Okay,” Bucky says, still smiling in a way that makes her chest clench up.

They clean up dinner and do the dishes and every now and then bump into or brush past each other in the process. Darcy’s heart beats fast in her chest, so fast she wishes for her music so she could put on something to slow herself down, except at the same time the too-fast rhythm feels good and she wants it even faster; like being just tipsy enough to feel perfect and reaching for another drink so you won’t have to come down just yet.

Bucky makes her feel perfect, she thinks in the middle of scrubbing out the chicken pan, and then feels a little woozy with the thought. That’s--that’s a lot, as a thought.

That is so much, as a thought.

Darcy scrubs very, very hard at the chicken pan and does not think about that thought anymore. Not right now, anyway. That’s a later thought, for when Bucky’s not right here, this close to her personal space and smelling so good and sweet and bred. That is--that’s a later thought.

They go to sleep and Darcy dreams of holding hands again and wakes up to another bacon sandwich. She wakes up feeling light and bright, still thinking about dinner and Bucky’s laugh and just how it’d all made her feel. Too much, too fast, too good.

He smells so good in their bed.
Darcy gets dressed and leaves oatmeal by the nesting closet and goes to work. It feels good and easy and right, and part of her feels bad about that because part of her is thinking about Steve, about mistakes she’s made, about things she can never ever possibly fix, but the rest of her is thinking about how good dinner tasted last night and that laugh.

It’s a lot to be thinking about.

Lab time goes just like yesterday, except she doesn’t feel like climbing the walls this time, and she manages to get all her work done and keep Jane and Erik fed and watered and taking an at least semi-appropriate amount of breaks, and even takes a few herself. It’s good, having a break.

Thor shows up a little bit after lunch and she doesn’t need to immediately start petting him, which is a great improvement in her opinion. Jane and Erik pay him very brief attention, but the siren call of Science!! distracts them pretty quickly. Darcy takes a break from transcribing, because at least someone who’s not science-crazy is available to talk to for a while.

“How’s it going, dude?” she asks, holding her hand up for a fist-bump. Thor bumps back with a reasonable amount of strength, which is a definite improvement on the first few times they tried that move.

“Quite well, my friend,” he says. “Though my Jane seems to be unavailable for the moment.”

“Yeah, sorry, you know how the science-y ones get,” Darcy says.

“I count myself fortunate that Stark and Banner have not yet become involved,” Thor says wryly, and Darcy winces at the thought. Every time that happens is always the worst. Well, except when it saves the world, obviously, but like, in general.

“Don’t invoke ‘em, we’ll never get out of here,” she says with a mock shudder. “I’ve gotta actually go home at night these days, you know.”

“Do you?” Thor asks curiously, and Darcy pauses. Well, actually--

“I guess not, actually,” she says. “But maybe? We haven’t really talked about it, beyond telling each other if we’re gonna leave the tower. We should probably talk about it, note to self.”

“Certainly it is best to be clear,” Thor agrees, nodding. “Bucky seems to prefer it, and I must admit I do as well. It is always pleasant to speak with someone so frank.”

“Is he?” Darcy asks. “I keep wondering how much he wants other people to actually know about what’s going on with him.”

“I could not say,” Thor replies with a shrug, folding his arms across his chest and leaning back against the doormframe. “He seems untroubled by my own questions when they arise, though he is not always certain of the answers.”

“Yeah.” Darcy frowns to herself, mulling it over. It’s good if Bucky feels comfortable with other people, although there is a selfish part of her that wants to be the one he’s most comfortable with. The actual ideal would be that he was most comfortable with Steve, though.

It’d be for the best, if he were.

“I want him to be okay,” she says eventually, and Thor shrugs again.

“A man who desires nothing but safety should be given it, I think,” he says. “Whether or not he
will be ‘okay’ past that, I am afraid, is not for us to say."

“No, I guess not,” Darcy sighs, dropping her head back against the wall. Steve is just--god, the way he’d smelled. But she made her choice, and she’s sticking to it. There’s a reason she still hasn’t called her parents either, even though the longer she waits the harder she knows it’s gonna be.

She wonders what Bucky thinks of Steve; if he’s resolved the friend he remembers with the friend he doesn’t, or if he was actually talking about someone else altogether. If he’s still scared of Steve seeing he’s not who he thought he was.

Probably. It hasn’t been that long, despite how long it feels.

She wonders if it’s felt this long to Bucky.

Jane and Erik do a reasonable amount of science and Darcy checks the time and then enlists Thor to break up the nerd party before they end up on a tangent doing unreasonable amounts of science. He mostly just has to bat his eyes a bit at Jane, which unsurprisingly is a lot more effective than Darcy’s usual approach and way more efficient. Flirty omegas are one of the most convincing forces in the known universe.

They all head up to the Thor floor together, Jane with an arm around Thor’s waist, Erik leading the way as he rambles on about something that may make no sense because science and may make no sense because Erik, and Darcy making sure Jane and Erik aren’t gonna try to sneak back to the lab for “just one more thing”. She’s planning to go all the way back to the common room with them, except halfway there--

“Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says, and Darcy automatically looks up at the ceiling. “I have informed Captain Rogers you are near his current location. He would like to speak with you.”

“Uh--okay?” Darcy manages, though it’s less an agreement than an expression of confusion. Steve wants to talk to her? She was under the impression Steve wanted anything but to talk to her.


“Darcy?” Jane asks, and Darcy waves the others on, feeling a little freaked out but . . . but yeah. Is this a good idea? Admittedly they can’t avoid each other forever, and he probably wants to know how Bucky’s doing. Except they could, probably, and he might not want to know that from her.

What’s she gonna do, though? Say no?

Yeah, as if.

Jane squeezes her shoulder and Thor smiles at her and Erik--well, Erik’s already halfway down the hall and doesn’t seem to have noticed the rest of them have stopped, but Erik. Jane and Thor go to catch up with him and Darcy waits, because J.A.R.V.I.S. hasn’t told her where to go.

That’s because Steve is coming to her, she finds out pretty quickly.

“Darcy,” he says as he appears at the opposite end of the hall, and Darcy tries not to wince. She waves, for lack of a better idea.

“Hey, Steve,” she says as he approaches her. “Everything, um . . . okay?”

“It’s fine,” he says. “I wanted to ask you a favor.”
“Yeah?” Darcy manages. He’s in close enough for her to see how tired he looks, although she could smell it on him the whole way down the hall anyway. What does it take to make a super-soldier look tired?

She knows, obviously.

“Before, when we came back from Perth . . .” He hesitates, and she doesn’t know what to say.

“Steve, I’ll do literally anything that won’t hurt Bucky,” she says, erring on the side of truth. “What do you need?”

“Just--this, please,” he says, then leans in and lays his hands on her shoulders. She’s so startled by the contact she doesn’t even react, but it makes her hyper-aware of his apple-sweet scent and just how close in it is. She should not be thinking about just how pretty Steve Rogers is even this tired and sad, but she’s still thinking it. “I don’t know how much it’ll matter, but . . .”

“But?” she asks, and he leans in and curls down around her, and the next thing she knows she’s got a super-soldier’s big warm hands sliding up her neck. Darcy freezes, not sure if it’s out of shock or the fear that she’ll dislodge him, and he leans in just enough to let out a quiet sigh against her scent glands.

Or--breathes in, maybe.

He’s scenting her. She doesn’t know what to think. He only keeps touching her for a moment, though, then lets go and steps back.

“Sorry for the trouble,” he says quietly.

“Sure,” Darcy says, operating on autopilot more than anything else and very aware of the apple-pie pheromones all over her now. There’s nothing claiming or clingy about the scent, but it’s undeniably there: apple pie all mixed up with cinnamon rolls. She thinks, briefly, how well those scents go together, and how jarring a contrast her own pheromones must make to them--spicy and burning and nothing sweet at all. She thinks how much Steve must miss Bucky, how badly he must want to see him, and how he hasn’t pushed or insisted or demanded anything, not even from her.

It’s hard to think too much past that apple-cinnamon scent, though.

“Thank you,” Steve says, and leaves.

Darcy . . . Darcy just lets him, because she doesn’t know what else to do.

“J.A.R.V.I.S.?” she asks a long moment after Steve’s long gone, tipping her head back to look at the ceiling.

“Yes, Ms. Lewis?” he asks.

“Is Bucky in our suite?” she asks.

“Yes, Ms. Lewis,” he says.

“Okay,” she says, and then she heads for it, because what else would she do? She could go downstairs and take a decontamination shower in the lab, but that’d be an asshole move. “Tell him I saw Steve, would you?”

“Of course,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says easily, and Darcy walks the rest of the way to their floor. Erik’s in
the common room, munching on something and watching TV, and there’s no sign of Jane and Thor but the air smells mead-sweet, so she’s thinking it’s a safe bet they’re denning down for the evening, or at least for now. There’s no sign of Bucky, but when is he ever out in the common areas, anyway?

Is he ever out in the common areas, she wonders. She hasn’t thought to ask. She doesn’t even know if he knows what they’re for.

It might not be a bad idea to bring him out here, come to think of it.

Darcy opens the door of the family suite and calls in: “Jamie?”

Bucky steps out of the kitchen in sweatpants and one of Thor’s shirts. There is, Darcy notices belatedly, a glass of wine by the door again.

“I kinda ran into--” she starts as she closes the door behind her, and then suddenly her back hits the door because Bucky is all up in her space and shoving his nose into her neck and oh, wow, wow her hindbrain could do a lot with this--

“You smell like him,” Bucky mutters against her scent glands. Darcy beats her libido into submission and does her damnedest not to sink her teeth into him.

“He scented me,” she says. “I think, uh--I’m pretty sure--”

“He was talking to me,” Bucky says tonelessly.

“Um--yeah, that’s probably safe to say,” Darcy says, keeping her eyes fixed on the ceiling and concentrating very, very hard on keeping her teeth in her mouth. “Not like he’s made a habit of going around scenting me otherwise. Obviously.” Barring incidents like certain heat-bond hangovers, that is, but she doesn’t really want to get into that one right now. It was definitely extenuating circumstances, either way.

“He smells different,” Bucky says quietly.

“From--DC?” Darcy hazards. “Or before?”

“I don’t know about before,” Bucky murmurs, pressing in just a little bit closer against her for a moment; rubbing his nose into her neck. Darcy holds her breath. “But he smells different now.”

“Well--he has heat partners now?” Darcy says, feeling a little dizzy. It is not her fault, okay, that’s two gorgeous and hurt omegas cuddled up in her personal space in the past ten minutes. She’d like to meet the alpha who wouldn’t be affected--except, again, for how she really would not. “Maybe that’s it?”

Bucky’s nose trails up her neck, and he inhales. Darcy feels weak in the knees and also like pinning him to the floor and not letting him back up until he forgets what feeling bad feels like.

“No,” he says after a moment. “I know what Natalia smells like.”

“Okay,” Darcy says, really wanting to ask why it’s specifically Natasha’s scent he knows. “Maybe you’re smelling Sam, though?”

“Sam,” Bucky repeats slowly. “Is Sam an authorized handler?”

“If you want him to be,” Darcy says. “I can ask him.”
“Mm.” Bucky pushes his face into her hair. Darcy assumes that’s a “no”, or at least a “not right now”. She doesn’t push it, but she does put a hand on the back of his head. Not his neck—she really doesn’t trust herself not to dig her nails in, if she puts a hand on his neck—but just above, so it’s close. Bucky doesn’t relax, exactly, but does lean into her a little more and breathe in again.

Super-soldiers are heavy, for the record.

Darcy will literally stand here until her knees give out, if that’s what it takes.

“Okay,” she says, and Bucky doesn’t say anything at all.
Life progresses as normal, and by “normal” Darcy means “the new normal”. She lives in the family suite with Bucky and Bucky lives in the family suite with her, and they don’t talk about Steve. Sometimes they have dinner with Jane and Erik and Thor, and sometimes they have dinner with each other, and sometimes Bucky won’t leave the closet all day and Darcy just leaves dinner on the nightstand for him and hopes really, really hard that he’s okay. They write some more rules, and Bucky never goes anywhere without his tablet.

He does go places. He and Thor bring back donuts once; he and Natasha disappear for twelve hours once. He goes to see Tony and Bruce for checkups. One day Darcy runs late at work and he shows up outside the lab, looking worried. He doesn’t come in, but her entire heart melts like butter at the sight of him waiting for her.

It’s amazing how easy it is to get used to some things, she thinks. Because she could definitely, definitely get used to things like Bucky Barnes in the other half of her bed more nights than not and coming to pick her up from work when he thinks she’s been gone too long.

She is, however, still not used to the soft curve of his stomach or the way he looks in a pretty dress or the way he smells, all cinnamon-sugar pheromones and vanilla soap.

But life progresses, and Darcy gets used to more and more things, and Bucky’s bookmark in his pregnancy book moves to the fifth month. It hasn’t been a full month, not yet--just two or three weeks--but it’s getting closer every day.

Darcy barely even remembers what it felt like being in a suite all by herself.

She spends a lot of time thinking about Steve, though. There’s only so much of that she can do, but . . .

But.

Darcy comes home to their suite after another day of taking notes and wrangling scientists and hears J.A.R.V.I.S. talking. She opens her mouth on autopilot to respond, halfway through the act of taking off her shoes, and then realizes--

J.A.R.V.I.S. isn’t talking to her. J.A.R.V.I.S. is talking to Bucky. He’s in the living room, looking at the ceiling, same way Darcy always does herself. She fixates a little too much on noticing that, maybe.

“Captain Rogers arranged it, should you express the desire,” J.A.R.V.I.S. is saying. “Would you like a representative sample?”

“. . . okay,” Bucky says. Music starts to play, something kind of eighties-sounding, and Bucky keeps staring at the ceiling for a long moment, then closes his eyes and just--

Listens, as far as Darcy can tell.

Well. She’s not fucking interrupting, either way. She takes the wine glass that Bucky leaves her every night and--okay, she’s not sneaking into the kitchen, obviously, because there’s no way Bucky doesn’t know she’s here, but she at least edges into the kitchen very quietly. And only stubs a toe, like, twice.
Dinner’s in the oven, like has become the usual, and when she peeks in there’s a pot roast big enough to feed Thor cooking, which may mean Thor’s coming over for dinner and may just mean Bucky’s packing her pot roast sandwiches for lunch tomorrow.

Oh, yeah, because that’s a thing now: Bucky is packing her lunches. Darcy has yet to fully process this fact, mostly because her hindbrain shorts out in glee every time she tries to. At this rate she might just develop a taste for Yubari melon juice, although left to her own devices she sneaks a vanilla Coke out of the back of the fridge to guzzle.

There’s something bubbling away on the stove, presumably a side dish--and nope, Darcy realizes as she checks; it’s gravy. She stirs it, because that seems like the thing to do. There’s bread on the table that she suspects Bucky baked himself but has yet to catch him in the process of making, and another covered pan on the stove--brussels sprouts, when she checks. She is not a fan, but there’s bacon in there so it can’t be all bad, she figures.

Hopes, anyway, because her dumbass hindbrain’s gonna have her eating as much of it as she can swallow. She’s gained five pounds since Bucky started cooking--as usual, mostly in her bra. Turns out it is very hard to say no to seconds when it’s a gorgeous omega with a knack for cooking asking you if you want them.

Darcy sneaks a taste of the gravy, which as expected is goddamn delicious, then sneaks a look back towards the living room. Bucky hasn’t moved, so she stirs the gravy again and then tries to check the oven timer before remembering for the umpteenth time that Bucky doesn’t use it. She suspects he doesn’t like the sound it makes, which, to be fair, is pretty jarring and unpleasant. Maybe she could get Tony to change it. He’d bitch about it, probably, but he’d also probably do it.

The pot roast looks okay, anyway--Bucky has burned exactly two things since he started making dinner, and those were both because Erik was having an episode in their living room and everybody was understandably distracted. She can’t say a playlist from Steve isn’t gonna be just as distracting, but still, nothing’s on fire or charred so it’s probably fine. She’s pretty sure.

. . . the oven’s just on “warm”, she realizes belatedly.

She is not a cook, okay? It’s definitely for both their bests than Bucky took up that particular chore.

Another sneaky taste of gravy later, Bucky comes into the kitchen, his arrival heralded by the kitchen speakers switching on and playing the first strings of a power ballad. It’s sort of amazing, to be honest.

“Please tell me that entrance was on purpose,” she says.

“I plead the fifth, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says as Bucky frowns in confusion. “I merely wanted to be certain Sergeant Barnes could hear the music clearly.”

“I love you too, J.A.R.V.I.S.,” Darcy says, and Bucky’s frown turns into a weird, undefinable expression. Darcy would put more into trying to read it, since usually Bucky is very easy to read, but then the gravy nearly bubbles over and Bucky has to rescue it and she forgets all about that strange expression in favor of grabbing the gravy boat for him. “Are we doing company tonight, is that why all the food?”

“Yes,” Bucky says, carefully pouring the gravy into the boat. “They’ll be here soon.”

“Cool,” Darcy says, then goes to finish setting the table. Bucky only got partway through, it looks like; there’s only four places out. Before she can, though, there’s a knock at the door. “Come in!”
she yells, because at this point she does not care enough to bother with proper manners for Jane and Thor and--

The door opens, and the entire suite suddenly smells sharp and clear and cold.

Oh, Darcy thinks, blinking stupidly at Natasha, who has a casually disaffected expression and Clint on her arm. Clint waves.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey,” Darcy echoes, strongly resisting the urge to go over and bury her face in his nice soothing beta scent until Natasha stops sprouting metaphorical icicles. “Um?”

“Dinner’s ready,” Bucky says, setting the pot roast on the table with superhumanly-perfect timing. He looks so domestic she could knot, which is really not a thought she wants to be thinking right now.

“I like the music,” Natasha says, still all casual-disaffected as she steps into the suite. Darcy has to resist the urge to let her hackles rise--she said come in. Admittedly she’d thought she was saying it to a different alpha at the time, but still. And it’s Natasha, not a threat. The worst thing Natasha could do was turn out to be Bucky’s type, which she wouldn’t even blame her for. Being Bucky’s type is a goal to be strived for.

It is really not the time to be thinking things like that.

“The captain gave it to me,” Bucky says neutrally as he sets out the rest of the food.

“Doesn’t sound like his taste,” Clint says.

“It’s for me,” Bucky says, giving him a strange look. “Why would it be his taste?”

“. . . point,” Clint says, mouth quirking up crookedly. “Food smells good.”

“I cooked it right,” Bucky says, still wearing that strange look, like he doesn’t understand Clint’s making polite, compliment-y small talk. Which, uh, he maybe does not. Clint seems to get this, though, and grins.

“Awesome,” he says. “Then I promise to eat it right.”

Natasha rolls her eyes. Bucky frowns briefly, then nods and moves to sit down. Darcy pulls his chair out for him without even thinking about it, which is definitely a hindbrain thing and definitely the fault of Natasha’s pheromones. Whoops.

Bucky sits in it without giving her a look like he thinks she’s a crazy person, though; he actually looks up at her like he’s--pleased? Maybe? Is that pleased, or does her stupid idiot hindbrain just want her to think that’s pleased?

Either way, they all sit down. Natasha takes the seat across from Bucky, which Darcy thinks is a mercy but isn’t actually sure on. Clint sits across from her and flashes her a quick grin across the table, which is mollifying but still not quite distracting enough. Natasha’s pheromones are really something, okay?

Darcy’s feeling very torn right now. On the one hand, she wants to kiss Bucky all over his face for taking the initiative to invite somebody new to dinner; on the other, Natasha’s pheromones. Because they sure are a lot of pheromones. Like, seriously, is her rut due? Because it’s a lot.
Darcy, admittedly, might be feeling a little hypersensitive at the moment.

Natasha and Clint have filled their plates, but Bucky’s looking at her, which reminds her that she always serves them both. That’s not something she’s usually self-conscious about, but now suddenly really is. Again: Natasha. Pheromones.

Buuuut it’s that or leave Bucky’s plate empty so really, it’s not that hard when it comes down to it. She probably over-serves him if anything. Okay, almost definitely. But Bucky pretty much always gets at least to thirds so she’s probably okay on that.

Clint, god bless him, strikes up a conversation. Darcy could not say what said conversation is about, other than that it amuses Natasha and mystifies Bucky, but at least it’s a conversation and at least it gives her time to get her big girl pants on and start acting like a normal alpha host and not a fucking territorial weirdo. She is not a fucking territorial weirdo, for one thing; she’s always been really good with other alphas. Admittedly other alphas have occasionally been not good with her, but that’s on them. You kind of have to be good with other alphas when your pheromones are super-aggressive and you’re super-pocket-sized.

It occurs to her, briefly, that Natasha’s pheromones being so strong around her might have something to do with hers being strong, but that’s ridiculous.

. . . admittedly, she does very rarely smell Natasha’s pheromones when they’re not in the same room.

Huh, Darcy thinks, then shakes her head and decides that no, she’s just crazy, and dismisses the thought in favor of sneaking more pot roast onto Bucky’s plate. Protein is probably good for pups. She really needs to do some more prenatal reading, come to think of it; mostly she’s just gotten little bits and pieces from Bruce, who she is almost definitely sure is not that kind of doctor, and half-remembered stuff from her mom being pregnant back in the day. It is not a super-reliable well to be drawing from. Like, at all.

“So how’s being knocked up going?” Clint asks out of nowhere around a mostly-full mouth. Darcy choke on her pot roast. Bucky tilts his head.

“I’m not dead,” he says.

“Cool,” Clint says, taking a drink. “Seen Steve yet?”

“He doesn’t want to see me,” Bucky says. Clint’s eyebrows go up.

“Buddy, we went to Australia trying to see you,” he says.

“No.” Bucky shakes his head. “He wouldn’t want to if he knew better. I’m not that person.”

Clint and Natasha both glance at Darcy, who shrugs helplessly and barely resists the urge to write Steve Rogers is right about me in the rules. It probably wouldn’t work, tempting as it is.

“He’ll figure it out sooner or later,” Bucky says.

God it’s tempting.

“I think he’d like to see you anyway, but, you know, that’s just me,” Darcy says instead. “Seconds?”

Dinner progresses normally, by which she means Bucky only says two or three fucked up things
and Clint and Natasha say about the same amount. Darcy isn’t sure if she should be trying to balance them out or negate them. Maybe a little of column A, a little of column B?

Still, things go fairly smoothly and she and Natasha don’t have a territorial face-off over the brussels sprouts and no one calls her a monster for how she’s been treating either Bucky or Steve and HYDRA doesn’t show up guns blazing, so really, no complaints on Darcy’s end, she’s all for how things are going. She washes the dishes while Bucky makes coffee thick as tar and sets out a plate of pastries of unknown origin and Clint makes enough small talk for everyone, god bless betas. Nothing of note really happens, which in itself is pretty notable.

Darcy is definitely not complaining.

Clint comes into the kitchen, sipping his coffee; Darcy catches a glimpse of Bucky and Natasha past him in the living room, leaned in close and murmuring to each other, and reacts totally rationally and doesn’t nearly stab herself with a fork or anything.

“You’re pretty good at this, Lewis,” Clint says. Darcy stares at him. She’d laugh, but she’s a little too shocked to manage it.

“You’re kidding, right?” she says. “I’m barely pulling this off.”

“You’re pulling it off, though,” he says with a shrug.

“That’s not good enough,” she says.

“See?” He points at her. “Doing pretty good. A lot of people’d be happy just to be keeping their heads above water, assuming they’d even have made it this far to begin with.”

“Dude, I’m barely managing better than basic human decency here,” Darcy says, glancing towards the living room again to make sure Bucky’s distracted. She doesn’t want to give him the wrong idea. “I’m pretty sure he’s still expecting us to kick him out. Which, believe me, I have gone to great lengths to avoid him expecting.”

“Considering he’s got seventy years of brainwashing and one of doing god knows what . . .”

“Following Steve and Sam,” Darcy fills in automatically, and Clint raises his eyebrows at her.

“Yes.” Darcy frowns at him, not understanding the point of the question. Clint claps a hand down on her shoulder, taking another swig of coffee.

“He tell you that?” he asks.

“Yes.” Darcy frowns at him, not understanding the point of the question. Clint claps a hand down on her shoulder, taking another swig of coffee.

“Yeah, you’re doing fine,” he says easily. “Hey, you got anymore of those pastries? Nat and the sarge already cleaned the plate.”

“No idea,” Darcy says, and proceeds to rifle through the kitchen. She doesn’t find any more pastries, but Clint seems satisfied with the chocolate cookies she turns up instead. She gives him the whole box, because her hindbrain is definitely being a hindbrain today. He puts a not-insignificant dent in it, probably because as much food as Bucky made, he and Natasha both went back for thirds before Darcy and Clint were even at seconds.

Understandably, superheroes and the genetically-enhanced all have serious appetites, to say nothing of pregnant people. Darcy just has an appetite period, so it’s definitely for the best she doesn’t fall under any of those categories. Even Tony Stark’s wallet probably notices the tower’s grocery bill; it doesn’t need help. Especially since it’s about to have who knows how many growing pups added
to it.

... actually, Tony and Bruce probably do know how many. They must’ve done ultrasounds on Bucky by now, and the pups should be decently developed, right? So ... he probably knows too, then. She wonders why he hasn’t mentioned it. She knows he’s not a big fan of the checkups, but that at least seems like something worth talking about.

Then again, it’s not like she’s asked.

She resists the urge to ask immediately, though only barely, and they all get through coffee and what’s left of the cookies like normal people, which is super-weird. These days the more normal things are, the more Darcy’s expecting an alien invasion.

Admittedly, alien invasions are getting pretty normal themselves.

“Thanks for having us,” Clint says, giving them a little wave as he and Natasha get ready to leave. Bucky looks mystified again--Clint apparently just has that effect on him--but mimics the wave in return.

“Sure,” he says. Natasha takes his hand and drops a kiss on the back of it, which Darcy very barely manages to contain her pheromones over. The temptation to do the same thing to Clint is ridiculous, but definitely there. Gotta love those alpha instincts.

“Any time. Seriously, any time, we can’t eat everything in that fridge ourselves and Tony keeps sending up more groceries. Come over whenever and take doggie bags when you go,” she says instead of doing anything ridiculous or territorial, and Natasha puts on a smile that may or may not be genuine. There’s no actual humor in it, but Darcy’s not sure if that makes it more likely to be real or less.

“Sounds like Tony, yes,” Natasha says, then opens the fridge and takes a can of juice out of it. Bucky stops her and replaces it with a different can, which is when Darcy realizes she grabbed Yubari melon juice first and oh god why is he so cute, how is he so cute. Goddammit, she is never going to get to drink anything else again.

Natasha looks curious, but doesn’t ask, and passes the replacement can to Clint before reaching for another, sharing a quick look with Bucky to check before taking it.

“I mean, if you insist,” Clint says with a chuckle, peeking at the label of his can. “Ooo. Strawberry-kiwi.”

“There’s a lot of groceries,” Darcy says feelingly, then finally gives up and digs out another box of cookies to shove on him. It was that or all the leftovers in the fridge, so really, she’s coming out ahead here. Maybe she should invite Tony over for dinner one of these days, actually, so he can see just how much food they really don’t need.

... admittedly, probably Bucky’s appetite won’t prove that. So okay, not her best plan.

They see Natasha and Clint out and Darcy only sneaks a couple protein bars into Clint’s jacket on the way, though it probably doesn’t count as sneaking since everyone in the room full of ex-assassins obviously knows she’s doing it. Hopefully he likes peanut butter cashew.

The door swings shut, taking all but the subtlest lingering traces of Natasha’s cold clear scent and Clint’s calm and reassuring one with them, and Darcy lets out her breath.

“That was nice,” she hazards. She thinks it was, anyway.
“You smell good,” Bucky says, planting his nose in her shoulder. Darcy, as a tough and confident alpha, freezes like a baby deer. J.A.R.V.I.S. is still playing music, and Bucky is big and warm and soft against her.

“Thanks?” she manages after a moment. Bucky lets out a quiet little sigh, then steps back and gives her one of those fucking looks she never knows what to do with: too open and too intense and much, much too pretty.

“I’ll finish cleaning up,” he says. She’d protest, but she’s still a little dumbstruck from that look.

So Bucky finishes cleaning up, and Darcy goes into the living room and sits down and tries to figure out if that went well or not. She doesn’t think it went badly, at least. “Badly” would probably have involved more knives. Possibly a gun or three. She wonders how many weapons Bucky’s hidden in the apartment, because he never seems to have any on him but never seems to feel safe either, so he must have, right?

Maybe she’s just assuming. She told him he didn’t have to fight here. Maybe he took that to heart.

She hopes he did.

Well--except for the part where he doesn’t seem to feel safe, she means. She’d really, really rather he did.

Bucky comes into the room and sits down on the other end of the couch, tucking his bare feet up under himself. He looks so pretty, Darcy thinks, trying not to stare. He really looks pregnant now, not just heavier.

“Did Tony and Bruce do an ultrasound yet?” she asks. He looks surprised by the question, which--fair, really, she’s kind of been avoiding the topic. She’s been avoiding it because she thought he wouldn’t wanna talk about it, though, not because she doesn’t want to know. And she really, really wants to know.

“Yes,” he says. “Two. They argued about the first one.”

Darcy waits for a moment, then realizes she’s expecting him to pick up on subtle “tell me more” signals when he still doesn’t even always understand explicit signals. Also not her greatest plan.

“Everything’s okay?” she asks carefully. She’s pretty sure someone would’ve told her by now if it wasn’t, but it’s still her automatic first question. Bucky nods, shifting a little bit against the sofa and settling in more comfortably. She wishes he were sitting closer, but that’s what she gets for putting her feet on the cushions, she thinks.

“Everything’s progressing normally,” he says.

“Do they, um, know anything about them?” she asks. “I mean, aside from that things are going okay so far.”

She’s so, so glad things are going okay so far. It’s hard to wrap her head around the pups as more than a vague concept of future responsibility, but Bucky? Bucky is right here, right now, and has gone through more than enough. After everything else, she’s really hoping the pregnancy at least goes smoothly for him.

“Like what?” Bucky says, frowning faintly at her.

“Like . . . how many? What they are?” Darcy says, biting her lip. It’s pretty hard to tell some of the
sexes apart without scent to go on, when it’s pups, but they could at least get some possibilities.
“Stuff like that.”

“Oh.” Bucky frowns a little again, then shrugs awkwardly. “They don’t know about the sexes yet. They’re doing another one in a month. They said they might be able to guess then.”

“How many?” Darcy asks again, trying not to frown too. It’s--kind of worrying that he skipped over that part, though she’s not sure how the number could be that worrying. Even if it’s a larger litter, it’s not like it’s gonna be--

“Four,” Bucky says after a moment, shifting uncomfortably. Darcy pictures the responsibility of raising four pups all at once and suddenly feels a little faint.

Okay, she lied. A big litter is intimidating. She’d really been hoping for just two or three. Four is... four. One more pup shouldn’t make such a difference, but it really, really does.

“Oh,” she says, still feeling kind of faint. She’s from a litter of four. She’s seen what litters of four are like. “That’s cool. We can handle that.”

God, she really hopes they can handle that.

“I kind of already figured it was gonna be four,” Bucky says, shifting restlessly again. “Since we’re both from big litters, and I’m showing a lot.”

“Yeah, good point. We’re lucky we didn’t have, like, six,” Darcy says with a wince. She might’ve had a couple freaky dreams along those lines. Litters that big are really rare, though, thankfully. That’d be dangerous for Bucky to carry, for one thing. Well--probably. Who knows, with supersoldiers. But even four’s a lot. Her mom was pretty grateful her second litter was only three, she definitely remembers that.

“I think I’d have thrown up,” Bucky says, looking nauseous at the thought.

“Yeah, would not have blamed you,” Darcy says. “Four’s not so bad. Though, uh, we’re super lucky Tony’s putting us up now, like, we are so much luckier than I even knew. I need to get him a really good birthday present this year. Which, hah, good fucking luck, me.”

“They’re going to be expensive,” Bucky says.

“Dude, the Avengers are expensive,” Darcy says. “Pups are not so much a thing compared to that.”

Well, at least not from Tony’s point of view, hopefully. From her point of view: grad student. Enough said.

“I’m not an Avenger,” Bucky says.

“Me neither, but between Thor and Steve, I’m pretty sure you’re covered,” Darcy says. And Natasha, maybe? Although she’s not sure what to think about Natasha yet. “I mean, worst comes to worst, I could always ask Thor if he’ll let us crash in Asgard for a while.”

“Asgard,” Bucky repeats, frowning faintly. “Where’s that?”

“. . . oh, dude, I am about to blow your mind,” Darcy says delightedly, then runs for her tablet. There’s a slideshow she made to explain what the hell happened in New Mexico to her advisor, and has since updated a few times. She kind of had to, it’s gotten put to a lot of use the past couple years.
She sets it up and hits play, holding it up in front of herself as her recorded voice starts rambling about the Bifrost. Bucky looks increasingly baffled as it goes on, his eyebrows rising higher and higher with each new slide, and Darcy can’t help grinning at him.

“Pretty cool, right?” she asks.

“I thought the papers were full of shit,” Bucky says disbelievingly.

“Well, to be fair, they frequently are,” Darcy says. “Like, you would not believe some of the stuff they’ve come up with, except apparently you’ve read them so probably you would. Did you hear about London?”

“They said he was fighting evil elves,” Bucky says doubtfully.

“Yeah, that’s a thing,” Darcy confirms with a nod.

“Fucking unbelievable,” Bucky mutters, shaking his head. “So, the psychic aliens in New York and the nuclear bomb and, what, Loki . . .?”

“All real,” Darcy says. “Also a real dick in Loki’s case, but he’s dead now so we mostly avoid saying that. Thor’s still pretty weird about it. Did you know they’re, like, over a thousand years old?”

“Jesus,” Bucky says.

“Uh-huh.” Darcy wags her eyebrows at him. “You’re what, ninety-seven? Ninety-eight? Basically a pup, is what I’m saying, and you are still the least pup of any of us compared to Thor.”

“Jesus,” Bucky says again.

“It’s awesome, right?” Darcy asks, grinning at him again.

“. . . kinda, yeah,” Bucky muses, then reaches over and hits replay on the slide show. He seems fascinated, and Darcy preens and answers all his questions, or at least all his questions she can answer. Some of them are more Jane or Thor’s wheelhouses. It’s still kind of a great conversation, in no small part because it’s not directly related to anything going to shit or making rules about day-to-day activities Bucky’s forgotten how to do. And, well, a little bit because she gets to show off. But just a little bit.

It’s definitely an improvement on a lot of conversations they’ve had.

“And then Ian hit them with a car, because science,” she finishes. “Or magic, but same difference, you know?”

“Right,” Bucky says, blinking slowly. “Your intern.”

“Well, ex-intern. And, like, ex in general,” Darcy says. “He stayed in London. We Skype him in sometimes but it’s not really the same, y’know?”

“Sure,” Bucky says, though he’s frowning. In retrospect, he may not know what Skype is. “Ex in general?”

“Oh, like--ex-datemate?” Darcy supplies. “We were both hitting that for a while. But again, London and stuff. We’re still really good friends, long-distance just isn’t our thing.”

“Right,” Bucky says.
“Right,” she confirms, thinking briefly of Ian’s melty-chocolate marshmallow pheromones. She is just really into omegas who smell like dessert, apparently. Not that she wasn’t also into Johnny’s hothouse flowers, just she’s really into the dessert case.

. . . she does not think about Steve Rogers’ pheromones’ place in a dessert case. At all.

Bucky’s quiet for a long moment, then looks towards the bedroom.

“I’m tired,” he says. “I think I’m gonna go lay down.”

“Oh--okay,” Darcy says, a little surprised. Then again, it is getting kinda late. She watches him go, but doesn’t really feel like sleeping herself; she’s still keyed up and distracted. Maybe she’ll re-scent the apartment before she goes to bed herself, that’ll probably help.

One very thorough re-scenting later, she’s flipping up the couch cushions in pursuit of more places to scent, and definitely not feeling any less keyed up or distracted. Hnnn. She really is good with other alphas, usually. She definitely never re-scents the living room after Jane comes over, much less the kitchen and front door. Like, that’s very territorial behavior for her. That’s just very territorial behavior in general, in fact.

Still, sometimes arguing with the hindbrain isn’t worth it, so she does it and then fluffs all the pillows absentmindedly, wondering if Bucky’s asleep yet and just where he is sleeping. Usually it’s the bed, but usually isn’t always. Most pregnant omegas eventually move into their nests and Bucky built his pretty early, he’s probably going to move in early too. At least, it makes sense that he would.

Then again, a lot of things Bucky does only make sense through the lens of trauma and despair, so who knows what he’s going to do.

Darcy fluffs the pillows a little more aggressively and seriously considers taking them to bed with her. Bucky deserves all the soft and comfortable things. She should pick up more truffles, too, now that she’s thinking of it. Maybe some more of those lobster tail pastries, too? He seemed to like those.

Jesus, you’d think he was going into heat, the way her hindbrain gets.

Darcy ends up spending so much time fussing over re-scenting the suite that she passes out on the couch instead of in bed, and she wakes up to a bacon sandwich on the floor next to her head and the gentle sound of running water and clinking dishes in the kitchen. She wolfs down the sandwich--she is out and out starving, which is what she gets for sleeping in--and scrambles around the suite getting ready.

“Sorry sorry sorry,” she says as she dashes past Bucky, making him the fastest bowl of oatmeal of her life and collecting all the little necessities she never remembers to get ready the night before. Jane’s not really a stickler for time, but Jane will absolutely use her being late as an excuse for them all to stay late, which: no. Darcy is determined to keep them all on the sane, no-immediate-peril-to-the-world schedule she’s had them keeping since London. Well--mostly keeping. She is under no illusions that either Jane or Erik willingly left the lab for more than an hour at any point while she was settling Bucky in, aside from to check in on her. “Sorry,” she says one more time, and Bucky just patiently hands over her lunch and she pops up on her toes to give him a quick peck in thanks, then bolts out the door.

Then she realizes she just kissed Bucky and nearly has a freakout in the elevator. Oh god, did that actually happen? Was that actually a thing she just did? He didn’t freak out or pheromone bomb
her, so maybe not?

No, she definitely did, she admits to herself, raising her fingers to her tingling lips.

Shit.

She gets to work nearly on time and manages to bully Jane and Erik into drinking protein shakes with minimal fuss and get to her usual pile of transcription and organization, still slightly behind from all the time she spent helping Bucky settle in but at least not unmanageably so. They’ve got a while before Jane actually needs all this stuff nice and neat, so she’s got time. She still does her damnedest to catch up, but only until noon, at which point she has to take a break and fuss Jane and Erik into eating lunch. Lunch is granola bars and yogurt cups, mostly, but it’s still better than Pop-Tarts. Not as good as her lunch, but Bucky made hers so it’s really not a fair comparison.

And she kissed Bucky, she remembers several times over the course of the day, and has to stave off mortification more than once, like she hasn’t done so much more with the guy. But there’s a difference between heat-partnering someone and kissing them like it was a habit, like it was something natural and easy. The closet incident should prove that, if nothing else.

But the closet incident was something else, of course.

She’s worked herself into a tizzy by the time it’s time to go back upstairs, because of course she has, and spends the whole way back scolding her stupid paranoid nature for being stupid and paranoid. It was just a kiss. Barely even a kiss, just a peck. A peck on the lips, but still. People do that. That’s not weird. Bucky probably didn’t even think it was weird.

God, she hopes Bucky didn’t think it was weird. Or that it meant she was expecting something. Or-

Darcy shakes her head and sighs, then rolls her eyes at herself. Okay, so her anxiety’s on a hair-trigger lately, but she’s not stupid. It was just a quick little peck. If Bucky got the wrong idea, she’ll apologize. If he didn’t, then who cares? She’s done dumber stuff.

She opens the door to the family suite, prepared to explain herself and apologize, and stops dead, dumbstruck. Bucky’s in the middle of the living room, doing something complicated and graceful with his feet that finishes with a spin that makes his skirt flare out just so, arms held above his head as J.A.R.V.I.S. plays a song she doesn’t know, all rising chords and staccato beats.

Bucky’s dancing, she realizes.

He notices her, and freezes. J.A.R.V.I.S. stops the music. Darcy immediately hates herself and opens her mouth to say--something--but then Bucky draws himself up and adjusts his skirt and gets this look like he might be steeling himself, and she can’t interrupt that.

“I can dance,” he says. It sounds like it’s new information to him too. “Can you?”

“I’ll learn,” Darcy blurs.

“Ohay,” Bucky says, and steps forward to pull her into the center of the room with him. She drops her bag, because of course she drops her bag, and lets him guide one of her hands to his waist and catch the other to hold in the air. He puts his free arm over her shoulder and her heartbeat goes double-fast, faster than that staccato beat, and she wonders if super-soldier ears can hear it. Maybe. Probably.

God, he’s so pretty, she thinks helplessly, just staring up at his face. His metal hand is cool in hers
but so careful, and she doesn’t know what to do at all.

“Watch me,” he says, which is the easiest thing in the world. His expression turns wry a moment later. “My feet, I mean.”

“Right,” Darcy says, looking down reflexively. Bucky steps back, and she takes the cue and steps forward into the space he just vacated. He steps back again, and she repeats, and when she feels his weight shift forward, she steps backwards instead. He smiles, she sees out of the corner of her eye, and she immediately swears that she will not only learn to dance, she will fucking master the art.

Then she trips over her own feet and goes down like a lead balloon, because of fucking course she does. Bucky catches her and turns it into a dip with a sound that’s nearly a laugh, and Darcy doesn’t even care how ridiculous an alpha getting dipped by an omega probably looks, she would do this a thousand times if it made Bucky make that sound again.

“There may be a learning curve involved,” she says, and he laughs again. Her whole chest squeezes in on itself, warm and tight, and she straightens back up and steps forward into his space. He’s smiling, though it looks a little painful. She wants to brush a hand over his face and smooth away all the strain in it, but she’s fairly sure she’d end up kissing him again if she tried.

“Like this,” he says, stepping back, and she watches him carefully place his feet through all the steps of a pattern, and then repeat it quicker. She’s pretty sure she’s gonna fall on her face if she tries it, but try it she does, and she only stumbles a bit. She doesn’t successfully recreate the pattern either, mind, but it’s a start.

“Show me again?” she asks him, and he does. The thing in her chest that’s been restless and wild ever since last night settles, at least a little bit. It can’t help it, with Bucky’s warm cinnamon-sugar scent so close.

Darcy wishes, briefly, that he were holding her hand with the right one. It’s not that she minds the metal one, it’s just they could be touching skin-to-skin right now and aren’t.

It’s probably for the best they’re not, she thinks.

“You smell good,” he says, and she flashes back to last night and his nose in her neck and just—just doesn’t know.

“So do you,” she says this time, which is definitely an improvement on “thanks” but still not great. He gives her this strange, warm look that makes the thing in her chest do flips, and his hand squeezes hers. Then he swiftly spins her around and dips her and she yelps in surprise, and he laughs. Darcy turns bright red and starts swatting at him. “Rude!” she sputters.

“Sorry,” he says, smiling down at her, and Darcy is doomed to forgive him—anything, anything he could possibly do or have done. “Wanna learn a box step?”

“I have no idea what that is, but sure,” she says, and he laughs again and pulls her back up. The music starts again.

Darcy is not a great dancer, since most of her previous experience with the art was the awkward middle school shuffle, but since it’s impossible to ignore Bucky it’s not that hard to follow what he’s doing. How he manages to teach her how to lead is beyond her, all the same. It’s fun, though, and doing fun things with him is such a rare and precious thing that she wouldn’t complain even if she’d spent the whole time falling on her ass.

She does almost fall on her ass a couple times, mind. Like, that is very much a thing that happens.
They spend so long at the dancing that they end up eating leftovers for dinner, which basically means the same thing she already had for lunch, but Darcy’s starving and Bucky manages to make it taste like new again with a few minutes in the oven, so whatever. Definitely an improvement on the lab microwave.

After dinner they settle in on the sofa and Darcy ignores her hindbrain’s very sincere desire for Bucky to sit on her and instead gets ready to get some more work done on organizing those transcriptions. She has time, yeah, but that doesn’t mean she wants to risk running it down to the wire.

That would be easier if she hadn’t somehow forgotten her tablet downstairs, mind.

“Shit,” she says, frowning into her bag. God, she’s a space case and a half today, isn’t she. She really doesn’t want to leave Bucky right now--the whole suite smells like them, after all the dancing, and she’s really digging it--but she also really needs to finish catching up on these damn transcriptions. “I forgot my tablet, I gotta run down to the lab real quick.”

“Okay,” Bucky says, just watching her from the other side of the couch. He sounds wistful, which is not something she can let her hindbrain process right now, and she hurries out to the common area, past the couch where the others are set up to the elevator. She hears Erik sneeze, and really hopes it isn’t catching. Now would not be a great time to get sick. She’s already not feeling great after trying to keep up with a super-soldier in both energy and appetite--kind of nauseous, and a little achy--but it’s been a long day. She can power through it long enough to get a little more work done.

She doesn’t want to, mind. What she wants is to go back to the family suite and pin Bucky into the softest part of the sofa and--

Anyway.

Darcy gets down to the lab and rifles through the place until she finds her tablet, which takes way longer than it should. Since the place she finally finds it is under Erik’s desk, she doesn’t really blame herself for forgetting it earlier. God knows how it wound up there to begin with. Not in a normal, reasonable way, she’s betting.

She takes a few minutes to tidy the place up a bit for tomorrow, since she left most of her stuff in a mess while she was distracted earlier, and carefully re-scents her desk while she’s at it. It’s been a while since she has. Admittedly, it’s not like she cares if Jane and Erik touch her stuff; she just wants them to know it’s her stuff they’re touching, is all.

A little bit of that restless energy from before is creeping back into her and she sighs, wondering if it’d be weird to hit the gym for a while. Probably, it is superhero-calibrated and all. If she were the type to go regularly, she’d have asked Tony if there was actually a normal person one kicking around on some floor or another by now, but she keeps forgetting to. She mostly just runs anyway. They do a lot of that these days, so she might as well be prepared.

She briefly considers dialing Tony up to ask, but then she remembers just how good the suite smells right now and, well . . . the running isn’t that urgent. Maybe she’ll remember to ask tomorrow.

She collects her tablet, rubs the scent glands in her wrist over the back of her chair one last time, and then heads back to the elevator and up to the Thor floor again. She took longer than she should’ve, and taps her foot restlessly the whole way up, thinking of Bucky and his cinnamon-bun scent and just how good it’d felt dancing with him, close enough to feel his body heat and
practically *taste* his pheromones. She could do with a few more nights like that in her life, she thinks. Or a lot.

The elevator dings open, Darcy heads past the common room, and Jane sneezes from the couch. She’s sitting tucked into Thor’s side with Erik in the armchair and the Food Network on TV.

“Guh,” she says, covering her mouth and nose with a little frown. “Darcy? Are you early?”

“Um--I was in the lab?” Darcy says, blinking at her in confusion and holding up her forgotten tablet in illustration. Thor purrs from beside her, his eyes going half-lidded and cheeks turning pink. Darcy’s not sure why; Jane isn’t even petting him or anything.

“No, *early*,” Jane repeats, raising her eyebrows pointedly. Erik sneezes into his elbow, then gives her a baleful look.

“I can never get over how it *burns,*” he says with a resigned sigh.

“. . . uh,” Darcy says with slow, sinking horror. They don’t mean--they *can’t* mean--they definitely *can’t,* she’s not due for a fucking *month*--

The family suite door audibly unbolts and slides open, and Darcy blanks out and automatically looks towards it. Bucky’s standing in the doorway in soft, easy-to-take-off clothes that so clearly show the curve to his stomach and with his face flushed even redder than Thor’s.

“Alpha,” he says dreamily as he leans against the frame, staring longingly at her.

Oh, Darcy thinks as she realizes the nausea in her gut is not just nausea and her clit throbs pointedly.

*Fuck.*

“Oh,” she stammers, staring stupidly as Bucky tips his head to show off his bare neck, and Erik sneezes again and Bucky gives her that killer under-the-lash look that has probably been used to *actually kill people.*

“Darcy?” Jane asks, frowning, which--right, okay. They can’t see Bucky from here, Darcy remembers, much less his current display. Which . . . probably explains said current display, actually, and . . . and fuck. *Fuck.*

Her fucking *rut* is fucking *early*.

“I have to go,” she blurts, and Bucky smirks like the cat who got the canary. Darcy stares at his mouth, momentarily transfixed, then outright panics and bolts back into the elevator.

The last thing she sees is the startled look on his face.
“Hey there, Lewis,” Tony says, ducking down to raise an eyebrow at her. “You flirting or having a nervous breakdown?”

“Definitely the nervous breakdown,” Darcy replies, retreating farther under his worktable with a grimace. “My rut’s coming early.”

“Woo boy,” Tony says, both eyebrows popping this time.

“I’m in so much trouble,” Darcy groans, burying her face in her hands. Of course. Of course it’s early. With everything happening, Bucky and Steve and how useless she is right now, with a clearly reproductively compatible mate who needs her—yeah, of course her rut cycle’s fucked up. Of course it is. Her hindbrain wants her to put a bond-bite that’ll stick in Bucky’s neck and probably also knot Steve ‘til he forgets he’s sad and would at this point frankly settle for knotting Tony like that’d even help, honestly, just--

So yeah. It makes perfect sense.

It makes perfect sense, and Darcy is absolutely never forgiving herself for it.

“How do you need help?” Bruce asks doubtfully, leaning back in his seat just enough to peer under the table.

“Yes. No. Maybe?” Darcy winces, dragging her hands down her face. “I mean--Bucky tried to pheromone-bomb me into having sex with him, like, practically last week. Two weeks ago? Really recently ago. I tried to explain but I’m not sure he doesn’t still half-think he’s getting kicked out of the tower if he doesn’t let me fuck him whenever I want.”

“He has met Steve, right?” Tony says dryly. “I mean, that whole ‘best friends since childhood’ line wasn’t total propaganda, was it?”

“Kind of thinking he might not remember some stuff,” Darcy says, still wincing. “He seems pretty blurry on the details. Fuck, can he even technically consent? What are the rules on consent for brainwashed amnesiac super-assassin POWs?”

“Maybe you could ask the actual POW,” Bruce suggests politely.

“Ngh,” Darcy says, burying her face in her arms. That is the worst idea she’s ever heard. For one thing, it’s a super fucking insulting question. For another--a way more concerning--she’s not sure Bucky wouldn’t lie to her, or misunderstand, or any number of terrible similar options.

All that shit HYDRA did to him . . . there’s no way he’s got a normal, informed grasp of “yes” and “no” right now. Hell, she’s not sure the forties gave him a normal and informed grasp of “yes” and “no”, from some of the stuff he’s said--and that’s not even counting that she’s bred and bitten him and the U.S. didn’t legally recognize bonded rape as a thing in every state until the nineties. In the forties she could probably have straight-up said “have sex with me or I’ll kick you out and leave you and our pups to HYDRA” and it would’ve been legally kosher!

The thought makes her want to throw up. And, unfortunately and fucking irritatingly, also stirs up her protective instincts and makes her hindbrain itch to go see Bucky again so she can make sure he’s okay.
Alpha instincts are fucking demented; she literally wants to go check on an omega to make sure she’s not taking advantage of him while she’s avoiding him so she can’t take advantage of him.

What the fuck, hindbrain.

“He hasn’t even been here for a month,” she says helplessly, then starts digging for her phone. Johnny Storm, Johnny Storm owes her a favor, maybe he’ll rut-partner her or at least let her crash at the Baxter Building for the next few days; she can’t go back to the suite all rutted up with a guy who still has trouble eating before he’s been told he’s allowed to, she just--she can’t.

She had to make rules for him, for god’s sake. She snarled and made him curl up and hide; she freaked out so bad he went to his damn knees trying to placate her. He thought he had to fight for the Avengers or have sex with her or both to get the things any decent human being would give him for nothing. He thought she’d take his pups away as soon as he gave birth and that if he was in heat she’d fuck him whether he wanted her or not, that she wouldn’t be able to stop herself--wouldn’t even try to stop herself.

And if that’s what he thinks about heat, then what does he think about rut?

Jesus.

“I really feel like you should talk to him about this,” Bruce says.

“Why?” Darcy demands incredulously, just staring up at him. That’s a terrible idea. That’s just about the worst idea since she and Bucky both assumed HYDRA had given him a totally accurate impression of his medical history and didn’t bother with the condoms.

“Well, for one thing, because he’s here,” Bruce replies, flicking his eyes towards the door meaningfully.

“Nrgh,” Darcy manages, but only after jerking around so fast she whacks her head on the underside of the table, ow, ow, ow. Bucky’s standing in the doorway, still wearing those soft clothes and looking . . . really, really pretty for someone who always looks like he needs a week’s worth of food and sleep, actually, although Darcy probably should not be thinking about that right now. Fuck. She should’ve gone straight to the clinic. Or the Baxter Building. Either. Both.


“They still make those or you just that old?” he asks, cocking his head a little.

“Oh my god, is he sassy?” Tony demands, looking around accusingly like he needs somebody to blame for that. “No one told me forties-era omegas came in sassy, I thought you were all cute little housewives back then.”

“. . . we were in the Army,” Bucky says, giving him a funny look. Darcy honestly can’t tell if the “they still make those” comment was a joke or not but if it was, well--she kind of wants to pretend it’s just her pre-rut that has that doing it for her, but it’s really not. It reminds her of the stupid flavored whipped cream and the laugh Bucky’d stifled the first time he’d tasted it and the warm little heat-happy grin he’d gotten when she’d licked it off his cheek and dancing in the living room and--

Yeah.

“Look, I work with Rogers, you cannot even pretend that man wasn’t going to get mated to Peggy Carter the day he got discharged and have two point five pups and a white picket fence in some
cute suburb,” Tony snorts, making a dismissive gesture.

“We were all going to,” Bucky says.

“Yeah, that’s what I was saying, Terminator, your whole generation was like that, keep up--”

“Carter and the captain and I,” Bucky interrupts, his eyes skating to the side like he’s maybe just piecing the memory together or maybe just not comfortable making eye contact while he talks. Both options are kind of painful to watch. “We were gonna mate and stay in France, ‘cause they wouldn’t give us the same kinda shit about it there like they woulda in London or Brooklyn.”

Tony blinks and does a quick little double-take. Darcy’s hindbrain finds it adorable, which is a serious problem because Tony Stark, Jesus Christ, she really did not pick the right place to hide. She might as well’ve just put herself under Thor’s cape.

“Uh--what, now?” Tony says, eyes bugged out. It’s still adorable, damnit. “Captain America in a romantic little polyamorous pile. In the forties. Captain America. What is this, no one tells me anything, since when was this a thing?”

“He did spend his last two heats with Natasha and Sam. Together,” Bruce reminds him ruefully, adjusting his glasses. “It’s not, uh, particularly surprising.”

“This is the man who was so uptight he didn’t partner anybody for two years!” Tony protests indignantly. “Excuse me for, you know, drawing reasonable conclusions in the situation!”

“I don’t think ‘uptight’ is the word to use there,” Bruce replies carefully, not quite looking at the rest of them. And yeah, Darcy would not use that word either, personally. Darcy would use the word “sad”, and then she would pin Steve down and bite the back of his neck and give him what he needs, fill him up and fuck him right and give him her teeth and all the sweet little pups he could possibly--

“Thought you said you weren’t here to flirt, Lewis,” Tony says, his voice going a little breathy. Bucky makes a weird, raspy noise and grips the stomach of his shirt so tight that his hip peeks out the bottom.

“Jesus,” Darcy says, turning bright red. Tony and Bucky are both a little flushed too, and--yeah, yup, she can smell her own pheromones now, and they are not joking around.

Also, her hindbrain’s shitty impulses are so much worse to think about now that she’s actually bred somebody, Christ.

“Seriously, you smell unreasonably good, how do you do that,” Tony says, grabbing her tablet off the nearest table and fanning himself with it. “Like, the handsome face and Johnny Storm’s locker room stories about how good the knot is are one thing, but the pheromones, good god, Lewis, where do those come from?”

“Same as they always smell, dammit,” Darcy mutters. Normally she’d make a face at him, but right now he’s an attractive unbred and unbonded omega in the middle of his den in a tight shirt and she’s about six inches from rut, so . . . yeah, not so much.

. . . well, maybe a little more than six oh god now she’s making clit jokes in her head, fuck her life, fuck everything, she should never have gotten off the couch today.

Not that spending the entire day in a suite that smells like a gorgeous and vulnerable omega would’ve been the best way to avoid accidentally triggering an early rut, now that she thinks of it.
So yeah, probably a doomed effort either way.

“Yeah, well, they always smell unreasonably good, they’re just not usually filling up my entire lab,” Tony says, gesturing pointedly around the room. Bucky frowns, shoulders hunching. “Not actually sure you’re not about to chase Bruce out, to be honest. I mean, I’m flattered, but . . .”

“Tony--” Darcy starts, her hindbrain having entirely the wrong reaction to that statement, but Bucky cuts her off with a threatening hiss. Tony’s eyebrows pop again and Bruce watches carefully, and Darcy . . .

Darcy really hates her hindbrain, basically, because god damn do her pheromones spike for that.

“All right then,” Tony says, flushing red again and blinking rapidly. Bruce digs a handkerchief out of his pocket and coughs into it, looking a little stressed.

Bucky’s flushed too, and breathing through his mouth.

“Alpha,” he says, voice a little cracked. Darcy’s clit throbs. Her hindbrain fixes her eyes on his heavy stomach and the thin, thin fabric of his shirt where his nipples peak against it and the way he’s standing with his feet braced apart on the floor. It’s a normal way for a trained fighter to stand. Totally normal.

To her hindbrain, it looks like an invitation to shove that soft loose skirt up and eat him out ‘til he fucking sobs for her.

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clit against his shoulder. Jesus. “Like--I don’t know how that translates in super-soldier terms but an omega in your, uh, condition probably should not be . . . uh . . . transporting me. Like this. Or at all.”

“Why?” Bucky asks, twisting his head to frown at her as he heads into the elevator. Darcy is thinking way, way too much about the fact her clit is this close to his throat and getting her pheromones all over him. If any other alpha tried to put their teeth in him after this they would know he was--

She really, really needs to stop thinking about that.

“Pregnant? Not safe?” she manages; Bucky immediately looks alarmed and sets her down so quick she barely catches her balance against his chest, and then the elevator doors slide closed and they are shut into a very small and enclosed space together and her hands are on his chest right over his pecs and his tight, peaked nipples and she’s remembering how sensitive his nipples are and oh god.

Yes. Okay. Her clit is definitely not staying down.

“Mm,” Bucky says, biting his lip. Darcy yanks her hands back off him like they’re on fucking fire.

“Okay,” she says, trying really hard not to breathe. He smells--still like cinnamon, obviously, still that sticky iced scent, but thicker and richer and somehow even sweeter.

Bred.

“Okay,” she repeats, forcing her eyes to stay open because she really wants to close them and just lose herself in that scent and back Bucky into the wall to--“Okay. I’m fine. We’re fine. I’m just . . . I’m just gonna go back to the room, and I’m gonna get my phone, and . . . and then I’m gonna call Johnny Storm, Johnny Storm owes me a favor.”

“Why?” Bucky asks, frowning.


“. . . why?” Bucky asks again, frown deepening as a trace of discomfort bleeds into the expression.

“Because I did him a favor?” Darcy replies blankly, not understanding the question, and Bucky’s shoulders hunch.

“No,” he says, eyes on the floor. “Why would you go to another omega for your rut?”

“Um,” Darcy says. “We talked about this, remember? You don’t have to sleep with me to stay here. And I mean--it’s not like we’re bonded.” Hell, they barely know each other, really.

“But . . .” Bucky’s face crumples, just barely, and he touches the side of his neck. Darcy draws a blank again, for a second, but her hindbrain helpfully picks up the slack with: our omega, our BITE, and she remembers exactly how many times she put her teeth just there for the heat-bond and exactly how bare his neck was before she did. There isn’t--it’s not like there’s scarring, she didn’t bite that deep, but--

“Oh my god, you’re old-fashioned,” she realizes, a little horrified with both of them. An old-fashioned assassin. Which is useful, actually, because Steve is going to fucking kill her. Bucky reddens in embarrassment, ducking his head, and Darcy’s stomach drops out. “Fuck, I didn’t mean that like that. I mean I didn’t mean it that way. I mean--fuck.”
“You said I get to decide who I have sex with,” Bucky says quietly, clearly trying to steer the subject away from that particular comment. Oh God. Oh God. “I--decided. Do you not . . .”

“Trust me, Jamie, that is the literal opposite of my problem right now,” Darcy replies faintly, kind of wanting to die. Is it too late for emergency suppressants? She knows Tony keeps those on hand. “Look, full disclosure, I sort of promised myself I’d give you anything you wanted, but--”

“I want,” Bucky breathes, leaning in and giving her that under-the-lash look again.

“Ngh,” Darcy manages, literally every neuron misfiring. Does this make her the worst? Is she the absolute worst because of this?

“Alpha?” Bucky pleads, his pheromones sweet and thick in the air.

Yes. Yes, she is the absolute worst.

The elevator door opens, and Darcy retreats faster than is probably wise. The living room is mysteriously devoid of the other residents of the Thor floor, and she’s not sure if she’s grateful for or despairing over that. Bucky follows her out, looking uncertain, and her stomach twists unpleasantly.

She put that look on his face.

“I just don’t want you doing something you don’t want to because you think you owe it to me,” she says, a little helpless. “Because you think somebody expects it from you.”

“It was--last time, it was--” Bucky stops, and struggles. Darcy digs her nails into her palms and forces herself to wait. “You gave me a truffle. When I asked for it.”

“I . . . yeah?” Darcy says, trying not to frown. She remembers that, how sweet and pretty he’d been with glitter in his hair and on his skin, the way he’d reacted all wide-eyed and stunned-looking. “You asked for it.”

“And you gave it to me,” Bucky says, like it’s some important thing.

“Oh,” Darcy says, feeling like an idiot. Because it is some important thing to him, isn’t it. Every time he’s asked her for something she’s done her damnedest to give it to him--hell, she even just told him she promised herself she would. And that is just . . . that is just the most depressing thing, those are just the lowest standards, but . . .

But they’re his standards, and he’s a grown-ass man, and she promised she’d give him what he wanted.

So where does that put them, exactly?

“You said you’d let me ride my heat out alone, if I wanted,” Bucky says, his eyes still uncertain but meeting hers. Something small and breakable in Darcy’s chest comes dangerously close to cracking. “That you’d bring me food and check on me but wouldn’t knot me.”

“I did, yeah,” Darcy agrees. Again, though, that’s the basic level of human decency, and it’s still not saying much for Bucky’s standards or making her feel any better about this.

“And I believed you,” Bucky says, looking away. “When you said it, I thought . . . I believed you.” Darcy’s stomach twists again, and she resists the urge to reach up and try to soothe the expression away.
“You’re so fucking brave,” she says helplessly. How is anyone this brave? After all the shit he’s been through and all the things that have happened to him . . . Christ. She doesn’t know if she’d ever be able to touch somebody again, much less trust them.

Bucky just shakes his head.

“It was really good,” he tells her quietly. “I get that I don’t have to do it, but . . . I’d like--it’d be nice, to do it again.”

“Yeah,” Darcy says, shaking her own head in return. “Yeah, okay.”

Bucky’s face goes soft and his eyes flick up again, and Darcy’s heart clenches at the look in them. If he could believe she’d take care of him without laying a hand on him in his heat, she can sure as fuck believe he genuinely wants to be there for her rut. Maybe it’s not the smartest idea either of them have ever had, but they’ve already made the ultimate stupid sex mistake, so . . .

So.

“C’mere,” she says quietly, lifting her hands, and Bucky steps right into them. She cradles his face in her palms and he makes a quiet, barely-audible keening sound that goes straight to her knot.

“Only if you’re sure, okay? You change your mind in the middle, that’s fine, I’m not gonna hold it against you.”

“It was good,” Bucky insists. Fuck everything, Darcy thinks.

“Yeah, last time,” she agrees, keeping her voice careful. Because yeah, grown-ass omega, but she knows he doesn’t know this anymore--hell, she can’t assume he ever knew it--and she doesn’t want him getting hurt because he doesn’t think he can tell her she’s fucking up. “But if it’s not good this time, tell me, okay? I want to be sure.”

“Okay,” Bucky says after a moment, his eyes flicking away. Darcy could spend all week unpacking the look in them right now, but . . .

But.

“Okay,” she says. She’s said her piece, and she can’t be second-guessing everything he says. She can’t be constantly assuming he’s deciding things for fucked-up reasons. Well, no--she could, but it’d be pretty shitty of her to treat him like that. “Let’s go to the suite so . . . well. I guess we don’t really need to den down, huh.” It’s not like it’s a public living room or kitchen in there; they could fuck on every surface and no one would say “boo”.

. . . they could fuck on every surface.

Nrrrgh.

*Down*, clit.

Bucky’s giving her a heated, breathless look again annd yup, yup, that was another pheromone spike, wasn’t it. Isn’t it. *Christ.*

“Let’s definitely go to the suite,” Darcy says weakly, grabbing his hand. Bucky follows her easily; she doesn’t need to tug at all. She wouldn’t be dragging him anyway, just . . . yeah.

He follows her easily. Her hindbrain is paying a lot of attention to that fact.
They go to the suite. Darcy double-checks the fridge and pantry’s contents out of paranoia, even knowing damn well they’re overflowing. There is so much food the only space for *more* food is where they took out breakfast and lunch. Her clothes feel too tight. Her breath’s coming too quick. Her ruts aren’t even that long--like, two days at *most*. Checking the supplies is both the most redundant and the most unnecessary thing she could possibly be doing right now. The thing about rut, though, is it’s not a baths and lotion and sweets kind of thing; it’s more like sweat and teeth and *meat*. There’s not a lot of prep work involved.

Which is good, because while pre-heat can take anywhere from sixteen to twenty-four hours, *pre-rut* is usually about two. At best.

So yeah, there’s a reason rut baths aren’t so much a thing.

At least it’s only every six months.

“Just--tell me,” she says, closing the fridge to glance at Bucky. “If it’s too much. If I do something--stupid. Or that you just don’t want me to. Or . . . anything.”

“There’s one thing I want to tell you,” Bucky says, and her gut clenches.

“Yeah?” she manages.

“Yeah,” he says, then steps in close and cants his eyes meaningfully towards the disgustingly plush and lush sofa. “You should spend more time eating me out this time.”

“. . . guh,” Darcy manages, mind going blank. Bucky doesn’t smirk, exactly, but the expression is close to it; a shadow of it. It makes her heart skip a beat or six.

Her clothes are definitely too tight, and stifling besides. Bucky’s can’t be any better, her stupid hindbrain is trying to insist, even though she knows damn well that’s not true. But Bucky is wearing a soft T-shirt and soft skirt and she could tug both of them off him so easily he’d barely have to move to let her, especially if he was taking her direction as well as last time. Every time.

He is so, so good at taking her direction, and how much she likes that makes her feel nauseous--even though she likes it with any omega, even though most omegas she’s dated would be just the same, with Bucky it still feels a little too close to a violation. Or like it could too easily become one, maybe.

But she needs to stop treating him like that.

“Okay, all right, I can take notes, I’ll put that on file,” she manages. “I am a capable modern alpha and heat partner, I can totally remember to--”

Bucky takes off his skirt.

“*Guh,*” Darcy says, deeply regretting not giving him underwear. Or maybe deeply regretting the fact he’s wearing one of Thor’s longer shirts, because it hangs just low enough to keep him . . . well, *decent’s* not the right word, probably, but it’s one hell of a tease either way.

“All right,” he purrs, and steps in close. Darcy kisses him before her stupid fucking *front*brain can get in the way anymore, and he noises softly into her mouth and kisses back, his body immediately sweet and receptive against hers. She wraps her arms around his waist and he melts into the embrace and wraps his own around her shoulders, squeezing tight. It’s the most contact she’d had with the metal arm since his heat broke, and that’s suddenly alarmingly hot, to her own surprise.
Her hindbrain is insisting on parsing it as him showing her his soft underbelly, is the thing—showing her his wounds, the places he’s been hurt before and that are vulnerable to being hurt again.

Which is really fucking optimistic of her hindbrain, frankly, because *metal fucking arm*.

The kiss deepens. Darcy’s pheromones spike, half from that and half from the oncoming rut; either way, it makes Bucky shudder in response. She tightens her arms around him and he lets out a breathy little noise that goes straight to her knot and makes her want to bend him over the kitchen counter and eat him alive. The kissing, though—she’s pretty happy with the kissing right now.

God, she wants to already have her clit in him. He got so noisy for it every time she put it in him during his heat but he was quieter the morning after, when he was getting ready to leave, and she wants to know what he’ll be like now. She wants him keening for it again; she wants him keening for her again. She wants to put her teeth in her old-fashioned omega’s neck hard enough to scar even past super-soldier healing and rut him so good he never even looks at another alpha.

“You smell so good,” Bucky mumbles, breaking the kiss to bury his mouth in her hair and breathing raggedly. Darcy takes the opportunity to lick over the pulse in his throat and cover it in her scent, and he muffles a moan.

“You like it?” she rumbles, smoothing a hand down his side over the length of the T-shirt, stopping at the hem and sliding back up. “I hope you do, it’s gonna be all over you by the time we’re done. Every inch of you’ll smell like me.”

Bucky makes a hot little noise against her hair and tightens his grip on her, and Darcy slides both hands down to squeeze his ass through the T-shirt and gets rewarded with another whine. It’s bigger than it was last time she had her hands on it, soft with pup-weight, which is a surprisingly distracting thing to notice.

“Is that a yes?” she croons.

“Yes,” he agrees breathlessly, nodding roughly against her, and Darcy’s hindbrain lights up like something electric.

“You can keep my scent this time,” she murmurs, giving his ass another squeeze just to hear him whine again, and a little bit because of the bigger thing. It’s making her fucking hot, she can’t help it. “Are you gonna like that too?”

“Yes,” Bucky chokes, and Darcy’s heart clenches and her gut goes hot and hungry. She can feel Bucky’s shirt rucking up against her stomach, pinned tight between them, and she can feel Bucky’s stomach against her stomach too, curved out warm and big and full.

“Good boy,” she says. Bucky buries his mouth in her shoulder and bites down, and she growls low in her throat and makes him shudder again. His hands grip tight at the back of her shirt for a second, and then he hits his knees without any warning. Darcy makes a surprised noise, and Bucky pushes his mouth into her hip and looks up at her.

For the record, that under-the-lash look is even *more* effective from the floor.

“Can I?” he asks quietly before kissing the button of her jeans in an extremely distracting display. Darcy momentarily glazes over, then nods real quick. They never actually got to this during his heat, after she saw how uncomfortable he looked the first time he tried it, but *this* time his eyes are hot and bright and his mouth is just barely edging into a smirk, so . . . yeah, no, this time she is
definitely not gonna be distracting him with truffles. Truffles are a later thing, this time.

Bucky purrs incoherently at her nod and proceeds to open her jeans with—yup, yup, with his teeth, okay. Well, she didn’t need her higher brain function for this, did she. She’s about to rut, it was already about five seconds from going out the window anyway.

“Fuck, you’re so great,” Darcy says helplessly, smoothing a hand back over his hair. Bucky gives her another purr, eyes going heavy-lidded, and kisses the waistband of her panties before getting his teeth in them too and giving a little tug. “You sure?”

“I want to take care of you, alpha,” he tells her. “Like you took care of me.”

“I want to come all over that pretty face,” Darcy’s rutbrain says, as opposed to anything grateful or self-effacing or just not fucking ridiculous. She winces the second the words are out of her mouth, but Bucky’s too busy hiding his face against her hip on a shudder to notice.

“Promise?” he rasps up at her a moment later, tilting his head just enough to look at her again.

“Oh, absolutely,” Darcy agrees roughly, because she is neither looking that gift horse in the mouth nor missing out on the chance to cover him in her scent that thoroughly. Not in rut. Hell, probably not out of it either. “That I’ll come all over you and that you’re pretty. The prettiest fucking thing.”

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“Okay,” Bucky says, his face flushed. He tugs down her jeans and panties just enough to expose her clit, and Darcy exhaled in a tangle of relief and lust and reaches back to brace her hands against the kitchen counter. Which is the right thing to do, because she’s only half-hard but he goes right to swallowing her down.

“Ahhh, fuck!” she gasps, jerking back against the counter, and Bucky moans around her. The vibration of the sound alone is enough to make her clit throb, and the sweet wet-hot pressure of his mouth around her nearly takes her knees out from under her.

Grabbing the counter was definitely the right thing to do.

Bucky rolls his tongue up tight against her clit and she curses and grips the back of his head, forcing herself not to put any pressure on him but just—holding on, kind of. Holding him. He purrs at the contact and wraps his biological hand around the base of her clit to squeeze, and her fingers tangle in his hair. His metal one’s on her ass, which is kind of surprising after last time but not something she is complaining about at all. Maybe it was the self-control that he was worried about before after all.

“Oh, omega, that feels so good,” Darcy pants, then growls as Bucky sucks harder and squeezes the hand around her swelling knot. She strokes her hand back over his scalp, brushing his hair back gently off his forehead, and he swallows her deeper in response, eager and greedy about it like—not like she wouldn’t have expected, maybe, but not like she did expect.

She should’ve, really. It’s not like she was blowing smoke up his ass when she called him brave.

“That’s my boy, so good to me,” she croons down at him, dragging her nails across the back of his neck, and Bucky moans again. “So pretty, so brave. You’re so good at this, too, makes me so happy you want my come on you that bad. I want to rub it all over you, make you smell like you belong to someone. You know I’ll give you whatever you want, don’t you? Do you want that too?”

“Ah-huh,” Bucky pants, drawing back just long enough to nod up at her and flexing his grip around her knot as he does, his expression heated and gorgeous. Darcy groans, hips pushing into his hand,
and Bucky immediately ducks back in and swallows her down again.

“Fucking perfect, baby,” she grunts, teeth gritting. She wants to rock her hips into his mouth; wants to fuck his mouth, really, especially with the demands of almost-rut simmering just underneath her skin. He hasn’t asked for it, though, so she doesn’t. Rut’s rough and fucking greedy and she just--she doesn’t want to push for more than he’s already giving her.

Even knowing he’s had so much rougher.

Especially knowing he’s had so much rougher.

Fuck. Fuck, this is not the time to be thinking about that shit, it is not. Darcy’s nails dig in against Bucky’s neck without her meaning it and her pheromones flare, and he has to break off again to gasp for air, his eyes glazed and his breath hot against her clit.

“I want to hurt everyone who’s ever touched you,” Darcy’s stupid fucking rutbrain says, her words heavy and heated between them. Bucky pants near-soundlessly, his knees spreading on the floor as his body leans in closer. “I want to string them up like Christmas lights and flip a switch and watch them twitch. But not as much as I want to wrap you up in something soft and keep you warm and happy in bed until you kick me out.”

“Wouldn’t,” Bucky mumbles, hiding his face against her hip again, a shiver going up his spine before he turns his face to press a kiss to her knot that makes her shudder in return. “I wouldn’t, I--you can have me as long as you want me, alpha. Keep me any way you like.”

“I like you like this,” Darcy tells him, tugging lightly at the back of his hair. “So pretty and sweet, and you look like you like it too. Do you? Am I right?”

“Yeah,” he says, shivering again at the tugging. “Yeah, you’re right.”

He’s the most heartbreaking thing she’s ever seen.

“Make me come,” she says, leaning back heavier against the counter and curling her nails into his neck again. “Mark yourself up and put my scent where you want it.”

“Yes, alpha,” Bucky breathes, immediately leaning after her. He gives her knot another kiss, then drags his tongue up the length of her clit and wraps his lips around the tip. Darcy drops her head back with a groan and he throws himself into it, mouth working hot and tight around her and--true to form--noisy as fuck the moment she gets her clit in him.

There are embarrassingly few words for how fucking hot that is.

It’s not hard at all to come. There’s a million thing she could and probably should still be worrying about, but right now the only thing she cares about is Bucky right in front of her, treating her like she’s the best thing he’s ever had in his mouth. She barely manages to warn him before she comes, and when she does he squeezes a hand tight around her knot and lets her clit slip out of his mouth and oh he looks good like that, he looks so good--

She comes all over that gorgeous, gorgeous face, and Bucky purrs.

“Holy crap,” Darcy pants, sliding down against the counter until her ass hits the floor, legs shaking like jelly. Bucky leans in close, just looking at her with her come all over his face, dripping down the perfect arch of his cheekbone and smeared across his mouth. It would not take rut to make Darcy’s clit twitch at the sight, but god damn does rut make it ache. “Look at you,” she says, and it comes out reverent. Bucky’s mouth quirks.
“What’m I lookin’ at?” he asks, licking his sticky lips.

“Nnngh,” is about all Darcy manages in response before she’s shoving in and kissing them clean. Bucky makes a soft, breathless sound into her mouth and she eats it up, pushing her hands up the back of his shirt. He shivers and she pulls him in closer, hooking a hand around the back of his neck and pulling him down into her.

“This okay?” she asks quietly, pressing their foreheads together, and he nods. She kisses him all over his face to clean him up, knowing she’s just making her scent on him stronger, and he makes another one of those soft noises and tilts into her mouth.

She’s definitely going to spend more time eating him out this time. God damn, is she ever. He could sit on her face right now, in fact, except for how the kitchen floor would be absolutely terrible for that.

He kisses her, panting softly in the air between them, which to be honest might be just as good.

“Are you sure,” she asks one last time, because she’s feeling increasingly stupid and hindbrained, and knows she’s not gonna be able to keep asking it.

“You took care of me,” he murmurs, wrapping his arms around her. “I liked it, I--the backpacks and the gloves and my heat and--and I liked it. And my--and the--” He breaks off, wincing.

“And the pups?” Darcy guesses softly, because that seems like the most likely thing to get that stuttering reaction out of him. Bucky shudders.

“Yeah,” he manages, eyes big and soft and vulnerable. “And--and that. You gave me pups.”

“I’ll give you anything you want,” Darcy swears, and kisses him again.

He kisses back, which might just be everything she could’ve asked for.
Darcy thinks she could keep kissing Bucky on the kitchen floor forever, but her hindbrain is all revved up and her body is too hot and her clothes are too tight and all she wants is more, more, more. And, ideally, to avoid any serious bruising. She fixes her pants and gets to her feet and pulls him up after her and only gets distracted for a few minutes’ worth of groping before remembering--there’s a bed, they could be on the bed right now. It’s a big bed.

Bucky moans.

. . . it’s a pretty big sofa, too.

Through some truly heroic effort on Darcy’s part, they make it to the sofa. Bucky hits his back among the cushions and pillows and Darcy can smell his sweet, sweet pheromones, and smell herself on him.

It’s a really, really good scent.

She crawls on top of him and he spreads his legs to let her in-between them, the soft swell of his stomach so fucking pretty and soft-looking and full and--yeah, yeah, okay, that’s very distracting. She wants to bite him open. She doesn’t even know what her stupid hindbrain means by that, but goddamn, does she want it.

Bucky purrs, which is the best sound in the world, and she pushes up his shirt and runs her hands up his sides as she admires his bared skin. He grabs the arm of the sofa behind his head and she hears stitches pop and the frame creak.

They are definitely gonna break this sofa.

“You’re so pretty,” she says, cupping his pecs--someplace else the pregnancy has changed, now that she’s got her hands on them; bigger and softer than before. Every place he’s gained weight is so distracting she could knot.

“Don’t stop,” he says, pushing up into her hands.

That is the easiest thing any omega has ever asked her to do.

She squeezes his pecs, flicks her thumbs across his nipples, pushes a thigh up between his thighs. Bucky pants, head dropping back against the armrest; Darcy drags her tongue over his chest. She loves how he looks with his shirt rucked up and arms over his head and legs spread, all stretched out on display. He’s so pretty, so gorgeous, so perfect. She wants to stick her clit in him and blow her knot so hard he sees stars.

That’s definitely going to happen if he stays, though, so instead she concentrates on rubbing her thigh up against him and kissing and biting his chest and letting her hands drop down to spread over his stomach. He makes ragged, adoring noises that make it very hard not to fuck him immediately and pushes into every point of contact. The sofa creaks again.

He’s so good.

“I want to knot you so fat you fucking cry,” Darcy rumbles lowly, which is almost a normal thing to say, except for how no, it’s totally not, shut up, hindbrain. Jesus. Bucky, against all odds, does not kick her off him for it.
“Don’t stop,” he says again, dropping his hands down to reach for her. She catches his wrists and pushes them back up towards the armrest.

“Stay,” she orders.

“Okay,” he says, staring up at her with big, sticky-sweet eyes.

“Good boy,” she tells him, then muffles his whine with her mouth and tucks a hand between his legs. He lets out a heated little yelp before her fingers are even inside him, his slick already this close to dripping all over her hand, and she yearns for the toy from the bath set--or a bigger one, maybe, to really fill him up and shake him apart. She wants him so blissed out by the time she’s in full rut that he won’t be able to do anything but take her. She wants him so blissed out that he won’t want to do anything but take her.

Bucky hooks a leg across the back of her knees. Darcy pushes another finger inside him and his hole gobbles it up greedily. His hips rock up into her hands as she fucks her fingers into him and rubs his pretty little cock, and he is the most beautiful sight she’s maybe ever seen. He’s not noisy, exactly, but he keeps making noises. She bets if she put her clit in him he’d be noisy. She bets if she put her clit in him he’d wail.

Not yet, though. She wants to make him wail for her clit, not just because of it. She wants him to feel so good he can’t think about anything else at all.

“Alpha, alpha,” he whines, and she squirms another finger into his hole and rubs his own slick over his cock. He jerks back against the sofa and the frame creaks even louder than last time. She’s waiting to hear it splinter.

“Omega,” she croons back sweetly, dipping her head to mouth wetly at his nipples. He mewls for her, leg jerking erratically against her side, and she bites down on one of his pecs and sucks hard enough to leave a mark. His leg jerks again and she bites down harder.

She knows he’s not really as vulnerable and needy as he seems to her idiot instincts, especially since she’s the one about to go nuts and rut, but it’s still hard to remember. She isn’t really trying to, either. She wants to treat him like glass, like cotton candy, like the last breath before the song starts. Bucky deserves treated like something precious and delicious, because any omega deserves that but also because he is that.

She wants him to feel as good as she knows he is, because she can’t imagine anything better than that.

Darcy kisses her way down Bucky’s stomach, rocking her fingers inside him, and he pants and mewls and moans in all the best ways.

“Is this good?” she asks him. “Do you like it?”

“Yes,” he purrs roughly, rolling up into her hands. She reflexively rumbles her satisfaction at him and he purrs right back. It’s still such a good sound. “Don’t stop,” he says again, so she doesn’t. She ducks down lower and bites the line of his hip, twists her fingers inside him, delights in the sounds he makes.

He’s still not wailing, though, so she still has work to do.

She kisses down to his cock and licks across it and delights in the way it makes his thighs squeeze in tight against her shoulders for a moment before they fall apart and she can really get to work. A few more teasing little licks means a few more stitches popped out of the sofa, and messing up
perfectly good furniture should really not be so hot but . . .

She reclaims her fingers and licks them clean. Bucky watches raptly, a restless shudder passing over him as his hands tighten on the sofa again.

Yeah, she’s gonna owe Tony a really good birthday present.

“I’m going to eat you alive,” she promises, then wraps her hands around his thighs (his thighs that are strong and muscled but also softer and bigger than before, not just skin and sinew anymore) and ducks down to drag the flat of her tongue across his hole. She wants him noisy. She wants him losing it.

She gets it.

Bucky is an even bigger fan of getting eaten out than Darcy remembered, though in retrospect maybe she should’ve remembered how last time he’d punched out the bedpost about thirty seconds in. Like--definitely she should’ve remembered that.

He doesn’t immediately break the couch, at least, but it sure does make some dangerous creaking sounds when she puts her tongue in him, and when she curls it . . . yeah. Very dangerous sounds.

She fucking loves it. Darcy likes eating an omega out as much as any reasonable person, which is to say she loves it, but goddamn, does that particular audio feedback get her going even more than usual. The up and coming rut probably has something to do with it too, admittedly, but the end result is she’s hard enough it hurts and doesn’t care as long as Bucky’ll let her keep going down on him like it’s going out of style.

She gets more aggressive about it, because she can’t not, and Bucky’s thighs tremble and his hands claw at the sofa overhead and he fucking melts in her mouth, his slick a stickywet mess that’s getting everywhere and tastes better than the best thing she can think of. She drags her nails across his thighs and licks deeper into him and gets the sound of splintering for her trouble. She doesn’t bother stopping long enough to check what it was.

“Alpha,” he moans, head tipping back again and hips tilting perfectly into her mouth. She sneaks a finger back into him and gets a breathy little cry in return.

It doesn’t take much more before he’s coming, soaking her face and hand with his slick all over again and making something in the couch audibly rip with another breathy cry. She rumbles her pleasure against him and keeps stroking him through it all the way to the last of the aftershocks, and he throws an arm over his eyes with a whine.

She loves every noise he makes, she thinks. She loves everything he does.

“Good?” she asks, her gut hot and heavy as she presses her clit into the cushions in an attempt to stave off the burn it’s setting off up her spine. It’s not particularly effective. Her clothes fit her all wrong. Her skin fits her all wrong, except for where it’s touching Bucky’s.

“Ngh,” Bucky says, not moving his arm. His thighs are trembling. She kisses the inside of one and the next thing she knows she’s hitting the floor and Bucky’s on top of her, a hand behind her head to keep her from knocking it and shirt still all rucked up over his chest, his thighs spread beautifully across her hips.

“Oh,” she chokes, and then snarls up at him reflexively, pushing up into the grip he has on her. He purrs soft as silk past a smirk and her clit twitches painfully against the front of her jeans and his weight on top of it. She can already feel his slick soaking through to it.
God, he’s perfect.

“Get up here,” she orders, and he laughs but ducks down to kiss her, licking his slick off her mouth. She kisses back, though that’s not what she’d meant. She reaches down and digs her nails into his ass, giving him a pointed tug. “No. Get up here,” she repeats.

“I already came,” he says, the briefest of confused looks flitting across his face. Darcy could literally club whoever taught Bucky Barnes what to expect in the sack, except actually she could literally murder them, since she’s pretty damn sure they’re psycho Neo-Nazis anyway.

“You’re not done coming until I say you are,” she says, because her rutbrain is even worse than her hindbrain. Bucky laughs again, a soft little huff of a sound, but she feels a shiver go through him too.

“What’re you gonna do, make me?” he asks, and she licks her lips. His eyes darken warmly.

“Absolutely,” she swears, then gives him another pointed tug. This one he follows all the way up as she guides him down to sit on her face and he lets out another huffed laugh.

“Gonna fucking smother you like this,” he says.

“Yes please,” she says, and drags her tongue across his hole. His breath hitches; she pulls her nails across his ass and drags her tongue again and he fists his metal hand against the couch cushions. He’s so much bigger than before. A whole hell of a lot bigger than he was the day he walked out on her and left her with the pheromone hangover to end all pheromone hangovers, healthy and soft where he wasn’t before--and she still has time to feed him up more.

Right now, though, her clit is aching and her gut’s on fire and there is a gorgeous and delicious omega riding her face, so right now all she cares about is eating him out all over again. He grips her hair with his biological hand and moves into every stroke of her tongue and drag of her nails, panting hotly right from the start and probably still over-sensitive from last time. He doesn’t do anything but encourage her, though, so she doesn’t do anything but lick and kiss him all over, messy and greedy and nowhere as gentle as she maybe should be being.

Bucky isn’t complaining, mind: he’s rocking his hips and pulling her hair and making noises she’s never heard him make before. In heat she didn’t hear him make these noises.

She definitely should’ve spent more time eating him out last time.

Darcy’s slower about it, this time--drags it out with long, slow licks and wet kisses and low rumbles and growls that never fail to make him shudder. Her clit hates her for it, but loves her for it. Bucky moves with her pace until he’s whimpering, and she relishes every drop of slick in her mouth and every sound out of his.

He comes shaking and moaning, tearing something in the sofa again and grinding down so tight he practically could smother her. It’s more than worth it.

“Good boy,” she praises roughly, and he shivers and shivers and shivers on top of her. She’s frankly impressed he’s stayed upright, all things considered. She turns her head to kiss the inside of his thigh and seriously considers going for round three right now. She wouldn’t be able to hold him down, not unless he let her, but he might just let her. “Aren’t you pretty when you come. I want to keep you like that until you kick me off.”

“Not gonna kick you off,” Bucky pants, shifting back just enough so his ass presses against her breasts and she hates her T-shirt and button-down both more than any other pieces of clothing she’s
ever owned.

“Take your shirt off,” she says, running her hands up his thighs. He does, which is a fucking picture from this angle. Not that she can think of an angle where it wouldn’t be, really. His arm is metal all the way up, which is a fact she knew—obviously—but hasn’t gotten to see in a while. She’d half-forgotten about the star on his shoulder, strange and incongruous thing that it is, but the scars are all exactly the way she remembers them.

He’s so pretty.

“You’re so great,” she says a little helplessly, and he sits on her hips and spreads his hands across her stomach.

“My turn?” he asks, ass pressing back and hands sliding up with a very promising suggestiveness. She definitely hasn’t forgotten how good and greedy he was the times he sat on her knot. Sometimes he swings back and forth so easily between passiveness and proactiveness that she can hardly keep up.

“In a minute,” she says anyway, own hands sliding up his thighs. He bites his lip and grins down at her, looking so smug. It makes something in her chest do a funny little fluttery thing, though it’s hard to notice past the way it makes heat spike through her gut. She wants to make him so lust-addledly stupid that he can’t even remember how to look smug. If her rut weren’t speeding up her heartbeat and grinding down her patience, she just might be able to get him there.

But it is, and it’s so hard to think about anything but how bad she wants her clit in him—about how close he is, practically sitting on it already, and how good he smells, cinnamon-sugar and satisfaction both coming off him in waves. Rutting him isn’t good enough. Rut is stupid and hungry and has no patience for anything else.

She wants to rut him so fucking bad. Instead she slips a hand around behind him and tucks it underneath to get at his hole again, rubbing insistent circles against him through the sticky wetness that hasn’t let up at all. He breathes out raggedly and her other hand starts rubbing his cock.

“Alpha, you’re so greedy,” he pants, grinning even wider down at her. It’s a beautiful expression, practically heartbreaking, and Darcy is gonna do everything she possibly can to make it happen again and again.

“You’re such a good boy, omega,” she croons, her clit throbbing so hard that she’s not sure the stupid thing isn’t trying to knot in her slick-soaked jeans. Bucky squirms on and into her fingers and takes shameless advantage of his position to feel her up. She’d tell him to wait, except his hands groping over her breasts are almost enough to help her concentrate on something not her own damn hormones.

Almost.

His biological hand finds one of her nipples through the layers of fabric and he pinches it; Darcy feels like she could fucking come. She thrusts her fingers into him in a rapid, erratic rhythm that doesn’t match the one she’s stroking his cock with and he tries to match her but keeps missing the nonsensical beat in her head. He pinches her nipple again, rolling it tight between his fingers, and her hips jerk up without any kind of permission at all. There’s no friction there except for the painful constriction of her jeans, and she’s really wishing she’d worn a looser-cut pair today. Her knot, meanwhile, wants something even tighter.

Bucky’s panting again, big gulping breaths that don’t seem to be getting him enough air. His metal
hand covers her other breast and she feels the chill and pressure of it like an electric shock through her clothes. She knows it’s not cold, not really, but for how it feels next to their overheated skin it might as well be ice.

She’d say something, but anything she tried to would just come out a jumbled-up rumble, she’s sure, and sorer with every stuttering rock of Bucky’s hips. She still can’t get the rhythm right and her hips are still fucking up into empty air for just the painful-sweet pressure of wet denim moving over her aching clit. She wants it in him. She wants him keening for her. She wants to shove him over and shove into him and not let up until he really does cry, and then she wants to keep going until he can’t even do that anymore. He’s such a good boy for her, getting so fat and full of her pups, all sweet and bred. He wanted that, right? That was what he wanted.

She’ll keep him fucked full of them until she dies. He’ll never have to leave his nest again. He’ll get so fat and pretty and she’ll feed him all the best things and make sure no one else ever touches him again.

She might be telling him some of that. She’s not sure, because she’s got four fingers shoved inside of him and she’s pushing her thumb up over his cock and nothing else could possibly be more important except for how desperately she wants to fill him up, how desperately she wants to make him come. If she is telling him any of it, he probably can’t hear her over his own yelping and moaning anyway.

She’s heard theories that omegas yelp because they want other packmates to come--other alphas to fill them up, betas to take care of them, omegas to share the knot. She doesn’t know if it’s pseudo-science bullshit or not, but she’s thinking about it now, finger-fucking Bucky so hard that her wrist is aching. Not another alpha--she’d chase out any alpha who showed up right now, up to and including goddamn Loki--and they don’t need a beta to bring them anything yet, but . . .

Bucky yelps again. Darcy’s stupid, stupid rutbrain imagines him being answered, just for a moment. She could’ve called in that favor from Johnny after all, she thinks, remembering his hothouse-flower scent and how it might mix with cinnamon. She curls her fingers inside Bucky and presses up into his weight and watches him come apart on top of her, practically collapsing on top of her as he comes, crushing her breasts and clit between them. She works him through it and he yelps and--and--

And he’s not yelping loud enough, some part of her hindbrain thinks. He needs to be louder. Thor’s probably all the way on the other side of the floor right now. Bucky slumps to one side, breathing heavily, and Darcy scrambles out from under him and shoves him onto his hands and knees. He moans, lifting his hips to tilt them just so, and she doesn’t even have the presence of mind to get her jeans off before she’d grinding her swollen clit into his exposed body. He grinds back, even though the denim can’t feel any better for him than it does her, and then she can’t stop, can’t stop, can’t--

Alpha instincts are the stupidest things evolution ever came up with, some part of Darcy thinks even as the rest of her desperately humps the warm and willing omega underneath her instead of just taking her fucking pants off. But Bucky’s shoving back into her just as desperately, his metal fingers leaving narrow furrows in the floor--sorry, Tony--so she can’t stop.

Bucky yelps again.

Mmm, Tony, Darcy’s stupid fucking idiot hindbrain thinks. Tony’s invasive enough that he’d come if he heard Bucky yelp. He’s always complaining about his heats anyway, he’d probably fucking love a few months off. Maybe he’d bring Rhodey. Maybe he’d--
Bucky moans, jerking underneath her, and she thinks she could maybe make him come like this if it wouldn’t drive her crazy first. She’d rut Clint if he showed up right now--she’d rut Bruce.

Alpha instincts are so stupid, she thinks, finally managing to pull her hips back far enough to get a hand between them. Bucky whines at the loss and she nearly breaks her zipper.

She does not get her pants off. She barely even gets them open. But they’re open enough for her clit to spring free again and she’s not even done hissing at the shock of cold air against it before she’s fucking it into Bucky, who outright yowls, wood splintering under his hand.

He’s such a good boy, she thinks, already thrusting deep enough for her half-blown knot to be bumping against him. So noisy for her clit, just like always; so loud for her, just like she wants. So perfect. That super-soldier hearing can’t possibly have missed that. Steve’ll be right here, safe and sound and content, and she won’t have to worry about him anymore, he’ll be fine, he’ll have everything he could ever want, he’ll--

She breathes out roughly and shakes her head and shakes those thoughts out of it. No. Just--no. For fuck’s sake, the suites are all soundproofed.

Her rutbrain reminds her that she’s got a phone, and she buries her face against Bucky’s back and tries to get some sanity back. It doesn’t work very well, since the position results in her nose being full of cinnamon-sweet omega pheromones full of sweat and lust.

“Alphaaaa,” Bucky pants, and she wraps her arms around him to cup his pecs and squeeze. He moans--so good, so loud--and spreads his knees further apart on the floor. Her half-blown knot pops right in and he clenches up around it with another moan. She means to keep thrusting, but he’s just so tight around her, like he wants nothing like he wants to keep her knot in him, and it’s so easy to just roll her hips into his again and again instead.

“You’re so good, momma,” she praises thoughtlessly, and Bucky makes a choking sound. For a second she thinks she’s fucked up at the worst possible time, but--

“Call me that again,” he rasps.

“Momma,” she repeats immediately, nuzzling the back of his neck and pushing a hand down over his stomach. “You’re gonna be so good at this, momma.”

Bucky chokes again and she rolls her hips harder into his, her knot growing bigger and bigger. He comes on it, because he’s a good boy. She remembers the bond bites she’d left during his heat and her mouth hangs just barely open, teeth itching in it.

She keeps rutting into him, even with her knot too big to let her properly thrust anymore and him whimpering and clawing at the floor with over-stimulation. He’s her omega. “Over-stimulation” is a start, at best. She pinches and pulls at his nipples and gets a hand on his cock and rumbles her approval into his ear as he tightens up around her again. She doesn’t know if he’s doing it on purpose or it’s just that her knot’s gotten that big, but it doesn’t matter anyway. It feels so good, either way. He’s being so good. Her perfect, perfect omega.

“You’re so sweet,” she says, barely paying attention to her own voice. It sounds like someone else’s, low and raspy-hot. “I’m gonna fuck you blind.”

“Don’t stop,” Bucky pants into the floor, his hands fisting against it. She doesn’t know how he thinks she could. Nothing short of him telling her “no” is going to stop her right now. Anything else can get fucked.
“Do you want me to stop?” she asks, nuzzling the back of his neck again.

“No,” he moans, and she feels herself grin against his nape.

“Then I’m not gonna,” she says, rubbing his cock a little harder. “You’re right where you belong, being so good for me. Why would I stop when I get to have you like this?”

“Nghhh,” Bucky manages to get out, and Darcy takes that as an obvious cue to push their hips even closer together.

“You’re so tight,” she praises, kissing his shoulder blades, rocking her hips down. “You fit me so perfect, baby. Am I big enough for you? Do you need more?”

“No,” Bucky croaks, shaking his head. “No, I don’t, I--you’re just what I need.”

“Perfect,” Darcy rumbles, dropping another kiss onto the back of his shoulder with another hard roll of her hips. “I hope your knees bruise, baby. I want you to remember this all week.”

“Won’t--ah, won’t last,” Bucky says in frustration, shaking his head again. “Bruises don’t last.”

“But you’ll remember this, won’t you?” Darcy says, giving his cock a little squeeze.

“Yes,” he gasps.

“Good boy,” she croons, rolling her hips in harder again and getting strangled whimpering as her well-deserved reward. He’s so good. Just right. She’s going to keep him just like this until he passes out, and then she’s going to fuck him back awake. “My good boy. You’re so soft and sweet. You’re doing so good with everything, I’m so proud.”

“Alphaaaaa,” he moans, pressing his forehead to the floor. She could come right now, if she leaned in just a little bit harder. He’s trembling so pretty, though.

“I love the way you come,” she tells him, dropping another kiss against his shoulder. “Do it for me again.”

“Do you--do you always rut like this?” he pants past a breathless laugh, hands fisting against the floor again.

“Baby, I haven’t even started,” she assures him, and he’s laughing when he comes, which is the best, best thing she’s ever done in her life. He clutches up so tight around her that she goes over the edge too, and yeah, she is definitely rutting, because even as she’s coming she’s thinking about licking her come out of Bucky and eating him out all over again.

Except that would mean taking her knot out of him, so . . .

Well, she’ll figure something out.

“Ohhhhh,” Bucky sighs, slumping underneath her. Darcy gets together exactly enough willpower to grab a pillow off the sofa for him and pull them onto their sides, and literally no more whatsoever. She collapses behind him, burying her face in his back with a groan.

“Good boy,” she huffs roughly, running a hand down his side. He clutches up around her knot again and she muffles a hiss in his shoulder blade.

“Alpha,” he purrs, dragging the pillow to himself and wrapping his arms around it. He turns his head just enough to peer back at her and the sight of his hair spread across his neck makes her want
to pull it back and make him bare his naked throat for her teeth. She doesn’t, but she thinks about it.

He’s so pretty. The only thing that could make him prettier would be . . .

She’s not gonna think about it. She’s gonna be responsible, and normal, and not *think* about it.

“Sorry about the bruises,” Bucky murmurs, and makes it *very* hard not to think about putting her teeth into his neck.

“You look so good,” Darcy says, which might sound almost like an answer. She’s trying not to stare at his throat, but that means staring at other parts of him, most of which are making her clit throb and telling her very clearly how bad she’s about to need to fuck him again. Which is gonna be a problem, since her knot still hasn’t gone down.

She’ll figure something out.

“You alright?” she asks while she has the chance to ask it, running a hand down his side.

“Better than,” he hums, nuzzling into the pillow. She can still see the naked side of his neck and still wants to put her teeth in it. She’s not going to, because he hasn’t asked, but that’s not going to stop her wanting it.

He’s so pretty.

Darcy kisses the back of his shoulder, fairly certain it’s a terrible idea to let her mouth go any higher, and Bucky sighs quietly, body soft and receptive against hers. It’s—very distracting. “Distracting” is not even the *start* of a good enough word, in fact.

She kisses him just one mouth’s-width higher, nails curling against his sides. He sighs again. She wants to touch him everywhere she possibly can. It’d be enough, if she could do that. Wouldn’t it?

Probably not, actually, but she’s willing to try it all the same. What else is she doing with her life, anyway?

She tugs restlessly at their tie and Bucky muffles a moan into the pillow, shoulders hunching. Her knot’s not quite willing to let him go just yet, which makes perfect sense but is also pretty damn annoying because they could be *fucking* again by now. She kisses his back again and runs her hands down his sides and he squirms *deliciously* for her, but their tie is still too tight for her to pull back. She resigns herself to making good use of the opportunity, if nothing else, and slides her hands across and over his hips.

Darcy is very gratified by how little it takes to get Bucky moaning for her again. It’s a good feeling. Not as good as it feels *inside* him, but really, what could be? Something, probably, but she’s hard-pressed to think of it.

Maybe if he let her put her teeth into his neck again.

“You’re so good,” she rumbles, nuzzling between his shoulder blades as she lets her hands wander how they please. They please pretty far, but they’ve definitely got favorite places. “Gonna keep it up? Gonna be a good boy for me tonight?”

“You gonna treat me nice?” he asks in a purr.

“The *nicest,*” she swears immediately, burying her face between his shoulder blades again. He lets
out a happy little sigh and squirms against her.

“I’ll be good,” he says. “I’ll be the best.”

“I’m going to eat you alive,” Darcy swears, digging her nails into his flanks. He purrs again, arching back against her, and she rolls her hips into him twice before her clit finally slips out, still mostly hard but with her knot finally softened. Bucky makes a disappointed noise and she has never put her clit back in an omega so fast. He lets out a pleased moan and she does the obvious, which is fuck him. Normally that wouldn’t work so quick, but normally she wouldn’t be burning up everywhere they aren’t touching or thinking quite this obsessively about how bad he so obviously needs her teeth in his neck.

Because he does, obviously and definitely; of course he does. He’s bred and unbonded and needs an alpha, needs protected, and isn’t she the one he picked? Isn’t she his last alpha standing?

She is. So she’s what he needs, for whatever reason he decided he needs her; so she’s going to give him what he needs, however he needs it.

And right now, what he needs is so, so--

Darcy buries her face in Bucky’s back and fucks him metronome-perfect and does not, does not put her teeth anywhere he hasn’t asked for them. She wants nothing more than she wants to fuck him and breed him and give him everything he could possibly need, but she’s already fucking him, he’s already bred, and as far as giving him what he needs . . . yeah, well, how’s that worked out so far?

She wants to think it’s worked out. She wants to think she’s done right by him. She wants to think a lot of things, and doesn’t know how many of those things are wrong or right because right now it’s so hard to think. Normally she’d know, wouldn’t she?

She just wants to do right by him.

“Is this it?” she asks, not lifting her head. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes, alpha,” he purrs. His back flexes--maybe he’s turning his head, or just adjusting his balance--but she doesn’t lift her head to see. She holds onto him, and she thrusts into him, and she keeps her goddamn teeth in her goddamn mouth. He moves back into her and moans in an incredibly gratifying way that makes it even harder to keep her teeth to herself, but she’s not a raging asshole, so she does.

He feels so good. He’s the best thing she’s ever felt, maybe.

“Ah, ahhhh, just like that--” he pants, and she does as much of “that” as physically possible. If it’s what he needs, if it’s enough--“Yes!” he gasps, and it’s the most perfect thing he could possibly say. Darcy snarls, because rut is stupid and greedy and brainless, and changes the angle of her hips to fuck deeper into him.

“Good boy, tell me what it’s like, tell me what you want,” she rumbles roughly, leaning into him with her full weight. She can do that, with an omega like Bucky--she’s never been the biggest alpha anyway, and he can throw her over his shoulder without even trying. If he doesn’t want to move, he’s not moving. “Am I treating you nice enough? You want more?”

“Yes,” Bucky says, and “Don’t stop.”

Yeah, that’s what she wants to hear.
“Good boy,” she says again, pressing her chest against his back and her clit just that little bit deeper into him. She’s still wearing too much and the fabric of her clothes is too rough and too restrictive, but stopping to undress properly would still be worse. The important thing is that Bucky is naked and accessible and wants to be that way. “You feel so good, I could do this all night.”

“Aren’t you gonna?” he asks breathlessly, reaching back to catch her by the back of the neck and tug her down even closer. The things that does for Darcy’s hindbrain—for Darcy’s rutbrain—are downright fucking wicked.

“Ngh,” she says. Bucky lets out a huff of laughter, twisting his fingers through her hair.

“Come on,” he says. “You’re supposed to be rutting, aren’t you? So rut me.”

Darcy is going to die.

“You’re the sweetest fucking thing,” she says, digging her nails into his flanks; fucking him harder despite the fact her knot’s already swelling demandingly. He asked. “I’m going to eat you alive.”

She might’ve said that already. She doesn’t actually care, though. Bucky’s still holding onto her and making these noises and—yeah, no, she doesn’t care at all. She wants to fuck him into the floor and kiss him all over and just adore him.

So she does. She fucks him with urgent, desperate thrusts and she kisses up his spine and over his shoulders and she adores him. She drags red lines across his skin with her nails and bares her teeth against his shoulder and thrusts in again, and again, harder and faster and as much as she can.

“I’m going to keep you,” Darcy swears.

“Prove it,” Bucky says, and pulls her mouth in against his throat. Darcy’s higher thought processes short out entirely and the next thing she knows her teeth are in his neck and her clit’s in him all the way to the root, knot blown, and she’s coming so hard she might have just hurt herself.

“Fuck,” she gasps out, rolling her hips roughly as the aftershocks shake through her, the word muffled against Bucky’s neck, and he purrs.

“Good alpha,” he says with obvious satisfaction, and wow, hello thing Darcy did not know she would like to hear so much, holy shit. She bites down harder, and he purrs louder. She wants to leave a mark. She wants to leave a dozen marks. She wants to layer his throat in bond-bites until one of them sticks for good.

She’s pretty sure she’s gonna try.
Darcy’s rut is a microrut; it feels like it’s hardly begun before it starts winding down (so much for “all night”, she guesses). Then again, it’s a month early and the omega she spent it with is already bred and let her put her teeth in his neck like he wanted it to stick, so yeah, maybe that makes sense.

Probably that makes sense.

Jesus, he let her do that.

“Jesus, you let me do that,” Darcy says. They made it to the bean bags at some point, which are definitely more comfortable than the floor outright, although the bean bags are probably gonna be harder to clean.

“I know,” Bucky says, turning his head just enough to raise an eyebrow at her. “I was there.”

Darcy laughs, kind of helpless, and throws an arm over her eyes. She never did get her damn clothes off, and they are definitely gonna be hard to clean. Bucky’s stretched out next to her, naked and sticky and very hard not to obsess over, and--well, she’s been obsessing over him a lot lately, so really, it only makes sense.

“You’re so fucking great,” she says, peeking at him from under her arm and resisting the urge to run a hand up his side. Is that too much? Rut-partnering her is one thing, but that’s intimate--like the bond bites she still can’t help sneaking peeks at. She’s just not sure enough of herself yet. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving,” Bucky says, propping his chin up on one hand. “But food means getting up.”

“. . . yeah, maybe another minute on that.”

“Mmmhm.”

Darcy laughs again and turns her body towards him, unable to keep the smile off her face. That was a really good rut, okay? She’s gonna be smiling for a while.

“Anyone ever tell you how good you are at this?” she asks. Bucky’s expression briefly shuts, then he shrugs dismissively, face clearing.

“No idea,” he says. “I didn’t even know how good I was at this before I met you.”

“You were clearly wasting your talents,” Darcy says, deciding to brush over that since Bucky clearly wants to, and he chuckles under his breath.

“I mean, I think I spent enough time stalking people,” he said. “Put those talents to good use.”

“There was the whole Perth thing,” Darcy says agreeably, a little surprised to hear him mention Steve, even obliquely. She usually is, even though it’s not like Bucky never mentions him. It just somehow manages to be surprising every time.

“And you,” Bucky says. Darcy blinks.

“Come again?” she asks.
“And you,” he repeats.

“Um--when was this?” Darcy asks, and he frowns at her in confusion.

“You didn’t know?” he asks.

“Um, no?”

“You left the backpack,” he said. “That was for me, wasn’t it?”

“. . . okay, A: I can’t believe you even have to ask that and B: Jamie,” she says, staring at him in disbelief. “Do I strike you as the type to notice she’s being followed by a super-sneaky super-soldier?”

“I wasn’t being that sneaky,” Bucky says. “And you left the backpack.”

“Fair,” Darcy says, internally deciding that she needs to start paying a lot more attention when she’s out and about. “But no, that was definitely just wishful thinking on my part.”

“Oh.” Bucky blinks at her, looking surprised. “I just figured . . .”

“That I was smarter than that?” Darcy guesses wryly.

“No, uh--I figured you were bothered too,” Bucky says, briefly touching the side of his neck. It takes her a moment, but then she realizes what he means.

“Oh! You mean you leaving early?” she says, giving him a startled look. “No, trust me, I was very definitely bothered by that. I had a bond hangover for days. It sucked.”

“Sorry,” he says, though he doesn’t sound very sorry. Since he was so sure it was necessary at the time, she’s pretty sure he’s not.

“It’s okay,” she says anyway. “I get why you had to go. How long were you following me?”

“A while,” he says with a shrug. “I followed the captain too. And Sam Wilson, once. He went to church.”

“Huh,” Darcy says. She’d be more freaked out by this, normally, but Bucky’s grasp of social conventions and not-creepy life choices has obviously been seriously damaged. Like--seriously damaged. And she already knew he’d spent a year creeping on Steve and Sam, so this is not exactly a shock, weird as it is to think about anyway. “You know that’s a little crazypants, right, babe?”

“I needed to be sure you weren’t HYDRA,” Bucky says.

“. . . okay, never mind, you follow anyone you want,” Darcy says, blinking at him. Yeah, she really can’t argue with that one. She’d forgotten him calling her a trap, before, but that must’ve been what he’d meant. Which--wow does she want to taze some people, thinking that. “So that’s why you were freaking out the next day?”

“Yes,” Bucky agrees with a nod. “Or you were an Avenger. That would’ve been worse.”

“Wait, what, worse?” Darcy demands incredulously. Okay, even more damaged than she’d thought, then.

“If you were HYDRA I could’ve stopped you,” Bucky says. “I can’t hurt one of the captain’s
people.”

“Ah.” Darcy winces. “Well, I’m definitely neither. I mean, I hang out around some Avengers, obviously, but that’s just because of Thor. Obviously.”

“You live here,” Bucky says with a little frown.

“Okay, it’s also because Tony Stark needs a puppy,” Darcy admits. “But you get my point.”

“You went to Tony Stark when you were going into rut,” Bucky says with another frown, and Darcy’s eyebrows pop.

“Um, no?” she says. “I ran away from you and . . . okay, he was the closest omega not within scenting distance of you, I guess, but in my defense: rut. If I’d actually been thinking straight I’d have gone straight to the Baxter Building. Um--that’s where--”

“Johnny Storm lives there,” Bucky says.

“Yyyyyeah,” Darcy says slowly, not entirely sure how to take the look he’s wearing. Or more accurately, not wearing. Bucky’s usually pretty easy to read, but right now his face is blank.

“He’s your rut partner?” Bucky asks.

“Hahaha no,” Darcy snorts, dropping her head back against the beanbags. “No, I heat-partnered him once when he was in a bind, I was just gonna see if he’d return the favor.”

“He’s the one who smells like flowers,” Bucky says. “Not the one who smells like mint?”

“Um--yeah?” Darcy blinks at him. Okay, well, he’d followed her a bit more thoroughly than she’d assumed, apparently. That was creepy, but understandable. “That’s his litter-sister. The mint, I mean. Why?”

“The mint one smelled bred,” Bucky says.

“Congratulations on being a better alpha than Reed Richards,” she says automatically, then frowns. “Wait, was he bothered by--“Did you think I bred her?”

“No,” Bucky said, shrugging loosely. “I just didn’t know.”

So “yes”, technically. Or a soft yes, anyway.

“Yeah, I’m usually way more responsible with my clit than we were,” Darcy says, shaking her head. “In my defense, you were awesome and I was being an idiot.”

“That’s the best defense you got?” he asks, raising an eyebrow at her.

“My usual self-defense methods all involve a taser,” Darcy informs him. “It didn’t seem appropriate for the conversation.”

“You need a better taser,” he says.

“For conversations?” she asks with a laugh.

“For HYDRA,” he says.

“. . . yeah okay, I’ll ask Tony about an upgrade,” Darcy says, pursing her lips. She never goes
anywhere without the thing anyway; she might as well make sure it’s operating at full capacity.

The conversation is, admittedly, not the most cheerful, but this is still such a damn sight better than the last time one of them partnered the other. She’s still itching to pet him and feed him up, but that still seems too intimate and her legs are also still barely better than jelly so she’s gonna have to wait on it no matter what. She feels really good right now, though, either way.

“I have a question,” Bucky says.

“I might have an answer,” she replies casually. He smirks at her, then his expression turns cautious.

“Before,” he starts, then hesitates for a moment. “Before, when you were talking to, uh . . . Jarvis-”

“J.A.R.V.I.S.,” Darcy supplies, because at this point she can literally hear when people are missing the acronym.

“--J.A.R.V.I.S.,” Bucky continues, frowning faintly. “When we first moved in . . . you said first litter.”

Oh god.

“Uh,” Darcy manages, turning bright red. “I didn’t mean--I mean, I don’t mean--I mean oh god. What?”

“Do you want to have more litters with me?” Bucky asks her.

“Definitely not and desperately,” Darcy says. “Um.”

“Okay,” Bucky says, then lays his head back down and closes his eyes. Darcy tries not to freak out a little, but that’s a very not-telling response, okay?!

“Uh, why do you ask?” she asks warily.

“I just wanted to know,” he says, not even having the decency to open his eyes. Darcy agonizes internally and tries not to let it show too much on her face, even if he’s not looking.

“Do you want to have more litters?” she asks cautiously. “With, uh. Me. Or at all.”

“Definitely not and desperately,” he answers, which--fair.

“Okay,” she says, laying back down and trying not to frown. Bucky looks peaceful for once, eyes still closed. Considering she just fucked him to the point of exhaustion and would still rather lie here for the next hour than do anything else, well, it’s pretty gratifying.

Her bond-bites are still dark against his throat. There’s a few places she scratched him, too, and his knees are faintly bruised. It’s hard not to lick her lips at the sight. She wants to kiss him again--on the mouth and everywhere else.

“I had another appointment with Stark and Banner,” he says, apropos of nothing. Apparently this is sharing time? Not that she’s complaining. Maybe this is just how he reacts after a good rut.

“They’re very bad at explaining.”

“Did J.A.R.V.I.S. translate for you?” Darcy asks.

“The important stuff,” Bucky replies with a nod, his eyes slitting open. “I really didn’t think I could
“get pregnant anymore.”

“I know, baby,” Darcy says, despising.

“Banner says there was an implant in my arm,” Bucky says. “That’s why I wasn’t having heats, before.”

“Before what?” Darcy asks automatically, and he gives her a wry look.

“Before you, stupid,” he says. Is that supposed to be an endearment? He made it sound like an endearment. But more distractingly--

“That was your first heat after going off birth control?!” she demands disbelievingly. “Jesus, no wonder you were so fucked up! No wonder you smelled so weird!”

“Thanks,” Bucky says wryly.

“Sorry,” she says with a wince. “Just, uh, Steve and Sam--they said your scent was different, when HYDRA had you. Sorta . . . chemical and metallic, I think?”

“Bleach and blood,” Bucky says. Darcy winces again.

“Maaaybe,” she says. He snorts at her.

“I know what I smelled like,” he says, gesturing at his face. “They had me wearing a mask that filtered out pheromones. There wasn’t much else I could smell.”

“That’s horrible,” Darcy says.

“Kinda, yeah,” Bucky agrees. “Easier to kill people you can’t smell, though.”

“Scent’s also, like, ridiculously good at triggering memories,” Darcy says. “Like, I’m surprised that thing wasn’t bolted on.”

“It was,” Bucky says, reaching a hand up to rub his chin. “The captain just hits really hard. Think he cracked my jaw with that one.”

“Jesus,” Darcy says. He shrugs.

“Super-soldier,” he says.

“Yeah, no fucking kidding,” she says, and then finally starts putting herself in . . . okay, not in order, exactly, but in a less uncomfortable state of undress. She kicks off her socks and her stained and sticky jeans and panties and then strips off her button-down and, after brief consideration, her T-shirt and bra too. She sweated practically right through them, they definitely need washed. “I’m gonna go throw in a load of laundry. Toss me your shirt?”

“I would if I had any idea where it was,” Bucky says, rolling onto his back among the scattered beanbags and peering up at her.

“Fair,” Darcy allows as she balls up her dirty clothes, then rolls to her feet and starts looking. She finds it halfway behind the couch. The place he lost his skirt is slightly more memorable, and she beelines to the kitchen for it and a damp cloth for Bucky. The living room floor is gonna need a bit of spot cleaning--and the sofa and beanbags too, definitely--but the clothes are at least a start.

She still feels kind of exhausted, to be honest, but rut’s like that. She’s actually less exhausted than
usual, which is probably a microrut thing. She doesn’t even feel like she went as deep as usual; she remembers everything pretty clearly, she thinks. Normally it’s a bit more of a blur.

That might be a Bucky thing more than a microrut one, Darcy can’t help suspecting as she sneaks a peek back at him. The bite marks on his neck are no less dark and pretty, and she remembers laying every single one. She knows they won’t stick—not that easy, and probably especially not that easy on a super-soldier—but for now they’re really, really nice to look at.

She heads back over to him with the damp cloth and gets briefly distracted watching him clean himself up, then bundles everything up and throws it all in the machine, hoping nothing’s gonna stain weird or anything. She dumps in some extra detergent like that’s gonna do anything, which—well, maybe?

She’s really gotta get better about this kind of thing. God knows what kind of stuff pups are gonna be staining their clothes with.

Pups. Jesus.

“Hey,” Darcy says, peering back into the living room for a moment. She means to say she’s gonna go get dressed, but Bucky’s sat up in the middle of the bean bags and is stretching, arms up over his head and the long perfect line of his back arched just so, and she sort of loses track of where she was going with . . . pretty much everything, honestly. “Ngh,” she says instead, and he peers over at her.

“Mm?” he asks.

“What clothes?” she says, not very intelligently.

“What clothes?” He gives her a puzzled look, leaning back on his hands and crossing his ankles, his belly resting in his lap. Fuck, his legs are long.

“The ones we’re not wearing,” she manages. “Want me to grab you something?”

“Anything’s fine,” he says with a shrug. Darcy leaves the room with the terrifically dangerous power of dressing an omega however she pleases and promises herself she’ll just lean into the nest real quick and grab the first thing she sees.

The first thing she sees is a flowy yellow dress covered in tiny flowers, so that’s off to a good start.

Oh boy.

Darcy grabs the flowy dress because she is only so strong, then pulls on a pair of yoga pants and a tank top because she apparently wants to look like a schlub, now? Jesus, never mind. It takes a good five minutes to find something decent and get into it, which is a weirdly mortifying process but a very important and unavoidable one. In the end she forces herself into skinny jeans, a new button-down, and a sweater, and is almost certain she looks presentable. She does tuck up like half her hair under a slouchy beanie, though, because holy shit it is a mess.

Probably she should’ve stopped to take a shower, but it’s too late now, so she grabs up the dress again and heads back out to the living room with it. Bucky is still sitting on the bean bags with a contemplative expression that clears immediately when he sees her.

“You look nice,” he says, looking a little surprised. Darcy hopes, sincerely, that that is not because she normally looks not nice. Or . . . whatever.
“Doing my best,” she says, tossing him the dress. He gets up to get into it and she does her level damndest not to stare like a creep. “You bought, like, a lot more clothes than I thought.”

“I had some money,” Bucky says as he adjusts the lay of the dress. It’s significantly shorter than it looked on the hanger. She should’ve grabbed him underwear. Or a longer dress. Or both. She wonders where he got the money from, but it isn’t really important enough to bother asking about. “They look nice, don’t they?”

“Definitely,” Darcy says, giving him a reflexive once-over. “Nice” is not a strong enough word for how good Bucky looks in that dress.

“Not that kind of nice,” he says, then pauses and shrugs. “Though that’s okay too.”

“What kind of nice, then?” Darcy asks, wrinkling her nose at him.

“This kind.” Bucky smooths his dress again, then shifts his posture and changes his expression and--oh, wow. Wow, that’s weird.

“Trippy,” Darcy says, staring at one of the most harmless-looking omegas she’s ever seen. And that’s including the arm. Bucky holds the look for a moment, then shifts his weight and is suddenly himself again.

Well, she could definitely lie to her parents.

“Yes, you definitely look nice,” she says. She wonders if he learned that one under HYDRA or during the war, but again, the question isn’t all that important. Also in retrospect maybe kind of cruel, so she’s definitely not asking. “You like shopping, then, or just like looking nice?”

“I don’t know,” Bucky says. “I want to do them both, though.”

“Fair enough,” Darcy says, then looks toward the kitchen. “Still hungry?”

“Yes,” he says. She remembers him not even being sure what “hungry” was, and feels a weird, possessive pride that she’s just gonna blame the last vestiges of rut for.

“Yeah, me too,” she says. “Let’s raid the fridge.”

They do, and Darcy tears through most of the lunch meat and a not insignificant amount of jerky. Bucky eats less urgently, and takes the time to cook them some bacon. Darcy would protest, but bacon. She craves protein like crazy after rut, and microruts do not seem to be breaking that habit. Even if she didn’t: bacon.

Bucky brings over a plate of bacon and Darcy eats most of it but makes sure he takes a decent-sized share too. He doesn’t protest that, or the box of protein bars she shoves at him. It’s not home-cooking, but it’s probably gonna taste better than her home-cooking would. Bucky methodically eats his way through a good two-thirds of the box, so he doesn’t seem to mind. She watches him only kind of creepily to make sure he’s getting enough, and slides over the last of the jerky just to be sure. He eats it with a contented hum, and she rumbles in satisfaction.

Yeah, this is so much better than last time.

“Thanks,” she says. “You didn’t have to do that. The, uh--you didn’t have to help me out, I mean.”

“Not like riding your clit was an imposition,” he says wryly, breaking a piece off another protein bar. Darcy might actually blush, which is not a thing she normally does.
“Still,” she says. “You didn’t have to do it. And it was really, um--really great.”

“Better than Johnny Storm?” Bucky asks, glancing at her as he puts the piece of protein bar in his mouth. Alarm bells go off in all of Darcy’s brain.

“Um . . . I don’t really, like, rank people I’ve partnered,” she manages. “I always thought that was kinda weird?”

“Hn.” Bucky chews for a moment, not quite frowning. “But you were going to him first. So he’s better, right?”

“What?! No!” Darcy exclaims, appalled. “I told you, he owed me a favor from me heat-partnering him!”

“So did I,” Bucky says, just watching her. “You heat-partnered me too.”

“That’s different,” Darcy protests. Bucky frowns.

“What’s different about me?” he asks.

“Um, the brainwashing and the torture and the very long list of rules you and I had to make up to help you remember how to human again, maybe?” Darcy says, which is probably not the smartest tack she’s ever taken in a conversation, but seriously. “Johnny Storm is easy. I mean--there’s nothing complicated, with him. You are. It doesn’t mean he’s better, it’s just different.”

“It’s not complicated to me,” Bucky says.

“We’d never even talked about me rutting,” Darcy says, which in her book is pretty complicated. “Which, believe me, if I’d known it was coming a month early, I definitely would’ve brought it up.”

“You were early?” Bucky asks, focusing that intent look on her again.

“Way early,” Darcy emphasizes. “Which I am never, for the record. If anything I’m likelier to end up late.”

“But you were early.” Bucky’s still just looking at her. She turns red again.

“Of course I was, dude,” she says. “You needed protected. And you’re so--like, you’re unbearably hot, you know that, right?”

“I think I used to be,” Bucky says, looking briefly distracted--like he’s trying to remember something. “Yeah. People used to think I looked good.”

“Well, they were right,” Darcy says. “You also smell delicious, and you’re unreasonably kind and you’re funny, and--look, there was a lot going on, okay? There is a lot going on, with you.”

“Because I’m complicated,” Bucky says.

“Argh,” Darcy says, dragging a hand down her face with a wince. Goddammit. “Yes. No. No, you definitely are. I don’t mean it in a bad way, I just didn’t want to screw anything up.”

“Screw what up?” He frowns at her.

“You, mostly,” Darcy says. “But also, like, how you and I get along. We get along okay, right? I didn’t wanna screw that up.”
She really hopes she has not, on that note.

“You didn’t screw anything up,” Bucky says, tucking a lock of hair behind his ear hesitantly. She wonders, randomly and irrationally, if he’ll let her brush it this time, and maybe give him that shoulder massage too. He looks a lot better than he looked after his heat, but he still looks like he could use both those things. “I don’t think you did, anyway.”

“Okay then,” Darcy says, because if Bucky thinks she didn’t screw anything up then at least probably she didn’t screw anything up. Admittedly, he may not be the best judge of that.

Okay, yeah, she’s doing just great at treating him like a person, isn’t she. But where’s the line between being careful of his problems and pretending like they don’t exist?

Talk about a goddamn knife’s edge.

See, it’s funny because assassins and knives, and also because she should never be allowed to talk to anyone ever.

“I really appreciated it,” she says after a moment, tucking her own hot-mess hair behind her ears too. “And, uh, just to be clear, you don’t have to do it again. Like, if this comes up again. Or just in general. Just because you wanted to do it this time doesn’t mean you have to do it any other time. Times.”

“You don’t want to do it again?” Bucky asks.

“Ngh,” Darcy says, nearly crushing the protein bar she just picked up. “Uh. No, that is not—that is not what I said. Meant. Thing. Jamie, baby, you’re gonna kill me.”

“If I was going to kill you—”

“That is definitely not what I meant,” Darcy says quickly, waving her hands in the air. She really doesn’t need to hear the second half of that sentence. “That is not in any way whatsoever what I meant. This is about, like, sexual autonomy and respectful behavior and you being mind-destroyingly hot, like, always.”

“Respectful of what?” Bucky asks, wrinkling his nose at her in bemusement.

“Um--each other?” Darcy winces a little. It sounds kind of stupid to say it out loud but since not saying it would be worse, well . . . “Like if you don’t want to do something, I also want to not do that thing. But if you do want to do something, well, I might too? Depending? Wow, I am not rocking this explanation.”

“Do you need the rules?” Bucky suggests, which might actually be a sincere question and also is not actually a bad idea, honestly.

“I’m good, thanks,” Darcy says anyway. “I liked what we did. I’d like to do it again, if you want.”

“I want,” Bucky says like it’s a complete sentence. Darcy resists the urge to fan herself.

“Cool,” she says. “So, like . . . maybe we will, then.”

“Maybe,” Bucky says, and gives her that under-the-lash look again. Darcy seriously considers crawling under the table and shoving up that dress, but she probably couldn’t get it up right now if her life depended on it.
Then again, she doesn’t really need to do that to eat him out.

“Okay,” she says instead of testing her luck. They should probably talk more, but she has no idea how to talk about this. “Um--do you mean, like, partnering each other for heats and ruts or friends with benefits, or do you mean, like, dating?”

“I haven’t been on a date in seventy years,” Bucky says, his expression turning briefly distant.

“I could, uh. I could fix that,” Darcy hedges. Hell fucking help the next HYDRA agent she meets. They’ll probably kill her, but they’re definitely getting a taser somewhere sensitive first. “We could . . . do something?”

“We don’t have to,” Bucky says, eyes shuttering a bit. Darcy frowns, not sure how to interpret that one.

“Does that mean you don’t wanna, or . . .” She trails off.

"Just . . . no one has to know. I won’t tell,” Bucky says, his eyes flicking away. “It's--I wouldn't blame you, if you didn't want people to know.”

“. . . riiight,” Darcy says slowly, then reaches for her cell phone. “One second.”

She hustles around to Bucky’s side of the table and opens Skype as she sits down next to him. Ian’s face appears on the screen after a few moments, and she angles the camera carefully to include her and Bucky both. At this point, fuck security; she can’t be paranoid about everything she does for the rest of their lives.

“Darcy!” Ian says, then blinks in surprise at Bucky. “Um--hello?”

“Bucky, this is Ian, he’s my ex-slash-BFF,” Darcy introduces easily. “Ian, this is Bucky, he’s my bae. We’re going on a date.”

“Nice to meet you?” Ian says. “Darcy, um, is that--”

“Probably!” she interjects cheerfully.

“Sure,” Bucky manages, half-covering his face with his biological hand. In his defense: camera. Darcy kisses the exposed part of his cheek just to make her point.

“Talk to you later, guy,” she says, and hangs up on Ian before Bucky can get too stressed. She’ll give Ian more details later; he’ll understand.

“Are you crazy?” Bucky asks. Darcy kisses his cheek again, and he kisses her on the mouth in response. She is not complaining.

“Only a little bit,” she promises. “Hang on, I’m gonna go tell Jane and Thor and Erik too.”

“You don’t have to do that,” he says.

“Too late, I want to,” Darcy declares, already halfway across the room to the door. This is probably the easiest thing she could do to make Bucky feel better, and it’s not like she would’ve wanted to keep her mouth shut about it anyway. “Jane, Thor, Erik!” she yells out the door as she leans into the hall. “I’m taking Bucky on a date! Don’t wait up!”

“It’s two AM,” Jane says, leaning into the other half of the hallway and raising an eyebrow at her.
“Good thing we’re in the city that never sleeps, then,” Darcy replies confidently, like she’d had any idea what time it was.

“How about we make it a double,” Jane suggests, which is actually probably a very good idea.

“You know, yeah, let’s do that,” she says. “Although I definitely need a shower first, so give us fifteen minutes?”

“Got it,” Jane confirms, then retreats back into the common room. Darcy makes a mental note to find out why she was up at two AM later, although she’s pretty sure the answer is science.

“You wanna go on a date now?” Bucky asks as Darcy closes the door.

“Why not?” she asks reasonably. “And hey, it’s a double date, that’ll be fun.”

“. . . a double date,” Bucky repeats, frowning briefly to himself for a moment. It’s his “remembering something” frown, so Darcy doesn’t sweat it.

“Yeah, but we need to clean up first,” she says, stripping off her sweater.

“I don’t want to,” Bucky says. “I won’t smell like you anymore.”

Darcy’s higher thought processes briefly glaze over and she nearly gets tangled in the sweater. “I’ll scent you when we’re done,” she promises.

“I don’t want to,” Bucky says. “I won’t smell like you anymore.”

Darcy’s higher thought processes briefly glaze over and she nearly gets tangled in the sweater. “I’ll scent you when we’re done,” she promises.

“Oh, all right,” she says, and takes off his dress.

Nnnnn.

“Okay,” Darcy repeats, and manages not to walk into a wall only by virtue of the open floor plan.

She heads into the bedroom to finish undressing and Bucky follows her into the shower and her brain manages not to short out entirely as she blesses Tony Stark’s unreasonably large walk-in showers, or maybe curses since they actually have some personal space left.

Bucky moves into her personal space and she sticks with “blesses”.

“Can I wash your hair?” she asks him.

“Oh, all right,” he says.

It’s fucking Christmas.

Darcy washes Bucky’s hair and he pushes his head into her hands and is gorgeous, really, is just . . . beautiful, simply and totally. Darcy pretends to be able to be chill about that, which mostly works. Look, she just spent half the night rutting him; there’s only so much she can do to embarrass herself at this point.

He lets her clean her come out of him and off his thighs, which is almost enough to get her embarrassing herself.

They make the shower quick, because they both have a lot of hair and only one hair dryer, and in the end they’re still both kind of damp when the fifteen minutes are up. Darcy especially, since she got a little distracted by the opportunity to brush Bucky’s hair. Or, well--very distracted.

Very, very distracted.
She rubs the scent glands in her wrists over the ones on his neck, because she promised and also
due to her maybe never wanting to scent somebody so bad in her life. He leans into the touch
and looks very good doing it. They get dressed again—same clothes as before—and Darcy pretends
not to notice that Bucky didn’t bother finding underwear but definitely notices that Bucky didn’t
bother finding underwear. Who the hell would miss that one?

She deserves this, somehow. She’s not sure if that’s in a good way or a bad one.

He does throw on a hoodie and the gloves she gave him, probably more to hide his arm than
anything else. If he’s willing to go outside at night in a dress that short, he probably doesn’t get
cold that easy.

Oh god, he’s willing to go outside at night in a dress that short. She is gonna die.

Darcy grabs her coat and they head out of the suite together and meet Jane and Thor, and they all
go out for a—very late—dinner. It’s the first time she’s left the tower with Bucky, Darcy realizes
belatedly. It’s uneventful, as an experience; not as awkward as dinner with Natasha and Clint, just
the same kind of thing they’ve been doing at home in a new location. Bucky doesn’t talk much, but
when their hands accidentally knock together on the walk he grips hers like he thinks it was on
purpose.

It wasn’t, but if Darcy’d known that was all it’d take to get him to hold her hand, it would’ve been.

They hit up a bar close to the tower. Darcy’s been there a few times, but not enough to count as a
regular. Thor immediately starts drinking the place out of all its liquor and Bucky eyes a bottle of
vodka in a very unomegalike way, but obviously ends up with a virgin drink. Darcy’s pretty sure if
it weren’t for the pups she’d be learning a lot about super-soldier alcohol tolerance tonight, except
if it weren’t for the pups Bucky wouldn’t even be here so—okay, yeah. This is not the time to be
worrying about stuff like that.

Jane orders every appetizer on the menu and a significant share of the entrees without any
preamble, because Jane both knows who they’re eating with and has her priorities straight, and
most of the conversation consists of things like “pass the onion rings” and “who’s got the
ketchup?”, and at no point does the world try to end. It’s pretty fucking great.

“This is pretty fucking great,” Darcy says, because why wouldn’t she? Jane steals the rest of the
mozzarella sticks right out from under her nose and she doesn’t even care. Well, hardly cares;
they’re really good mozzarella sticks.

“Is it?” Bucky asks, more as a genuine question than anything else. Darcy feels the tasing urge rise,
but smothers it in favor of having a normal date night.

“As soon as we order more mozzarella sticks, yes,” she confirms firmly, leaning back in her seat to
wave the waiter down. Said waiter is not secretly a murderous alien or Loki back from the dead
with a sharp object and bad news, so yeah, this is pretty fucking great.

They eat the place out of house and home and Thor cheerfully acquiesces to a few photos with
other patrons and Jane starts scribbling equations on napkins halfway through the meal and Bucky
doesn’t always seem entirely sure what to do, but overall everything goes pretty smoothly. They
end up out even further past a reasonable bedtime and putting the whole bill on the “Avenging-
related expenses” card, but walking back to the tower with Bucky’s hand in hers again is about the
best Darcy’s felt in weeks. Maybe months, even; right back to the first moment she’d caught his
scent for the first time and gone to check on whoever it belonged to.
This is, obviously, a vastly preferable state of affairs to that situation, but she wouldn’t change that situation for a damn thing.

So they head back to the tower, Jane and Thor laughing the whole way and Darcy laughing most of it, aside from whenever she’s sneaking little peeks at Bucky to make sure he’s okay. He isn’t laughing, and he doesn’t really smile either, but he watches them alertly and pays careful attention to what they say. She thinks that means he’s good? Probably?

... has he laughed in front of anyone else yet? She’s not actually sure.

They make it up to the Thor floor and Darcy tries not to glee out listening to Thor and Bucky make plans to go out tomorrow before going their separate ways. Telling a grown omega she’s proud of him for having a friend—which she is almost sure is a thing Thor and Bucky are—would be super-weird, probably, but she’s definitely still proud of him. She’s proud of a lot of things about Bucky, and admittedly that is sometimes in the creepy-possessive hindbrain way, but that doesn’t make it any less true. He’s doing really good. Like, almost unreasonably good, all things considered.

Normally she’d be kind of paranoid, honestly, but so what if he ends up losing some ground or relapses once or twice? He’s trying to be a person, and that’s what matters.

... as long as it’s not a full-on Winter Soldier relapse, anyway. Which admittedly would be a problem. Still, that’s the worst-case scenario, and they’ve been doing pretty good avoiding worst-case scenarios. Even Bucky getting pregnant isn’t the worst-case scenario that could’ve happened there; obvious problems aside, it’s pretty safe to say nobody’d rather HYDRA had gotten their creepy-ass tentacles on him again.

Ugh, tentacles.

“I had a nice time,” she tells Bucky in front of their suite door, since the front door’s the traditional place to say that kind of thing even if they are both about to go through it. “Thanks for coming out with me.”

“No one tried to kill us,” Bucky says, which might be ex-POW for “I had a nice time too” but might be ex-commando for “I was bored as fuck”, Darcy’s not sure. Bucky looks pensive and a little troubled, and she wonders if he knows either.

“Yeah, I enjoyed that part,” she says, tucking her hands into her jacket pockets to keep them off him. She’d really like to touch him but she’s taken a lot of liberties in regards to touching Bucky today, so she should probably cool it a bit. “Maybe we could do it again sometime.”

“Maybe,” Bucky says, still looking troubled. “But people will really think we’re dating, then.”

“I’m okay with that,” Darcy reminds him. He frowns a little and looks at the floor. “… are you okay with--”

She doesn’t even get the sentence out before Bucky’s crushed up in her space and craning his neck to rub their scent glands together, which despite spending the evening in rut still goes straight to her clit. Darcy makes a strangled noise. Bucky buries his face against her hair, his softly-gloved hands catching at her shoulders and holding on tight.

“I’m okay with it,” he says. They’re pressed so close together that Darcy is hard-pressed to stop remembering just how little he’s actually wearing under that short little dress: i.e., the fact that there is nothing under that short little dress except for their pups and some of her more inappropriate thoughts. It’s--it’s a thing, definitely.
“Okay,” she says. She could bite one of the bond bites on his neck, if she wanted. She restrains herself to pressing a kiss to one. Bucky shivers, his hands tightening on her shoulders, and Darcy pushes up on her tiptoes to kiss behind his ear. Look, she’s not made of stone.

This is so much better than it was after his heat.

“Alpha,” Bucky murmurs quietly, voice hot and soft, and Darcy’s skin pricks greedily as her hands settle on his hips. It’d be easy as anything to ruck up that dress a bit.

“Omega,” she rumbles back, nuzzling into his bitten-up neck and earning a few hitched breaths. She’s definitely not strong enough to lift a pregnant omega who’s mostly muscle and he’s much taller than her, but maybe if he leaned back against the door and just sort of slid down it a bit . . . They’re in the hallway, geez.

“Door,” Darcy says meaningfully, groping for it. Bucky’s too busy nuzzling her to listen, from what she can tell. She manages to find it anyway, just as he gives her jaw a tiny little kitten-lick that makes her shudder down to her core. “Nngh.”

He purrs, and licks her again. Darcy misses her grip on the door twice before catching it, and then they’re both stumbling over the threshold and letting it shut behind them. She might have something intelligent or at least semi-coherent to say, but Bucky’s started kissing down her throat so yeah, no, chances are slim with a high of none.

“Ngh,” she says again before catching his jaw to pull him into a kiss. He follows her direction so easily—and their mouths meet with electric urgency. Darcy was not previously aware she had the hormones left for even a chaste peck on the cheek, but with Bucky’s arms sliding around her neck and Bucky’s mouth pliant and pleading against hers . . . yeah, yup, she’s finding them.

Maybe they should talk about this, she thinks.

“Should we talk about this?” she manages breathlessly somewhere between kisses, and Bucky lets out a soft huff and rubs their cheeks together.

“No,” he says.

“Are you sure?” She runs her hands up his sides reflexively, a touch of anxiety in the gesture even with how good he feels under them. He huffs again.

“Yes,” he says, stripping off the gloves and shrugging out of his hoodie.

“Okay, but--”

Bucky puts his hands on her breasts. Darcy pauses. Her front brain attempts to reboot and her hindbrain takes the opportunity to sneak her own hands up under his dress and squeeze his ass, which makes him make a very good sound.

“What did you wanna talk about?” he asks, raising an eyebrow at her.

“You know what, actually I’m good,” Darcy says, and that’s how they end up all tangled up together and back in the bean bag pile. Maybe she still has some leftover rut pheromones in her system to get her going when normally she’d still be tapped-out, but she has no complaints at all about the situation. Worst case scenario, maybe there’ll be some chafing. She can handle some chafing.
Bucky keeps kissing her. It’s really nice. Darcy returns the favor eagerly and pushes her hands up his thighs while his dawdle wonderfully around her chest and throat. He takes the excuse to rub the scent glands in his wrists over the swollen and over-sensitive ones in her neck, and she groans. She wants him to keep doing that all night and to roll over and present right now and to never, ever stop touching her. She also wants about five thousand other things, most of them conflicting, but settles for getting her hands under his dress and pushing into his touch.

It doesn’t take much to get him sighing and mewling, and it doesn’t take much to get her in the same state. Well--she’s rumbling, obviously, not mewling, but the point stands.

“You’re amazing,” she says, kissing behind his ear--over a bond-bite.

“Don’t stop,” he says, tilting his head just so for her as he tugs open the front of her pants.

“Pretty sure I’d need a bucket of cold water or a global emergency for that,” she tells him as she keeps kissing the bite marks she’d left one-by-one and keeps getting very good noises in return. “Maybe both. Mmmm, you’re so good. What’re you gonna let me do to you?”

“Yeah, I was more thinking the other way around there,” Bucky says, pushing her over and throwing a leg across her lap.

“I’m listening,” Darcy says, grinning widely up at him. God, he’s gorgeous.

“Good, there’s gonna be a test,” Bucky says with a smirk, then grabs her clit and sits on it. Darcy groans, hips jerking up instinctively, and he hisses breathlessly as he works his way down her length. He’s wet and warm and tight and already rocking down to meet her erratic thrusts with practiced ease. She’s this close to knotting that quick, but knows she has to hold on longer than that.

The problem with that, Darcy has learned in her brief but enthusiastic experience partnering Bucky, is that when he’s on top he gets fucking greedy. Just about any other position he’ll take anything she gives him and love it just how it is, but when he wants to climb her . . .

“Harder, alpha, harder!” he pants, fucking himself down so roughly Darcy’s expecting bruises on her hipbones in the morning. “Gimme your clit, gimme more, I want the whole thing!”

Yeah, it’s about like that.

“Doing my best, baby,” Darcy manages to get out somewhere in the mess of hisses and groans she can’t contain, and Bucky whines, sits down hard, and then does something with his hips that nearly makes her screech.

Yeah, she was not just blowing smoke up his ass when she told him how good he was at this shit. Jesus Christ.

“Oh, good boy,” she moans, and he does that thing with his hips again and she nearly comes without even knotting, which is some fucking high school shit right there. “Nghh! Baby, fuck, if you keep that up I’m gonna--”

“Do it,” Bucky demands immediately, leaning back on his hands so the next thrust slides her in even deeper and has her burying curses in the crook of her arm. “Fill me up, alpha, it’s not enough yet.”

Considering the amount of times she came in him today . . . ngh.
It does not take much more to get her knot to blow, put it that way. The moment it’s too big for Bucky to fuck himself on he drops hard into her lap again, swallows the whole thing to the root, and squeezes.

“Jesus Christ!” Darcy chokes, her hands scrabbling at his thighs, and Bucky smiles beatifically down at her and lifts his dress just enough to let her see his pretty, perfect cock and just how tight he’s grinding down onto her knot.

Seriously, she was not warned about this. No wonder everybody called him a heartbreaker.

“You’re a fucking treat,” she says, then gets her fingers on his perfectly-presented cock and starts working it. Bucky makes a noise that sounds like fucking candy but doesn’t miss a beat of merciless grinding. Darcy doesn’t make it another thirty seconds before she’s coming, and he coos at her.

“That’s better,” he says breathlessly, rolling his hips just enough to drag out her aftershocks. “Can’t rut me up all night and then expect me to go to bed without your come in me, alpha.”

“Ngh,” Darcy says, and Bucky pins her to the beanbags with one hand--not even the freaking metal hand--and takes his time getting off on her knot. It’s so hyper-sensitive and he takes so long that she nearly starts whimpering more than once, and one or two might just escape. “Jamie, baby, oh my god, Jamie.”

“I’m good at this,” he says to her, all smug smirk and sugar-sticky sweat. Darcy is barely keeping herself from howling.

“You’re so--you’re--I’m gonna fucking die, baby,” she gasps out, and he just squeezes harder around her again, like he’s trying to completely wring her clit out. He has, she’s pretty sure. “Oh my goddddd!”

“Can you go again?” Bucky asks her like it’s just some innocent little question and not a gorgeous, bred omega she’s promised to give everything she can to asking for her to go twice in fifteen minutes on the same knot after she just fucking rutted.

“There is literally zero chance,” she manages, as badly as she wants to tell him anything else.

“You sure?” He’s smirking, a little, but he’s also biting his bottom lip and there’s this hungry little look in the back of his eyes and oh fuck--

“I can’t,” Darcy wheezes, then grabs his ass and pulls him down even tighter. He makes a thrilled noise and clutches up vise-tight, so tight it probably hurts but Darcy can’t tell for how she’s already fucking aching.

“Maybe you can,” Bucky says with those same hungry eyes. “If I tell you how much I want it, can you? You cleaned me out, alpha, it’s only fair you fill me back up.”

“Oh, the things she is thinking are not decent things. I’d still be all full of you,” Bucky says, which actually might be worse than what she was thinking herself. “Everybody would’ve been able to smell your rut all over me.”

“You are going to kill me,” Darcy groans, and Bucky grinds his hips down just that little bit harder.
She’s definitely going to bruise.

“That’d be okay, right?” he says, licking his lips in a painfully distracting way. “You wouldn’t mind people knowing that either, right?”

“I would the *opposite* of mind that,” Darcy says, and Bucky bites his lip and does this sort of--this sort of *swivel* thing with his hips and goddddd--

“Prove it,” he says, and yeah, okay, looks like “all night” is back on the menu.
Darcy wakes up late, covered in bruises and bitemarks and the scent of Bucky’s slick and satisfaction. She could get out of bed, probably, but before she does anything she definitely, definitely needs to jack off. Like, there are no two ways about that. She actually cannot believe she even has it in her.

She does, apparently, because she really needs to, so she takes care of business and then gobbles down this morning’s bacon sandwich and rolls off the wrecked bed to start stripping the sheets. The entire apartment is gonna need washed, she’s pretty sure, and also she never actually put last night’s clothes in the dryer sooo . . .

Yeah, they might need to replace some stuff.

Heading out into the suite, however, it turns out she’s been beaten to the punch: the clothes are in the dryer and everything is fucking spotless, which--how? How even? She’d been pretty sure they were gonna have to bleach that floor.

Jesus, don’t underestimate a forties-era omega’s capacity to clean up a mess.

. . . or a super-assassin’s ability to get incriminating stains out of anything. Whichever one’s actually relevant here.

Darcy decides not to figure that one out and just goes and takes a really hot and badly needed shower instead. There’s no sign of Bucky, so no reason to make oatmeal; he must already be out with Thor. She checks just to be sure, and J.A.R.V.I.S. confirms.

She’s off today, obviously--the day after a heat or rut is basically a mandatory off-day--so she takes her time about showering. Washing off Bucky’s scent is an unfortunate side-effect, but seriously, she’s a sticky mess. She’s not leaving the suite in this condition come hell or high water. Well, probably for an alien invasion. But only an alien invasion.

. . . unless Bucky needs something, obviously, then--anyway. She’s a mess and she needs cleaned up, so she cleans herself up. Her hair takes almost twice as long to wash as usual due to some, uh, unfortunate things having dried in it, and she makes the same mental note she makes every six months, which is Jesus, Lewis, tie your DAMN hair back for once. She’s definitely gonna forget next time and is also pretty sure this is actually the post-rut’s fault anyway, but still. One of these days it’ll sink in.

She gets out of the shower, dries off, and decides that after spending her whole rut in jeans she’s not putting pants on for anything less than an emergency, so only bothers throwing on a robe and staking out a nice cozy corner of the sofa to have her morning coffee in. Alphas don’t need pampered around rut like omegas do around heat, but Darcy doesn’t see why she shouldn’t be extra-nice to herself anyway. She’s still over-sensitive and gonna be pretty mood-swingy if she’s not careful, so she might as well. Better she lounge around in a robe all morning being lazy than end up pissed-off and climbing the walls by noon.

She settles in on the sofa with her coffee and phone and starts idly going through her favorite apps, looking for something to play for a while. She’s leaning towards the latest Candy Crush ripoff, because yeah it’s Candy Crush but it’s still pretty fun. Definitely more involving than an idle game, at least. There’s a thunderstorm brewing outside the wall-encompassing windows, which is
blissfully relaxing these days. Admittedly some of Darcy’s associations with thunder are a bit more “alien attack”-oriented than “relaxation”-oriented, but Thor wins over freaky monsters and dark elves any day. Like, literally.

So there’s a thunderstorm brewing, things are going pretty good—not perfect, obviously, but way, way better than they could be—and Darcy’s cuddled up with some pillows and coffee on the sofa, having some alone-time while Bucky’s off chilling with Thor. Probably they’re shopping, she’s pretty sure they said they were going shopping. If she’s lucky, they’ll bring back cake.

“Darcy!” Jane bursts into the suite out of nowhere, and Darcy spills coffee all over herself with a curse, ow.

“Jane!” she yells back at her. “Are you nuts, what if Bucky’d been in here, he’d have stabbed you! And I wouldn’t have blamed him!”

“He’s not in here,” Jane says, which yeah, okay, Jane probably remembers from last night but—“J.A.R.V.I.S! Turn on the TV!”

Thunder rolls outside the window. The bottom drops out of Darcy’s stomach.

“Oh no,” she says.

J.A.R.V.I.S. turns on the TV. Darcy’s stomach does not feel any better about things.

“Oh no,” she repeats in dread, staring at the live report on the screen. The footage is shaky, but it’s definitely Thor and a bunch of guys in black tac gear and no sign of Bucky whatsoever.

“They were together, right?” Jane says. “They must be together.”

“It’s fucking HYDRA!” Darcy half-shrieks, jumping to her feet. She forgets about her mug and the coffee splattered all over her robe and runs into the bedroom in a panic. A more rational alpha would grab clothes; she goes for her taser and then rushes right back out and beelines for the door.

“Darcy! Pants!” Jane says.

“HYDRA!” Darcy yells at her. There’s still no sign of Bucky on the screen.

“I know, I know, but—!”

Lightning strikes, outside and on-screen. The TV goes white, and she can hear the cameraman cursing.

Yeah, fuck pants. Darcy tears out of the suite and bolts into the elevator, Jane just a few steps behind her. She slams the lobby button, then slams it again when the elevator doesn’t immediately start moving.

“J.A.R.V.I.S!” she yells.

“Yes, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says, and the elevator doors snap shut and the elevator drops. Jane yelps in alarm and grabs one of the rails, but for Darcy, it’s still not fast enough. It’s HYDRA. It’s HYDRA, and there was no sign of Bucky on the TV, and it’s HYDRA and she’s going to fucking murder--

The elevator stops, and the doors pop open. Darcy bolts straight out of it and hears thunder crashing outside, hears yelling and screaming from the street, and sees the door outside held half-
jar by someone who’s about to get *trampled* if they don’t--

It’s Bucky. He’s just standing there, holding the door and a couple shopping bags and watching the lightning arcing through the sky outside with a mystified expression. Darcy is both overwhelmed with relief and suddenly terrified, and rushes straight at him.

“*Bucky!*” she shouts, and he turns his head to look at her, still looking bemused.

“Hi,” he says, and it sounds so *normal* that she skids to a stop right before she would’ve thrown herself at him, breathing heavily.

“Are you okay?!?” she demands, still more panicked than anything else. Bucky gives her a strange look, then nods.

“We brought cake,” he says, lifting one of his shopping bags.

“Agh,” Darcy says, and throws herself at him after all. Bucky makes a surprised noise, blinking down at her, and she squeezes him as tight as she can. Jesus, that was so--she was *so sure*-- “I thought you were with Thor!”

“He said he’d take care of it,” Bucky says.

“What?”

“Thor,” Bucky repeats, like *that’s* the thing that needs clarified. “He authorized me to go back to the tower unsupervised so he could engage the hostiles.”

“Oh my god, you scared me so *bad*,” Darcy says, not even caring about the “authorized” part or any of the other weird phrasing in that sentence. “He was on TV! And you weren’t!”

“You’re not injured, are you?” Jane asks, coming up beside them and staring up at the lightning. She seems much calmer now that Bucky’s right here, which is fair because obviously Bucky and the pups were the ones at risk, not the alien god-prince with the lightning hammer, but Darcy’s still this close to freaking out.

“No.” Bucky shakes his head. “They tried to activate old programming. It was *defunct.*”

“They tried *what*?!” Darcy demands in horror, suddenly remembering her taser and all the HYDRA-related places she’d like to stick it. She pictures, very briefly, the Winter Soldier on a mission to kill Captain America with a bellyful of pups, and makes a horrible strangled noise.

“They had some old code words,” Bucky says, frowning faintly. “They didn’t work.”

“Why not?” Jane asks with a frown of her own even as Darcy’s saying, “Thank *fuck.*”

“I don’t know,” Bucky says. “They should have.”

“We’re going upstairs,” Darcy says, tightening her grip on him. “Like, upstairs where it’s *secure.*”

“. . . yeah, we should do that,” Bucky agrees, watching a fresh fork of lightning hit the ground. Darcy hears something explode in the distance, but really does not care whatsoever. Thor’s an omega, yeah, but he’s not the currently *pregnant* omega, and also could bench-press the full roster of the Avengers without even trying. He’s fine. Bucky, however, is standing way closer to the blast radius of whatever Thor’s doing than Darcy is even *remotely* comfortable with.

“Good idea,” Jane says. They all retreat to the elevator and J.A.R.V.I.S. closes the doors behind
them and sends them back up, and Darcy breathes a sigh of relief but still doesn’t feel that much calmer. She’s definitely not putting away her taser, that’s for fucking sure.

“J.A.R.V.I.S., does Tony--” Darcy starts.

“Mr. Stark is aware of the situation and will be en-route to assist Thor momentarily,” J.A.R.V.I.S. informs her, and Darcy lets out another relieved sigh. Okay. Okay, that’s good. Not that Thor really needs the help against normal humans, but she’s not gonna complain about him getting it.

“I have a mission report,” Bucky says, looking down at her. Darcy has no idea what that means, but well, she has a few guesses.

“Awesome, cool, we’ll get to that in a sec,” she says, taking the bags from him and barely resisting the urge to pat him down for injuries. “You’re sure you’re not hurt, right?”

“Yes.” He’s just looking at her, something faintly curious in his expression. The elevator doors open and Darcy ushers him out anxiously, beelining straight for the suite.

“Darcy--” Jane starts, following her to their door, and Darcy barely keeps herself from snarling at her for coming that close to her territory, even though it’s Jane. It doesn’t matter, she doesn’t want anybody within a hundred miles.

“Yeah, no, I definitely can’t right now,” she says instead of snarling, then leaves Jane there and drags Bucky back to the bedroom. Well--she says drags, but he follows her easy as anything, so it’s not really that labor-intensive. She drops the bags by the bedroom door and basically herds him into the nesting closet, and again he goes easy as anything, though he seems mystified all over again. Darcy doesn’t care. Darcy the opposite of cares. Her omega’s not safe, he needs to be safe. Literally nothing else matters until he is.

“Darcy?” he says. She grabs the pillows and comforter off the bed and shoves them into the nest with him, like there’s anything useful they could do. It doesn’t matter. The nest needs to be bigger, safer, better--

She’s seriously considering dragging the mattress off the bed. If it weren’t so huge she’d already be trying.

She still hasn’t actually managed to put down her taser.

“Darcy,” Bucky says again. She moves the nightstands in front of the bedroom door. “Darcy.”

The nightstands aren’t that big. Maybe if she can get the mattress down--

“Alphaaa,” Bucky whines, and Darcy immediately forgets everything else, whipping around to rush over to him. He grabs her by the face, leans in, and bites her lower lip.

“OW!” she yelps. Bucky gives her a dry look.

“You in there?” he asks.

“They tried to hurt you!” Darcy protests reflexively.

“So have half the major law enforcement agencies on the planet,” he says. “Do you want my mission report or not?”

“... you know telling me what happened isn’t actually a mission, right?” she asks.
“I don’t remember what else to call it,” he says, which—fair. And also making Darcy want to go back downstairs and taze somebody real, real bad.

“Okay,” she says instead. “What’s your report?”

“Thor and I were followed,” Bucky says, finally letting go of her face. Darcy stomps on the urge to push him back into the closet. It’s no safer in there than it is out here, all dumb hindbrain-impulses aside. “Thor lost line of sight on me while tourists were asking for his photograph and a disguised agent approached me and attempted to activate my programming. The activation code failed.”

“I wanna break their teeth,” Darcy says, fingers twitching on her taser. The idea that someone was trying to just walk off with Bucky like he was theirs . . .

“Probably overkill,” Bucky says. “I already broke their jaw.”

“I love you,” Darcy swears immediately, pulling him down so she can kiss his cheek. He makes a startled noise, then stares at her. “Seriously, way to go, good job. I know you hate that shit but I’m really proud of you for doing it.”

“. . . thanks,” Bucky says slowly, then goes on: “Their backup tried to drag me into a van. I put up an unholy fucking fight, Thor heard, and then, uh . . . then his hammer happened, pretty much.”

“Yeah, it kind of defies explanation,” Darcy says, kissing his other cheek. “You’re so great.” Considering the last time HYDRA agents were trying to drag him off . . . yeah, Bucky’s fucking amazing. “That when you came back?”

“Yes,” Bucky says. “They called in all their backup to deal with Thor and I lost pursuit in the crowd.”

“You’re the best,” Darcy praises, kissing him again. “God, baby, I was so scared, I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“You’re a good handler,” Bucky says wistfully.

“Do you know what word you’re trying to use when you say ‘handler’?” Darcy asks him instead of responding how she actually wants to, which would involve way more freaking out. It’s really not the time.

“No idea,” he says, hiding his face against her hair. She pets the back of his neck and breathes out. Okay, then.

“You did so good, baby,” she says. Bucky presses in closer against her, close enough that she can feel his stomach against hers. Admittedly that’s a lot less close than it used to be, but it’s still pretty close. She keeps petting him, because if she can’t taze a HYDRA goon she can at least do that, and after a few moments he starts shuddering and shrinks in on himself in a way that hurts to watch. Darcy keeps up the petting, because it’s the best she’s got. “Really, you did perfect, I’m so proud, omega.”

Steve is going to have a fucking heart attack.

They spend a while like that, Bucky just standing there and Darcy just holding onto him, hoping she’s helping. She’s not Thor or Tony; she can’t actually go out and fight. Normally that doesn’t bother her, but right now . . . yeah, there’s a lot she’d do to be a superhero right now.

HYDRA knows where Bucky is. A cold chill goes up her spine at the thought, and she tries to just
concentrate on holding him and keeping that dread out of her scent. It’s the hardest thing she’s done all day.

“I took a shower,” Bucky says. She pauses, leaning back enough to give him a confused look.

“Uh--okay?” she tries, not really sure what that has to do with anything.

“They don’t know what you smell like,” Bucky clarifies, and her eyes widen.

“Baby, you think I’m worried about that?” she asks. “They could have me by the neck and I wouldn’t care, as long as you were okay.”

That isn’t even hyperbole, she’s surprised to realize. She’s prone to exaggeration, she’ll admit it, but she meant every word of that as literally as possible.

“They couldn’t,” Bucky says, trailing a hand over her jaw and looking at her with a strange, searching expression. It’s not a look she recognizes on him. “I’d kill them first.”

“While I wildly appreciate that, if it comes down to it, protect the kids,” Darcy says. “I’d rather I need avenged than them.”

“I think I love you too,” Bucky says, and she blinks up at him. Wait. What?

What?

He kisses her. She kisses back, because obviously, but what the hell is he . . .

Right, she remembers with a jolt. Right, she’d said--holy shit, she’d definitely said--

Shit. Shit, that was--they’ve been on one damn date! What the hell kind of idiot went around telling omegas they’ve only known a few months shit like that?! Her, apparently, apparently her!

She is the worst at this.

“Is that okay?” Bucky asks, and she grabs his face and kisses him again.

“More than okay,” she promises, because just because she’s an idiot who can’t pick an appropriate moment or keep her knot in her pants doesn’t mean . . .

She’d meant that. Same as she’d meant she didn’t care if HYDRA got their hands on her, so long as Bucky and the pups were okay--she hadn’t known it ‘til she’d said it, and now it was such a simple truth, such a simple fact. How had she not known it before?

Yeah, this was gonna be a fucking thing.

Jesus.

She kisses him yet again, because it’s easier than any of the rest of it, and Bucky kisses her back. It’s something she can wrap her head around a lot easier than either their nebulous future or Bucky’s awful past.

Their future, she thinks. Because it is both of theirs, isn’t it.

Darcy exhales roughly, and Bucky nuzzles her jaw, then gives it a soft little kitten-lick that sends a jolt straight to her clit. The temptation to shove him over and climb him is a very, very strong temptation. He needs her.
He doesn’t actually need what her hindbrain thinks he does, though, and also they should probably check on Jane and make sure nothing went wrong with Thor. Not that Darcy actually thinks a handful of measly humans could do much to Thor, but there’s always unpleasant surprises to worry about.

The temptation to shove Bucky over and climb him is still there, mind. It’s not a very useful impulse, though, so she buries it and just takes his hands in hers and squeezes them. He’s wearing her gloves again; somehow they feel softer on him than she remembered them being. Which is saying something, probably, what with the metal hand thing.

“You’re okay?” she asks, and he nods, looking down at their hands for a moment before glancing back up to her.

“I’m okay,” he says.

“Okay.” Darcy exhales again. She kisses his knuckles, then goes to check on Jane and the TV, which is busy informing New York of how good Thor is at punching fascists like it somehow didn’t already know. He is pretty impressive in the footage, so she figures they can be forgiven. Also, this means she gets to watch footage of Thor punching fascists, which helps her calm down a little more. The news doesn’t appear to have noticed Bucky as a person of interest, which is probably lucky, and the cops are dragging off the HYDRA agents to probably learn nothing from, knowing HYDRA. They’re getting locked up, which is the part that matters to Darcy. She just hopes they stay that way.

Or chew suicide pills rather than talk. That’s an option too. And maybe a slightly dark thought to be having but they tried to take Bucky. Darcy is not in a place to give a fuck.

“It looks like everything’s taken care of, at least,” Jane says, still watching the TV warily. Darcy wants to rig a taser to the front door, personally, so she doesn’t blame her. Thor’d be fine, and maybe Erik, and everyone else can just stay out for a while.

“I wanna rig a taser to the front door of the tower,” she says.

“We could figure out how to do that,” Jane says.

“That is the best idea I have heard all damn day,” Darcy says, hefting her taser and reaching for her phone. The Internet will help her. The Internet always helps.

“Don’t people work here?” Bucky asks.

“Not anymore.” Darcy’s already Googling. “What do you think, Janie, most of the volts or all of the volts?”

“We could probably get a couple more tasers,” Jane suggests.

“This is why you’re my favorite alpha,” Darcy says feelingly. “J.A.R.V.I.S., please order us some more tasers. Same-day delivery.”


“Unless they come in volt-ier now,” Darcy says.

“That would no longer be, as they say, ‘street legal’, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says. “But I’ll see what I can do.”
One of Tony’s holo-screens pops into existence, a slightly disgruntled-looking Tony visible in it. He’s clearly been in the Iron Man suit; his hair is windblown and a little staticky-looking.

“Are you getting my AI to break the law again, Lewis?” he asks.

“HYDRA!” Darcy says, waving her hands in the air protestingly.

“First off, my security is flawless,” Tony says. “Second, I could build you a better taser out of my scrap pile.”

“You literally hacked SHIELD and didn’t find HYDRA,” Darcy reminds him.

“What was that, Lewis, you’re breaking up,” Tony says. “Bzzt. Bzzt. Bzzzzzt. Oh damn, we’re going through a tunnel. Hey, where’s the boy scout, I need to talk to him.”

“Steve?” Darcy squints at him, pretending not to notice the way Bucky suddenly goes very still and quiet beside her.

“Last I saw him he was in the kitchen on the common floor,” Jane says. “But I have no idea where he is now. Can’t J.A.R.V.I.S. find him?”

“Obviously, I just thought he’d be with you,” Tony says dismissively. “He never showed up to punch Nazis, so where else would he be but checking on the other half of his twin pop?”


“And the call to assemble?” Tony gives her the special kind of dubious look that only an omega looking at an idiot alpha can pull off. Darcy reddens in embarrassment.


“Captain Rogers is reviewing the tower’s security tapes with me in the lobby,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says. “He wishes to be certain no unsavory characters have or will enter the tower.”

“Somebody should go talk to him,” Darcy finds herself saying, and then winces at the part of herself that internally goes and that somebody is ME. But she’s the one who smells like Bucky safe and secure, and she’s the closest thing he’s gonna get to Bucky, so . . . well, it’s kind of her responsibility, isn’t it?

It’s definitely her responsibility.

“I can,” Jane says, starting to get up, and Darcy waves her off with a grimace.

“No, it should be me,” she says, even though she’s loathe to leave Bucky at all right now. Still--nobody’s with Steve. She might not be worried about him getting kidnapped by HYDRA, but she’s definitely worried about how he’s taking all this and what Natasha and Sam are gonna think if they come home to him all upset. “Uh--you two’ll be okay without me?”

“I can leave,” Jane says to Bucky, who doesn’t seem to be listening. “I’ll leave. I’ll be in the common room if you need me.”

“Is that okay?” Darcy asks carefully. Bucky glances briefly at her, then turns away with a shrug. It seems to be the best answer she’s getting, so . . . “J.A.R.V.I.S., lock down the suite once we’re gone. No-fly zone for everybody but Bucky until he says otherwise. Please.”
“Of course, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says, and Darcy spares a last worried look at Bucky before Tony blinks out and she and Jane clear out. She grabs his hand and squeezes it on her way past him and he squeezes back, however briefly, so that’s . . . that’s something, she thinks.

Jane sets up in the common room, and Darcy heads for the elevator and heads down to the lobby. She has no idea what she’s going to say when she gets there, but she knows she needs to say something. Leaving Steve all alone after everybody got a scare like that--yeah, that’s not okay. That wouldn’t be okay even if she didn’t have her hindbrain screaming at her to go take care of the omega in distress. Her hindbrain isn’t that helpful anyway, its idea of “taking care of” is stupidly limited.

Somebody has to check on him, though. Might as well be her.

“Um--you did tell him I was coming, right, J.A.R--” she starts belatedly, and then the elevator doors slide open and Steve is standing in front of them with a solemn expression, smelling so sad she could cry. She is suddenly very aware she is still in nothing but her coffee-stained robe.

Okay then, J.A.R.V.I.S. told him.

“Bucky’s okay,” she says. “They, uh, tried to activate some old programming, but it didn’t work. He’s not sure why.”

Steve looks at her for a long moment, then lets out a sigh that sounds like the weight of the world is in it.

“Oh, you’re okay?” she says instead, biting her lip. “Do you . . . need anything?”

Steve smiles humorlessly. Darcy feels like an ass.

“No, I don’t need anything,” he says. “Thank you, Darcy.”

She wants to do right by him. She wants to be able to do right by him. But she picked which omega she was gonna be in the corner of, and even if she hadn’t, Steve clearly wouldn’t want her stepping all over Bucky’s boundaries anyway and it’s just . . . it’s just really sad, and she wishes she could fix it for him. Them. Preferably them, for obvious reasons.

There’s no fixing this, though, at least not that she can do.

“She handled it really well,” she says, like an idiot who can’t stop talking. “Like--the after and the during. He broke somebody’s jaw. Last time I saw him get cornered by HYDRA was a lot, uh . . . a lot more worrying.”

“When you met him,” Steve says, and Darcy nods, biting her lip again.
“He didn’t want to go with them then either,” she says quickly. “He just was having trouble refusing orders, I think. This time--broken jaw, first thing. Didn’t need Thor or anybody to interfere.”

“That’s . . . good,” Steve says slowly, letting out another pained exhale. Darcy barely keeps herself back from trying to pet him. She’s not one of his alphas, it’s not like it’d actually help. “So you think he’s doing better.”

“I mean . . . yeah,” Darcy says. “Yeah, he’s a lot better. I still don’t know how much he really remembers, but he’s definitely better. I mean, he still kinda thinks we’re in charge of him, I think, but he wants us to be in charge of him, so . . . that’s better, right?”

“I hope so,” Steve says. He doesn’t look any less sad or heavy, and Darcy still doesn’t feel like she’s doing him any good.

“He’s funny,” she says. Steve blinks at her, and she tries not to wince. That--sounded weird, definitely. “I mean--he makes jokes, sometimes. Little stuff. He’s funny.”

“Oh.” Steve looks a little lost at that. Darcy wonders if maybe she shouldn’t have said it. She’s having a hard time thinking of smart things to say right now. Or at least, like, not stupid ones.

“I’m really sorry, Steve,” she says. “I swear I’m doing the best I can for him.”

“I believe you,” Steve says, which is probably the most trust an omega has put in her since Bucky first decided she should be last alpha standing.

She definitely doesn’t deserve it, but she’s not gonna let him down, either. Either of them, if she can help it.

The fact they both believe what she tells them . . . Yeah. She’s definitely not going to let either of them down.

“Do you want me to tell him anything?” she asks.

“No,” Steve says, shaking his head. “I don’t want to push him. As long as he’s doing alright, that’s all I’m worried about.”

“Okay,” Darcy says. There’s not really much else she could say.

“I’m going to keep an eye on the lobby for the rest of the day,” Steve says. “Just in case this was supposed to be a distraction.”

“That’s smart,” Darcy says, biting her lip. She hadn’t thought about that before J.A.R.V.I.S. had mentioned Steve was doing it, even with as paranoid as her hindbrain had gotten her. “I’ll keep an eye on him. You know, for what that’s worth. We’re definitely staying in tonight.”

“You’ve been going out?” Steve looks a little surprised again.

“Well--a little,” Darcy says. “Like, he was out with Thor when they tried to nab him. He goes out with Thor pretty regularly, I think they’re friends. Natasha didn’t tell you?”

“She said he’d asked for her. And she mentioned taking Clint to dinner in your suite,” Steve says. “I don’t really ask her about it.”

“It went okay,” Darcy says. Of course he doesn’t ask. Jesus. She’d use this as an excuse to invite
him for dinner but obviously that’d be a terrible idea, so she’s not sure what else to say. “Um--his appointments have been going okay, too. The pups are all healthy. We’re having, uh--we’re having four.”

“He was from a big litter,” Steve says neutrally.

“Yeah, me too.” Darcy bites her lip again. “So, you know, not a big surprise. Um. Do you . . .” He’s standing a little far back, compared to other conversations they’ve had. “His scent. Do you want . . .”

She gestures at herself a little helplessly, and Steve gives her a long, quiet look before stepping in close and leaning down to breathe her in, except of course it’s not her he’s breathing in.

“Thank you,” he says, then very carefully rubs the scent glands in his wrists against the sides of her neck. Darcy has to repress a shiver and twists her hands together against her stomach.

“Sure,” she says. “No problem. You know it’s not you, right?”

“I wouldn’t blame him if it was,” Steve says.

“It’s not, though.” Darcy gives him a searching look, hoping he’s not actually blaming himself. He probably is. She’d be blaming herself, and she’s not the kind of person to kill herself for the greater good. He’s probably blaming himself a lot. “Did Natasha tell you . . .”

“Tell me what?” Steve asks with a faint frown.

“Mn.” Darcy shifts uncomfortably, not sure if this would be saying too much or even help at all. Still . . . “He thinks you wouldn’t want to see him, if you knew what he was like now. He didn’t say he wanted to see you, but . . .”

“But you think he might,” Steve finishes. Darcy nods guiltily, really not sure if this is too much.

“I don’t wanna make him do anything he doesn’t want to,” Darcy says. “Obviously. Just . . . I thought I should tell you. It’s not you.” She’s said that to him before, but maybe this time . . .

“It’s me,” Steve says. “But thank you.”

So much for this time.

He steps back, and she smells like both of them again, she knows. She’s the only thing that ever does anymore, when their scents probably used to mix so often people might’ve had trouble telling which of them was which.

It’s sad. It’s sad, and terrible, and something she can’t fix.

She wishes she could.

She can’t, though, so she heads back upstairs to do what she can.
The Fantastic Four are having a baby shower. Reed Richards does not appear to have noticed, but Reed Richards doesn’t notice a lot of things, apparently. Sue is surrounded by presents, and much, much more pregnant-looking than the last time Darcy saw her. Hopefully Reed’s noticed that, but she wouldn’t bet money on it.

“I cannot believe I am at a superhero baby shower,” Darcy says as she stares around the top floor of the Baxter building, dearly hoping the Avengers-themed onesies she brought are as funny as she thought they were in the store.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t have called that one for a way to spend a Saturday,” Bucky says. Darcy tries not to look directly at him, on account of the fact he’s wearing the cutest maternity dress he owns and put his hair up. She is just . . . she is just not strong enough, okay? She was not prepared for Bucky Barnes in the cutest maternity dress he owns with his hair up. It is a fucking sight, is Bucky Barnes in the cutest maternity dress he owns with his hair up.

Seriously. What did she do to deserve this, and how can she do it again?

“Hey, you made it!” Johnny says with a grin as he pops up behind them and nearly startles her into dropping their gift. Bucky doesn’t so much as twitch, which is probably for the best because if Johnny’d surprised him somebody might’ve gotten stabbed. He doesn’t even look uncomfortable, which Darcy was honestly kind of expecting with the whole “undeniable resemblance to Steve, seriously Tony wanted a DNA test” issue. “Wasn’t sure you would.”

“Are you kidding?” Darcy says, about to shove the gift at him but reconsidering when she considers how not fireproof it is. “I wouldn’t turn down a superhero party if you paid me.”

“Well, we’ve had more interesting parties,” Johnny says wryly, rolling his eyes. Behind him, several people are flying by and a woman with incredibly long red hair is petting a dog bigger than her twice over. With her hair, for the record.

“Yeah, it’s so boring and normie here, I don’t know how you function,” Darcy deadpans. “This is Bucky. He’s from the forties. Bucky, this is Johnny. He’s an adrenaline junkie who catches fire.”

“Oh, wait, you actually brought a date?” Johnny asks, giving her a delighted look before looking Bucky up and down, giving his stomach a very significant look, and then immediately smirking at her. Darcy resists the urge to make a face at him, but only just. “So this is your type, huh? Wouldn’t have guessed you liked ‘em so prim and proper, Lewis.”

“I didn’t have time to get my Halloween costume pressed,” Bucky says dryly.

“Ouch,” says Johnny, who, to be fair, is currently wearing his superhero suit like that’s a totally normal thing to wear to a party. Then again, judging by some of the other guests . . . “Hey, I make this look good.”

“Well, work with what you got, pal,” Bucky says. Darcy puts this entire conversation into a mental scrapbook, hoping to never forget it ever. Johnny opens his mouth again, but before he can speak a pretty blonde alpha wearing a black headband shows up.

“You’re Darcy!” she says delightedly.

“I’m Darcy,” Darcy agrees, giving her a blank look. Who in--?
“Crystal,” Johnny clarifies, pointing at her. Oh. Ohhhhh.

“Oh!” Darcy exclaims, eyes widening. “Dude, those flowers you sent were sick, thanks so much.”

“It was nothing, I just appreciate you taking such good care of Johnny,” Crystal says, beaming at her. “He told me you were wonderful!”

“Yeah, apparently a lot of people have been hearing that,” Darcy says dubiously, resisting the urge to eye him. She did not need Tony Stark commenting on her knot, thanks so much, Johnny. Not to mention the Steve thing. God, just . . . just the Steve thing. How had she survived the Steve thing again?

“You’re welcome,” Johnny says, winking at her. Bucky gives him a look. Darcy resolves never to tell Johnny Storm a secret, ever.

“Brat,” she says, taking Bucky’s hand. They mingle a little more and meet a lot of people with superpowers. Bucky seems increasingly mystified by all the polite small talk, but is way better at it than Darcy is, to her surprise. He starts out obviously a little rusty, but by the time they get to Sue he’s chatted up half the room near-effortlessly.

“Darcy! I didn’t know you were whelping!” Sue says delightedly when she sees them. “When’s your shower, I need to send you something.”

“Haven’t really thought about it, actually,” Darcy says as she hands over their gift, imagining a baby shower with all the Avengers in attendance and immediately swearing they’re going to have one no matter what.

Then she thinks about Steve, and tries not to wince. Maybe--maybe not her best idea, actually.

“Oh, everyone will hate these,” Sue laughs as she opens the bag with the onesies, and Darcy grins.

“My favorite’s the Falcon one,” she says. “It has little wings on the back.”

“Oh my god, it does!” Sue says with another laugh. “That’s adorable. If either of the pups can fly, I’m never letting them wear anything else.”

“If what now?” Darcy blinks at her, and Sue smiles wryly.

“We’re pretty sure they’re going to inherit the superpowers,” she says. “We’re just not sure what superpowers.”

“Oh my god, I feel so much better about super-soldier babies,” Darcy says, picturing with horror the idea of a pup who could turn invisible. She hadn’t even thought about that, even after assuming Johnny would have little matchstick babies. “I should’ve bought you vodka.”

“Breastfeeding,” Sue says with a smile. “Though I appreciate the thought.”

“You can’t drink when you’re breastfeeding either?” Bucky asks with a groan. “I’m gonna end up a goddamn teetotaler.”

“He’s from the forties,” Darcy explains to Sue’s puzzled expression before frowning at Bucky. “Can you even get drunk, baby, Steve made it sound like that’s not a thing for super-soldiers.”

“I can get drunk,” Bucky says. “It just takes dedication.”

“Well . . . noted for the future, then,” Darcy says, wondering how in hell he found that out.
Probably in a really depressing way, all things considered. “So Reed’s finally noticed you’re bred, right?”

“Thought it was Johnny for two whole days, but yes,” Sue says with a laugh. “He’s completely forgotten about the baby shower but when Ben checked on him earlier he was making adamantium baby toys just in case the pups come out with super-strength, so I’ll probably forgive him.”

“That’s actually kind of cute,” Darcy says, then pauses for a moment. “. . . baby toys normal babies would want to play with, right?”

“We’re working up to it,” Sue says wryly.

They chat for a little bit longer, and then the snack table calls and Darcy fills up a plate to push on Bucky, who seems a little surprised but pleased by the gesture, so that’s nice. He eats it, and they make small talk with a few more people and Darcy learns some really interesting shit about the moon that she did not previously know. Also, that NASA might kill to know.

Maybe she’ll tweet them.

All in all, though, the whole party seems to be going pretty well, and all sorts of fascinating new superpowers are now in Darcy’s life. Bucky’s being surprisingly social, too, she really wouldn’t have expected--

“Darcy,” Bucky says through his teeth and under his breath. “If I have to talk to one more stranger, I think I’m going to stab them.”

“You know, that’s fair,” Darcy says. “Wanna go make out in the closet?”

“Is this that kind of party?” Bucky asks, wrinkling his nose at her with a doubtful expression.

“Do you mean can we make this that kind of party?” Darcy replies with a grin. Assuming no one has super-hearing. Or telepathy.

. . . that might be assuming a bit much with this crowd. Still.

They make out in the closet and don’t even get caught, which Darcy is gonna credit entirely to Bucky’s super-assassin skills, and come out just in time for cake, which Darcy is gonna credit entirely to her sweet tooth. Reed’s even made it out of his lab by then, which is frankly a miracle.

It’s really good cake, to be fair.

“That was fun,” Darcy says contentedly after Johnny’s seen them out and they’re waiting in the lobby for the armored car Tony had insisted they take because her taser isn’t up to thunder-god levels of destruction and he wasn’t dealing with another kidnapping attempt this month, which: reasonable. Also, free ride, so Darcy’s not complaining. Bucky’s probably about eighteen times more dangerous than Happy, even five months pregnant, but Happy’s okay.

Happy is not driving them back, it turns out.

“Hey,” Natasha says casually as she comes in the lobby door. “How was the party?”

“There were three interesting people there and everyone else wanted to touch my stomach,” Bucky says flatly. Which--oh yeah, that had come up a couple times, hadn’t it. Or . . . several, actually.

“Cake was good,” Darcy says. “Although now Sue Storm wants to know when we’re doing a
shower and I am literally baffled by the concept.”

“We’re not, are we?” Bucky asks, looking alarmed.

“Not one that big,” Darcy says. “Maybe, like, with Jane and Thor and Erik.”

“Maybe one with Thor,” Bucky mutters under his breath. Darcy tries not to snicker, but his disgruntled expression is really cute.

“Maybe,” she says.

“Very decisive, both of you,” Natasha says wryly, then holds the door for Bucky before it occurs to Darcy to. Darcy is totally normal about that, though, and definitely isn’t kicking herself over getting beaten to the punch. Natasha still manages to beat her to the car, somehow, and holds the door for Bucky again. He looks pleased about it.

Darcy is going to have to get more old-fashioned, clearly.

They drive back to the tower and no one tries to kidnap Bucky or kill anyone else, which Darcy definitely can’t complain about. She keeps thinking about the baby shower thing, is the problem. She hadn’t gone to the baby showers for all of her litter-brothers’ litters or anything, so it isn’t like her family’s going to put up a fuss if Bucky doesn’t have one, but . . .

Well, they can’t all have superpowered families a la the Fantastic Four’s. Explaining all this to her parents is gonna be a Thing, for sure.

. . . like, no pun intended.

Still. She still hasn’t worked out what she’s going to tell them, and it’s been weeks now. She really needs to decide one way or the other. Either that, or come up with a brilliant plan that’ll keep it from ever being a concern.

All things considered, the brilliant plan option is looking increasingly unlikely.

“You’ve got lipstick behind your ear,” Natasha mentions casually.

“Makes sense,” Bucky says as Darcy flushes sheepishly and reaches over to scrub it off him. She’d thought she’d gotten all that in the closet. He tilts his head for her hand with a little purr, and she ends up petting him without really thinking about it. He’s just so sweet, and he gets so sugar-soft and pretty when she pets him like this.

“Stark’s going to kick up a fit if you scent up his car,” Natasha says conversationally.

“. . . is that, like, a warning or a suggestion?” Darcy asks, squinting questioningly at her reflection in the rearview mirror and not quite able to bring herself to quit petting Bucky yet. Natasha smirks.

“Take from it what you will,” she says. “He and Rhodes did fuck in the common room last week and forget to run the scent-scrubber procedures after, though, so some might say he’d deserve it.”

“Ruthless,” Darcy says with a snicker, giving Bucky’s neck one last stroke before letting her hand fall away from him. He lets out a little sigh and leans over, putting his forehead against her shoulder.

“You have good hands,” he says. Darcy grins and ruffles his hair a bit.

“You have good everything,” she says.
“Never mind, it’s not worth the vengeance if I have to listen to your cutesy couple talk in the process,” Natasha says dryly, and Darcy laughs. Bucky just hums, leaning a little heavier into her.

“Vengeance is for children,” he says, the faintest trace of a Russian accent slipping into his voice. Darcy blinks.

“Hmm,” Natasha says. “Well, we still pay our debts, don’t we, soldat.”

“We do,” he agrees. Darcy catches Natasha’s eyes in the mirror, trying not to frown, and Natasha shrugs.

“Don’t worry about it,” she says.

Honestly, that is probably the most worrying thing Natasha could say, but Darcy figures if it were really a big deal it would’ve come up by now. It’s still weird. They’re coming up on the tower, though, and she doesn’t want to push it. Natasha lets them out on the curb, and Bucky brushes a loose lock of hair out of his face and looks really, really pretty in the sunlight. She hasn’t seen him in it too often.

“I think I’m gonna call my parents,” Darcy says as Natasha goes to park the car and they head up the elevator, looking at her phone with a little frown. “Are you okay with me telling them, like . . . basically the truth?”

“Why would you?” Bucky asks, giving her a puzzled look.

“I don’t wanna lie about you unless you want lied about,” Darcy says, glancing back at him. “Also, they’ve seen the slide show, they know my life hit the tipping point on ‘live weird or die’ years ago. I mean, I might gloss over just how dumb we were about the condom thing, but I don’t really want you stuck spending every future holiday pretending like you’re an accountant or something.”

“I can,” Bucky says.

“Yeah, but you shouldn’t have to,” Darcy stresses. “Also, what, we’re gonna teach the pups to lie to them too? Or lie to the pups?”

“We should lie to the pups about me,” Bucky says. “They shouldn’t have to know what I’ve done.”

“Like, there’s age-appropriate information and there’s making shit up entirely,” Darcy says, frowning at him. “I don’t want to lie to our pups. I don’t want you living a lie. It’s not right.”

“It’d be better,” Bucky says.

“For you, or them?” she asks. He frowns back at her.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s better for me,” he says. “They’re the important thing.”

“It’s better for them if you’re better,” Darcy points out. “Kids are smart, they know when shit’s going on.”

“Your family might not take it well,” Bucky says, still frowning.

“My family will handle it,” Darcy says firmly. “And if they don’t, that’s on them, not us.”

“I don’t . . . know,” Bucky says slowly, looking away for a moment. “I don’t want to make trouble.”
“You are so not trouble,” Darcy says. She reaches over and squeezes his hand, and he hesitates, but squeezes back.

“Maybe just . . . some of it,” he says. “Break it to them gently.”

“I will be as gentle as humanly possible,” Darcy swears immediately. Bucky grimaces a little, but nods.

“Okay,” he says. “I don’t really want to lie either, so if you really think it’ll be okay . . .”

“It will absolutely,” Darcy swears. Which it might, even. But even if it’s not, she wants to do what’s best for Bucky and the pups, and lying about them or treating them like some guilty secret? There’s no way that can be what’s best. She can’t believe it would be. It might be easier, admittedly, but she doesn’t wanna live a lie either, so yeah.

They head back into the suite, and Bucky heads into his nest and Darcy sets up in the kitchen with her phone and tablet and a snack and a drink and--

Okay, she might be padding the process a bit.

Darcy calls her mom.

It goes to voicemail.

Great. Just . . . just great.

She considers leaving a voicemail, but decides she’s way too likely to say something damning and just hangs up. She’ll try her dad, he might be--

Voicemail. Yeah.

Well, this is off to a great start. She guesses she could call one of her littermates and start there, but she should probably start with their parents. Not that she’s ever had to tell her family she’d knocked somebody up before, it just seems like the logical thing to do. Hopefully logical. Reasonable. Normal.

This is probably one of the least normal things that has ever happened to Darcy, of course, but to be fair a lot of not normal things have happened to her since she took this internship, so really if anything her parents should be expecting it and should in fact be grateful she didn’t knock up an Asgardian. Like, really, at least Bucky’s human and only semi-enhanced.

They could seriously have had the decency to pick up the phone. It could’ve been, like, an emergency. She could be about to die or something.

Admittedly, she’s never actually had time to call them when she was about to die. But she might. Probably not, of course; when Darcy’s about to die she’s usually busy trying not to die, but still.

She sighs and looks at her phone for another moment, then sticks it in her pocket and wanders back to the bedroom. Bucky’s in the middle of it, comparing blankets. Presumably it’s for the nest, and the sight makes her feel kind of warm and stupid.

“You’re done already?” he asks, wrinkling his nose at her.

“Went to voicemail,” she replies, shaking her head. “Kiiiinda didn’t want to leave a message about this one. Are you updating the nest again?”
“Yeah.” Bucky holds up the blanket in his arms. “This one’s softer.”

“Sounds good,” Darcy says. Softer is better, right? Bucky folds up the blanket without comment and walks into the nesting closet with it, and she glances after him but resists the urge to be too invasive. His style of nesting hasn’t changed much, still basic and utilitarian, though he appears to have added a few layers to it. It’s still a little awkward-looking too, but she’s not gonna judge.

She doesn’t really know what to do. She’s tired, and she’d gotten herself all psyched up to break the news to her parents, and Bucky’s doing his own thing, and . . . and she doesn’t know. She’s tired. The baby shower was fun and all, she’s definitely glad they went, and she and Bucky smell like each other from all the kissing in the closet and it’s really nice, but she feels restless and worried and--

“What’s wrong?” Bucky asks as he leans back out of the closet. Darcy blinks, a little startled by his reappearance.

“Nothing,” she says.

“Something,” he says, obviously unconvinced. “Is it your parents?”

“No,” Darcy says. “They’ll deal. I’ve done way worse in my life than meet a nice omega and settle down.”

“We’re settling down?” Bucky tilts his head, and she turns bright red. Oh, wow, she really did say that in cold blood and everything, didn’t she.

“I mean--you don’t have to,” she tries. “I just . . . kinda feel like I should, at least? Better for the pups if I’m not haring off after every crazy science experiment.”

“You can do that,” Bucky says. “I don’t want to be an Avenger. I’d rather stay with the pups.”

“Technically we could take turns doing the ‘staying with the pups’ thing,” Darcy says, giving him a searching look. Him not wanting to fight, that’s something she knew--they’ve talked about it before, after all--but hearing him say it so matter-of-factly, without worry or guilt . . . it’s kind of weird, hearing him say it like that.

Good weird, definitely. Like, just about the best kind of weird there is.

It kind of makes her want to kiss him, but . . .

Actually, but what? There’s no reason not to kiss him.

“I don’t want a turn haring off,” Bucky says, and Darcy goes over to him and pushes up on her toes and tugs his face down gently and kisses him, because that’s a thing she can just do now. Like making out in closets and going to parties together and going on weird late-night double dates with Jane and Thor and having people over for dinner.

“Okay,” she says, then kisses him again. He kisses back, sweet and soft, and she sighs contentedly into it. She’s still tired and a little too frazzled for how uneventful a day they’ve had, but she feels good being with Bucky. Being with Bucky is good. It’s really--

Her phone rings, and she freezes. Bucky’s expression turns wary.

“You could call back later,” he says.
“Believe me, I would love to,” Darcy says resignedly, already pulling it out of her pocket. It’s her mom. “Really put this conversation off long enough, though.”

“Okay,” he says, giving her a searching look and then reaching over and taking her hand to give it a reassuring little squeeze that makes her heart just melt as she answers the phone.

“Oh, Mom,” she says. “So... I kinda have a thing to tell you?”

Bucky squeezes her hand again. He makes her feel so warm.

“What’s wrong?” her mom asks immediately, and Darcy represses a wince.

“It’s not wrong, exactly, more... unexpected?” she tries. “Um. I’m seeing someone, is the thing, and--”

“Are you and Ian pregnant?!” her mom demands, which—how? How even? Both how did she guess that and how did she leap to that?!

“Mom!” she says in exasperation. “Ian is in London, for God’s sake!”

“You want me to believe your alien friend can travel through outer space but you can’t get to England,” her mom says crossly, which, okay, kind of fair. But still, dammit! Not the point!

“Ian and I are not together,” Darcy says. “We are just friends.”

“He saved your life!” her mom says.

“Not, like, romantically!” Darcy says. Bucky is wearing a very bemused look. “Also, so did this guy, kind of! Maybe!”

“Please tell me you’re not dating an Asgardian,” her mom says.

“If I was, what’d be wrong with that?” Darcy retorts crossly. She’s a grown-ass alpha, she can date whoever she wants. Even if they happen to be alien sort-of-gods.

“Darcy!” Her mom sounds scandalized. “You can’t leave Earth for an omega!”

“For crying out—I am not leaving Earth, except maybe for summer vacation,” Darcy says in exasperation. “And he’s not even an Asgardian, okay, he’s a totally normal human!”

...er.

“Well, almost totally,” she amends.

“Please just tell me it’s not Tony Stark,” her mom says.

“It is not Tony Stark,” Darcy says, rolling her eyes. Bucky scowls, and she gives his hand another squeeze. “He might be sort of a super-soldier, is all.”

“...Darcy,” her mom says. “If you bring home Captain America, your father is going to have a heart attack.”

“Okay, that one was a fair conclusion to jump to,” Darcy allows. “But no, definitely not him either. Um. There’re some files I should maybe send you, to be honest, but do you remember the whole big mess in DC last year...? With the helicarriers? And the... the horrible attempted murder of millions?”
“Yes,” her mom replies guardedly.

“Well, Steve has a friend, is the thing,” Darcy says, and then she--briefly--explains the Winter Soldier. Her mom is uncharacteristically silent for said explanation, which is very alarming.

“Sweetheart,” her mom says.

“No, really,” Darcy says.

"Sweetheart."

“It wasn’t his fault,” Darcy defends immediately.

“Of course it wasn’t!” her mom exclaims. “But you got an omega in that situation pregnant?!”

“Seriously, how did you even guess that,” Darcy says, shaking her head in disbelief. “It was an accident!”

“That’s not an excuse!”

“It’s a reason!”

They may descend into some minor arguing at that point, which--well, Darcy’s parents have wanted her to mate Ian and buy the house down the street and join the local PTA for the past two years; she’s not super-surprised her mom isn’t taking “I knocked up Captain America’s dead best friend” well. It is a fucking trip of a sentence.

She could probably have phrased it better, to be fair.

On the plus side, she hasn’t been disowned yet, so . . . yay?

“And you didn’t even come tell us in person!” her mom says.

“I did mention the HYDRA issue, right?” Darcy asks. “You remember how I said that was a thing?”

“Darcy, I could not get you to recognize danger if it came up and bit you as a pup,” her mom huffs.

“Well, this is about my pups,” Darcy says, reflexively glancing to Bucky as she speaks. He’s looking at her kind of funny, but she doesn’t have time to figure out why just yet. “It’s different.”

“Oh, baby,” her mom says, her voice softening. “I can’t believe you’re finally going to be a dad.”

“I’m twenty-eight, not fifty,” Darcy grumbles, reddening in embarrassment. Jesus, you’d think the woman didn’t already have grandpups. “Look, Mom, I gotta go. I’ll keep you updated, okay? And have Dad call me back and I’ll tell him.”

Alright, baby,” her mom says, sounding a little tearful, which definitely means it’s time to get off the phone. Like, okay, good, she’s not mad and they’re almost definitely happy tears, but Darcy is terrible with crying people. Like, just the worst. “Say hello to your boy for us. We want to meet him first chance you get, okay?”

“Yes, Mom,” Darcy says, mostly to escape the conversation before it can get emotional. Arguing with her mom is fine. Emoting is a little harder. “Talk to you later, I love you.”

“I love you too,” her mom says, and Darcy hangs up still half-expecting something to go wrong.
Nothing seems to have, at least.

“I think that went okay,” she says slowly, staring warily at her phone. She might’ve had to fudge the whole “I’ve known for two months and didn’t tell you” part of the conversation, but otherwise.

“She wants you to move to Connecticut,” Bucky says, looking alarmed.

“Hah, yeah, no, my parents have wanted me back in CT since I turned eighteen and ran away to college, believe me, that is an ol!l!d argument and they ain’t winning it,” Darcy snorts. “Except, like, for the occasional holiday. Occasional holidays are fine.”

“And the PTA?” Bucky says warily.

“I would sooner home-school,” Darcy swears, sticking her phone back in her pocket and pushing up on her toes to give him a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks for sticking around for that, I appreciate it. I know it was proobably a little weird to listen to.”

“I’ve listened to weirder,” Bucky says, which: fair.

“Point,” she says. “You hungry yet?”

“Starving,” he says. “You want dinner?”


“I can cook,” he says, shaking his head. “Better for the pups anyway.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Darcy sighs. It has been a long time since her last slice of pizza, is all. “Want help?”

“Um . . . sure?” Bucky blinks down at her, tucking that loose strand of hair back behind his ear again. She sort of loves that he always ends up with one of those no matter who does his hair. Probably Natasha could tame it if it came down to it, but so far no one has. “I was just gonna roast a chicken.”

Darcy’s “help” mostly ends up involving washing vegetables and cutting zucchini into not very even slices; Bucky’s “just”, meanwhile, involves roasting the chicken, making mashed sweet potatoes from scratch, and cooking the zucchini and some much more evenly sliced squash. Darcy has no idea how he manages it all without losing track of what he’s doing or his stomach getting in the way, but he pulls it off without even getting his apron dirty.

Oh yeah, because he has an apron now. Which he wears. Regularly. Darcy doesn’t know whose fault that is, but she’s pretty sure she owes the guilty party at least one of her firstborn children for it.

Dinner, unsurprisingly, is delicious. She’d previously thought Bucky had remembered how to perfectly roast a chicken; she was previously wrong, because apparently there are even better ways to roast a chicken. Like—so many more ways than she had ever imagined in her previous Hamburger Helper/frozen dinners life.

“This is so good. How do you always make this so good?” she asks, giving Bucky another helping of chicken. He smiles; she maybe swoons a little.

“It’s just a chicken,” he says.
“It’s an amazing chicken,” Darcy says feelingly. Considering the way Steve talks about food in the forties, there’s no way these are all old recipes: Bucky’s got to be learning new ones. Does this mean he likes cooking, or likes getting complimented on cooking, or just likes food in general?

She should buy truffles again either way, definitely.

“If you say so,” Bucky says, still smiling.

“The baby shower wasn’t too annoying, was it?” she asks around a mouthful of chicken. It’s really good chicken. “Sorry people kept bugging you about your stomach.”

“I think that’s just a thing people do,” Bucky says, tucking his hair back behind his ear again. “It wasn’t too annoying. You didn’t mind having to take the car?”

“I am never gonna mind a free ride,” Darcy promises him. “Anyway, I think we’re probably stuck with the babysitters, at least for now. I mean—no offense, we still don’t know why those code words didn’t work.”

“Yeah,” Bucky murmurs, his expression turning distant.

“I’m really, really glad they didn’t work,” Darcy says. There are very few things she is gladder about, for obvious reasons.

“Me too,” Bucky says, his expression flickering for a moment before he manages to smile at her again. She reaches over and grabs his hand to squeeze, and he lets out a slow breath.

“You okay?” she asks.

“I don’t know if there are more code words. Maybe ones that would work,” he says. “I don’t--remember.”

“Worst case scenario, we tie you up in the basement for a while,” Darcy says matter-of-factly, and Bucky lets out a startled laugh. “You remembered before, you’ll remember again.”

“Maybe,” he says. “But as long as I’m pregnant . . .”

“As long as you’re pregnant, we’ll tie you up very gently in the basement,” Darcy says firmly.

“You’re getting kinky on me, Lewis,” Bucky says mildly.

“Oh, very funny.” She makes a face at him and squeezes his hand again. “I mean it, though. We’re not letting HYDRA run off with you. And if they do there’s a whole tower full of people here ready to go and get you back. Like, there is a Hulk in this tower, Bruce alone will fucking wreck them.”

“Maybe not the Hulk,” Bucky says, looking a little nauseous.

“Okay, fair,” Darcy allows. “Last resort there. But my point still stands.” Honestly, Steve would go get Bucky back alone if that was what it took, she’s sure, but she’s not sure how saying that would go over. Bucky’s still calling him “the captain”, for whatever reason, despite the fact she knows he remembers his real name and . . . well, at least some of him. Maybe a little disjointedly in places, but still.

The way he reacted when she came back smelling like Steve after HYDRA’s attempt at grabbing him . . . yeah, he’s never held onto her that tight. She doesn’t think he held onto her that tight in
“I’m a liability,” Bucky says.

“Literally no one here cares,” Darcy says.

“. . . okay,” Bucky says slowly, and Darcy squeezes his hand again. She hopes that sinks in. She hopes that sticks.

“Seriously, I’m a liability,” she says. “So’re Jane and Erik. Hell, everyone in the building’s a liability in one way or another. Some of us are just better at punching than others.”

“Okay,” Bucky says again, looking at their hands. Darcy kisses the back of his knuckles and then gets up to clear the dishes and put away the leftovers. Bucky just sits at the table with a hand on his stomach, frowning faintly at nothing. She starts washing up and continues to hope stuff’s sinking in. It doesn’t all have to, especially not at once, but she really wants Bucky to understand that he has more value than just--whatever he thinks he’s valued for. More value than as a killer or soldier or mother or just . . . anything not just him.

She’s doing her best to convince him. She hopes it works, one of these days.

Bucky stays at the table as Darcy finishes cleaning up and makes sure the leftovers aren’t gonna fall out of the fridge--seriously, Tony needs to stop having people drop off groceries. Maybe when the pups are teenagers, but until then . . .

God, they’re gonna have to feed four teenagers. Bucky’s probably still legally dead and she’s a grad student, when are they ever gonna make “feed four teenagers” money?

Okay, so Tony needs a hug or twenty. She’s not gonna hold it against him at this point. Still, a little less food wouldn’t go amiss, okay, she’s living in eternal fear that they’re gonna let half the fridge spoil and has no idea how Bucky’s managed to avoid that so far. He’s really good at the house spouse thing, which honestly really does it for her so--

“I think it’s you,” Bucky says.

“What?” Darcy turns away from the fridge to blink at him, confused. “What’s me?”

“Why the code words didn’t work,” Bucky says, glancing over at her. “I think it’s you.”

“Um . . . how, exactly?” Darcy asks as she lets the fridge door fall shut, still confused. Bucky just shrugs, looking away again.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I just feel like it was you.”

“Well--good, then,” Darcy says slowly, coming back over to the table and stepping up behind him. Bucky’s looking at the floor. “If there’s anything I can do, I wanna do it.”

“You do a lot,” Bucky says.

“I’d do more,” Darcy promises. She pauses for a moment, then lays her hands on his shoulders, pushing her thumbs up the back of his neck. He makes a soft sound, his head falling forward a bit, and she starts rubbing his shoulders in earnest. “Anyway, you do a lot. I gotta keep up, right?”

“I don’t, really,” Bucky murmurs.

“Jamie, baby, come on,” Darcy says wryly. “This place is constantly spotless and I come home to a
drink and dinner on the table every night, you do everything Bruce and Tony tell you the pups need, and you’ve been working on that nest for two months. And you’ve done all that while trying to recover yourself, too, and doing a really good job of it. I still haven’t gotten through *What To Expect When Your Mate’s Expecting.*”

“You really should finish that,” Bucky says with a little frown, tipping his head back just enough to look up at her. Darcy squeezes his shoulders. The stuff he asks her for is so small she doesn’t even know what to think of it, sometimes. It makes her want to do even more for him.

“I’ll take it to the lab and read on my lunch break,” she promises as she drops a kiss onto his forehead, already mentally compiling a list of additional books to ask J.A.R.V.I.S. to download to her tablet. It’s a pretty short list, but she can probably get some recs if she asks Sue. Might be best to ask someone else who’s having super-powered babies anyway. “Point is, you’re doing great. I’m so proud of you, omega.”

“I still think it was you,” Bucky murmurs, his eyes going half-lidded for a moment. Darcy gives him another kiss.

“I think it was probably you,” she tells him honestly. Bucky’s done so much and come so far--if someone else asked her, she’d definitely say it was all him. Still--“But if I had anything to do with it, I’m really, really glad.”
Darcy comes home after a day’s labwork to dinner warm in the oven and a package wrapped in butcher paper. Tearing open the wrapping, she finds a pair of brand-new tasers with a snarky note from Tony and a laundry list of health and safety warnings written in Rhodey’s handwriting. She also comes home to Bucky napping on the couch in sweatpants and a T-shirt and one of Thor’s old flannels, which is very distracting and almost makes her miss the new tasers. J.A.R.V.I.S. is playing Steve’s playlist again, quietly; she’s gotten very familiar with the contents of it.

The tasers are red and gold. Darcy is dubious, but not gonna complain. There’s also a star on one of them. She’s not sure if that’s a joke or what, but she kind of likes it. Like, it’s cute. She hooks the tasers on her waistband and takes the plates out of the oven and goes over to Bucky. He opens his eyes before she’s even halfway across the room, his expression still sleepy and lazy.

“Hi,” he says.

“Hi,” she says, offering him a plate and then tugging out one of the tasers to show him. “Got a present from Tony. Again. Tony is mostly made of presents. Seriously, what am I getting this guy for his birthday.”

“Are those tasers?” Bucky squints at her.

“These are forces of nature,” she says. “Like, seriously, Rhodey says they might kill somebody if I’m not careful. They are definitely not civilian-grade, put it that way.”

“Good.” Bucky pulls his feet up, and Darcy takes the offered place on the couch and starts reviewing the list from Rhodey more carefully as she eats maybe the best meatloaf of her life. J.A.R.V.I.S. keeps the music going, which she’s just not gonna comment on. Bucky likes talking about Steve less and less, it seems like, and she’s not sure how to talk to him about him.

When she sees Steve, rare as it is, he scents her, and then leaves. When she comes home smelling like Steve, Bucky buries his face in her neck and won’t move for a long, long time. Neither of them’s done anything else yet, which is . . . well, it’s great Steve’s giving Bucky time and agency and space and it’s great Bucky has boundaries and can enforce them, but god, it is still kind of killing Darcy. Like, it’s a problem.

But they’re not doing anything about it, and it’s nobody else’s place to.

Maybe she should be doing something. She brings Steve up when it’s appropriate to, and she lets him scent her when she sees him—encourages it, even—but she’s just not sure what it’d take to convince Bucky that Steve wants him. Him as he is, not just some misunderstanding of the man he used to be.

It’s complicated. And really, really simple, at the same time.

“Jesus, these really might be forces of nature,” she says, blinking at the tasers’ list. There’s some additional functionality in here that she’s not even sure she wants to use.

Some of it sounds kind of sick, though, she’s not gonna lie. Still, for right now it might be best to use them like normal tasers and ignore the fancy add-ons.

“You should test them out,” Bucky says.
“Ummm, I don’t know anyone I hate that much, baby,” Darcy snorts, holding out the list for him. His eyebrows immediately raise, which means he’s definitely reading it. “At least not who’s conveniently accessible.”

“Jesus,” Bucky says. “I thought he was just gonna give you something military-grade.”

“I definitely thought the same thing,” Darcy says. These sound practically superhero-grade. She miight need to ask Natasha for some “don’t tase yourself” tips. Like, almost definitely. There’s gotta be some training dummies somewhere she can taze.

There’s a knock on the door, and Bucky immediately sets aside his empty plate and gets to his feet to answer it. Darcy politely lets him, since he doesn’t bother hiding the fact he’s palming a knife from her. She has no idea where he keeps getting the things, but today’s has a very pretty ceramic handle. There’s flowers.

“Hi,” Jane says, waving at them a little as Bucky opens the door and holding up a box set in her free hand. “Thor picked up The Great British Baking Show on DVD and we’re gonna marathon it. You guys want in?”

“Oh my god, yes,” Darcy says immediately, practically jumping off the couch. “Um--Jamie, you up for it?”

“What’s The Great British Baking Show?” Bucky asks, wrinkling his nose.

“Please let me show you,” Darcy begs, and that’s how they all end up in the common room, Erik in his usual chair and Jane and Thor on the couch and Darcy tucking herself into the loveseat like usual. Bucky sits down next to her without any hesitation and something in her chest melts a bit, and then melts a bit more as she remembers not very long ago at all that him sitting out here with all of them was something she thought couldn’t happen.

He’s so brave.

They watch the show. Bucky seems mystified, but eventually gets into it, which is genuinely delightful to watch.

“People watch this stuff for fun?” he complains. “I’m gonna die without some of those damn cookies.”

“They do look pretty good,” Darcy agrees. Bucky gives her the meanest look he actually ever has, then puts a hand under his stomach.

“No, I’m legitimately going to die,” he says, getting to his feet with a huff. “Tell me we have almonds. Tell me we have raspberries.”

“Are you about to start baking in the middle of the show?” Darcy asks, squinting questioningly at him. “Not that I’m, like, opposed to it. I don’t think we have almonds, though. Dunno about raspberries.”

“Then find me some,” Bucky demands, and stalks into the common kitchen. Well--maybe a little less “stalk”, a little more like that really cute pregnant waddle.

“Are these cravings?” Darcy whispers to Jane, hoping it’s quiet enough for super-soldier ears not to hear. “Is this what cravings are?”

“I would find him the almonds,” Jane advises.
“And raspberries!” Bucky yells from the kitchen. Darcy and Jane share a look, then hit pause and get to finding. It takes a while--Tony has his weird yellow raspberries in his smoothie fridge and Bruce has a bag of almonds for snacking purposes, it turns out--and by the time they get back Bucky’s covered in flour and clearly *vehemently* in the middle of baking something, so Darcy just sneaks the ingredients onto the counter and takes the better part of valor.

Sue her, okay, he seems *very* vehement right now. She doesn’t want to upset an omega with cravings.

“. . . these aren’t raspberries,” Bucky says. “They’re *yellow.*”

“I swear to God and Tony Stark they are,” Darcy says quickly, waving her hands in the air. “Taste-tested ‘em and everything.” Bucky gives her a suspicious look, but tries one, then makes a face.

“What the hell,” he says.

“I know, right?” Darcy waves her hands again. “Tony buys weird shit. They’ll work though, right?”

“I need blackberry jam,” Bucky says.

“On it,” Darcy says, and flees. Part of her is running on the alpha “must provide for pregnant mate” instincts, but part of her is sort of wooed just on principle. Bucky getting cranky and demanding things is just *not* something she’d have expected to ever see. Like, even less than sharing space on the loveseat did she expect she’d ever see that. Which is dumb, kind of, because he’s still a *person,* but doesn’t make her any less weirdly pleased.

Assuming she can find blackberry jam, anyway. The blackberry jam is kind of important.

Rhodey has some, bless him, and Darcy gratefully accepts the jar and scurries back to the elevator.

“Ms. Lewis--” J.A.R.V.I.S. starts, and Darcy just *knows.*

“Aw, hell,” she says right before the doors open and reveal a resigned-looking Steve with his hands folded behind his back. “Hey, Steve. Sorry.”

“I’m not avoiding you,” he says, stepping back to make room for her. Darcy isn’t a hundred percent sure she believes that and is even less sure it’s a good idea to get in the elevator, but her stupid hindbrain already has her stepping into the space he made her. She could step right up into his space, if she wanted to; crowd him in and--*anyway.* “What are you doing up here?”

“I needed blackberry jam,” she says lamely, holding up the jar as proof. “We only had strawberry and apricot. And gooseberry. And grape. Um. Tony buys a lot of food.”

“He does,” Steve agrees, frowning faintly at the jam. “What’s the rush? You look like you’ve been running.”

“Well, it’s for--you know, it’s for Bucky,” Darcy hedges. “We were all watching *The Great British Baking Show* and I think, uh, I think the pregnancy cravings finally kicked in. Or at least, finally kicked in for something he didn’t immediately have available. He’s baking in the Thor floor kitchen right now, which, let me tell you, no one has done in a *while.* Erik makes pancakes like every three or four months, that’s about it.”

“Thor does seem to like the grill better,” Steve replies, neutrally agreeable. Darcy bites her lip and shifts awkwardly in place as J.A.R.V.I.S. resumes the elevator.
“He likes your playlist, I think,” she says. “I mean--Bucky, obviously.”

“I know,” Steve says, which--fair, probably, Steve probably knows what Bucky likes better than Bucky does right now. Or at least, what he used to like. Maybe some stuff’s different now.

Darcy wouldn’t know, obviously.

“He likes to cook, I think,” she says. “He’s been doing it a lot, anyway.”

“He was always good at that,” Steve says. “Could make just about anything taste good.”

“Yeah, um--he’s really good,” Darcy agrees with an emphatic nod. “He’s sort of rocking the housespouse thing in general, actually, I’m having trouble getting him to let me do my share of the chores. Which, you know, I’m in the lab most of the day so . . .”

God, is she babbling? Is this babbling?

“Are you together?” Steve asks, and Darcy turns bright red.

“Kinds of?” she manages awkwardly. “We haven’t, like, put an official name on it or anything, but . . . yeah. We, like, go on dates and stuff. We went to the Fantastic Four’s baby shower together. There’s, you know. Stuff.”

This is definitely babbling.

“Good,” Steve says quietly, and Darcy feels something stab through her just at the tone he says it in. He smiles at her and it hurts. “I’m glad. He should have nice things.”

“Absolutely all of them,” Darcy replies fervently, although she has no idea when or why Captain America decided that she counted as a nice thing. The elevator stops, and Steve very briefly presses the inside of his wrist to her neck before leaving. She feels vaguely dazed, just for a moment.

The elevator goes down another floor, and Darcy gets off and heads for the kitchen. Steve’s scent is very faint on her but she can still smell it, sticky-sweet and sugary-tart. Bucky’s head snaps up the moment she steps off the elevator. Erik’s laying across his chair and Thor’s standing across from Bucky; there’s no sign of Jane.

“I found blackberry jam,” she says, lifting the jar awkwardly. Bucky doesn’t come over, so she goes to him. He sniffs noticeably as she approaches, looking briefly hunted and then just sad. Darcy gives him the jam without comment, and gets very briefly embraced. Bucky puts his nose in her neck right where Steve touched her, to her total lack of surprise.

“Thanks,” he says, then returns to the counter and whatever he was doing--stirring cookie batter, it looks like. At least, she’s pretty sure it’s cookie batter?

“Steve says hi, obviously,” she says. “Well, as much as Steve ever says hi.”

“Mm,” Bucky says, not looking up from his cookie batter.

“I told him we’re together,” Darcy says, because that seems like the kind of information she should pass on. “He, uh, he said ‘good’.” Bucky pauses mid-stir, and lifts his head a little.

“‘Good’?” he echoes.

“He said you should have nice things,” Darcy says, biting the inside of her cheek. “Which, you know, I personally am not sure how I rank as a ‘nice thing’ but--”
“You’re the nicest thing that’s ever happened to me,” Bucky interrupts. Darcy blinks at him, her face getting hot.

“Thanks,” she says. “Um . . . I know you don’t wanna see him, but . . .”

“It’s not that I don’t wanna see him,” Bucky says, looking back to the cookie batter and starting to stir it again. Darcy tries to come up with a response for that, but she’s struggling.

“Bucky is making almond cake,” Thor mentions conversationally. “We have scoured your internet for an appropriate recipe and finally found one suitable for his purposes.”

“Oh, word? Nice,” Darcy says, more than willing to let the topic slide for now. Apparently not cookie batter, then, although she has no idea what jam or raspberries have to do with almond cake. To be fair, she’s not sure she’s ever had almond cake, but it’s cake, so she’s not gonna complain either way. Assuming she gets a piece, anyway, which admittedly might be assuming a bit much when talking about a pregnant super-soldier’s sudden cravings.

Jane comes back with even more blackberry jam and Bucky makes cake while the rest of them get back to watching the show. Darcy sneaks a peek over at him a couple times and finds him eating the blackberry jam with a spoon while the cake bakes, which is somehow both super gross and super cute? Like, she doesn’t know what’s up with that but apparently she is weak for it.

Bucky brings over an overflowing plate of jam thumbprint cookies and gives them all a slice of almond cake—except for Thor, who gets two slices—and then sits down with the other half of the cake and a fork and no shame whatsoever. Darcy is definitely weak for this. Also, the cake is really, reaaaally good; most of the raspberries have been turned into some kind of thick syrup and used to fill the cake, and the top of it is covered in the rest and enough vanilla icing to choke on, which in Darcy’s opinion is exactly as much icing as necessary. Almond cake is apparently delicious, at least how Bucky makes it.

“This is so good, Bucky,” Jane says appreciatively. Bucky seems too occupied with the judging going on on the TV to answer her, but grunts in some kind of acknowledgement around his next forkful of cake. It is the least omega-like sound Darcy has ever heard him make, but honestly she’s still riding the “how is he so cute” train. Watching him eat half a cake on the common room loveseat and actually kind of relax around people is . . . is pretty fucking great, really.

She’ll give him every nice thing she can find, if it comes to it.

They go back to watching the show and eat the entire plate of cookies, which has to be at least two batches’ worth, and honestly Darcy could probably eat more. Sue her, there are a lot of very attractive desserts on the screen, and also the cookies are—unsurprisingly—also really good. Bucky absolutely destroys the cake and starts eyeing the empty plate like he’s seriously considering making another one. Darcy wonders if she needs to find more raspberries. Maybe she should’ve had J.A.R.V.I.S. order groceries when Bucky started baking.

In the end, he doesn’t get up, though he does scrape the leftover icing off the plate and suck it off his fork, which is . . . distracting, yeah, “distracting” is the word Darcy is gonna use. He sets the plate on the floor and curls up next to her as best as his stomach will allow and she melts, of course, and drapes an arm over his shoulders. He settles in and keeps watching the show, and she hopes this counts as a nice thing. He smells content, at least, so she hopes it does.

She wishes she could fix things for him and Steve. She knows it’s really not her place to interfere any more than she already has been, and it’s not really something that needs fixed so much as a mental hurdle Bucky’s got to get over, but she feels like it’s something she should be able to do.
It’s really not, though, so she’s just gonna have to deal with it.

She really wants to think Bucky will get over it, eventually. Will realize that Steve wants him around no matter what he did when he didn’t know any better and couldn’t even remember himself, much less anyone else. It’ll have to sink in eventually, won’t it?

Well, no, it doesn’t have to do anything. But all he’s really doing right now is upsetting them both, and it’s driving her crazy that she can’t just fix it, whether it’s her place or not.

She can’t actually complain. At least Bucky has a comfortable place to live and cake when he wants it and a nest arranged just the way he likes and he’s not too scared to come in from the cold. If he never wants to see Steve again . . . well, that’s a choice he gets to make, isn’t it. He deserves choices, even if she thinks they’re the wrong ones.

He’s so good. He deserves every choice and everything she can give him, everything all of them can give him, and it’s just--

“Sorry,” Bucky murmurs quietly as the credits play, and Darcy peers over at him.

“For what?” she asks, a little confused.

“Just . . . sorry, I guess,” he says, and shrugs loosely. She rubs his shoulder, frowning in confusion.

“You want more cookies?”

“. . . are there more?” Darcy asks hopefully, because seriously, those were good cookies.

“There’s more batter, I just didn’t bake it yet,” Bucky says with another shrug. He rests his head on her shoulder for a moment, then carefully gets to his feet and collects everyone’s empty plates to take back to the kitchen with him. She’s about to get up and help him, but Thor beats her to it and then washes the dishes while Bucky gets a bowl of cookie batter out of the fridge and starts spooning it out onto a baking sheet. It looks like a fairly big batch, but given their collective appetites she’s not surprised by that. The floor already smells delicious from earlier, and it only gets better when Bucky puts the new trays in the oven.

It’s nice. Like . . . this whole thing, this is just nice. Like, cute and domestic and sweet. She likes it.

She hopes Bucky likes it too.

They spend the rest of the night watching the show and eating really good cookies and Darcy half-dozes off on the loveseat with Bucky’s head on her chest. Being this close just to be close and not for any ulterior motive, nothing about scenting or sex or heat or rut . . . it’s really nice. She’s gonna wear that word out, but it’s totally worth it.

She only realizes she’s playing with Bucky’s hair about halfway through actually playing with it, but he doesn’t seem to mind so she doesn’t stop. It’s softer than she remembers it being, and she cards her fingers through it carefully, making sure not to tug or tangle anything. Bucky might actually be dozing himself, though it’s hard to tell; if he is, she doesn’t want to wake him.

He’s so pretty. So pretty and brave and good and--well, she could go on for a while.

She really does love him.

They sleep on the loveseat. Darcy wakes up with a crick in her neck, but it’s totally worth it. It’s double worth it because Erik’s making pancakes, which: fuck yes. Bucky’s helping, mostly in the sense of fetching and carrying things and looking vaguely concerned, and Jane and Thor are still
dozing on the couch. Darcy considers going back to sleep for a little bit, but Bucky is frowning adorably as Erik explains his pancake recipe and you know what, never mind, she’s good.

She gets up and heads over and gets conscripted into dishwashing, and Erik leans down way too close to Jane and Thor to wake them up and nearly startles them both off the couch, then cheerfully comes back to cook off the pancakes while they recover.

Darcy really hopes he didn’t wake Bucky up that way.

Erik’s pancakes are as awesome as always, and over breakfast Jane and Erik argue about what they’re going to do in the lab today and Thor and Bucky talk about going shopping and Darcy grins kind of stupidly and loves them. Like, all of them. They’re all so great. This is one of those moments where she is so glad she needed those science credits.

They eat, and then all go get dressed and split up for the day. Thor kisses Jane before he leaves, Bucky gives Darcy a sweet little peck on the cheek that makes her melt all over, and they head out together, probably with one of Tony’s credit cards. Darcy grins kind of stupidly and loves them. Like, all of them. They’re all so great. This is one of those moments where she is so glad she needed those science credits.

They can’t be scared all the time, anyway. What kind of alpha could she be to him if she was always operating on her fears? Not a very fucking good one.

Jane and Erik keep bickering the whole way to the lab and Darcy grabs her latest pregnancy book and makes sure she packs enough protein bars to get them all through the morning. As long as she can keep Jane and Erik from working through lunch, she’s pretty sure they’re good. They get to work, and Darcy starts wondering if this is the new normal—or at least the new normal until the pups happen, because obviously that’s gonna be a huge change. Until then, though, Bucky’s gotten folded so neatly into their lives that it’s . . . kind of amazing, really. Kind of a miracle.

Seriously, he hasn’t stabbed anyone. Not even Tony!

And speaking of the devil . . .

“Lewis!” Tony shouts, bursting into the lab with a resigned but amused-looking Rhodey behind him. Jane jumps a mile and Erik nearly knocks over his computer. Darcy drops . . . way, way too many papers. Ugh.

“Talk fast or I’m gonna take this out on you, Stark,” she threatens. He laughs at her, then comes over and calls up a holoscreen.

“I need feedback,” he says, pointing at the screen. “Making some baby-sized protective suits, just in case. What do you think, red or gold?”

“You’re making what?” Darcy asks, staring at him.

“Suits, Lewis, keep up,” Tony says. “Well, not literal suits, more like emergency escape pods that’ll return to the tower when activated, but we live dangerous, explosive lives. Lives it’s good to occasionally be bulletproof for.”

Darcy looks at the screen. Then looks back at Tony. Then the screen again.

“You’re ridiculous,” she says, then hugs him.
“Ack,” Tony says. “No, no, I wasn’t shooting for this. Please stop this.”

“Ridiculous,” Darcy repeats, then forces herself to let go of him and looks at the schematics again. She’s not really an expert in reading those, but the important part is that Tony made them up at all. “When did you do this?”

“Last night, mostly,” Rhodey says wryly, folding his arms.

“On that note, there’s coffee in this lab, right?” Tony asks, looking around the room.

“Only decaf. I know better than to let these two get wired,” Darcy says, then pushes a protein bar at him.

“I don’t like being handed things,” Tony says. Darcy sets it on the table and slides it towards him instead. He eyes it for a moment, but snatches it up and unwraps it to inhale in two bites. “Mmph. Anyway, you didn’t answer my question, red or gold? How about red and gold, I’m open to that.”

“Tony,” Rhodey says.

“I literally could not care less about the color,” Darcy says. “They’ll really be bulletproof?”

“They’ll be explosion-proof, keep up,” Tony says, then lifts his wrists and gives them a little wave to show off his bracelets. “They’ll have to wear the bracelets and you’ll have to keep the briefcase on hand, but I figure that’s a fair exchange for your kids being able to go out and about and you know, see the sun on occasion.”

“That’s so awesome,” Darcy says, shaking her head in disbelief. “Like, that’s amazing, Tony, I can’t believe you did this.”

“Am doing, technically, first drafts and all,” Tony replies with a dismissive shrug, waving away the holoscreen. “I’ve got what, four months still? Plenty of time.”

“Getting closer to three, I think,” Darcy says, which—shit, that’s no time at all, is it. She needs to read so many books.

“Gross,” Tony says conversationally. “I’ll have ’em done by the end of the week.”

“That’s so—thank you. And for the tasers, too,” Darcy says, resisting the urge to hug him again. He blinks rapidly at her, then shrugs again.

“Child’s play,” he says. “No, you know, pun intended. Hah.”

Tony and Rhodey clear out, and Darcy starts cleaning up the papers she dropped, way less annoyed about them than she was before. Jane gives her a hand. Erik . . . makes things worse, mostly, but he tries. They make it through the rest of the day without incident, and Darcy goes back to the suite and finds dinner warm in the oven and Bucky folding tiny baby clothes in the living room with the laundry basket, which, oh god.

“Oh god,” she says, putting a hand over her heart.

“We bought pup stuff,” Bucky says. He’s holding the world’s most darling onesie. There’s little dinosaurs on it. Darcy might need to sit down.

“It’s so cute,” Darcy coos, immediately going over to get a closer look. There’s all sorts of precious-looking little outfits on the table, and she resists the urge to unfold anything in favor of
looking through the pile of unfolded ones. “Jamie! These are awesome, baby!”

“Storm recommended a couple stores,” Bucky says.

“I’m gonna assume you mean Sue and not Johnny.” Darcy admires a pair of overalls. They have a little embroidered duck on the bib. “Oh my god, I’m gonna die, these are precious.”

“Thor picked those,” Bucky says.

“He picked good,” Darcy says, then coos over the next pair of overalls. These ones have trains on them. “Did you guys get anything else, or just clothes?”

“Bedding,” Bucky says, nodding towards the laundry basket. “Stark only had one set.”

“Jamie!” Darcy nearly squeals as she looks in the basket and finds a little set of stuffed circus toys next to the matching sheets. She picks up the elephant and immediately hugs it. “Oh my god, I love them!”

“I picked those,” Bucky says, ducking his head a little. He’s smiling, so she considers that a win.

“You picked great,” she enthuses. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything so cute in my life.”

“It is kinda cute,” Bucky says.

“The cutest,” Darcy says firmly. “You need help folding?”

“Um--sure,” Bucky says, and scoots over to make room for her even though there’s already plenty of room on the couch. Darcy melts for the umpteenth time and sits down next to him to grab the nearest onesie. Between the two of them they finish the folding pretty quick, and Bucky takes it all to the nursery to put away. Darcy follows him, mostly because she hasn’t been in the nursery since . . . well, pretty much since they moved in, honestly. It looks a lot cuter and softer than it did then, full of blankets and toys and sweet little bits of wall decor and bright colors, and she makes a surprised noise.

“You didn’t buy all this today, did you?” she asks in bemusement, touching a pretty little butterfly mobile.

“No,” Bucky says. “What did you think we kept going shopping for?”

“. . . fun?” Darcy says sheepishly. He blinks at her, then lets out a soft laugh.

“Well. A couple times,” he says. “But mostly we were doing this.”

“You did good,” Darcy says, looking around the room. Bucky is so much more on top of this stuff than her; she hadn’t even thought about buying stuff like this for the pups. If they’d left it to her she probably would’ve had to make a midnight run for diapers the first night, but Bucky already has packages of them stacked up by the changing table. She never even followed up on buying a rug. “Like . . . shit, baby, I’m really impressed.”

“Stark paid for most of it,” Bucky says, glancing around too. “He gave me a credit card and said to, uh, go nuts.”

“Yeah, sounds like Tony,” Darcy says. “Did you know he’s working on, like, little protective pods for the pups in case we get attacked? Kinda like his suit.”

“He is?” Bucky blinks. “That’s . . . really smart.”
“Yeah, I definitely did not think of that one,” Darcy says. “He’s probably gonna paint them something super garish, but I for one am not gonna complain even a little. He showed me the schematics but I couldn’t understand them at all.”

“He’s doing a lot,” Bucky says, looking down at the crib he’s currently tucking a small stuffed giraffe into.

“He does that,” Darcy says with a shrug. “So do all the Avengers, really; Tony’s just the only one with a wallet to match. Once again, I owe him a really good birthday present.”

“All the Avengers,” Bucky says distantly. “Yeah.”

Darcy doesn’t really know what to say to that, because it’s pretty obvious who he’s thinking about. Steve seems so sad. She doesn’t know if Bucky’s that sad too.

She kind of suspects that he must be, at least on some level. Once upon a time he was planning to do this with Steve, to say nothing of Peggy Carter. Darcy’s doing her best, but she’s not a supersoldier or SSR agent, and she’s not who he lost. Steve’s still around, but he doesn’t want to see Steve--no, he doesn’t think he can see Steve--and all she’s got is herself. He seems to be okay with that, at least, but she’s not gonna blame him if he’s grieving what he’s lost.

There’s a lot for Bucky to grieve.

“Yeah,” she says finally, walking over to him to take his hand and squeeze it. He’s quiet, but squeezes back. He’s looking at the crib in front of him.

“They’re going to be small,” he says. “And defenseless.”

“Yeah, they are,” Darcy agrees. “The Avengers are gonna help us with that, though.”

“Right.” Bucky’s still looking at the crib. She thinks about Steve again, though she’s trying not to right now.

“I’m scared too,” she says, squeezing his hand again. “You know that, right?”

“Yeah.” He glances back to her. She smiles as encouragingly as she can and hopes it helps, at least a little. Her phone goes off and she pauses for a second, then pulls it out. She doesn’t like to leave her phone unchecked, their lives just do not account for that. A snap from Johnny Storm probably isn’t a crisis, but she opens it anyway and makes a surprised sound at the sight of the picture.

“Oh! Oh man!” she exclaims, immediately screencapping it. “Jamie, check it out!”

“What?” he asks with a frown, leaning over her shoulder, and she replays the snap, grinning widely at the sight of an exhausted but beaming Sue and the two tiny blonde pups curled in her arms. The caption says “my litter-sister is a BEAST. meet Franklin and Valeria!”

“They had the pups!” Darcy says delightedly.

“Oh,” Bucky says, staring at the picture in surprise. “Oh, wow.”

“Look at them, they’re so cute!” Darcy gushes, bouncing in place and then switching back to her camera to send back a snap of her gleeful face and some keysmsah emoticons. Bucky looks more awed than gleeful, but hey, good enough. She switches back to the screencap and coos delightedly at it, utterly charmed.
“They’re so little,” Bucky says wonderingly, his fingers not quite brushing the screen.

“I know, right? So cute.” Darcy grins stupidly at the picture and feels a sudden excitement swelling up in her chest—they’re going to have pups just like those soon. “But ours are gonna be even cuter, obviously.”

“Fuck yeah, those poor kids got Richards in them,” Bucky snorts, even as he turns a little pink. “Ours are definitely gonna be cuter.”

“Word,” Darcy says, and fist-bumps him. “Oh my god, though, this is so cool, they have real babies now. And we’re gonna too! The realest and the cutest! They can have play dates!”

“Is the Baxter Building secure?” Bucky asks doubtfully.

“Probably not as secure as the tower, honestly, but: Iron Man pods,” Darcy says.

“Point.” Bucky frowns a little, looking at the picture again and resting a hand—the biological hand—carefully on his stomach. Darcy is going to melt into vapor. He’s so sweet.

“Also, the Fantastic Four,” she says. “You know, while we’re at it.”

“The pups aren’t gonna be fireproof,” Bucky mutters.

“Well, we’ll be careful about that,” Darcy says, taking one last peek at the picture before putting her phone away. “That’s pretty cool, though, a couple more superbabies in the world. I hope they get along with ours, it’d be nice for them to know other, you know, enhanced people. Assuming they’re coming out enhanced. Assuming these two came out enhanced.”

“They’re coming out enhanced,” Bucky says. “Banner said so.”

“Oh . . . oh boy,” Darcy says weakly. Well, she’d already been pretty sure they would, but for some reason hearing Bruce-certified confirmation makes her feel a little woozy. “Well, hopefully my side of the genes won’t drag ‘em down too far, then.”

“They won’t,” Bucky says, taking her hand and lacing their fingers together. “They’ll be real tough pups, with you in ‘em.”

“Well . . . they’ll be real sweet, with you in them,” Darcy says, turning pink. God, he’s a treat and a half. Bucky laughs a little, shaking his head, and then smiles at her.

“If you say so,” he says.

“I do,” Darcy says firmly, squeezing his hand and getting another smile for it.

“You’re good,” Bucky says. It’s a complete sentence, the way he says it. It’s an essay, the way he says it.

“You too,” Darcy says, because he is.
In Darcy’s defense, a lot’s been going on. When she wakes up to her phone going off on the nightstand, she doesn’t bother checking who’s calling, much less thinking about any reasons anyone might be calling at two in the morning. The world’s probably ending, is all.

“Nnnfgh?” she manages into the phone, barely repressing a yawn.

“J.A.R.V.I.S., put us on speaker,” Natasha says, and a holoscreen pops into existence over Darcy’s head, its glow illuminating the bedroom. She blinks up at it sleepily, pushing herself up in the bed as Bucky pulls her pillow over his head with a low groan. He’s been having trouble sleeping, and part of her’s kind of annoyed that Natasha’s interrupting, but knowing their lives--

“Aliens?” she asks automatically.

“Not quite that level,” Natasha says. Darcy scrubs the sleep out of her eyes and puts on her glasses, then blinks blearily at her--oh, and Sam, Sam’s there too. She’d be feeling a bit more reflexive guilt at the sight of them, knowing how Steve’s been, but she’s really tired.

Still some room for the guilt, though.

“S H I E L D?” she guesses.

“Closer,” Natasha says. “We’re going to be late.”

“. . . for what, dinner?” Darcy asks, squinting at her in confusion.

“For Steve,” Sam says.

“. . . Jane’s on Asgard,” Darcy says, feeling all the color drain out of her face as Bucky stiffens in the bed beside her. Bucky’s six months along. And six months along means--

“As are Sif and Fandral,” Natasha says.

“Pepper’s in Cairo,” Sam puts in.

“Crystal’s off-planet, again,” Darcy groans.

“There’s no one left alive from S H I E L D who can be trusted with Captain America,” Natasha says.

“Not who we can find in time, anyway,” Sam says.

“Are you sure there’s no one--” Darcy starts.

“There’s no one,” Natasha cuts her off. “We even called Reed Richards, for God’s sake, not that the man even picked up.”

“Fuuuuuuuck,” Darcy groans, burying her face in her hands and then dragging them through her hair. “Well, he can--he can ride it out alone, right, he, uh, he used to . . . to do that, didn’t he, that’d be--”

“Barnes has been in the tower for three months and still hasn’t let him see him once,” Natasha says, perfectly neutrally.
“Fuck,” Darcy says, pulling her knees up to her chest and dragging at her hair again. There’s no way. There is no way. “He’ll slam the door in my face!”

“Relax,” Sam says. “You’ve gotten Barnes through a heat before, you’re the best choice anyway. Steve’s, uh—”

“Demanding,” Natasha says.

“Bucky’s not actually that demanding,” Darcy says weakly.

“We’re stuck for at least the next fourteen hours, and it’ll take another eight to get back. He’s already in pre-heat by now,” Natasha says.

“Oh Jesus,” Darcy groans. It’s a terrible idea, but she can’t just leave Steve in the lurch like that. Not without at least offering. “Let me take a shower first. Let me take two showers first.”

“I’d recommend it, yes,” Natasha says.

“If you can’t do it, you can’t do it,” Sam says.

“I can do it,” Darcy says. He came to her for this once, almost, so . . . “Assuming he doesn’t slam the door in my face, anyway. God, he’s gonna slam the door in my face.” The idea of being rejected by an omega who needs her—but that’s his right, obviously, and his choice to make. It’s gonna suck, but it’s the least she can do.

“Alright,” Sam says. He and Natasha are looking at her with very different expressions that probably both mean “reading her like a book”, but she can live with that. “We’ll tell him you’re coming.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Darcy says. That’s probably the only good idea in this conversation. The holoscreen blinks out and the room goes dark. Darcy sighs, pressing her forehead into her knees. Okay. Take a shower. Pack a heat bag. Do not let Bucky scent her. She can handle that. “Jamie, baby . . .”

“I heard,” Bucky says from under the pillow.

“You’ll be okay?” Darcy asks. She’d reach for his hand, but it’s too dark to see. Besides that, she’s not sure he wants her touching him right now. She wouldn’t blame him for avoiding it.

“Yes,” Bucky says.

“Okay.” Darcy flicks on the light, and finds Bucky sitting up and looking directly at her. She startles and nearly knocks the lamp over, but he jerks an arm out and catches it before it can fall. “Jesus!”

“Sorry,” he says.

“It’s okay,” she says, getting out of bed awkwardly. “I’m just--I’m gonna go take a shower, okay?”

“Oh.” He stares intently at her, and she flees to the bathroom. She takes probably the quickest and most thorough shower of her life, scrubbing every single part of herself nearly hard enough to sting and shampooing twice even though it’s gonna be shit for her hair. The important thing is that she smells as little like Bucky as possible, which is gonna be hard since everything in the suite smells like him these days. She can only hope she can find some suitable heat snacks he hasn’t touched. What kind of heat snacks does Steve like, anyway--she didn’t even think to ask.
God, she is blowing this already, isn’t she. Steve really needs her not to blow this.

Darcy wrings out her hair and dries it roughly, not even bothering to deal with the blow-dryer. If her hair’s gonna be damp in Steve Rogers’ bed, well, so fucking be it; she’s got bigger concerns, satisfying a sad super-soldier being basically all of them. Satisfying a sad super-soldier without reminding him of his estranged best friend who she is sleeping with and with him being, quote, “demanding”.

She is gonna die, she’s pretty sure. Like, almost positive at this point.

Darcy finishes up in the bathroom and heads out to change into clean clothes. Bucky’s standing by the bed in his nightshirt and pajama pants and one of Thor’s flannels, very carefully packing a bag.

“What are you doing?” Darcy asks blankly.

“You need a heat bag,” Bucky says, not looking up from what he’s doing--packing snacks, it looks like. Darcy blinks, and blinks again.

“Jamie, baby--I can’t take Steve a heat bag that smells like you,” she says.

“Yes you can,” Bucky says, packing in one last packet of jerky and then zipping the bag shut. “I did it right. The things he likes.”

“Baby, I’m sure, but . . .” Darcy trails off, not really sure how to explain this. Isn’t this something Bucky should just--know? “He hasn’t seen you in over a year.”

“You’re going to take care of him,” Bucky says, looking over at her.

“I--yeah, of course I am,” Darcy says. “If he’ll let me, I mean. I’ll do whatever he lets me do for him.”

“Not without me,” Bucky says.

“. . . what?” Darcy tilts her head, not understanding.

“Not without me,” Bucky repeats, picking up the bag and hooking it over his shoulder. Darcy, lost for words, goes to grab a clean nightshirt of her own. She debates panties, but, well--kinda unnecessary, all things considered.

“You mean you’re coming with me?” she asks warily, still not sure she’s understood him.

“He’s my friend,” Bucky says.

“He was your friend yesterday, too,” Darcy says. “You didn’t want to see him then.”

“I did.” Bucky shakes his head. “I always want to see him.”

“Well, I mean--you maybe wanted to, but you didn’t want to,” Darcy says, fumbling a bit for the words. She’s not sure she’s making sense right now. “This is . . . this is kind of a bad time to be testing the waters, is all I’m saying.”

“If he doesn’t want me there, he’ll say,” Bucky says.

“That is really not what I meant,” Darcy says. “If you come, you’re gonna have to stay. Like, no leaving. Whole heat, whole time. You get that, right?”
“Yes.” He’s just looking at her. She looks back at him, not sure what else to say. Seven solid days together after a year apart seems seems like . . . a lot, to her.

“Okay,” she says helplessly. “Um--you packed snacks? And condoms and lube? And something sweet?”

“And some other stuff,” Bucky says, but doesn’t elaborate. Darcy almost follows up, but then she glances at the clock and realizes just how long they’ve kept Steve waiting, and curses under her breath instead.

“You’re sure you wanna come,” she says carefully. “And stay the whole time? ‘Cuz last time it was seven days.”

“I’m sure.” He’s just looking at her expectantly, jaw stubbornly clenched. For lack of any better ideas, Darcy heads for the bedroom door, and Bucky follows on her heels. She resists the urge to double-check what he packed--he has the important stuff, at least, and Steve’ll have prepared too, obviously. It’ll be enough.

They take the elevator to Steve’s floor and Darcy spends the whole ride trying not to fidget. She really doesn’t know how Steve is going to take Bucky showing up now, is the thing. Like, of all the times.

“Why did he pick now?” she asks, because she can’t help it.

“Because.” Bucky looks no less stubborn, though his eyes slide away from hers, a trace of anxiety in them. “He should have nice things.”

Darcy’s heart clutches up in her chest. Before she can say anything else, the elevator stops, and they’ve officially missed their last chance to back out. Well, maybe she could still--

The doors open.

Never mind. Steve is standing right outside the doors and looking right at her and the whole hallway smells like apple pie. Okay. Okay, this is happening.

“Um,” Darcy says. “Natasha and Sam--they, uh, they called.”

Steve’s not looking at her anymore.

Well--she doesn’t blame him, really.

“Bucky,” Steve says very carefully, and Bucky watches him . . . warily? Is that wariness? He’s hard to read, for once.

“Steve,” Bucky says, and Steve--inhales.

“Yeah,” he says. “That’s me.”

“I remember,” Bucky says, and a strange look crosses Steve’s face. “You’re my friend.”

“I--yeah, I am,” Steve says, his voice a little thick. Darcy feels like the worst kind of intruder right now. She should not be here. Or this should not be happening right now. Or both of those things, probably, maybe. “What are you doing here, Buck?”
“Natalia and Wilson are going to be late,” Bucky says.

“I know.” Steve scrubs a hand over his face and back over his hair. He smells so good, and so sad, and so . . . “Look, I don’t know what they told you, but you don’t have to do this. This isn’t something you have to do.”

“I don’t have to do anything I don’t want to do,” Bucky says.


“So I’m not gonna,” Bucky says, then steps forward out of the elevator and grabs Steve’s hand, pulling it to his mouth to kiss the back of. Steve shudders, and the hall smells even sweeter and sadder.

“Bucky . . .” he starts, then trails off helplessly and looks at Darcy again. She startles, feeling about ready to jump out of her skin.

“This was not my idea,” she says quickly, holding her hands up. “We’re just—if you want us, obviously. Either of us. I can leave.”

She’s pretty sure she can leave, anyway. It’ll hurt, but so would leaving any omega in need. But she’ll do whatever they want her to do, which hopefully won’t be opposite things this time.

“You don’t have to leave, Darcy,” Steve says quietly. Bucky kisses the back of his hand again, and his breathing goes a little unsteady. He’s obviously only skimming pre-heat, but it’s just as obviously still affecting him.

Then again, maybe that’s just Bucky.

“Do you want help?” Darcy asks. “Or, like, somebody to watch the door or keep you fed and hydrated, or . . . ?”

“I’ll be fine,” Steve says as he reclaims his hand, which is, unsurprisingly, not actually an answer.

“Oh, well, that sounds like a deflection if I’ve ever heard one,” Darcy says.

“You’re an idiot,” Bucky says matter-of-factly.

“I’m fine,” Steve says, frowning at him with an expression that is honestly painful to look at; Darcy has no idea how Bucky can handle having it directed at him. It is the least “fine” expression she has ever seen on his face. It’d be the least “fine” expression she’d ever seen on any omega’s face, in fact, if it weren’t for Bucky.

“You don’t have to be,” Bucky says. Steve stares at him for a long moment, then just shakes his head.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” he says. “I’m sorry you didn’t feel like you could come to me.”

“That’s not what we’re talking about,” Bucky says, looking unsettled.

“You think you had to be alone?” Steve asks.

“I did,” Bucky says.

“You really didn’t,” Steve says. They both fall silent, and they’re looking at each other with expressions Darcy can’t read, having an entire conversation she just can’t understand. She
definitely feels like an intruder.

Steve told her not to leave, though. Or as good as, anyway.

“Are you two gonna be okay?” she asks carefully.

“I’m fine,” Steve says again.

“He’s a liar,” Bucky says with a huff, shaking his head. “You’re never fine being alone for heats.”

“I’ve done it fine before,” Steve says.

“No, you got through it before,” Bucky says. “Doesn’t mean you were fine.”

“Bucky . . .” Steve gives him a weary look, and Bucky lifts his chin and snorts at him.

“I don’t remember everything, but I remember you,” he says. “You used to let me take care of you.”

“We took care of each other,” Steve says. “It was different.”

“Why?” Bucky demands. “I ain’t got any more of a knot than I did before, and it worked fine then.”

“You don’t want to be here,” Steve says.

“I know where I wanna be, Rogers,” Bucky says. “And I know you know where you wanna be too.”

“Of course I do,” Steve says tiredly. “But I’m not going to take advantage of you just because--”

“Nobody is taking advantage of me,” Bucky cuts him off irritably. “I already had this talk with Lewis about eighteen times, I don’t wanna have it with you. I know when I want things now. I don’t have to figure it out or work my way up to it or check with anybody else, I just know.”

“I’m not saying you don’t know what you want,” Steve says. “I’d still be taking advantage.”

“I say who’s taking advantage of me,” Bucky retorts with a scowl, folding his arms. “You’re my friend. I’m with you. Don’t be a fucking idiot about it.”

“I don’t . . .” Steve trails off again, and Bucky’s scowl darkens for a moment. He shoves the heat bag at Darcy, who barely catches it in time, and grabs Steve’s shoulders and pulls him in to press his mouth roughly against his jaw.

“You don’t have to,” he says. “I’m here. And I brought you a nice dame to knot you right.”

“Um,” Darcy says, turning bright pink. Steve flushes too.

“She’s good. Not as big as Carter, but still nice and fat,” Bucky continues, and Steve puts a hand over his mouth, looking almost as mortified as Darcy feels.

“I know,” Steve says, still blushing. Wait, what-- “Johnny Storm told me.”

Right. Yeah. Okay, apparently all omegas want to gossip about Darcy’s clit. That’s fine, she can live with that. Maybe they could just stop doing it in front of her? Please?
“Well, Johnny Storm was right,” Bucky says. “Now are you gonna be difficult, or are you gonna let us take care of you?”

“Bucky,” Steve says. He fits so much into it. Bucky just huffs in exasperation.

"Steve,” he says, putting a hand on his stomach. “I’m too pregnant for this shit.”

“Yeah, you’re pretty fat,” Steve says wryly.

“I am,” Bucky says, looking briefly mollified. “Darcy’s been feeding me.”

“Hey, okay, that’s a lie, you’ve been feeding me,” Darcy says. “Like, excessively. I’ve gained like ten pounds?”

“If you gained it, you needed it,” Bucky says firmly, tucking his hair behind his ear with his free hand.

“That sounds familiar,” Steve says meaningfully, raising his eyebrows.

“You definitely need ten pounds,” Bucky says, eyeballing him pointedly. “You don’t have a damn ounce of fat on you, Rogers.”

“I have heat snacks,” Darcy volunteers lamely, pulling a granola bar out of the bag. Steve gives her a wry smile, but accepts it.

“Thank you,” he says.

“Sure,” she says, then watches restlessly until he unwraps and eats it. He really does smell so good. Even smelling sad he smells so good; how is that even a thing? Like, really?

Bucky smells even better, of course. The whole hall smells like apple pie and cinnamon rolls and heat and bred. It’s--it’s a little hard to concentrate past, honestly, but she’s doing her best. Jesus, though, how often in her life is she going to smell the two most delicious omegas she knows together like this? Like, really?

She should probably be savoring the moment, but mostly she’s just overwhelmed by it. What a damn combination they make.

Nobody’s ever smelled them together like this, she realizes abruptly--Bucky bred, and Steve coming up on his heat, and both of them right here together . . . that’s something no one else has ever smelled or seen or . . .

Wow, that’s a thought, isn’t it.

Wow.

Steve and Bucky both turn and look at her at the exact same time she realizes her pheromones just spiked and they both just--inhale, and get matching slightly glazed looks in their eyes for just a moment.

“Ngh,” Darcy says feelingly, clutching the heat bag to her stomach and silently willing her clit to behave.

“You smell like firecrackers,” Bucky says.

“I--thanks?” Darcy tries, not really sure how to take that one. He sounded like he was
complimenting her. She thinks. “What do you want us to do, Steve?”

“Nothing you don’t want to,” he says. Bucky gives him a long-suffering look.

“If you don’t stop me I’m gonna kiss you,” he says. Steve blinks at him, looking genuinely startled, and Bucky grabs him by the face and reels him in. Darcy . . . Darcy watches, and blue-screens a bit. And oh boy, does Bucky kiss him. Oh boy, does he ever.

“This is not really talking about it like adults,” she says. Bucky breaks off the kiss to give her a sullen look. Steve just kind of . . . blinks. He might be having his own blue-screen moment.

“I never said I was gonna talk about this like an adult,” Bucky says. Which: fair.

“We probably should, though,” Darcy says anyway.

“Right,” Steve agrees, then tugs Bucky’s face back to his face and kisses him. Bucky makes a pleased, triumphant noise and returns it. Darcy kind of just stands there, still feeling like an intruder. They’ve got this whole big epitragic thing going and she is a grad student who only smells good to one-third of the population, can’t cook for shit, and still has trouble pronouncing “Mjolnir”. She is definitely the third wheel here.

“I’m gonna go,” she says. “Not that I’m not enjoying the view or anything, just I am really in the way here and I--”

“Don’t go,” Steve says.

“. . . okay,” Darcy says, because let’s be real, it’s not like she wants to. This is a very weird heat already, though, and she really doesn’t know how to approach it. Aside from by asking the obvious question, anyway. “What can I do for you?”

“You don’t need to do anything,” Steve says.

“Knot him,” Bucky says. He looks well-kissed and his hands are in Steve’s back pockets, their stomachs pressed together. It’s . . . it’s a sight, is what it is. Darcy might still need a moment or ten.

“I more meant right now,” she says. “Like, prior to any need for whatever kind of knot. Did you nest yet, do you want us to leave and come back, do you need pillows or a certain kind of food, that kind of thing.”

“I don’t need anything,” Steve says. Bucky bites his ear, and he shudders. “I didn’t nest yet.”

“Okay,” Darcy says, biting her lip. “You want us to wait out here?”

“I . . .” Steve hesitates, and Bucky tugs on his ear with his teeth and wraps his arms around his neck. Darcy attempts to keep eye contact with Steve. It mostly works. “I’d rather go to your floor,” he says.

“Oh--really?” Darcy asks in confusion. “I mean, I know you don’t like heating up in an alpha’s den . . .”

“It isn’t just an alpha’s den,” Steve says, which--fair point, really.

This is a really normal conversation, all things considered. She would not have thought this conversation was going to be so normal.

She doesn’t know what she thought this conversation was going to be.
“Okay,” she says, and presses the button on the elevator. “You really don’t need anything, right? You’re good to go?”

“I’m good,” Steve says.

“Okay,” Darcy says, very aware she is about to shut herself in a small enclosed space with the both of them. That is—that is definitely a thing that is about to happen.

Jesus.

Bucky pulls Steve into the elevator. Darcy prays for mercy and follows them in. Mercy, unsurprisingly, does not arrive. Instead, they ride the elevator in awkward silence. Well—awkward on her part, anyway. Bucky and Steve aren’t kissing anymore, which is a small momentary mercy. Darcy doesn’t know how long to expect it to last, but at least it’s lasting the length of the elevator ride.

They get out of the elevator. Darcy continues not to know what to do, but leads the way to the suite. It’s a little easier on her than watching the other two. She doesn’t know if it’s easier on them. Hopefully?

She opens the door and waits for them to go in. Bucky grabs Steve by the arm and pulls him through before anyone can think better of any of this, which might be smart and might be stupid. Darcy follows them in as Bucky keeps pulling Steve along. Steve keeps going. Darcy keeps following, heat bag slung over her shoulder. It seems like the thing to do. At least, it’s the only thing she can think to do.

Bucky takes Steve past the nursery and into the master bedroom. Steve’s eyes catch on the nursery doorway, but he doesn’t stop. Darcy feels like she should’ve bought a rug again. Bucky goes straight into the bedroom and then for the first time pauses, looking between the bathroom door and his closet door with an obviously torn expression.

“What are you looking for?” Steve asks.

“There’s a bath,” Bucky says. “Have you seen the baths here?”

“They’re . . . they’re something, alright,” Steve says wryly.

“They’re proof that Tony Stark has never been hugged in his life,” Darcy says. “What are you getting him for his birthday? I need ideas.”

“Um—I hadn’t really thought about it?” Steve says.

“Dammit,” Darcy says.

“You should take a bath,” Bucky says, tugging Steve towards the bathroom. “Make yourself all nice and pretty”

“I’m not pretty?” Steve asks, smiling humorlessly.

“You are super pretty,” Darcy swears immediately, because sue her, pre-heat pheromones and also the truth. “You are almost the prettiest omega I know.”

“Prettiest one I know,” Bucky says, opening the bathroom door and heading into it. He starts drawing the water and Steve hovers in the doorway, watching him. Darcy kind of doesn’t know what to do with herself so heads over to Bucky’s side of the bed and sets down the heat bag next to
it. It’s not like they’re gonna need—”Darcy, where’s the go-bag?”

Never mind.


“What’s that?” Steve asks with a frown.

“Bath bomb,” Bucky says reverently, taking the vanilla bath bomb back into the bathroom with him. “Trust me, you’ll love it.”

Darcy grins, more than a little pleased that Bucky liked it that much, and makes a mental note to buy more next chance she gets. Like, a bushel more. She’s gonna clean Lush out. Steve looks puzzled, but then puts on an amused expression.

“This isn’t going to be like the bath salts incident again, right?” he asks. Bucky pauses and frowns for a moment, confusion flickering across his face as he sits down on the edge of the tub.

“I don’t know,” he says finally. “I don’t remember a bath salts incident.”

“How much do you remember?” Steve asks.

“I don’t know,” Bucky says. “That’s like asking how much I forgot. How am I supposed to know what’s not there?”

“That’s . . . fair, yeah,” Steve sighs. “You remember the Howlies?”

“Some of them.” Bucky inspects the bath bomb. “Dugan and Jones and Morita and Falsworth and Dernier. The book I read said there were more, but I didn’t remember them.”

“There were more after the war,” Steve says carefully. “You didn’t know any of them.”

“Oh.” Bucky pauses, then sets the bath bomb aside and checks the temperature of the water. “I didn’t know that.”

“Well—now you do,” Steve says.

“Right.” Bucky pauses again to adjust the temperature, then frowns to himself for a moment before looking at Steve again. “You’re my friend, right?”

“Buck—of course I am,” Steve says, looking heartbroken, and Bucky shakes his head.

“No,” he says. “I mean you’re my friend. I knew you before the war. I thought you were smaller.”

“I was.” Steve sits down on the edge of the tub next to him, just looking at him. Bucky’s frowning again.

“We were from Brooklyn,” he says. “You’d never run away from a fight. You kept starting fights.”

“It was kind of hard not to,” Steve says wryly.

“No, you were just a punk,” Bucky says, and Steve lets out a soft little laugh. “Get in the bath, Rogers. Be nice to yourself for five minutes.”
“I’m old enough to know how to handle a heat bath, Buck,” Steve says.

“I trust you about as far as I can throw you,” Bucky snorts.

“You can throw me pretty far,” Steve points out.

“... about as far as Darcy can throw you,” Bucky amends.

“Okay, I can’t throw a marshmallow, that’s a little harsh,” Darcy says. They both look at her and her stomach does a funny little jump. She heroically does not immediately pop a stiffy, at least, though god knows how she manages that one. “Ngh. You two are both way too pretty, you know that, right?”

“American dream,” Steve says with a dismissive shrug, moving to pull off his T-shirt. Darcy saw him with his shirt off in some of those old SSR file pictures, but god damn, the up close and personal is something else. No wonder all those nurses were staring.

“Ngh,” she says again. Steve takes his pants off. He isn’t wearing underwear. ”Ngh."

“You coming?” Steve asks, looking at the bath and missing Bucky half-reaching out and nearly touching his flank before thinking better of it. Darcy empathizes. Deeply.

“What?” Darcy asks inanely.

“Bucky,” Steve clarifies, then glances at him again. “This tub’s even bigger than mine.”

“Family suite, and all,” Darcy says faintly. Is what she thinks is about to happen about to happen? What she thinks is about to happen can not be about to happen.

Bucky takes his pants off. Steve gets in the bath. Bucky takes his shirt off. Steve stretches out the full length of the tub, then moves over to make room and Bucky slips in beside him. Darcy grabs the doorframe before she can fall over. If she falls over, they might, like, check on her, and if they check on her they’ll stop being in the bath together.

Seriously, her early adventures in softcore porn are not helping her keep her cool here.

“This is a bath bomb,” Bucky says, picking it up and dropping it into the bath. Steve makes a startled noise, then watches it fizz to the surface. The vanilla scent of it spreads out, mixing with the apple pie cinnamon of Steve and Bucky, and Darcy considers going and having a lie-down while they finish up in here. Except then she’d miss them finishing up in here, soooo . . .

“You guys need anything?” she asks weakly.

“No,” Steve says.

“Yes,” Bucky says, and reaches up to turn Steve’s head towards his and plants a little kitten-lick kiss behind the corner of his jaw. Steve tense a little, and then all the tension goes out of him.

“Bucky,” he says, his pheromones just barely spiking.

“Yeah,” Bucky says, giving him another little kiss. Steve’s pheromones give another barely-there spike, and he turns into Bucky and presses his face into his throat, arms wrapping around him. Bucky looks a little hunted for a moment, but relaxes into the embrace and runs a hand across the back of Steve’s arm. “Maybe unpack the heat bag?” he says.

“I can do that,” Darcy says, pushing off the doorframe. She would rather be in here, but so would
literally any person on Earth, she’s pretty sure. She heads back into the room and unpacks the heat bag into the little mini-fridge and onto her nightstand--lube, condoms, jerky, bottled smoothies--

Truffles.

She blinks at the pretty gold box, then looks back towards the bathroom door. Bucky packed Steve truffles.

Goddammit, she is gonna die of how sad and cute they are.

She finishes unpacking, then remakes the bed while she’s at it. She’d drag out the nesting pillows, but they’re all pretty occupied in Bucky’s closet, so hopefully Steve isn’t gonna want any. He might’ve assumed they had spares, which, you know, would be a pretty normal assumption to make. Maybe she should check the linen closet.

She checks the linen closet. It is entirely devoid of pretty much anything but a single set of spare sheets, which isn’t really a surprise. She’s pretty sure even her bed curtains have wound up in the closet at this point.

There’s more she should be doing, she’s sure, but she’ll be damned if she can think of what.

Darcy heads back into the bedroom. There’s some soft splashing sounds from the bathroom, which is extremely distracting, and nothing to do anywhere else in the room, which is not distracting at all and therefore not doing her any good. She heads back over to the bathroom, avoiding looking inside, and knocks lightly on the doorframe.

“You guys doing alright?” she asks.

“Mmmmm,” Bucky purrs.

“Yes,” Steve says breathlessly. Darcy really wants to look, but refrains.

“Cool, cool,” she says. “I’ll be out here if you need me.”

“Okay,” Bucky sighs, and Steve makes a muffled, shocky sound. Darcy takes the better part of valor and retreats.

She doesn’t know what to do. She doesn’t know what they’re expecting her to do. She’ll watch the door for them until the next freaking apocalypse if she has to or fetch them anything they want or do anything they ask, but they’re not asking. How’s she supposed to know what to do if they aren’t asking?

She could guess, obviously, but she doesn’t want to do anything weird. Bucky’s acting like this is all normal, more or less, but Steve seems a little too fragile, brittle at the edges, and she doesn’t want to risk fucking anything up for him. Them. Either of them.

This is definitely one of the hardest things she’s done as an alpha, sitting out here waiting for the best omegas she knows to come out and want . . . what, exactly? Who knows.

She wants to have it for them, whatever it is.

They stay in the bath for a long time. Darcy waits, because there’s nothing else she can do. If there is something else she can do, she’s not thinking of it and no one’s bothered mentioning it to her. She wants to do right by them, and she’s pretty sure they want her to stay, but during a heat bath is not exactly the time to be asking questions like that.
She’s usually much better at this kind of thing. Like, she handled Johnny’s heat okay—well, mostly okay—and she handled Bucky’s heat okay, and she never had a real problem with Ian or any of her past partners. Usually she knows what to say and when to say it, and if she fucks up she knows she can fix it. This time . . .

It’s a bit more fragile, this time.

Or maybe it’s not. Maybe this is just one of those weird things where two omegas make eye contact and have a whole conversation without saying a word and she’s just being paranoid and weird. It doesn’t feel like she’s being paranoid and weird, though, and she can’t imagine anyone fitting seventy years into just one conversation. Maybe Bucky’s acting like this so they don’t have to. Maybe Steve’s acting like this because he’s afraid to scare Bucky off. Maybe--

The bathroom door opens, and Bucky comes out damp and glittery in a barely-tied bathrobe and comes over to her and kisses her cheek. He looks amazing, as always.

“Thanks,” he says. “He’s almost done. You need anything?”

“No,” Darcy says, catching his wrists in her hands and giving them a little squeeze. She really loves him. She really, really loves him. “You guys are good?”

“We’re good,” Bucky says with a nod, giving her another little kiss and then tugging her hand to his stomach. “The pups are kicking.”

“What?” Darcy asks stupidly, then feels a soft little bump knock against her palm and oh—”Oh, wow,” she breathes, eyes widening. She knows moms feel it sooner, but she didn’t realize the pups were far enough along for anyone else to feel them. “I didn’t know you were this far along. I mean, I know how far along you are, obviously, just I didn’t know that was this far along.”

“They kicked the captain,” Bucky says wryly.

“Oh, wow,” Darcy says again, spreading her fingers on his stomach. She feels another little kick against her palm and a thrill goes up her spine. “Baby! Hi, baby!” she coos, unable to help the wide grin that breaks out on her face. “You’re getting so big!”

“Big enough,” Bucky snorts, pushing his hands into the small of his back. “They’re heavy.”

“You’re so awesome,” Darcy says helplessly, grinning up at him. “Hey, we’re gonna have pups.”

“I noticed,” Bucky says, but he’s smiling. She keeps grinning at him, because of course she does, and he lets out a soft little huff of a laugh. God, he’s so good.

“I love you,” she says, dropping a kiss on his stomach.

“I believe you,” Bucky says, which might be an even better answer than “I love you too”.


Steve comes out of the bathroom. Unlike Bucky, he didn’t bother with a robe. He smells so good Darcy could probably knot right now, but she manages to keep acting like a normal person, she thinks.


“On a scale of one to too heated up to function?” He shrugs. “About a two. Sam and Nat are on top of it, you got me pretty early in pre-heat. We have a little while before I need anything.”

“Okay,” Darcy says. “Um, try not to break the bed, but it’s okay if you do.”

“Break the bed?” Steve gives her a confused look. Bucky looks disgruntled.

“One time,” he says.

“It was a pretty memorable time,” Darcy says, quirking a smile up at him before looking back to Steve. “Traffic lights okay?”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” he agrees with a nod.

“Any hard nos or definite yesses?”

“Nothing with bodily fluids, limited pain play, not a fan of impact play,” he ticks off easily. “Humiliation and insults don’t do anything for me. You?”

“I mean, try not to break me either,” Darcy says, noting that yes, he did totally fail to list any actual “yes” kinks in there. “I like a lot of touching. And I like to talk a lot too. Just give me a heads up if you need some peace and quiet.”

“Alright,” Steve says, tilting his head a little. He continues to smell really, really good, but since he doesn’t seem to want touched yet Darcy doesn’t do anything about it. He doesn’t seem particularly body-shy, which is . . . which is a thing, alright.

“You smell really good,” she does say, because, like, she’s not made of stone here.

“Thanks,” Steve says, sounding a little more pleased than when she complimented his looks. She wonders if the serum changed his scent too or if he always smelled like this, all sweet and sugar-tart and such a perfect complement to Bucky.

The vanilla really suits him too, she can’t help but notice.

And the glitter.

Nnnnn.

“We should fuck in the closet,” Bucky announces out of nowhere, and Darcy nearly choking. Holy shit, is he trying to kill her?

“Why the closet?” Steve asks.

“So the nest’ll smell like us,” Bucky says, licking his lips. Yeah, okay. He’s definitely trying to kill her. And possibly take down Steve too, judging from how red he just turned at that.
“If you want,” he says softly.

“I want,” Bucky agrees. It’s a complete sentence.

They move to the closet, obviously. Specifically, Bucky and Steve move to the closet, and Bucky immediately starts re-arranging pillows and blankets. Steve watches him for a moment, then joins in like they’ve done this a thousand times, which they probably have. It’s a good thing the closet’s as huge as Tony Stark’s abandonment issues would allow for.

Darcy watches them from the doorway for a minute, not sure if she finds this soothing or hot or--both, actually, probably both. She watches them a little longer, then goes back to the bed to transfer the heat supplies to the nightstand by the closet door. She has to lug the whole fridge over, but it’s not too heavy and there’s an outlet it’ll reach, so it all works out. By the time she’s done, the closet is stuffed with a brand-new nest that looks fit to burst and also really, really comfortable. Bucky’s already reclining contentedly against the back wall, her old lime-green marshmallow pillow tucked in under his knees. Steve’s standing in the middle, testing the give in the curtains hung around the walls and making sure they’re secure.

He is still very glittery. So is Bucky. So’s the nest, now. It’s . . . it’s a thing.

“You’re very glittery,” Darcy says.

“It’s from the bath bomb,” Steve says, glancing back over his shoulder at her. “Didn’t want to come off.”

“I’m not sorry about that,” Darcy says, trying not to stare too much at any star-spangled . . . anything. It is extremely difficult. “Like, not even slightly. It’s a good look.”

“It’s been a while since I wore glitter,” Steve says. “Like . . . since the forties, I’m pretty sure. SHIELD managed to restrain themselves from putting it on the new outfit.”

“That is honestly a tragic, tragic waste,” Darcy says, now trying not to picture that cute and flirty showomega outfit Steve used to wear. She’s avoided looking at too many pictures of it since moving into the tower, for her health and sanity. Unfortunately that means she’s picturing the cartoon version now, and since the cartoon she remembers was the one from the eighties, that one might be even skimpier than the real deal was.

Seriously, is she being rewarded or punished here? It is so hard to tell.

Then again, she’s saying that with a naked Captain America less than ten feet away from her and his best friend right behind him and wearing barely more than that. Kind of a stupid question.

“I want to be clear here, if I die halfway through this, it’s because my heart just couldn’t take it,” she says. “Know that I go without regrets.”

Bucky laughs. Steve smiles a little.

“Well, I know CPR,” he says.

“My heart definitely wouldn’t be able to take that,” Darcy says. “Like, for real, I’m pretty sure I would legit die. I realize I’d already be dead in this scenario, but like, extra dead. I’d need twice as big a funeral. I expect lasting and tearful eulogies from both of you.”

“Seems a bit dramatic when we could just throw ourselves on the coffin,” Steve says.
“Also fair,” Darcy allows. “And I want Crystal to do the flowers.”

“Johnny Storm’s alpha?” Bucky asks, wrinkling his nose. “What’s up with her and flowers?”

“You’ve seen the ones in the common room kitchen, right?” Darcy asks. “That’ve been there for, like, five months?”

“. . . I thought those were aliens.”

“I’m pretty sure they are?”

“Only pretty sure?” Steve says.

“Pretty damn sure,” Darcy says. “Seriously, I wasn’t exaggerating about the five months thing. Also sometimes they glow?”

“ Weird,” Bucky says.

“They are very pretty,” Steve says, looking around the nest with a distracted expression. Darcy almost wishes he was further along in his heat, because at least then she’d know what to be doing. This . . . yeah, not so much.

“Do you guys need anything else for the nest?” she asks.

“I don’t think so,” Steve says.

“You could come in,” Bucky says, casual as anything. He is definitely out to kill her.

“That is a thing that I could do,” Darcy agrees.


“That is also a thing that I could do,” Darcy says, voice a little faint this time. Jesus wept. “Steve?”

“You should do whatever you want to do,” Steve says, which is thoughtful but not even slightly helpful.

“Awesome, if a terrifying amount of power,” Darcy says. What she wants to do is knock Steve over and eat him out ‘til he’s too heated up to even think straight anymore and then knot him through the floor. As for what she should actually do . . . well, that’s a little harder to figure out.

Bucky, who obviously has much better ideas than she does, unites his robe and lets it fall open. He immediately becomes the center of attention, which Darcy thinks is saying something since he’s competing with a) an omega in pre-heat looking at an alpha and b) a naked Captain America. Like, it’s definitely saying something.

Bucky crosses his legs. Speaking of people Darcy wants to eat out until they can’t think anymore . . .

“Jamie, baby, you’re killing me,” she says, and he smirks smugly up at her.

“Do something about it, alpha,” he says.

Well, she’s not gonna argue.

Darcy steps into the nest, inhaling reflexively as she does. She should be able to smell other things,
probably, but all she can really concentrate on is the warm apple pie scent of Steve’s pre-heat and Bucky’s cinnamon-sticky, icing-sweet scent of 

*bred*. It’s been a while since she’s been in the nest, and it’s very different from the last time she was in here--much softer, much fuller, much better-made. Something twinges in her heart at the sight, but also in her *clit*.

Bucky’s doing so much better. It’s--amazing, really.

“Alpha,” Bucky says. Darcy walks over and kneels down beside him, leaning in to give him a little kiss. He purrs into it, relaxing languidly against the pillows. “Alpha.”

Bucky’s easy to kiss. Darcy’s learned the ins and outs of the process pretty well by now, she thinks, and he’s warm and receptive and soft and *warm*. She already wants to push a hand up his thigh and get her fingers inside him and rocking right to the rhythm he likes. Hindbrain thoughts, like always.

It’s going to be harder with Steve. It’s not like Darcy has trouble learning someone new’s preferences, but still. She’s still not sure she isn’t going to trip over some trigger and set him off like she did Johnny. She’s pretty sure she’ll get kicked out of the country if she makes Captain America cry. At least New York. She’d definitely never feel safe in Brooklyn again, that’s for goddamned sure.

“We make a pretty picture?” Bucky asks, kissing her again. Darcy doesn’t understand the question for a second, but--

“You do,” Steve says quietly. Bucky hums contentedly between kisses, and Darcy glances back to Steve for a moment. He’s just standing there, watching them. Watching Bucky, mostly, which is what she would’ve expected, but also watching *her*, which she honestly would not have. If she were Steve, she doesn’t know if she could ever look at anyone but Bucky again.

Bucky tugs her back into another kiss and she goes, because of course she goes, and he pushes his hands into her hair and she pushes hers into his robe and he smells *so* good and feels even better. She kisses him like he deserves and he kisses her back like she could only *dream* to deserve and this part, at least, is easy.

It’s a little less easy when she remembers Steve, though.

Then again, he’s hard to forget.

“You want in on this?” she asks him, breaking off the kiss long enough to look back at him again.

“I’m alright,” he says, sitting down next to Bucky, who gives an unimpressed huff.

“You’d say that if we were ignoring you in full heat,” he says. “I think I’ve *heard* you say that in full heat.”

“Once or twice,” Steve allows. “But I’m fine, really.”

“Well, Captain America’s done it again,” Bucky says. “He’s gone and found the only phrase in the English language that’d make me not wanna kiss Darcy Lewis.”

“Too bad, I’ll miss kissing,” Darcy says.

“Very funny,” Steve says to them. He leans over and gets one arm under Bucky’s back and the other under his knees and sweeps him up and lays him down flat against the cushions, and Bucky makes a startled noise and aborts an obvious instinctive attempt to struggle.
Steve ignores it, which might be for the best, and leans down to kiss him. Bucky goes immediately soft and sweet under the contact, his eyes falling closed as he reaches up to put a hand in Steve’s hair, and Darcy feels the weird urge to go barricade the door. No one else should get to see this. She’s not even sure she should get to see this. They’re letting her, though, so she’s not gonna argue.

They look so pretty together. Maybe she shouldn’t be thinking that, but it’s undeniable.

“You’re both so pretty,” she says, because it’s true. Bucky hums into the kiss, and Steve breaks it off to glance over to her, his eyes heavy and half-lidded.

“Thanks,” he says, like that’s the kind of thing you thank someone for.

“Oh, sure,” Darcy says. “No problem, stating the obvious is my specialty.”

“That mean we’re special?” Bucky deadpans, and Darcy barely manages not to blush.

“You are the most special thing I have ever seen,” she says anyway, because it’s definitely true. Forget the Bifrost, forget the miracles of science and magic she’s encountered--this right here, this takes the cake. “You are, like, Myew-Myew special.”

“Thanks?” Steve says again, sounding a little bemused this time, and Bucky leans up and kisses him again. He kisses him back, as a man who obviously has his priorities straight, and Darcy considers barricading the door again. Right now, though, just sitting here watching them touch each other is putting a warm buzz in her gut and under her skin, and she doesn’t really want to move. No one in the tower would come in without being invited anyway.

Bucky’s robe falls off one shoulder. Darcy reaches out to fix it unthinkingly, which is the only reason she realizes how close they actually are. Bucky slants his eyes towards her, still kissing Steve, and her heart skips a beat.

“Darcy,” he says between their mouths, and Steve lifts his head, giving her a slightly . . . blurry look.

He is smelling fucking mouthwatering.

“Alpha,” he says, which is all the warning she gets before she gets knocked over. She goes down among the pillows with a squeak, and Bucky sighs.

“You always get so stupid when you’re heated up,” he says, affection creeping into his tone. Steve scowls briefly at him, but doesn’t stop feeling Darcy up. She’s flattered, she thinks? Ah, okay, he was just looking for the fastest way to get her nightshirt off, she learns in short order.

“Mmph!” she manages as he drags it over her head. Bucky laughs, and when she looks over at him he’s bundled up all sweetly in his robe again and running a foot up the back of Steve’s calf. When she looks at Steve, he’s big and naked and very, very close.

“Like--very close.

“They were not kidding about you being demanding,” she says.

“You sure you wanna do this?” Steve asks, his face flushed and a fine sheen of sweat already breaking out over his skin. His hands are a little less delicate about things, and are firmly planted on her breasts, thumbs rubbing across her nipples. His hips are even less delicate about things,
because he is sitting right over her clit and just sort of . . . rocking.

“Oh, pretty sure,” Darcy agrees faintly, not sure if she’s regretting not wearing underwear or not, and Steve immediately drops his head to kiss her and grinds down into her lap. She groans embarrassingly loudly and grabs at his hips. Another omega she might guide into a rhythm; Steve clearly already has one in mind, and it is brutal. “Oh, holy shit--”

“Alpha,” Steve purrs, shoving his mouth into her neck and cupping her breasts in his big hands. Zero to sixty is not a strong enough metaphor. It is not a strong enough metaphor at all. “You smell so good. I want your knot.”

“Condom, please?” Darcy manages weakly, waving in Bucky’s general direction with, admittedly, a slight air of distress. He snorts, but comes over to rescue her with the box. “Thank you. Steve-- ack, please, just a sec--”

“Why? Don’t you like me?” Steve whines, and Darcy’s brain drips out her ears.

“Don’t listen to a fucking word he says,” Bucky says dryly. Steve gives him a dirty look. Darcy seizes the opportunity to squirm away just enough to give her clit the few strokes it needs to get fully hard, which for the record is not many.

“Darcyyyyy,” Steve whines. It is not helping her brain recover, but fortunately she can put on a condom even rut-stupid, so she manages to get her junk wrapped in short order.

“Okay, just let me--” she starts, and Steve grabs her clit and sits on it. "FUCK!"

“That’s the idea, yeah,” Bucky says mildly. Darcy is too busy getting ridden like a trick pony to be sarcastic at him, which just might be a first. Natasha and Sam really weren’t kidding about the “demanding” thing, though, Jesus wept were they not. She can’t even keep up with the rhythm Steve’s setting; the best she can do is just hold on to him and try not to immediately come.

It is very, very hard, for the record, even considering that she was just getting turned on when he jumped her. His pheromones are already filling up the closet, though, thick and sweet and sugar-good, and his body is against her body, warm and heavy and strong, and Darcy is still not made of stone.

Also, he’s beautiful, and she’s got a real up close and personal view of that right now.

“God, Steve,” she groans, and Steve’s hips snap down staccato-quick and he kisses her mouth and jaw and throat and his hands go everywhere they can reach. He’s so slick and hot and good that it’s making her dizzy.

“Alpha,” he says again, and she grips him tightly and pants into his chest, trying to keep herself together. Bucky hums quietly, settling back against the wall of the nest again and just watching them. He looks sad, when Steve’s not looking at him. Darcy doesn’t really know what to make of that.

Well, no. She kinda does.

“Give it to me, alpha,” Steve says, and Darcy buries a groan against his skin, her nails digging into his ass. She doesn’t know what he thinks she’s gonna give him, he is more than doing all the heavy lifting here. She couldn’t keep up if she tried.

“I wanna give you everything,” she says anyway, because it’s true. Steve deserves just as much as Bucky does, and if any of it’s in her power to give, then yeah, absolutely is she going to. Absolutely
Steve makes a hot, breathless noise, then rolls his hips down even harder. Darcy chokes, sure she’s gripping him too hard, but he doesn’t protest and doesn’t break rhythm. She should be touching him properly, she’s vaguely aware, but it is so hard to concentrate on that right now. Jesus. Jesus.

“Ohhhh, Steve,” she gasps out, then bites down roughly on his chest. He immediately pushes into her mouth, wrapping his arms around her neck and tangling his hands in her hair, grinding down and gripping her growing knot tight. She is still doing absolutely none of the work here, but she can at least mouth and bite at his skin, can at least hold onto him. She is absolutely gonna come miles before he does, definitely, but she can deal with that, she’ll work something out, oh god he feels so-

“STEVE!”

“That’s a start,” Steve says, clenching his body around her as she comes and comes, wringing her dry. Darcy is lit up and shaking and trying to remember how to breathe. It’s not going very well.

“Shit,” she manages. Steve leans back a little bit, bracing a hand on the wall and spreading his thighs a little further, and sort of . . . squirms. Darcy makes a strangled noise, eyes nearly rolling back in her head. "Shit.”

“Give her a minute, Jesus, Rogers,” Bucky says, and Steve looks over to him with heat-hazy eyes and--oh god, Darcy realizes in terror, that is Captain goddamn America sitting on her knot and looking like somebody just broke his heart.

“I was,” Bucky says, eyes darting back and forth.

“You didn’t have to be,” Steve says.

Bucky tenses up, pressing back deeper into the wall of the nest. Steve just looks immeasurably sad.

Darcy . . . Darcy has limited options, so does the best she can.

“You did good, Steve,” she soothes, letting a bit of alpha into her voice and smoothing a hand up his back. “There were safe places for him to be, after you were done clearing them out. He knew where it was okay to hide.”

“That’s not enough,” Steve says.

“That’s what he needed,” Darcy says. “And he’s safe now, see? He’s right there.”

“Bucky,” Steve whines, still looking at him. Bucky stares back with those big and wary eyes. Darcy’s hindbrain wants to go straight to him and knock him over until he forgets he’s ever been scared in his life, but Darcy’s knot is a bit occupied for that.

“See? He’s right there,” she says instead, nuzzling Steve’s chest and getting another whine for it.
“You did good, omega.”

“I didn’t do enough,” Steve says, and Darcy cranes her neck to kiss his collarbones, still rubbing his back. He squirms unhappily on her clit, which is a fucking tragedy as far as her hindbrain’s concerned, and she shifts her hips to rub her knot against his sensitive inner walls, hoping it helps. She’s starting to wonder if when Natasha and Sam said “demanding”, they also meant emotionally.

Even if they didn’t, she’s not exactly gonna blame Steve for being emotionally demanding right now.

“You did so much,” she says. “You did more than anybody.”

“That’s not true,” Steve says. “He came in for you.”

“Ummm, no, baby, he came in for the pups,” Darcy corrects him. She’s still pretty sure she’d never have seen Bucky again if it weren’t for them. “Not that I am not super-flattered by your delusionally high expectations of my skills in bed. But, like, the knot’s not even that bomb.”

“It’s pretty bomb,” Bucky says, biting his lip.

“I don’t even believe you know what that means,” Darcy accuses.

“Context clues,” Bucky says, then moves forward onto his knees and leans in to kiss her. Darcy kisses him back, catching a hand against the back of his neck to dig her nails in just a little, and he shivers into the contact.

Okay, sad super-soldiers time is officially over, she decides. Bucky and Steve can work out all their angst when no one’s hyper-emotional and likely to freaking cry over it.

“Always so sweet for me,” Darcy rumbles, pressing a kiss to Bucky’s cheek and then glancing at Steve again, who looks a really weird combination of heartbroken and horny that she is definitely gonna have to do something about. “Alright, we owe Bucky a nicely-scented nest. You up for that?”

“Yes, alpha,” Steve says, biting his lip the exact same way Bucky just did. She wonders which one of them picked that up from the other, but mostly she’s trying not to die over getting a “yes, alpha” from Captain America, Jesus Christ. She can never tell her litter-siblings about this, they will not believe her. Hell, Jane might not believe her, and she’s the one boning the alien god-prince on the regular.

“Cool,” she says, and kisses his collarbone again. He tips his head down and she takes the opportunity to kiss him, and he kisses back a little clumsily, like he maybe hasn’t done it very much. She finds that very unlikely, between Natasha and Sam, to say nothing of Bucky and Peggy Carter and any heat partners he must’ve had during the war, but there’s something sort of sweet about it anyway.

Maybe it’s less clumsiness and more uncertainty, she finds herself thinking as he leans more heavily into the kiss and pulls himself up off her softening knot. She makes a strangled noise, automatically reaching to take off the condom and then realizing there’s no place in the nest to put it. Bucky takes it from her, and then Steve kisses her again and she kind of loses track of what happens to it. There’s trash cans in the bedroom, probably Bucky’s taken it to one of those, god does Steve smell good.

“I need a dental dam,” Darcy mutters to herself, skimming her hands up his sides. How did she not pack dental dams?
“I’m clean,” Steve says.

“Nghhhh,” Darcy says, burying her face in his chest. “Good to. Good to know. I guess it’s kind of late to be worrying about that kind of thing anyway, huh.” She and Bucky are definitely fluid-bonded, for one, and she has no idea what they got up to in the bath.

“What’s a dental dam?” Bucky asks, wrinkling his nose.

“One of these days, I’m kidnapping every omega I know for basic sex ed,” Darcy mutters. At least she managed to find time to talk to Crystal about Johnny’s whole . . . Johnnyness. It’s a start.

“I want to suck you off,” Steve says, staring down at her with heated eyes. Darcy nearly chokes.

“We’re coming back to that,” she promises. “Like, definitely coming back to that one. Hold that thought.”

“Alpha,” Steve whines. She wants to eat him out like she wants to knot him, which is quite a fucking lot, but her refractory period is still a thing.

“Hang on, okay,” she says, very regretfully squirming her way out from underneath him. “Lemme grab a water bottle. I’m getting the feeling we’re all gonna need one.”

Steve makes a mournful noise, but lets her leave the closet long enough to fetch a couple bottles from the nightstand and pull a trashcan over to the doorway, since they’re pretty definitely gonna need one at hand--snack wrappers and condoms, and all. They’ve made enough safe-sex mistakes in this tower, she is not knocking up Captain America. That is just not happening.

“Oh boy,” she says faintly, and they break off the kiss and look over at her with dark, heavy eyes and oh boy.

“Alphaaaaa,” Steve whines, and Bucky pushes his mouth into the corner of his jaw. “Where’d you go? I need you.”

“I’m right here,” Darcy manages, heading over and putting a hand on his flank. He lets out a breathy little panting sound, then buries his face in Bucky’s shoulder and lifts his ass to present to her, picture-perfect and enough to make her mouth go dry and her clit twitch.

There is no way she can fuck him again yet, but god damn does she want to.

“I’m right here,” Darcy manages, heading over and putting a hand on his flank. He lets out a breathy little panting sound, then buries his face in Bucky’s shoulder and lifts his ass to present to her, picture-perfect and enough to make her mouth go dry and her clit twitch.

There is no way she can fuck him again yet, but god damn does she want to.

“Good boy,” she says, and forgets all about the water, kneeling down and leaning in. He squirms, and then she gets her mouth on him and he wails, immediately shoving back into the contact. Bucky grabs his hips and holds him steady and Darcy does her damnedest to eat him out like he deserves, that being completely, thoroughly, mercilessly.

Merciless is almost enough for Steve, it turns out, but he still bucks and whines and begs for more. Darcy’s pretty sure if Bucky weren’t holding onto him he’d have ended up knocking her over and riding her face inside the first thirty seconds.
Not that she’d _mind_ that, of course.

But Bucky’s holding his hips, and kissing him, and Steve is whining and begging and _squirming_ in his grip. Darcy is increasingly certain her refractory period is not gonna be an issue in this situation. Like, at all.

“Alpha, alpha, c’mon, _give_ it to me,” Steve pleads between kisses, trying to push back into her mouth, and Darcy gives him everything she’s got. “Alpha, _please_!”

Jesus.

Steve’s so soaked his slick is already dripping down past her tongue and all over Bucky’s big full stomach and thick thighs, and Darcy groans at the sight, leaning back to catch her breath and rubbing his cock in restless little strokes as she does. Steve _moans_, a fresh rush of slick coming out of him, and Bucky lets out this soft little sigh and slips a hand down between them to run his fingers through it.

“You always get so _wet_,” he says, voice a little dreamy. He slips his biological fingers across Steve’s hole, and Steve starts shuddering.

“I need it, come on, don’t make me _wait_,” he pants out, grabbing Bucky’s wrist and holding it tight. Bucky hums, getting that distracted look he gets when he’s remembering, or at least trying to remember, and then slides a finger into him. “I said don’t make me _wait_!”

Darcy takes a moment to compose herself, for obvious reasons, and then rubs her thumbs around the edge of Steve’s hole. He yelps loudly, then whines in disappointment.

“Put them _in_ me, I want it _in_ me,” he moans, and Darcy can’t say no to a needy and heated-up omega who smells like _that_, so works her thumbs in next to Bucky’s finger. Bucky works another in, carefully careless, and Steve clutches up desperately around both of them.

“Not too much?” Darcy manages to remember to ask.

”_More_,” Steve demands. Bucky works in yet another finger and Darcy barely manages to restrain her hindbrain from _shoving_ her own in. Steve is finally not squirming, at least, but he’s squeezing their fingers so tight Darcy’s genuinely not sure she could pull hers out, and that’s _with_ how wet he is. Another rush of slick coats her fingers and drips down over her palm, and Bucky curls his and gets Steve moaning and cursing.

“Right,” Bucky says, licking his lips. “You like bein’ real full, don’t you.”

“_Knot_ me,” Steve gasps out.

“Okay,” Bucky says, and then he tucks his thumb into his palm and before Darcy even fully realizes what he’s doing, he’s pushing in, and Steve immediately goes soft and receptive and _takes him_.

“Ohhhh my god,” Darcy says as she stares at the sight of Steve’s body swallowing Bucky to the wrist, hands full of his perfect ass and brain too shocky-stupid with hormones to even pull her own fingers out.

“Oh my _god_!” Steve cries. “Alpha, alpha, _alpha_!”

“Not exactly,” Bucky says, staring up at him with that killer under-the-lash look he has so perfected. “Feels good?”
“You’re so big,” Steve says, breathless and achy-sounding as he squeezes down, and Bucky lets out a huff of a laugh.

“Big enough?” he asks. Steve barely seems to hear him.

“Fuck me,” he demands, grinding down with his hips. Darcy squeezes his ass reflexively, and he moans, pushing back into the contact. “Like that, yeah. I want more.”

“Whatever you say, pal,” Bucky says, and then Darcy feels him move his fist inside Steve, and feels Steve clench up hot and tight and nearly painful, god, she doesn’t even know how he can take that.

“Alpha,” he pants, squirming restless and reckless again on Bucky’s fist, which Darcy still isn’t over. “Alpha, I need more. Fuck me.”

“You’re kidding,” Darcy says in disbelief, and Bucky lets out another huffed laugh as Steve groans, looking back over his shoulder to her.

“Fuck me,” he says again. “I’m pretty, aren’t I, you want to knot me, right? Fill me up fat too, put pups in me.”

“You definitely do not want that,” Darcy says, with heroic strength of will.

“Told you not to listen to him,” Bucky says.

“I want it. Want it now, alpha, get me bred, knot me hard,” Steve pleads, giving her a look that could melt her clothes right off, if she were still wearing any. And yeah, it’s definitely his heat talking, definitely, but oh god, what hearing all that does to her hindbrain is just . . . Jesus. “Put it in me, I need it in me.”

“Can he actually take me or is he full of shit?” Darcy asks Bucky, who opens his mouth to answer but gets cut off by--

“I can take Sam and Nat together,” Steve says. Darcy’s hindbrain rolls over and dies.

“Okay then,” she replies faintly, and fumbles for the condoms. Steve whines.

“I don’t want those, I want to feel you,” he says.

“Maybe later, okay, baby?” Darcy lies as she rolls on a condom as quick as she ever has in her life, because forget everything else, if she knocks up another super-soldier she is not gonna survive what Natasha and Sam do to her, and she will not deserve to either.

“Not later, now,” Steve insists, and Darcy grips the back of his neck to dig her nails in. He goes liquid under the pressure, and she takes the moment to guide her clit in against Bucky’s wrist and slowly move to push into--

“Fuck!” she yells, because the second the head of her clit breaches Steve’s hole he snaps a hand back to her hip and yanks her in to the root. Her hips stutter and he moans. She can’t believe that even felt good, that was so hard she thinks she’s gonna bruise, but--

“Yes, yes, fuck me!” Steve cries eagerly, and after that fucking display she can’t say no. She thrusts into him as hard as she can and he thrusts back onto both of them, hole vise-tight and hot as hell and practically gushing slick. Captain America is apparently a size queen; who knew?
Darcy is not complaining.

“Good boy,” she gets out somewhere in there, though she’s not sure if Steve hears her because he’s busy being the noisiest she’s ever heard him.

“Alpha, alpha, oh alpha,” he practically chants, his hand clawing greedily at her ass and pulling her in harder, and she wraps her arms around his waist and buries her face in his back as she snaps her hips in. “Fuck! Oh, oh, oh, don’t stop, don’t stop, come on come on fill me up, come in me, I need it!”

Okay, well. Darcy’s a modern alpha and all, but goddamn, her hindbrain is loving this.

“That what you want, omega?” she rumbles, nuzzling into his back and licking the nape of his neck, and Steve clutches up roughly with a needy moan. She can feel Bucky’s knuckles pressing into her clit. “My come in you? Would that make you happy?”

“Yes, please,” Steve gasps.

“You’re already so wet, baby, how would you even tell the difference?” Darcy asks, squeezing her arms around his waist as Steve keeps greedily fucking himself on her clit and Bucky’s fist.

“I can tell,” Steve says, _clenching_ around her. She groans into his back, her clit aching hotly inside him as her knot starts to swell. Steve’s little breathless noises get louder. “Oh! Oh, yes, yes, yes, you’re so big--”

“Not really just me there,” Darcy says, shifting just enough to peer down at Bucky, who’s watching Steve with a strange, wondering expression. She doesn’t blame him, because goddamn, does Steve look _good_: eyes hooded and skin flushed all the way down his chest and thighs spread wide, all sticky with sweat and slick.

And this is _early_ heat.

God, what’s he gonna look like by the time he’s satisfied?

“Alphaaaaa,” Steve whines, clawing at her ass again, and Darcy pops her knot into him one last time and then starts rolling her hips in tight little grinding circles, running her hands up his stomach to cup and squeeze his pecs and rub his nipples. Steve starts _yowling_; Darcy can’t help thinking about omegas wanting other packmates to come, and _really_ can’t help thinking about Steve taking Natasha and Sam at both at once. That is--oh boy, is that a thing that she is thinking about.

He’s so _wet_, God. So wet and so tight and so _sweet_--

“Come on, come on,” Steve pleads breathlessly, and Darcy’s knot fattens and she buries her face against his back again and comes so hard she _shakes_ with it. Steve clutches her so hard it actually _sincerely_ hurts, and she chokes and gasps and can’t stop shaking.

Bucky makes a soft little humming sound and turns his hand inside Steve until Darcy can feel it _cupping her knot_, and she chokes all over again.

Steve whimpers. Bucky flexes his hand. Steve _whimpers_.

“Oh my god,” Darcy says dizzily, and then Bucky does something with his wrist and Steve lets out a shout and comes and no, no, never mind, _this_ is him clutching up hard enough to hurt, _Jesus_.

“Oh,” Steve gets out shakily, his thighs trembling, and Darcy looks down and catches another
glimpse of thick and sloppy slick leaking out of his stretched hole and dripping down onto Bucky’s already sticky and shiny thighs.

“Ngh,” she says, with great feeling. She touches Bucky’s thigh, and he lets out a soft little sigh and lets his legs fall apart so she gets a perfect view of his hole, soft and wet and waiting. ”Ngh.”

“That went okay,” Bucky says conversationally.

“Don’t stop,” Steve says, his breathing coming out uneven and rough. Bucky tilts his head, then twists his wrist. Steve yelps. So does Darcy.

“Jamie, baby, please give me a minute here,” she manages to stammer out.

“Steve doesn’t want to wait,” Bucky says, giving her a searching look, and she groans and drops her forehead against Steve’s shoulder blade.

“Okay,” she says helplessly, because how could she say no, and Bucky rubs his free hand up Steve’s thigh and twists his wrist in him again and Darcy honestly suffers, but manages not to go crazy from the oversensitive feeling of it. She tugs lightly at Steve’s nipples and he pushes his pecs into her hands with a moan, his back arching beautifully, and Bucky’s knuckles rub against her clit again.

“Don’t stop,” Steve says again, so they don’t. Darcy might really lose her mind, but it’ll be worth it.

“Good boy,” she repeats, because it’s the best she’s got, and grinds their hips together. They keep going until Steve comes again, and by then her knot’s soft enough she can pull out of him. He makes the unhappiest noise when she does, which makes her groan into his shoulder. If she had even half-chub left, she’d be trying to push back in.

Bucky reclaims his hand, and Steve makes an even unhappier noise and Bucky tugs him down. Steve burrows into his side, just for a moment, then pushes himself back up and starts kissing along his chest. Darcy’s not sure he’s even done with the aftershocks of his orgasm, and he’s still already ready to go again?

“Oh my god, baby, you’re insane,” she says weakly. Steve drags his tongue across Bucky’s nipple and pushes a hand between his thighs. Bucky slides his clean hand into his hair, biting his lip as he spreads his legs. Darcy lays down on her back beside them and watches, because she might literally die if she tried to participate, and Steve catches Bucky’s slick-sticky hand to lick clean and works his fingers into him one at a time, careful but relentless.

“You smell so good,” Steve says reverently. He’s not talking to her. Bucky shifts restlessly, then lets out a little sigh as Steve works in another finger. “I’m so glad you’re okay. You look so much better.”

“I am okay,” Bucky says, and then Steve starts finger-fucking him in earnest and he starts moaning. “I’m--oh, oh--you don’t need to--”

“I want to,” Steve says, kissing his temple, and Bucky clings to him with the biological arm and fists the metal one in the sheets, wrapping a leg around his back. Darcy watches them rock together and match each other’s rhythm perfectly, like it’s something they’ve done a thousand times. It must be something they’ve done a thousand times.

“You’re my friend,” Bucky says, his voice a little thick, and Steve kisses him as their scents mix sweetly.
“I’m your friend,” he agrees.
sweet and heat

Steve and Bucky go at it for a while, which is kind of torture but definitely good for Darcy’s refractory period, because holy god is her refractory period getting tested. The two of them seem perfectly happy to be all tangled up and wearing each other out, fortunately, so she just might live to see another day without dying of exhaustion. She definitely takes the break to hydrate and get a snack; Mama Lewis didn’t raise no fool. At least not in terms of how to take care of everybody involved in a heat, anyway.

God, though, is it distracting listening to them, to say nothing of looking at them. Bucky doesn’t seem to know what to do with his hands—they won’t settle anywhere for long—and Steve seems determined to hold onto him as tight as possible, and also to make him come his fucking brains out.

Bucky is not complaining. Darcy is definitely not complaining.

“Steve,” Bucky moans in a voice that literally sounds like literal sex, and Darcy takes another swig off her water bottle. Jesus.

“Bucky,” Steve says, nuzzling into his throat before dragging his tongue up it. Bucky whimpers. Darcy is never going to be able to go into a bakery again without getting a chub. Darcy is never going to be able to look at these two again without getting a chub, like, that is a concerningly real possibility at this point, geez.

She definitely isn’t soft now, that’s for damn sure.

Bucky comes whimpering and Steve works him through it until he’s gasping and doesn’t stop and Bucky shudders and shudders and shudders and--

Yeah, she is definitely not soft. Darcy drops the water bottle and they look at her, Steve’s eyes heat-hazy and heavy and Bucky’s wet with—maybe bliss, maybe something else, it’s hard to tell. He’s trembling.

“Steve,” Darcy says, and immediately ends up with a lapful of super-soldier, holy shit he’s fast. “Whoa!” she gasps as her back hits the well-cushioned wall, Steve already grabbing her clit and stroking it tight.

“Alpha,” he says as he licks his lips, voice just as heat-hazy and heavy as his eyes. “Gonna rut me right?”

“There is literally nothing I would rather do,” Darcy says feelingly.

“Good,” Steve says, and then he moves back and drops his head into her lap and oh--

“Oh my god!” Darcy manages to get out. He really has no patience at all in heat.

He sucks. She groans. He bobs his head and pushes his hands up her thighs and swallows her down like somebody’s fucking life depends on it and she should really be doing something for him in return but Jesus.

“Oh, you’re good at this,” she manages, and Steve fucking purrs around her clit. Her head slams back into the wall and she barely keeps herself from howling. She is really glad they built the nest’s walls so high, because that would’ve really hurt otherwise. “Oh, baby--”
Bucky sits down next to her. She grabs his hand because otherwise she is gonna tear Steve’s back open.

“Only time he’s ever kept his mouth shut,” Bucky says, own mouth quirking in amusement. Steve shoots him an unimpressed look, rolling his tongue up against the underside of Darcy’s clit just so.

“I’m okay with it, actually?” she pants, trying not to squirm. This is made very difficult by the things Steve is doing with his tongue. “Ohhhh, Steve, sweetheart, if you’re not careful you’re gonna make me knot your throat.”

Steve makes an intrigued noise. Darcy groans.

“He won’t,” Bucky says, resting his head on top of hers. “He’d never waste a knot he could be sitting on like that.”

“Oh, good to know,” Darcy manages faintly. Steve pulls back. He’s not even breathing hard, but he looks even more hazy-eyed than before.

“Gonna knot?” he asks, licking his lips again.

“Pretty fucking soon, yeah,” Darcy says, unable to help staring at his mouth and only distractedly remembering to take the condom Bucky’s offering her. Do Sam and Natasha have toys? Sam and Natasha must have toys. She can’t imagine them keeping up otherwise. She already knows she’s definitely not gonna manage it.

“Do it in me,” Steve says, moving up into her lap again as Darcy very quickly rolls the condom on. “Get me all fat and full too.”

“Nngh,” Darcy says, and nearly knots air like a fucking teenager. She might’ve if Steve weren’t already tugging her clit to his hole. His slick is dripping all down his hand and thighs and onto her clit, and she chokes on a dazed groan.

Then he sits down, and she really groans.

“You’re big,” Steve says, squirming on her clit. Because that is a thing Captain America will do, apparently, apparently Captain America is willing to squirm on her clit and tell her it’s big.

“I thought Peggy Carter was bigger?” she manages, because she is pheromone-stupid and cannot be held responsible for the stupid shit she says.

“So’s Bucky’s fist,” Steve says dismissively, squirming again as he settles into just the angle he wants and then slides up and down her length. She groans. He sighs dreamily, pushing a hand up his chest. “Doesn’t make you small.”

Darcy’s pretty average, actually, although admittedly she’s short enough that “average” looks bigger on her than on some alphas. She is not gonna argue if Captain America wants to say different, though.

“Okay,” she says, putting her free hand on Steve’s hip and barely keeping herself from rutting up into him like a graceless idiot. “That feel alright?”

Steve raises an eyebrow at her, then squeezes around her.

“Shit!” Darcy yelps.
“Knot me,” Steve says. He’s touching his cock, which is extremely distracting. “I want you bigger. Nice and fat, like you’re gonna get me.”

“That would definitely be a terrible idea,” Darcy says.

“I want it,” Steve says with a very meaningful roll of his hips. Darcy isn’t sure which part makes her choke harder, but she is gripping Bucky’s hand so tight it’s starting to hurt. “You made me wait all this time, why can’t I have what I want? Treat me right, alpha, breed me.”

“Later, baby, okay?” Darcy lies. Plenty of omegas say stuff in heat they don’t really want, but god, it never gets easier denying them it.

“No,” Steve insists, spreading his thighs and sinking lower on her clit. Her hips jerk up involuntarily and his eyes flutter shut at the press of her swelling knot, face flushing prettily. Darcy might die a little bit. Just a bit.

Just a lot.

“Oh my god,” she says. Steve starts touching his cock again.

“Like that,” he pants, working himself up and down her clit, flushing a little redder every time her growing knot pops in or out of him. He’s so wet. Darcy’s nails dig into his flank and Bucky’s hand, her toes curling. “Ohhhh, come on, alpha, come on.”

“Tell him. He likes hearing it,” Bucky says, his head still resting against hers. Darcy--

Well, she can definitely talk. Talking is definitely a thing she can handle.

“Like this?” she croons breathlessly, like she has anything to do with the way they’re fucking. This is the Steve show, clearly, and she is just along for the ride. “You want filled up just like this, all fat and happy with a nice big litter all your own?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Steve moans, rocking down harder with each repetition. Darcy is gonna be bruised, but she’s pretty sure it’ll be worth it.

“Okay,” she says roughly. “Make me come, and it’s all yours. You can nest up right here with Bucky and have all the pups you want. And if that’s not enough, I’ll fill you up until it is. You can stay here all bred and warm and safe and not have to do anything but whelp. I won’t even let anybody else in, unless you want Sam and Natasha to give you a couple litters. Okay, momma?”

“Darcy,” Steve gasps as he comes, quick and greedy, eyes flaring wide and whole body jerking with it. He collapses into her with a moan, and Bucky braces him with an arm before he can crush her, which she really appreciates.

“You’re really good at that,” Bucky murmurs into her hair.

“Doing my best,” Darcy says weakly, because now she is basically sandwiched between the two hottest omegas she knows and one of them is carrying her pups and the other just came so hard he nearly blacked out just thinking about carrying her pups. That is. That is very distracting.

Well, at least now she knows more about Steve’s kinks.

Steve moans, squirming on her clit again and burying his face in her hair, his hands clutching at her shoulders. Her lap is fucking soaked with his slick, and she’s so close to coming that she’s aching with it. The feel of his body flexing and contracting around her knot is enough to have her
clawing at his back.

“Oh,” Darcy groans, aching, and--

“Come in me,” Steve rasps, and she has no problem obeying: she goes off immediately, like a fucking rocket. Steve whines, reaching down between them to touch their slick-soaked tie, and Darcy buries her incoherent groans in his chest, her body weak and shaking. Fuck, he feels good. Fuck.

“I got you,” Bucky says, finally reclaiming his hand from Darcy’s. Steve whines again, shifting in her lap. Darcy shifts back just enough to see Bucky moving in behind him. Steve twists his head, keeping hungry eyes on him, and Bucky leans up against his back and slips his biological hand around his front to start rubbing his cock. Steve leans back into him and squirms, and squirming is both Darcy’s new favorite thing and the thing that is gonna kill her, no lie.

“You’re gonna kill me,” she says.

“Your knot feels so good,” Steve moans.

. . . well, she doesn’t need to live to thirty.

“I really wish I could use both hands for this,” Bucky says, hooking his chin over Steve’s shoulder and doing something very inventive with his fingers, the metal arm left wrapped loosely around his stomach. Steve does some more squirming.

“It’s cool, I’m not using mine,” Darcy says, pushing her hands up Steve’s thighs meaningfully. “Where do you want ‘em?”

“In me,” Steve pants. He is--he is definitely one-track-minded.

“Be creative,” Bucky says, pressing a kiss into his neck. Steve moans, reaching back with an arm to hold him in close. “Maybe a little rough. He likes that.”

“I am shocked by this,” Darcy deadpans as she watches Bucky bite down and Steve flush even redder. She drags her nails down his thighs and he pushes up into them with a choked little gasp that just makes her resolve to do it harder. So she does, and he sighs. It’s such a blissful sound that she almost forgets they’re already tied. “God, you’re pretty. Look at you. Does it feel good, baby?”

“More,” Steve moans, which Darcy is gonna take as a “yes”. She leans in to bite up his chest, nails dragging again, and rolls her hips up to press her knot in just so. Steve pushes into her greedily and outright mewls, which is officially her top accomplishment of the week.

It’s nice to know he’ll take what he wants at least some of the time.

She keeps rolling her hips and Bucky keeps rubbing his cock and between the two of them, Steve’s coming again pretty quick, harder than she would’ve expected. He falls back against Bucky with a cracked, heated cry, and Bucky braces him securely and nuzzles lovingly into his throat. Darcy’s knot is soft enough to slip out of him now, and a fresh rush of slick comes with it, all down his thighs and all over hers too.

“You come so good, baby,” she croons, and Steve spreads his legs even wider and puts his fingers in himself.

“Empty,” he whines in disappointment, and Darcy tries not to either laugh in disbelief or die of hotness. He just came.
Man, she wishes she had some toys. The only one they’ve got is the vibe from the heat basket, and she’s pretty sure that’s not big enough to satisfy him. Might be worth trying later, but right now her legs are still mostly pinned anyway.

“Not for long, I promise,” she says, running her hands up his sides and getting a dazed, sticky-eyed look in return. Heat hits Steve hard, clearly. Hell, Bucky wasn’t this bad after probably literal decades of not having a heat. “Jamie--”

“Yeah, I got him,” Bucky says, nuzzling into Steve’s throat again and then pushing him forward. Steve braces his hands on the walls like it’s instinct, which Darcy appreciates, and Bucky starts working his fingers into him. It does not take long at all. Like, it takes pretty much no time at all. Steve’s already panting and whining and trying to work himself back for more.

“Be patient, okay? Just a minute,” Darcy rumbles, putting a little bit of alpha into her voice and running her hands up his flanks in an attempt at being soothing. Steve bites his lip beautifully and struggles to hold himself still. It only lasts a scant few moments before he’s rocking back again, though. Seriously, Sam was taking care of him alone before? Really? Even if his heats were shorter then, she is incredibly impressed, and also maybe a little bit intimidated. It’s not like they’re all that far into this heat, for starters.

“Like he’s ever patient,” Bucky says, meeting the rhythm of Steve’s hips with a little huff.

“Buckyyyyyy,” Steve says pleadingly, his hips jerking back harder and hands fisting in the blankets lining the walls. “C’mon, it’s not enough, give me all of it.”

“I’m too fucking bred for this,” Bucky gripes, but Steve starts making noises that make it very clear he’s giving him said “all”. Darcy wraps her arms around Steve’s neck and starts kissing up the underside of his jaw and he moans and groans and shudders between them.

He takes longer to come this time, but he comes soon enough, and basically collapses outright when he does. Darcy gets a bit crushed, but it’s okay. The last thing she is gonna complain about is getting smothered by a hot omega. If that’s gonna be how she goes, it’s just gonna be how she goes.

They untangle, more or less, and Steve goes face-first into a pillow with a sigh. Darcy takes the moment to get up to throw out the condom and retrieve some important stuff, like snacks and water and a cloth to clean them all up a bit. The cloth does its best, but some things are just hopeless causes. Bucky’s wrapped himself back up in his robe and laid down next to Steve, and her clit actually finds the strength to twitch a bit at the sight, because god is it ever a sight, the two of them laid out together all well-fucked and soft-looking.

Nnngh. She is. She is gonna need a minute.

Bucky cracks open an eye to look up at her, which probably means her pheromones are spiking way harder than she’d realized, and bites his lip.

“You smell really good,” he says.

“You need to eat,” she says, holding up a protein bar in self-defense. He sits up and takes it. Steve stirs, looking up at them sleepily. Darcy puts a hand on his side. “You doing okay?”

“Nnkay,” Steve says, more or less understandably. Darcy gives him a water bottle. He presses it to his neck, but doesn’t seem very interested in actually drinking it; that takes some coaxing from Bucky. Since he’s got that covered, Darcy retrieves more snacks. When she comes back, Steve’s
stretched out on his back, absently running a hand over his chest. He looks . . . really well-fucked, body all flushed and sticky and hair a mess and eyes still hazy and heat-heavy. Like. Really well-fucked.

She might need another minute.

Bucky takes the snacks and coaxes Steve into eating some of them, and eats some too. Unsurprisingly, he opts for the truffles. Darcy remembers to snag some jerky for herself, but is otherwise terribly distracted. Watching her omega--and she gets to think that now, her omega--watching her omega basically hand-feed truffles to the best friend who he just made come is an experience. Like, wow, she does not know what she did to deserve this experience, but whatever it was, it was definitely worth it. Good job, past Darcy, way to go. Present Darcy is super proud.

“You realize he’s gonna be ready to go again in like two minutes, right?” Bucky asks.

“Argh,” Darcy says, and stuffs more jerky in her mouth. She is gonna die. She is gonna die and be dead. It’ll be a good death--she would’ve definitely picked “fucking an insatiable Captain America” as her cause of death, given the option--but it’s definitely gonna be a death all the same.

“Yeah, he’s always been kinda useless in heat,” Bucky says.

“I think he’s gonna kill me,” Darcy says.

“You survived me, you’ll survive him,” Bucky snorts.

“You are way less demanding, baby,” Darcy stresses. “Like, I cannot even begin to explain to you how much less demanding you are. You are a kitten and he is a tiger.”

“. . . you’ll probably survive him,” Bucky amends, biting into a protein bar.

“I’m feeling very reassured right now,” Darcy says.

“Mm,” Steve says, his hand trailing lower on his stomach as his pheromones spike. Darcy is pretty sure she’s doomed.

“Hey,” she says, leaning over him. “Getting the itch again?”

“Alpha,” he moans, staring up at her all hot-eyed and gorgeous as he gets his fingers on his cock again, legs falling apart. Yeah, that’s probably an affirmative.

“Cool,” Darcy says, dropping a hand down to give him a little help with that. Steve pushes his head back into the nest with a very pretty mewl.

“Alpha!” he moans again, and she slips a finger into him and crooks it. “Alpha!”

“I got you,” she says.

“Don’t stop,” Steve pleads, pushing up into her. “Give me more, knot me.”

“Believe me, there is very little else I want to do in the world,” Darcy promises him. “Hold on just a little longer, okay, baby?” It’s not really gonna take that long, her clit is already pretty eager for it, but she knows how long even just a few seconds can feel when you need it this bad.

“Okay,” Steve says, shivering underneath her. He’s a sight. Darcy leans back enough to give her clit a few strokes and get a fresh condom on and he watches hungrily, spreading his thighs for her. It is an experience, and if he weren’t so heated up, Darcy might draw it out a little longer. Instead
she leans back in and guides herself into him where he’s so soft and so tight, and he moans hotly and wraps his legs around her to pull her in even deeper.

“Good?” she manages roughly, dangerously close to overwhelmed already, and he throws his arms around her neck and pulls her down.

“Rut me,” he says, and what else would she do? She listens, rocking her hips in, and he mewls again and a shiver goes through him. Darcy does her best to set a rhythm quick and deep enough to satisfy him, and Steve lets her keep her own pace for the first time. She’s not sure if that’ll last, but as long as it does she’s going to do her best with it. He feels so good, she can’t do anything less. He is so good--he deserves the best she can give him.

She braces her hands in the nest and keeps fucking him, trying to hold off her knot, and Bucky reaches over and starts petting his hair. Steve pushes into his hands and her clit, breathing in big, shaky gasps and the closest to pliant he’s been so far.

“Oh, you’re so good,” she husks. “You’re perfect, baby, you feel so good. This what you want?”

“I want more,” Steve says, which is not remotely surprising to hear. Darcy does her best and gets a hand between them and on his cock.

“You can have as much as you want,” she says, because at least her mouth can keep up with him, if not so much the rest of her. “I’ll give you everything I’ve got. We’ll take care of you.”

“Bucky,” Steve says, his face crumpling with--grief, maybe? Fear? It’s hard to tell, with everything else going on.

“Yeah?” Bucky leans over just a bit so Steve can see him better, and Steve inhales raggedly and drops an arm to grope towards him. Bucky catches his hand and squeezes it before pressing a kiss into its palm, and Steve keeps up that ragged breathing and comes just like that, held tight between the two of them as they work him through it--or more like holding on tight, maybe. Darcy’s sure her sides are going to bruise from his thighs. She is not gonna regret it at all.

“You’re so sweet,” she rumbles, letting her growing knot press against his rim. Steve immediately tightens his legs around her again, and it pops right in. She keeps it there, rolling her hips into his again and again and getting rewarded with little gasps and grunts and dripping wet slick. Steve’s not as noisy as Bucky--not especially noisy at all for an omega, really--but he sounds so good.

She kind of can’t get over how wet he gets. It’s so hot, she loves it. She could fuck him all day, it feels like.

She’s gonna have to, so she hopes that feeling lasts for a while.

“Alphaaaaa,” Steve pants, and she croons back, “Omegaaaaa.” Bucky laughs, light and easy, and Steve gets this broken-hearted look that Darcy feels on a deep and spiritual level. Listening to Bucky Barnes laugh is enough to break anyone’s heart, she thinks.

“Come here, momma,” she pants, lifting her head enough to look at him, and Bucky visibly melts and leans down. She kisses him, because he should always be being kissed, he should always be being treated sweet and soft and just how he deserves, and he kisses back. Steve moans, tightening up around her clit, and she hisses into the kiss and tries to keep her rhythm. She’s close, about to go any moment now, and it’s getting harder to do anything but fuck eagerly into the wet and welcoming body underneath her. Bucky keeps kissing her anyway, and Steve digs his heels into her back. She wants another mouth, wants to be able to kiss him too, but settles for pushing one
hand up over his pecs and working his pretty little cock with the other. Steve starts mewling again, which as far as Darcy’s favorite sounds in the world go has got to be at least top five.

Darcy grinds their hips together as hard as she can. Steve mewls.

Maybe top three.

“So good, just right,” she pants out near-senselessly, and Bucky breaks off the kiss and moves to lay down on his side and puts his head in Steve’s lap and oh--

He puts his mouth on Steve’s cock and licks between Darcy’s fingers and sucks, and Steve gets even tighter and grabs his head and starts trembling. It’s clumsy, but it’s so hot Darcy doesn’t care, and Steve clearly doesn’t either. She wants to wear him out. She wants to wear them both out. She settles for pushing her spit-slick thumb up the underside of Steve’s cock and rolling her hips in just so and--

“Oh, oh, oh!” Steve cries, and he comes fast and messy and perfect, bucking up into Bucky’s mouth and Darcy’s knot both. She doesn’t even make it through his aftershocks before she’s coming too, and it knocks all the breath out of her in one hot rush. Bucky sits back up and licks his lips. Darcy takes one look at him and feels like she could come all over again.

“Shit,” she says breathlessly.

“Don’t pull out,” Steve whines like her knot’s not way too fat and locked way too tight to even try.

“Not gonna,” she promises anyway, because even if she could, right now she would never. She reaches up to brush a shaking hair through his sweat-soaked hair and he turns into it with a hot little moan, stretching beautifully underneath her. Just–damn, he’s a sight. Damn. “You want my knot, it’s all yours.”

“Mmm,” Steve says, looking up at her hazily and squeezing around her. She nearly chokes.

Because yeah, he can have everything she’s got to give him, but god.

“I like this,” Bucky says, biting his lip.

“Uh--what?” Darcy manages, just a little bit distracted what with everything else.

“I like this,” Bucky repeats. “You look good tied.”

“Oh,” Darcy says, suddenly not remotely worried about being able to get it up again because unless she just hallucinated that, Bucky just said--

“It’s hot,” Bucky says speculatively, like he’s testing the idea out himself.

“Nnngh,” Darcy manages. Steve squirms, pressing a hand to his stomach. She attempts to reboot her brain, but it’s not working. Oh, no, it is not working at all.

“It is, right?” Bucky asks Steve.

“Yeah,” Steve says, his hazy-eyed look getting even hazier for a moment. “You get so sweet when you get a good knot in you.”

“Yeah,” Bucky says almost musingly, his own expression briefly distant. “Yeah, we used to do this. With Carter. And the Commandos. And . . . back in the neighborhood.”

“That’s right,” Steve gets out, his voice heat-addled and thick. He’s blinking a little too fast. “We
always heated up together, when I wasn’t too sick.”

“You were exhausting,” Bucky says. “Always scaring off the rutters I found us, too.”

“Should’ve found tougher rutters,” Steve says, cracking a weak smile.

“Can’t all be SSR agents,” Bucky says with a snort.

“Well, we do our best,” Darcy says, thinking briefly of how much not like Peggy Carter she is ever gonna be, upgraded tasers or not. She doesn’t think anybody’s holding that against her, but it’s still a lot to live up to. They were gonna mate her and all run away to France together. And Natasha is so intense, and Sam is so fearless, and she’s nothing like Pepper or Jane either, and . . .

She just wants to be as good an alpha as they all are in the best way she can. She hopes Bucky and Steve think she is.

Maybe that’s a dumb thing to be worrying about with her knot in Steve and Bucky looking at them like he could eat them alive, admittedly.

“Mnn,” Steve says, pulling a little at their tie. Darcy hisses. Her softening clit slips out of him, and he whines unhappily. He’s looking a little less clear-eyed again. “Alpha.”

“I got you,” Darcy says, smoothing a hand through his hair again and getting a shiver for it. She has no idea how she’s gonna fuck him again, although if Bucky goes back to talking about liking watching them tie, well—that would probably help, is all she’s saying.

God, they’re both so pretty.

She really needs to buy some time, though, so she puts a couple fingers in Steve and starts rocking them soothingly, and he settles a little, but only a little. She’s probably not gonna be able to pull this off for long. Eating him out should help. Eating an omega out always helps.

Like, in heat, she means. Obviously. Not that she wouldn’t love that being an in-general solution, honestly. The world would be a much better place in that case.

Darcy puts her mouth to good use, and Steve immediately wraps his legs around her head and nearly smothers her. Again, though, if she were picking ways to go . . .

“Cripes,” she manages breathlessly, hooking her hands around his thighs, and he moans. It’s definitely worth it if he smothers her.

“Yeah, I like this,” Bucky says, moving around them and then sitting down and tugging Steve’s head into his lap, or at least what of his lap isn’t filled with the round swell of his stomach. Steve moans again, reaching back, and Bucky catches his hand and laces their fingers together. Steve’s other hand ends up in her hair, tugging urgently. Darcy takes the direction and eats him out with utmost dedication, taking time enough to be thorough but not enough to tease. Steve clearly has zero interest in anything but getting off as efficiently and as many times as possible.

Well, it’s heat. Darcy really doesn’t blame him.

She eats him out ‘til he comes and for her own sake keeps going, and Steve doesn’t protest at all. He makes some truly beautiful noises and squirms and writhes, his pheromones downright overpowering all crammed into this small space. Darcy’s hoping sympathy rut will kick in soon and kind of can’t believe it hasn’t already. All she has to do is keep him happy until she can get it up again, though.
It is not easy, for the record. Thank fuck Bucky’s here. Even though he’s not really helping right now, he’s done plenty already. Just knowing he is here is making it easier to handle this.

“Alpha, alpha, I need you in me, alpha,” Steve starts pleading, and Darcy groans against the inside of his thigh. He’s gonna kill her. She’s said that, right? Because it’s happening for sure. “C’mon, don’t you like me?”

“I like you so much,” Darcy promises, groping for the condoms again.

“Then get in me,” Steve demands.

“Yeah, okay,” Darcy says. She tears open a condom and Steve makes impatient noises underneath her, pulling her down. She barely has time to get the thing on before Steve’s rubbing his hole against her clit, greedy and urgent. He’s wet enough that he’s downright sloppy with it, and her clit glides easily against him and he makes much better noises. “Ohhhh, oh--”

“Put it in me,” Steve says, spreading his thighs as far as they’ll go, which it turns out is pretty damn far, god.

“Just a second,” she manages, because if she puts it in him right now she’s gonna immediately come, and Steve whines loudly and reaches down to make a show of spreading his hole for her. She nearly bites through her tongue. “Oh my god.”

“Darcy,” Steve says pleadingly, and probably some other stuff happens but the next thing Darcy knows she’s already fucking him and he’s clinging to her and making these hot little yelping noises with every thrust as his nails rake furrows in her back. She feels like she just bit a live wire and has no idea how she’s got the energy for this, but he feels so good.

“Fuuuuck,” she rasps out, and Steve clings harder to her. She’s definitely bruising. She definitely doesn’t care. Bucky’s shifted over so he’s sitting beside her; she’s not actually sure when he moved. Steve’s holding onto her so hard she can barely stay upright. She’s getting dragged down. That’s what he wants, her down and close and in him.

“Hey,” Bucky says, leaning over. He’s watching Steve’s face, all flushed and screwed up and sweaty and hotter than goddamn fire. Steve looks up at him, heat-hazy with his eyes too bright, and Bucky drops a kiss on his forehead.

“You’re okay, right?” Steve asks, sounding desperate. It’s not a question Darcy would’ve expected right now.

“I’m okay,” Bucky says quietly, tucking a loose lock of hair behind his ear. “Darcy takes real good care of me.”

“I know,” Steve says, blinking rapidly.

“Here,” Bucky says, and reaches over and guides Darcy’s mouth to his throat--to the place she bit bond-bites into his skin, not very long ago. With her clit in another omega, he does that, and she groans.

She also sinks her teeth in, because no damn way is she looking that gift horse in the mouth. Bucky sighs, tilting his head to give her a better angle, and she bites down again, harder. He puts a hand between his thighs and starts touching himself, and then she is fucking one omega and bond-biting another into touching himself and yeah, no, she’s not gonna last this round. She’s not gonna last at all.
“See?” Bucky says.

“I want you both in me again,” Steve says roughly.

“Okay,” Bucky says, licking his lips, and Darcy muffles another groan, burying her teeth in his neck again on a shudder.

It’s gonna be a long heat.
Seven fucking days. Darcy’s not sure she doesn’t faint a couple times. Darcy’s not sure she hasn’t just died. Steve wants more than any single alpha could be expected to provide and doesn’t have any patience to wait for it, which wrings Darcy out like hell but she still does her best to provide. Bucky being around is fortunately very helpful, so thank fuck he decided to come because otherwise yeah, she doesn’t think it would’ve gone so well.

Seriously, the idea of leaving Steve unsatisfied makes her cringe. He’s greedy and demanding in a way she’s never seen him and no matter how much she gives him, he just wants more. He doesn’t use a safeword once, although she has to pull out “yellow” a few times for her own self-preservation. He doesn’t technically stop when she does, mind; just pounces Bucky instead until she’s recovered enough to get it up again.

She is so glad Bucky came.

Eventually, though, she wakes up to the scent of softer, subtler pheromones, and peers over to find Steve and Bucky all cuddled up next to her. She’s still half-draped over Steve--the last thing she remembers is knotting him, which was exactly as exhausting as every other time--but Bucky’s found room to wrap around him.

They’re feeding each other truffles, which is the sweetest, most fucking heart-breaking sight.

“That is the sweetest, most fucking heart-breaking sight,” Darcy rasps, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

“Joining us again?” Bucky asks mildly.

“. . . how long have I been asleep.”

“About ten hours,” Steve says, smiling sheepishly at her. “Sorry about that. But thanks?”

“Jesus,” Darcy says, rolling onto her back with a groan as all her sore muscles all protest at once. She probably is dead. “Natasha and Sam are goddamn heroes.”

“They’re pretty good, yeah,” Steve says. “You alright?”

“I think I’m dead,” Darcy says. Bucky leans over and pops a truffle into her mouth: a sweet little bite of cheesecake-y goodness in her mouth, and him smiling down at her. “. . . okay, well, at least if I’m dead I got into Heaven.”

“Good job,” Bucky says solemnly. “We’re all real proud, Lewis.”

“I do my best,” she says. She’d roll over again and hug him, but Steve’s kind of in the way and she doesn’t really know if Steve’s the hugging type. It’s tempting to try, admittedly.

Well, he did sit in Natasha and Sam’s laps that one time. But that was Natasha and Sam, so who knows.

“You a hugger?” she asks as she peeks over at him.

“Do you want hugged?” Steve asks, blinking curiously at her.

“Seriously, are you always like this?” she asks, squinting back at him. “Also yes, always.”
“He’s always like this,” Bucky confirms, tucking his hair behind his ear. “Outside of heat, anyway.”

“Of course he is,” Darcy sighs.

“I’m feeling a little ganged up on here,” Steve says.

“You liked it fine yesterday,” Darcy says, wagging her eyebrows at him meaningfully. He lets out a quiet little chuckle and shakes his head.

“Very different situation,” he says.

“Okay, we’ll remember to only gang up on you when we’re naked, then,” she says reasonably.

“If you two are gonna fuck, I’m leaving,” Bucky says, pushing himself up with a huff of effort and cradling his stomach. “I’m already gonna be sore for days.”

“Noooo, don’t go, I still haven’t been hugged!” Darcy laughs. He picks up a pillow and whaps her with it. “Ow! Baby, why so mean?”

“Because I know what this punk’s like, and if we don’t get up now we’re gonna be here for another two days,” Bucky replies firmly as he struggles to get to his feet.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Steve says, getting to his own feet much more efficiently and sweeping Bucky off his and into a princess carry in the process. Bucky makes a startled noise and hits him in the chest, and Steve smiles wryly at him. “You’re welcome.”

“Goddamn brat,” Bucky says. Steve carries him out of the closet and Darcy grudgingly gets up to follow them, because she definitely doesn’t want to be that far apart from them just yet. She didn’t bite Steve or anything, obviously, but they did just spend a very long heat together; sue her if she’s feeling a little attached. And Bucky is just Bucky, of course.

Steve takes Bucky to the bathroom and lays him down in the bath, and Bucky sighs at him but turns the water on with a foot.

“Get in here already,” he orders.

“I’m okay,” Steve says, sitting on the edge of the tub. Darcy sits down next to him, because it seems like the thing to do.

“You are at least as gross and sticky as I am,” Bucky snorts.

“Darcy and I used condoms,” Steve reminds him.

“. . . okay, fine, almost as gross and sticky as I am.”

“Are you alright?” Steve asks, and Bucky blinks up at him, looking bemused.

“Course I am,” he says.

“Do you need me to leave?” Steve asks. Bucky scowls at him.

“Do you want to leave?” he shoots back.

“Do you two wanna just have a normal conversation?” Darcy suggests. They both look at her, then turn red and look away. “Dorks. Hey, Steve, you’re glad Bucky’s here, right?”
“Of course,” Steve says quietly.

“Awesome,” Darcy says. “And hey, baby, you feel safe here, right?”

“Yes,” Bucky says.

“Awesome,” Darcy repeats, clapping her hands together. “And you’re both happy to hear the other say that?”

Steve and Bucky look at her for a moment again, then back to each other. They don’t say anything, but both their expressions soften and Steve reaches out to put a hand on Bucky’s shoulder.

“I’m not who you think I am,” Bucky says to Steve, finally. “I didn’t—I don’t wanna fight anymore. I didn’t ever want to.”

“You don’t have to,” Steve says. “I’m sorry you ever thought you did.”

“I did have to,” Bucky says. “And I . . . I still should. I shouldn’t leave you.”

“You don’t have to leave me,” Steve says. “But I’ve got other people to fight with me, either way. You can do whatever you want, and I’ll be fine.”

“You always say that,” Bucky says, looking distantly at the pouring faucet. “When have you not said that?”

“You both really need to cut yourselves a break,” Darcy says, shifting around to put her toes in the slowly rising bathwater. What, she’s gross and sticky too. “You should actually believe what the other says, for one thing. You can’t be second-guessing everything you both do.” She’s pretty sure she’s learned that lesson, at this point.

“I just want you to be okay, Bucky,” Steve says.

“I am okay,” Bucky says. “I just don’t wanna lie to you.”

“You’re not,” Steve says. “Okay?”

“. . . okay,” Bucky says, deflating a bit and sinking down in the bath. If they’ve actually figured anything out, Darcy’s not really sure, but she’s not gonna hold their hands through couples therapy; that’s really not her place. They could probably use couples therapy, actually, but maybe that’d be a little too weird for the average psychiatrist.

Whatever else, though, at least this is a start.

“How you feeling?” she asks, petting a hand through Bucky’s hair. He makes a soft sound and leans into the touch, and she shifts so he can rest his head on her thigh. “Hungry? Thirsty?”

“Starving,” he says, laying a hand on his stomach. “Like usual.”

“Want me to get breakfast started?” she suggests. Yeah, she’s gross and sticky, but who cares, it’s not like anyone else is in the suite.

“Darcy, you’re great, but please don’t do that to us,” Bucky says, giving her a wry look. “Give me some time to clean up and I’ll do it.”

“Hey, just because I’m the worst cook on the floor doesn’t mean I can’t scramble an egg,” Darcy says. “Like, in theory.” It has admittedly been a while since she did it.
“Have some damn mercy, woman,” he says, then reaches over to Steve and tugs gently at his wrist. Steve follows the pull, and the two of them fill up the tub together, the displaced water up to Darcy’s knees now. Steve turns off the faucet, and Bucky tangles their legs together.

“Let me get your hair for you,” Steve says, reaching for the shampoo. Bucky sighs.

“Can’t relax and enjoy a good thing while you got it, can you,” he says.

“I dunno, I think getting my hair washed by Captain America would be a pretty good thing, personally,” Darcy says. “Like, if you’re complaining . . .”

“I didn’t say he shouldn’t do it,” Bucky huffs, turning his head to bite her thigh, and she and Steve both laugh. Hearing Steve laugh is soothing, after all the times she had to face him so sad, and Darcy mentally resolves to make it happen every chance she gets. Hopefully she’ll get a lot of them.

Steve pours a handful of water over Bucky’s hair and then starts washing it for him, and Bucky signs and tilts his head into his hands, eyes closing. Steve watches him with a look that’s somewhere between longing and relief, and Darcy hunts down the conditioner for him. She doesn’t know how she feels about sticking herself in the middle of their relationship, confusing as it is, but neither of them seems to mind her being around. She hopes it’s that they like her--well, no, she knows Bucky likes her. Steve’s feelings are a bit more nebulous.

He doesn’t hate her, at least, and he liked her knot well enough. Beyond that, she doesn’t really know.

“Your back hurt?” she asks.

“My back always hurts,” Bucky grumbles. “My back is nothing but hurt.”

“I’ll give you a backrub after breakfast,” she promises as she leans over to kiss his temple, careful to avoid getting in Steve’s way. “Anything you guys wanna do today?”

“Get a backrub,” Bucky says firmly.

“Breakfast,” Steve says. “I’m pretty hungry too, honestly.”

“No damn wonder,” Darcy says. Anybody would be after that, although Clint was nice enough to keep the suite supplied when she slipped little menus out under the door. Probably that was actually Sam and Natasha, though, since Clint doesn’t actually, you know, live on this floor and would have no reason to be here unless they were lurking. Darcy wouldn’t blame them, she’d be lurking too if her omega’d had to heat up with another alpha. Even with an alpha she trusted, she’d still worry. “Seriously, I know everybody keeps saying this but ‘demanding’ does not cover what we just spent the past week doing.”

“Sorry,” Steve says with a sheepish little smile.

“Don’t apologize, I’m putting this on my resume,” Darcy says feelingly. “Like, both sides, bold type.”

“Are you going to need a reference?” he asks wryly.

“You joke, but I’m very serious,” Darcy says. “Hell, this is going in my slide show.”

“Slide show?” Steve squints at her.
“It’s a pretty good slide show,” Bucky says. “You should show it to him sometime.”

“My life’s dream is to get everyone in this tower in one room and show them all my slide show,” Darcy says reverently, passing Steve the conditioner. She might even Skype in Ian and Johnny, if she actually gets the chance.

“Maybe if we have a movie night one of these days,” Steve says with a low chuckle that warms her right through. Seeing him anything besides sad is pretty much a gift, at this point, especially now that he’s not heat-compromised anymore.

“Don’t tempt me, I’ll plan one. I’m gonna have the power of cute pups on my side soon, none of you will stand a chance,” she swears. Steve laughs again, and it puts a warm little feeling in her stomach. Bucky sighs, tipping his head into Steve’s hands.

“Don’t tell Steve you’re gonna use the pups to con people, he can’t keep a straight face for the life of him,” he huffs.

“I expect pup-conning rights,” Steve says mildly, coaxing him into tilting his head back to rinse out the conditioner.

“You kidding?” Bucky snorts, putting a hand on his stomach again. “There’s gonna be four of them. I’ve seen you freak out trying to handle one pup.”

“You say that like you can handle four at once,” Steve says.

“Excuse you, who was the best babysitter on our block?”

“Ronnie Nelson.”

“I’m pretty sure we’re gonna need some help, baby,” Darcy says.

“This guy doesn’t even know how to hold a baby,” Bucky says.

“. . . okay, Steve, you know to support the head and everything, right--”

“I know how to hold a baby!” Steve protests with a laugh, splashing a bit of water at Bucky, who makes a face at him in return.

“Yeah, tell that to all the crying ones in the newsreels,” he says.

“We’ll work on it,” Darcy says. Bucky huffs, then pulls Steve in and kisses him. Steve makes a soft, surprised little noise, but closes his eyes and kisses back. Darcy watches, because she’s no fool, she’s not missing out on the best show in New York.

She’s definitely right to watch, because before long Steve starts moaning and she realizes Bucky’s slipped his fingers in-between his thighs. It must be the leftover heat hormones in his system, she thinks. He wouldn’t accept it so easy otherwise.

“You don’t have to--” Steve starts anyway, panting, and Bucky kisses the words out of his mouth and twists his wrist in a way that makes Steve whine. Darcy tries not to fall off the edge of the tub, but it’s a close call.

“God, you’re both pretty,” she says feelingly, amazed that their pheromones still smell so overwhelming even after days and days of close contact with them. Bucky cracks open an eye to look at her, still kissing Steve, and she resists the urge to grab her clit. They’re all a lot more clear-
headed now, and the idea of jerking off while practically on top of them is a bit too much.

Also really tempting, honestly, but still a bit too much.

God, they smell good.

“Ah,” Steve says breathlessly. Darcy can’t see what Bucky’s doing with his fingers very well, but Steve’s flushed bright red and squirming down onto them restlessly. Bucky pets his flank, and he shudders. He’s still not very noisy, but his body seems plenty talkative at the moment. She wants to pet them both, though she’s not at a great angle for it. Maybe if she moves to the head of the tub . . . ?

Steve lets out another breathless little noise, his hips jerking as his legs try to spread in the limited space they have, and Darcy decides she definitely wants to move to the head of the tub.

“You both look so good like this. And you smell amazing,” she says, shifting over a bit; Bucky glances at her again and tugs Steve forward a bit to give her more room to maneuver. Darcy takes full advantage and moves to sit on the edge of the head of the tub, which gives her both the ability to reach both of them without leaning and a very nice view down both their bodies. Like--very nice. “Nngh.”

Steve pants into Bucky’s mouth, and Bucky keeps kissing him and working his fingers inside him. Steve puts his hands on his hips and their legs get all tangled and Darcy has, definitely, the best seat in the house.

She reaches out and strokes their hair, and Bucky looks at her mid-kiss again, but Steve stops kissing him outright and looks at her a lot more intently. His eyes are dark and heavy, but there’s a hesitance he didn’t have in real heat there.

He’s also Steve, though, so hesitance doesn’t mean much.

“You’re hard,” he says, licking his lips. Darcy’s brain shorts out.

“Yes,” her hindbrain says automatically, and then maybe some other stuff happens but the important part is then Steve has his mouth on her clit, swallowing it all the way to the root and sucking tight. She really might fall off the tub, except then her clit wouldn’t be in Steve’s mouth anymore and that would be the worst possible thing that could happen right now.

“Share,” Bucky says, leaning over, and Steve pulls back just enough to let Bucky get his mouth on her too. Darcy’s brain might not survive, but her hindbrain keeps running.

“Such good boys,” she rumbles, putting her hands in their hair. Bucky’s tongue is dragging up her clit and his hand is still working between Steve’s thighs, and the way it feels when Steve moans around the head of her clit is--fuck, just the way that feels is so much. “Shit. Be careful or I’m gonna end up knotting your mouth.”

Steve moans again. Bucky purrs. Darcy--well, Darcy hasn’t fallen over yet.

Steve gets his hands between Bucky’s thighs. Bucky makes a startled noise, eyes flaring hot. Darcy can’t decide between watching them rock their fingers into each other’s bodies or watching their mouths on her clit. In her defense, she can’t imagine the person who could. She is--God, she is so overwhelmed right now.

She’s been overwhelmed a lot this week, though, so she keeps petting their hair and slides her hands down to the backs of their necks with a pleased rumble that makes them both look up at her
with heavy, hazy eyes. Steve’s still sucking the head of her clit. Bucky’s mouthing at her swelling knot. She digs her nails in on their necks, because of course she digs her nails in on their necks, and they both whine.

“I said be careful, didn’t I?” she says.

“You said ‘be careful or’,” Bucky corrects, batting his eyes at her. Darcy hisses, nails digging in tighter, and they both start panting. Steve stubbornly keeps her clit in his mouth, swallowing her down until his lips are touching her knot and rolling his tongue up against her. It’s a level of dedication Darcy seriously admires.

“That what you want?” she asks. Steve answers by swallowing the rest of her, and she curses roughly, head knocking back and nearly slipping on the edge of the tub. This is not a secure position to be doing this in, but hell if she’s gonna move now. “Ohhhh god. Okay, baby, you asked for it. You’re such a good boy, you know that? Makes me so happy when you let me knot you.”

Steve moans around her, and her knot swells behind his teeth, filling up his mouth and holding it open. Bucky pushes into him, working his fingers in deeper, and Steve clutches at him in return. Bucky kisses the stretched corner of his mouth. They’re both wet and gorgeous and touching each other, and both clearly very close to coming. Darcy strokes their hair and drags her nails down the nape of their necks and fucking aches.

Steve comes first, gasping and panting around her clit, and it doesn’t take much more for Darcy to come down his throat. Her knot’s locked in his mouth, and he’s breathing heavily around it and shuddering with aftershocks, but still working over Bucky. Darcy can’t see what he’s doing with Bucky’s heavy stomach in the way, but he’s using both hands.

She keeps petting Bucky with a shaking hand, and he comes whining and keening, with her nails pressed into one of his bond bites.

They spend a little while longer in the bath, until her knot’s gone down and Steve’s washed up and Darcy’s given herself at least a bird bath, and then Bucky has to put up with Steve sweeping him off his feet again and taking him back into the bedroom. They all get dressed, or at least loosely dressed--Bucky only puts on a nightshirt and one of Thor’s flannels, which doesn’t even smell like Thor anymore at this point, and Darcy just grabs a sports bra and some pajama pants. Steve redresses completely, though he stays barefoot. Darcy’s relieved--for a second she thought he might be planning on leaving right away.

They head out to the kitchen and Bucky makes breakfast while Darcy and Steve wait at the counter. Steve’s hair is kind of a mess; Bucky took the time to braid his. Darcy’s is probably a rat’s nest but she really doesn’t care.

Breakfast is delicious, of course. The three of them eat a truly ridiculous amount of food, then retire to the living room and set up on the couch. Bucky ends up in the middle, no surprise, and immediately takes over the remote and puts on a show about wildly extravagant house renovations, which Darcy internally promises herself she will never let Tony watch. They’d end up with the whole tower redone by the first commercial break.

She has no idea why Bucky wants to watch something like this, but apparently he does, so she’s not gonna complain about it. It’s the opposite of a problem, honestly, as long as he’s making decisions for himself. Considering what he was like when he showed up, even the little stuff is big stuff.

They spend some time watching the show while Darcy makes good on her promise to give Bucky a backrub and Steve watches the assembly of a very expensive chandelier with clear mystification.
Darcy feels similarly mystified, but it’s safe to say they would both watch *paint* dry for Bucky, so they watch it.

Normally Darcy would be spending her time spoiling Steve, post-heat, but Steve doesn’t seem interested in being spoiled and heads off her attempts at it. Spoiling Bucky instead is the natural result. She wants to spoil Bucky all the time; Bucky *deserves* spoiled all the time. It’s not exactly a hardship to have time to spend doing it, even though she’d like to do it for Steve too.

She’s like to do a lot for Steve, but he doesn’t seem willing to let her.

He leaves sooner than Darcy’d really like, in the end. He lets them both kiss his cheek and smiles at them—wryly, sadly, maybe a little bit painfully—and it kind of hurts to let him go.

Maybe not “kind of”.

“Thank you,” he says. “I appreciate the help.”


Steve smiles at them again. Darcy wants to drag him back into the nest and *spoil* him, but restrains the impulse to try.

“I like the music,” Bucky says abruptly, and Steve blinks at him.

“I--you listened to it?” he asks.

“Yes.” Bucky looks restless, shifting in place. “Darcy danced with me. She’s as bad at it as you always were.”

“I never did get the hang of it,” Steve says, his face softening.

“Of course you didn’t, you were too busy picking fights with alphas twice *my* size,” Bucky says, and Steve lets out a soft huff of a laugh.

“Hm, no, doesn’t sound like me,” he says. Bucky scowls at him.

“Fucking punk,” he says, and then steps in and kisses Steve again. Steve kisses him back, and for a moment they just stand there framed in the doorway, the prettiest picture Darcy’s ever seen. Then Steve steps back, and he leaves, and Bucky just . . . stands there.

Darcy has very few ideas that don’t involve chasing Steve down and dragging him back into the suite. She settles for, “Wanna watch the rest of the show?”

“Yeah, sure,” Bucky says after a moment, stepping away from the door. Darcy pushes up on her toes and kisses his cheek, taking his hands in her own to squeeze.

“You did really good,” she says.

“Why am I so *sad,*” he says, and they don’t end up watching the rest of the show after all; instead Darcy sits on the couch and Bucky lays down with his head in her lap and she pets his hair and tells him everything’s okay. Everything *is* okay; it’s normal to have an emotional drop after heat, even if it’s somebody else’s heat. Sometimes especially if it’s someone else’s heat. And Bucky went through that whole hormonal roller coaster *pregnant,* too.

“I love you,” she says, still stroking through his hair.
“I believe you,” he says, still laying there.

They spend a while like that. They don’t have anything else to do today, so why not? Darcy keeps petting Bucky and Bucky keeps his head in her lap and they don’t talk, really, just sort of exist near each other. Darcy wants to talk--there’s a lot to talk about--but she doesn’t know where to start. With Steve? Her family? The code words that didn’t work? Her so far unused tasers? The--

“What do you think we should name the pups?” Bucky asks, and Darcy blinks, her hand stilling in his hair.

“I don’t know,” she says honestly. “I hadn’t thought about it yet.”

She really needs to get more proactive about this. Bucky can’t be doing all the work for the pups; he’s already doing enough of it.

“Oh,” Bucky says. Yeah, she really needs to get more proactive.

“Have you been?” she asks quickly, brushing a hand through his hair again.


“A baby name book?” she assumes; he nods. “Did you find anything you liked?”

“Maybe,” he says. “I don’t know. They’re names. They should be more important than just something I found in a book, right?”

“They don’t have to be,” Darcy says. “It doesn’t matter where you found them, they’re still gonna be our pups’ names. That’s important enough. Also, like--four kids is a lot, let’s be real, they can’t all be Steves.”

Bucky snorts, and she grins at him.

“I am not naming any of them ‘Steve’,” he says.

“Stephanie?” Darcy suggests helpfully. Bucky makes a face.

“. . . maybe,” he says. “No, I can’t do that to a kid. No way I’m naming a pup after the captain.”

“Well, you wouldn’t be,” Darcy reminds him. “You’d be naming them after Steve.”

“Same difference,” Bucky says. “Never mind all that nonsense with the press and the posters and whatever--the captain and Steve are the same person.”

“Okay,” Darcy says. “Well, what about--his middle name, maybe? What’s that?” She should probably remember that from history class, but sue her.

“Grant,” Bucky says.

“That’s not a bad name,” she says. “No offense or anything, but it rolls off the tongue a lot easier than ‘Buchanan’.”

“Just a bit,” Bucky says dryly. “What about yours?”

“Mine?” She blinks at him. “Uh, no way, mine’s Marie. I’m not naming a kid that.”

“Why not?” Bucky wrinkles his nose at her.
“For one thing, I don’t actually wanna name any of them after me, that seems super arrogant,” Darcy says. “For another I never liked it, every girl I knew’s middle name was Marie. Well, not literally, but you get my point. Grant is a way better choice. Or Grace, maybe.”

“I like Rosalind,” Bucky says. “We could call her Rosie. Or Carolina, I like that too.”

“That’d be cute,” Darcy says. They both sound a little old-fashioned, but so what? “Oh! I used to wanna name a boy Eli, if I ever had one.”

“I like Eli,” Bucky says, and she grins at him.


“I dunno,” Bucky says. “Maybe we shouldn’t think about it yet. We don’t even know how many are gonna be boys and how many are gonna be girls.”

“Better to have options, right?” Darcy says.

“I guess.” Bucky pauses, then frowns a little before his face clears. “I want to name one Natalia.”

“Um--you do?” Darcy asks, a little startled. “First or middle?”

“Middle, I guess,” he says. “Less confusing.”

“I mean, everybody here calls her Natasha,” Darcy says. She’s pretty sure, anyway. She doesn’t remember ever hearing anyone but Bucky use “Natalia”.

“Still,” he says.

“Okay.” Darcy draws her fingers through his hair again, not really sure where to go from here. It’d seemed natural that one of the pups should be named after Steve in some small way, but she hadn’t really expected that last one. If anything, she would’ve expected Thor. It’s really not that she’s jealous of Natasha, she just doesn’t understand who Natasha is. Like, both in general and also to Bucky.

She could ask, she guesses.

“You know you shot her once, right?” she asks after a moment, lacking a better segue. Bucky snorts.

“If we ruled out everybody I’ve shot, we wouldn’t have any names to pick from,” he says.

“Fair, I guess,” Darcy says. “I guess I just . . . don’t, uh, don’t get it. You seem really, um . . . attached to her.”

“I knew her,” Bucky says.

“. . . yeah?” Darcy tries after a moment’s silence, not really sure where that’s going. Bucky frowns a little, like he’s trying to remember something, and then just shrugs and turns onto his side, a hand going to support his belly as he moves.

“Yes,” he says. “A long time ago. After Steve, but before all this.”

“When you were with HYDRA,” Darcy says, not quiitite sure she’s parsing this right.

“No,” Bucky says, then pauses. “Yes. Kind of. There was a room.”
“A room?”

“A red room,” he says, nodding slightly. He looks distant, for a moment, then turns his head to look at her again. “What about Rebecca?”

“. . . that’s a cute name,” Darcy manages. She has no idea what any of that meant, or if any of that should be concerning. Bucky doesn’t seem concerned, but . . .

“One of my litter-sisters was named that,” he says. “I think--she was my favorite, I think. We were really close. Or . . . maybe that was Emma.” He pauses for a long moment, frowning to himself, then shakes his head. “No. It was Rebecca.”

“Rebecca it is,” Darcy says, hating HYDRA. “What about Margaret?”

“Leave that one for Steve, if he ever pups,” Bucky murmurs, his eyes half-closing for a moment. Darcy is pretty sure he’s gonna pup, if this last heat was anything to go by, so--“Though he’s probably not gonna change his mind, so maybe.”

“Change his mind?” Darcy blinks at him.

“He never wanted pups,” Bucky said, glancing up at her. “He was okay with Carter and I having them, but he didn’t really want anything to do with it. I mean, not like he was gonna make us do all the work, just the actual having ‘em part.”

“Ummmm, but the whole . . .” Darcy makes a vague gesture that she hopes encompasses the whole “breed me, alpha” thing. Then again, it’s not like she doesn’t know what kind of things omegas will say in heat. Bucky just shrugs.

“He says stuff like that,” he says. “Doesn’t mean it.”

“Noted,” Darcy says. Okay, well, that’s a kink she can put in her back pocket, she guesses, just in case it ever comes up again. Which it might, maybe. Oh man, there’s a thought. Though she’s definitely gonna be busy for Steve’s next heat. “Probably should’ve figured that one out on my own, really.”

Bucky shrugs again.

“They’re gonna be Lewises, right?” he asks.

“Um--the pups?” Darcy blinks at him again. “You don’t wanna do Lewis-Barnes or something like that?”

“Not really,” he says, tipping his head back a little. “I like just Lewis.”

“Okay,” Darcy says, heroically not saying anything about how if he likes it that much he can have it too. Too soon. Definitely too soon. Even if they’ve already pupsed and she’s bond-bitten him three times now and--too soon.

Bucky sits up and tucks his hair behind his ears. Darcy watches him do it and just--loves him. It’s such a simple little gesture she’d gotten so used to seeing, and it just . . . she doesn’t know, really. She just loves him.

“Is my dancing really that bad?” she asks him with a little smile.

“Yeah,” he says, which is probably fair but also merciless. “But you’re better than you were.”
“I guess I should practice more?” she suggests, leaning in a little bit. J.A.R.V.I.S. starts to play Steve’s playlist, as a true hero and wingman. Bucky peers up at the ceiling, then gives her a wry look.

“You think?” he asks.

“Definitely,” she says, then gets up and offers a hand to him. They’ve had enough going on this week, with taking care of Steve and worrying about him. Time to actually relax again. Not that she holds it against Steve, but he clearly doesn’t want fussed over anyway, so . . .

Bucky takes her hand and stands up, giving her ego the gift of pretending like she had anything to do with pulling him up, which--not likely, no.

“Do you remember last time?” he asks, lifting his hands into position. Darcy wraps an arm around his waist.

“Almost definitely,” she says. “Probably. Mostly?” He laughs, soft and quiet, and adjusts the position of her hand on his waist.

“Like this,” he says, and they spend the next little while practicing. Well, Darcy’s practicing, obviously--Bucky really doesn’t need it, like, at all. He manages to make every move look graceful and easy even with a partner who’s fumbling along as much as she is and while heavily pregnant, which is frankly an achievement and a half and really impressive to watch. She tries not to look too hopelessly wooed, but then again, who cares if she does? Bucky already knows how much she likes him, so why shouldn’t she moon over him a bit? Hell, he deserves mooned over.

“You’re really good at this,” she says.

“I like it,” Bucky says with a shrug, and something warm and soft fills up Darcy’s chest.

“Yeah?” she asks, not even trying to repress her grin. Hearing him say he likes things--yeah, that’s never gonna get old. Like, ever. “Me too.”

“One more song?” he asks.

“Absolutely,” she says. She’d go all night, if Bucky wanted. She’s done it in bed; she could manage it for dancing. It’s not hard, if it’s for Bucky.

They dance to one more song, and she holds him close and he holds her close, and they do a pretty good job of it. Bucky was gonna nail it no matter what, obviously, but Darcy manages not to trip over her own feet so hey, that’s a win.

She’s sore and tired and kind of wants to sleep for another ten hours or so, but she’s also still kind of keyed up from having Steve in the den. He smiled. She’s so relieved. She hopes this means he and Bucky are going to start spending time together again, and it wasn’t just a heat thing. She really hopes that.

“You should go see Steve tomorrow,” she says. “I mean, like. If you’re up to it. I bet he’d be really happy.”

“Maybe,” Bucky says hesitantly, glancing down at their feet.

“Definitely,” Darcy says.

“He’s gonna have had time to think about me,” Bucky says. “About how I don’t wanna fight.”
“Yeah,” Darcy agrees with a nod, peering up at him. “I still think he’ll be really happy. And he might not come see you himself ‘cuz he won’t wanna push you.”

“He didn’t try to see me all this time,” Bucky says distantly.

“Yeah, exactly,” Darcy says. Bucky bites his lip and looks away. “He wanted to see you more than anything and he waited for you to come to him.”

“Maybe,” Bucky says again. Darcy pushes up on her toes and kisses one of the bond bites on his neck.

“Just think about it, okay?” she says.

“Okay,” he says, and kisses her. She lays a hand on his stomach and kisses back, because obviously, and the music keeps playing. It’s very movie-romance. She’s into it.

“You’re so great,” she says, and he bites his lip again. “I could tell you that every day forever, seriously, you are doing amazing. You’re gonna be such a good mom.”

“I . . .” he starts slowly, ducking his head. “I--thanks. For saying that.”

“I mean it,” Darcy says, just to be sure he knows. “The stuff you’ve done is incredible. I’m really proud of you.”

“I don’t know if it’s fair,” Bucky says. “For me to be--for me to get things like this.”

“It is more than fair,” Darcy says. Bucky deserves the literal world. Nothing less. Actually, more like more.

“I hurt people,” he says. “Killed them, mostly. There’s red in my ledger.”

“That doesn't mean you don't deserve to be safe,” Darcy says. “Also, I do not remotely believe there is red in your ledger, though I get why you do. But it's not your fault, what happened to you. It is even less your fault what you did.”

“I did a hell of a lot of it,” Bucky says.

“Still not your fault,” Darcy says.

“Still me that did it,” he says. “I remember doing it. I thought it was the right thing to do.”

She can't necessarily argue with that part. He'd know better than her, obviously. Still--

“You figured out it wasn't,” she says.

“Not soon enough,” he says. He'd have an answer for anything she said right now, Darcy knows, but it doesn't make it any less true.

“Soon enough for Steve,” she says, leaning up to give him another kiss. He looks restless. “Soon enough to get away from HYDRA. You did the best you could with what you had, just like you're doing now. That's all anybody can ask for. That's all I ever would ask for.”

“Mm,” Bucky says, ducking his head again. Darcy gives him another kiss. She doesn’t expect to convince him that easy, but she’s gonna say it every time it comes up. She’s gonna say it until he does believe it, and maybe even after that.
“You didn’t do anything but survive,” she says. “And I am so glad you did.”

The idea of Bucky being gone, of her never having met him, of him losing any chance at getting to live the life he’d wanted . . .

“Thank you,” Bucky says quietly.

“Any time,” Darcy promises, and this time he kisses back.
The next day Bucky goes to see Steve first thing in the morning, and Darcy is so proud she could freaking burst. He visits him twice more that week, and Darcy really might burst. He doesn’t really tell her anything about said visits, but he doesn’t talk about hanging out with Thor or Natasha either so she’s not really surprised.

He seems a little softer, though. A little less stressed.

Over the next few weeks, Steve gets folded into the regular rotation of people Bucky spends his days with neatly and effortlessly, and Darcy nearly dies from relief. Bucky repeatedly shows up smelling like apple pie and it is basically the best he’s ever smelled.

She resists the urge to tell him this every time he shows up that way, but it definitely happens a couple times.

Meanwhile, she’s busy keeping Jane and Erik on schedule and reading a whole lot of pregnancy books and trying to figure out how to be more proactive about the whole thing. Bucky’s already bought literally everything the pups could ever need and decorated the nursery and built the nest, and he’s doing the hard work of carrying them and watching his diet and taking care of the suite. Darcy can barely do her assigned chores before he beats her to them; the only things he willingly leaves for her are the ones involving, like, bleach and anything too chemical-y. The pregnancy books are not big on the chemical-y.

Seriously, she can’t believe he’s still this active pushing seven months pregnant. She knows her mom was not when she had her second litter, and that was only three pups. Super-serum is an amazing thing, apparently.

Still, she goes out of her way to give him backrubs and make sure all his favorites are on the grocery list and run random midnight errands to go buy pico de gallo and taco shells, which is what she’s currently doing. She finally introduced Bucky to tacos and there is literally nothing he doesn’t love about them, which is pretty gratifying but admittedly less convenient when he wakes up in the middle of the night with a craving.

She’s done weirder, really. Though they’re gonna have to make sure to keep taco stuff around from now on, apparently, since late-night errands are not the most convenient. She does have, like, work and shit tomorrow.

“Mild or hot?” Clint asks, hefting two jars, because he’s a true bro who apparently doesn’t sleep and came along.

“Both?” Darcy hazards, making sure he can see her mouth so he can read her lips. He isn’t wearing his hearing aids.

“How about we split the difference and do medium,” he suggests.

“Yeah, okay,” she agrees, and he tosses it into the basket and moves on. She keeps inspecting the taco shells, trying to figure out which ones Bucky will like best. They don’t sell Tony’s brand here, probably because this is a normal grocery store and he shops at, like, high-end castles that sell yellow raspberries and Yubari melon juice and don’t even look like stores. Not that Tony actually does his own shopping, but he at least sends somebody to do it, so same difference.

Kinda.
“I am probably worrying way too much about this,” she says, putting back the more expensive brand. Bucky isn’t gonna care if she gets the cheap shit, he’s just gonna care that he gets to eat. Lately that seems to be his driving focus in life. Well, one of them. He’s also pretty--

“Duck,” Clint says. Because Darcy has learned survival instincts, she drops the basket and hits the floor. The jar of pico de gallo shatters, and she hears a stifled cry. Clint isn’t next to her anymore.

“Crap,” she says, which is when somebody grabs her ankle and starts pulling. She takes one look at the musclebound stranger in black tac pants dragging her across the floor and starts screaming, because, you know, squeaky wheel gets the grease and all. She’s pretty sure Clint can hear a scream, anyway, hearing aids or not. She kicks the guy in the chest too, because this squeaky wheel is not an idiot. Unfortunately he doesn’t seem to be particularly affected.

More fortunately, a second later there’s a crossbow bolt through his bicep and Clint’s vaulting the side of the aisle. Because of course Clint didn’t stop to put in his hearing aids before going out, but he definitely packed his mini-crossbow.

“Stay down,” he advises her, then shoots the guy again as he’s lunging up.

“I can handle that,” Darcy says even though he’s not looking at her, and Clint jumps over the shelves again and vanishes. She shifts up against a row of cans and pulls out one of her tasers. It’s the one with the star, which is kind of comforting, actually. Not to pick favorite tasers or anything, but it’s her favorite taser.

Well, assuming it works, anyway. She never did get around to trying it out.

Live trials it is, she guesses.

She can hear the sounds of fighting a couple aisles over, and because she’s not an idiot she stays right where she is, taser in hand but concealed inside the fall of her button-down. The place is pretty empty, but that’s not reassuring. Like, at all.

She sneaks a glance at the guy who’d grabbed her, who’s lying still on the tile and not moving anymore, a bolt sticking out of his--she blanches, and tries to look at something else. Like, pretty much anything else would be good right now. This is not a dude dressed to rob a place, this is a dude dressed for a fucking military operation. No guns on him, though, for some reason. Maybe they’d be too loud?

A cracking sound goes off, and Clint curses.

Maybe not.

There’s a syringe on the floor, she notices belatedly. It looks like the guy dropped it.

Oh, well, that bodes horrifyingly, she thinks, and finally thinks to call Thor.

“Darcy?” he asks sleepily.

“Hey,” she says. “I think, um, we have a problem? Clint and I are at the grocery store, you know, the one Tony hates, and there’s kinda--”

Another staccato burst of gunfire goes off, and she jumps and nearly drops her phone. She hears electricity crackle over the line.

“Kinda that,” she says weakly, and the line goes dead. She hears the sounds of a struggle and starts
debating if she should be trying to hide. She’s kind of a sitting duck right now. Hiding means getting out of view of the security cameras, though, and she would rather be in view of the security cameras right now in case anything happens. She also doesn’t want shot, though.

A crossbow bolt appears in the ceiling. Darcy stares up at it warily. Clint never misses, but . . .

Another musclebound stranger appears at the end of the aisle, and she decides to go with the better part of valor. The idea might’ve worked, except as soon as she turns to run she finds another stranger standing at the opposite end of the aisle, which puts her between two alphas twice her size with none of Clint’s high jump abilities. They’re both armed, but neither’s drawn his weapon.

They’re both advancing.

“Agh,” Darcy says, and pulls out her taser and fires it at the nearest guy, praying it’s got the range. A cooler, more Avenge-y person could probably get them both at once, with two weapons; she’s just gonna count herself lucky if she gets the one.

Instead of wires and probes, though, a bright electric arc bursts out of the taser, the unexpected recoil knocking her backwards a few steps and nearly making her drop it. The arc slashes across the aisle, leaving the approaching alpha nowhere to dodge, and throws him back.

That was not a normal taser, Darcy thinks, staring incredulously after him with her arm still raised. That was more like a repulsor blast.

So much for “street legal”, she guesses.

A hand grabs her wrist and squeezes.

Right. Two guys.

“Fucker, let go!” she yells instinctively, trying to yank away, but the guy’s got a grip like iron and he’s holding the hand she’s got the taser in. She fires it again accidentally and the electric arc slices into the shelves, exploding a few cans and spraying them both with tomato sauce. He throws his free arm up to protect his face, and Darcy--well, two guys.

But she’s got two tasers.

The backlash here is probably gonna hurt, though.

She sticks her second taser in the guy’s gut and fires. They both go flying. Her back hits the shelves and she cracks her head; his back hits the shelves and he knocks them over.

That. That is a lot of power in a very little device, she thinks dizzily, still clutching both tasers like her life depends on them, which it maybe might right now. Tony is way too good at his job. And she really should’ve asked Natasha for those tips.

Clint appears, and grabs her by the wrist.

“Run,” he says, and Darcy’s survival instincts are happy to oblige. She knew she should’ve asked Tony where the normal-person gym was.

They bolt out of the store and into the street, Clint knocking down a display of cans as they run. Darcy pretends not to realize how many people are following them, although she can’t quite wrap her mind around the why. If they’d ignored her, sure--they were focused on the Avenger. But they hadn’t.
She makes two connections, both admittedly a little slow. Before this, she was curled up in bed with Bucky and right now she probably reeks of him. And the options for who these single-minded assholes in black tac gear could be are very, very limited.

Great. Super great. Can’t even go buy pregnancy-craving midnight snacks without HYDRA deciding it’s an opportunity.

They really need to step up security around the tower.

Also, she’s an idiot who should’ve taken a shower.

She and Clint run down the street and Clint fires a bolt into the sky, which makes no sense to Darcy whatsoever until it bursts into light and she realizes it’s a flare.

“Please tell me there’s a plan,” she says, dearly wishing she knew any ASL besides the alphabet. Clint doesn’t hear her, obviously, and he’s too busy looking ahead and behind to read her lips, which—fair, definitely, she would definitely rather he was keeping an eye out for HYDRA goons than watching to see if she was gonna say anything snarky. She wonders how many bolts he has left. It can’t be that many; he can’t have brought that many.

“Keep running,” Clint says, letting go of her wrist and pulling a knife out of somewhere as he skids to a halt.

“That sounds like a terrible plan,” Darcy says, but she doesn’t stop running. She tears right past him, going as fast as she can and already this close to exhausted—she is not a sprinter, not at all, and even less is she a marathon runner—and behind her she hears cursing and shouting and the sound of Clint’s crossbow firing again and again. A more Avenge-y person would have a smart direction to run or a good place to hide; the best she’s got is keeping her tasers in her hands and running straight ahead.

She really doesn’t want to think about her chances of running straight into another HYDRA agent. They are way too high.

Oh god, she is definitely going to run straight into another HYDRA agent. Oh god.

It’s fine. It’s fine. She called Thor, Thor will be here, Thor will show up and all she has to do is not get caught for however long it takes him to do that because the last thing this situation needs is a freaking hostage. Like, that is the opposite of what this situation needs.

She hears a yell of pain echo down the street and really, really hopes it wasn’t Clint.

A beta and alpha in black tac gear step onto the sidewalk in front of her with nasty, smug expressions, and Darcy freezes. Oh, this is bad. This is very bad and not good.

Now would be a great time for a thunderstorm.

The beta steps forward, and she really, really hopes her tasers have multiple charges. She’s got at least one shot left, she knows, because she fired one twice and one once—but which one was which, shit, that was--

The star, she remembers, and swings up the other taser.

“Back off!” she snaps. They don’t even acknowledge that she’s spoken, just keep advancing on her.
Well, fine then.

Darcy fires the taser between them, and the wide electric arc isn’t a strong enough hit to send either flying, but they both go skidding back a few feet. Somebody on the street yells, because there is no such thing as a deserted street in New York even with HYDRA crawling all over it, and thunder rolls overhead.

She sags in relief, right up until the HYDRA goons start standing up.

Shit.

Darcy spins on her heel and starts running back towards Clint, because that’s a terrible idea but not as bad as trying to run through two HYDRA agents, and she hears thunder again. Okay. Okay, she can do this. She’s so close to doing this--

A sharp burst of pain stabs into her shoulder, and she staggers in shock. She looks, because her first impulse is always the stupidest one, and there’s a . . . a dart? Just kind of sticking out of her arm?

What the hell?

Darcy staggers forward a few more steps, and then her legs fold underneath her and she hits the pavement. She drops one of her tasers. She feels . . . weird. Kind of floaty and distant. She’s vaguely aware she should probably scream again, but . . .

The beta and alpha catch up to her. The beta’s holding a pistol. They both look smug again. She tries to lift the taser she’s still holding, but it’s so heavy. It’s . . .

Something clangs against the streetlight, and Steve’s shield ricochets into the alpha’s neck, knocking him into the beta. Darcy blinks, slowly, and watches Steve charge straight into them out of nowhere. The agents go down cursing.

It occurs to her that she should maybe take the dart out of her shoulder, so she does. It stings like a bitch. She almost drops it, but then it occurs to her that maybe she shouldn’t. She tries to pick up her other taser, but her hands feel stupid and heavy and she’s so tired.

“Darcy,” Steve says, and she looks up at him. He’s very pretty, and looks very worried.

“Steve,” she says, and thunder rolls, and that’s the last thing she remembers.

Mostly the last thing she remembers, anyway. She has the vague sensation of being scooped up and she thinks she hears some things, but very little else makes it through.

“--happened?"

“--just--right in like they owned the place--must’ve been--”

“--security--”

“--not enough security--”

Darcy feels floaty and tired and warm, and has no intention of moving anytime soon. There’s a storm, so she’s safe, and someone who smells sweet and delicious is holding her. She doesn’t need to worry, with that.

She falls asleep.
She wakes up.

“Darcy,” Bucky says roughly, and throws his arms around her. Darcy blinks up at the ceiling slowly, automatically lifting a heavy hand to lay on the back of his head. Where--?

“Oh, thank fuck,” somebody mutters, and through her swimming vision she recognizes the ceiling of the penthouse, which--long time no see, definitely, she only ever comes up here for parties, and they haven’t been having many of those lately. She thinks the last time she was here was right after Bucky came back, when . . . yeah, that was the last time. When he didn’t want to see Steve.

Definitely not party time.

“Um?” Darcy manages, patting the back of Bucky’s head as he clings to her and trying to figure out what the hell they’re doing up here. Is she laying on the table? She thinks she’s laying on the table.

“How do you feel, my friend?” Thor asks, leaning into her line of sight.

“Like somebody’s doing the Charleston inside my skull,” she says. “So, not great. What happened?”

“You and Clint were attacked,” Bruce says, and she feels someone pick up the wrist of her free hand and check her pulse--presumably him, but Bucky’s taking up most of her immediate point of view. That’s--wait--

“Clint!” she blurts, jerking in alarm. “Is he--”

“Bruised wrist and a black eye,” Clint says dismissively, leaning into her line of sight too, and she sags in relief. “I’m good.”

“I’m so sorry,” Bucky chokes, which Darcy cannot even figure out the reasoning for, it’s not like they were--oh, right, they did go out because of him.

“It’s not your fault, baby,” she says, tightening her grip on the back of his head. “We should’ve been more careful, we knew there were--wait, were those guys actually HYDRA or was that just me jumping to conclusions?”

“Suicide pills and ‘hail’-ing were involved, so pretty sure you jumped right,” Clint says.

“Awesome, that sucks,” Darcy says, attempting to peer around the room enough to figure out who all’s here without dislodging Bucky or worsening her headache. Thor, Clint, Bruce-- “And did I get hit with a real-life tranq dart, was that actually a thing?”

“That was definitely a thing,” Bruce says. “You’re, uh, you’re lucky, it was a lot of tranquilizer.”

“Huh,” Darcy says, then leans over the side of the table and throws up. Bruce sighs quietly, and Bucky makes an alarmed sound.

Wow, her head is swimming.

“Lemme guess: super-soldier dose?” she says with a grimace.

“Probably intended to be,” Bruce says. “At least, enough to slow a super-soldier down. You’re going to need to be under supervision for a while. I was honestly about to put you in the infirmary if you hadn’t started waking up.”

“Great,” Darcy mutters, deciding not to ask how long it’s been, since the answer is definitely “too
long” no matter what. She still feels groggy as hell, for one thing. “Sounds like a good time.”

It’s been a very eventful night.

Thor carries her down to the suite, since Bucky doing it is not a great idea, and Darcy goes to bed with instructions from Bruce to immediately call him if anything goes weird or bad at all. Bucky frets over her like it’s going out of style, which is not as much fun as it sounds like. And it doesn’t sound super-fun to start, all things considered.

“Seriously, it’s not your fault,” she tells him.

“It’s my fault,” Bucky says. “They wouldn’t have even cared about you if you hadn’t smelled like me.”

“Which probably would’ve gotten me shot, so hey, technically that was a good thing,” Darcy points out. Not that she doubts Clint’s Avenging skills, but that situation was only one of him against a lot of HYDRA.

“They wouldn’t have attacked you at all if you hadn’t smelled like me,” Bucky says with total certainty, which . . . miiiight be a fair point, admittedly.


“Who else would it be on?” he asks.

“Um, them?” Darcy raises her eyebrows at him. She feels way too gross and nauseous and achy for this. If it’s about comforting Bucky, though, she’d do it while puking. He doesn’t deserve any guilt for this. “It is literally always them. It has never once not been them. There is not a single thing in this mess that is not them.”

“I was so scared,” Bucky says, and wraps his arms around her and hides his face in her neck. She lays her hands on his back and nuzzles into his throat.

“It’s okay,” she says. “I’m fine, see? All good here. Worst case scenario I need some anti-nausea meds or something.”

“They’re going to keep trying,” Bucky says.


“Barton said you did really good with the tasers,” Bucky says after a moment, glancing away.

“Well, I did my best,” Darcy says. “Wasn’t enough to not get tagged but I didn’t actually get kidnapped sooo . . .” She shrugs, tucking her hair behind her ears. She’s not sure how much of the nausea is the tranquilizer and how much of it is the idea of being dragged off by HYDRA for god knows what purpose. Bait, probably. Maybe some casual torture on the side trying to figure out Avenger weak spots they could take advantage of. Just like, the usual.

She really wants to puke again.

“‘Scuse me,” she says, and grabs the trash can just in time. Bucky pets her hair and she heroically does not have a panic attack. She’s got an omega with a bellyful of pups; no way she can afford to freak out right now, so she’s not gonna. At least being an alpha gives her that much.

Admittedly, she might have to freak out some tomorrow. But ideally not right in front of Bucky.
Like--definitely not right in front of Bucky, that’s a “private time with Jane” kind of thing. The last thing she wants to do is stress Bucky out any worse than he already is.

“Where’s Steve?” she asks, looking for any topic change.

“He stayed to talk to the cops,” Bucky says. “Thor might’ve wrecked the street.”

“Bless him, the poor bastard,” Darcy says, spitting bile into the trash can and then gingerly picking up the glass of water on her nightstand to rinse her mouth out. It still kind of tastes like death, but at least she didn’t vom all over the stupid-expensive penthouse floor again. “I owe a lot of people really good birthday presents this year.”

“Thor or Steve?” Bucky asks, taking the trash can from her.

“Both,” Darcy says. She kind of wants to kiss the worry off his face, but since she currently has puke-breath she’s gonna refrain. Instead she puts a hand over his closest hand and squeezes. It’s the metal hand, but hopefully the point still gets across. “Also you, while I’m at it. When’s your birthday?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “I think sometime in March or April. I’ll ask Steve, I guess.”

“Yeah, figure that out. I want the excuse to spoil you,” Darcy says. It’s a much better thing to think about than the idea of nearly getting kidnapped and/or murdered.

It’s still better it was her and not Bucky, though. *Fuck* knows what those tranqs might’ve done to the pups.

Bucky keeps an eye on her for the rest of the night, and they talk about dumb stuff--little things, nothing important. Steve checks in at one point and Jane checks in twice and Bruce comes by in the morning to see how she’s holding up. After he gives the all-clear, it’s apparently open season and *everybody* takes a turn or two coming through to check on her, to the point that she moves to the Thor floor’s common room just to make it easier and save Bucky from constantly having to go answer the door and let people in. She spends the afternoon watching *Ace of Cakes*, and he spends it baking blueberry coffeecake and chocolate chip cookies, both of which are delicious.

She spends more time than she should wondering what HYDRA thinks they’re trying to pull, trying to steal Bucky out from under the Avengers’ collective noses. Like, really--they think that’s gonna work out for them in the long-term? That’s basically *asking* to get stomped into the ground.

Probably they’re trying to do something worse, and this is just a distraction. That’s not really a better thought, though.

She wishes she knew why those old code words didn’t work. She wishes she were better with a taser. She wishes she were just a little more Avenge-y.

She’s really glad Bucky’s here, even if he’s paying more attention to the oven than to her. Being alone right now would really suck.

“Maybe we should have a baby shower,” she says, watching a whole lot of cake get very thoroughly decorated on the screen.

“Why?” Bucky asks, sounding confused. Which--fair, it’s not like they *need* anything.

“I dunno,” she says. “It’d be fun, right? It’s been a while since we had a party.”
“I haven’t had a party since 1944,” Bucky says.

“. . . yeah, we’re definitely having a baby shower,” Darcy says, and pulls out her phone and starts making a list of people to invite. *This* is a thing she can do, and also a way better thing to concentrate on than last night. “Is it okay if I invite the Fantastic Four?”

“How the hell are the Fantastic Four?” Bucky asks in bemusement.

“Johnny and Sue’s family,” Darcy says. “If we’re lucky they’ll bring the pups. If we’re *really* lucky, Reed’ll distract Tony from spiking the punch.”

“I guess, then,” Bucky says.

“Cool.” Darcy adds them to the list. She debates adding her family, but that feels kind of like crossing the streams. She’d really rather the first time they meet Bucky be *after* the pups are born, because then there’ll be pups to distract them from, like . . . everything. So many things. Babies are magic that way, and she is not above taking advantage of that fact.

Bucky comes over and sits down next to her, and she looks up from the list. He offers her a cookie, which she takes because *obviously* she is not turning down homemade baked-by-her-omega cookies, like, ever. That is not a thing she is ever gonna get sick of.

“These are so good,” she tells him around a mouthful of cookie.

“Thanks,” he says. “The Internet told me how to make them.”

“I love the Internet,” Darcy says, kissing his cheek. “How’s the nest?”

“It could smell more like Steve,” Bucky says.

“Well, you could always invite him over?” Darcy suggests. “Or make him give you his sheets, that’s also probably an option.” She’s pretty sure Steve would give Bucky the shirt off his *back*, so a set of sheets is probably not a major imposition. “Is it ready for the pups?”

“Not really.” Bucky makes a face. “I need to move the bassinets in. It’s not safe to have four pups just sleeping wherever.”

“Point,” Darcy says. “You want help with that?”

“I’ll make Steve help,” Bucky says. “Then it’ll smell like him.”

“Good idea,” she says. “So--are you gonna *have* them in there, or . . .?”

“It’s the nest,” Bucky says, giving her a strange look. “Where else *would* I have them?”

“Fair,” Darcy says. And probably reasonable, since the other choices are “hospital” and “lab” and neither sounds like a very soothing birthing environment for Bucky. She really doesn’t like the idea of him giving birth outside the tower, honestly, that seems *ripe* for “and then Uncle Steve had to beat up HYDRA goons in the hallway” stories. She would rather the pups be born as boringly as possible, for everyone’s sake.

. . . Bruce probably knows how to help with that, right?

“Have you thought about who’s gonna be in the nest with you?” she asks, frowning faintly at the thought.

“Nobody else?”

“Steve’ll probably be in heat and it’d be weird to have you, so . . .” Bucky shrugs again.

“ Weird?” Darcy’s not sure how to take that, honestly.

“Yeah,” he says. “Who has pups with their alpha there?”

“Is this a forties thing?” Darcy asks him. “ ‘Cause people do, I mean. Have pups with their alpha there. We’re good for holding hands during contractions and being blamed for the whole situation.”

“I’m the idiot who thought I couldn’t get pregnant,” Bucky snorts.

“Technically we’re both that idiot,” Darcy says. “I mean, I don’t have to be there, but if you wouldn’t mind me there . . .”

“You want to be?” Bucky blinks at her.

“Um--a little?” She gives him a sheepish look. “I get it if you don’t want me to, though, it’s a super-stressful situation. You’ll probably need more than just Bruce, though, with that many pups. At least, like, maybe Thor or Clint?”

“Point,” he says, frowning faintly. “I’ll think about it.”

“Okay,” Darcy says. She can’t really ask for more than that, so she doesn’t. She hadn’t thought about it much either, but she would like to be there. She doesn’t like the idea of Bucky in pain without her. It’s not like he’d be alone, just . . . yeah. “I’ll plan the baby shower, if that’s cool with you.”

“Sure,” he says with a shrug. “There’s worse reasons to have a party.”

“Totally,” Darcy says, which is how they end up having a baby shower a week later. It’s pretty last-minute and a bit thrown-together, but Tony gave her permission to use the Avenging-expenses credit card and the decorations turned out really nice. It’s not like they need gifts or anything, it really is just an excuse for a party, and maybe also just an excuse to get her mind off the whole HYDRA issue. That’s not a problem that’s going away any time soon.

She’s okay with that, honestly. Yeah, HYDRA is gonna keep being a problem for at least a while and maybe she’s not gonna be able to just run out and do whatever whenever she feels like it anymore, but if that’s the price she’s gotta pay to be in Bucky and the pups’ lives, well . . . she’ll pay it, then. An evil shadow organization that’s been in operation well over seventy years is not getting weeded out in two, much as she wishes otherwise.

As long as they don’t get their fucking hands on the pups. That’s the important part. That’s the one part that really matters.

Not really baby shower talk, though.

“Nice!” Darcy says delightedly as Bucky raises an eyebrow at the little pack of Fantastic Four onesies he’s just unwrapped. Sue laughs.

“I thought you’d appreciate those,” she says.
“You brought babies, I appreciate *everything* you do,” Darcy says firmly. Franklin and Valeria are on the other side of the room right now and tucked up on Ben’s shoulder, Valeria peering curiously around the room and Franklin sleeping. They’re both tiny and blonde and *adorable*. Darcy wants to hold them really badly but hasn’t gotten a chance to ask yet. She is definitely not letting the Fantastic Four escape before she does, though.

Sue heads back over to the babies (so tiny! so adorable!!) and Darcy peeks at Bucky to make sure he’s okay. It’s a very small party—pretty much just the Avengers and their assorted affiliates, plus the Fantastic Four and Crystal—but she wants to be sure being the center of attention isn’t too overwhelming for him. He doesn’t look upset or anxious, so she chalks that one up in the win column.

“Want some punch?” she says.

“Only if Stark hasn’t gotten to it,” Bucky says.

“I’ll check,” she promises, and heads over to the buffet table. She’s gonna be honest, most of her budget went into the food. There were other options she could’ve spent the money on, but *food*. Like—good food. Obviously that was gonna be the main concern. Judging by how much time everyone’s spent at the table, she wasn’t wrong.

She sidles up to the punch and pours a cup, then takes a sip. Well, it doesn’t *taste* alcoholic, at least, and Tony’s been arguing with Reed for the better part of an hour on the other side of the room, so she’s pretty sure it’s fine. Even Tony *probably* knows better than to spike the punch at a baby shower, anyway.

. . . maybe she should double-check and ask him.

She checks with Tony—all clear on the punch, at least for the moment—and then goes back to the buffet table and fills a plate for Bucky and takes a small, greedy pleasure in knowing his favorites. When he first came in he didn’t even know when he was *hungry*, and now he not only has favorites, he’s told her what they *are*.

It’s pretty gratifying. Also, a pretty huge relief. She feels a lot better about just about everything, knowing Bucky likes almonds more than pecans and raspberries more than blueberries. It doesn’t sound like much, she knows, but it *feels* like so much.

She brings the plate and the punch back to Bucky and kisses his cheek as she passes them over, and he gives her a kiss in return as he accepts them.

“Thank you, alpha,” he says.

“You’re welcome, omega,” Darcy says, barely resisting the urge to pet him. She’d really like to, but she still doesn’t know how comfortable he is with public displays of affection in situations like this. She’s learned a lot about him, but this is a bigger crowd than they’re usually in. “You holding up okay?”

“I’m fine,” he says, taking a bite of a cookie. “How long is this gonna go on for?”

“I will literally kick everyone out right now if you want,” she says immediately.

“Not really what I meant,” he says, giving her a wry smile.

“Probably another hour or so, then,” Darcy says. “You want anything else?”
“I’m good,” Bucky says, and takes another bite of cookie. “Mmph. Are you okay?”

“I’m good too,” Darcy says, kind of pleased that he’d ask. Actually really pleased, honestly. She’s better at handling this stuff than Bucky, yeah, but that doesn’t mean she never gets overwhelmed. Plus, like--it’s just nice. Seriously, Bucky is one of the nicest people she knows.

She’s so lucky.

“Okay,” he says, and then turns his attention to decimating the plate she brought him. She probably should’ve brought two, all things considered. “Your parents aren’t gonna be upset, right?”

“About not getting invited?” Darcy asks, leaning against the side of his chair. “Naw, it’s like a work thing, they’ll get it. Besides, there’s a lot of kids in our family, we can’t all do every little thing together. I figure we’ll give them a vid call after the birth and then after the pups are old enough to be interesting we’ll either go to Connecticut or invite them over here.”

“My parents would’ve killed me for waiting that long,” Bucky says. “Also would’ve killed me for getting knocked up without getting mated proper first.”

“I mean, I’m pretty sure most people would cut you a break under the circumstances,” Darcy says.

“Woulda definitely still been a shotgun wedding,” Bucky replies, giving her an amused look.

“Oh, we’re having a wedding, now?” Darcy asks, definitely not blushing at all.

“Maybe when the pups are old enough to be ring-bearers,” Bucky says with a faint smile. Okay, yeah, Darcy’s blushing. Jesus.

“Yeah?” she says, trying not to smile too stupidly.

“Might as well be official about it, right?” he asks.

“We don’t have to be,” Darcy says. Bucky bites his lip and gives a little shrug.

“I might like to be,” he says, and something in her chest warms.

“Oh, well,” she says, sneaking a hand over to lace their fingers together and smiling a little wider as Bucky returns the grip. “In that case.”
Darcy comes home from work to find Steve and Bucky talking quietly on the couch and Natasha and Sam in the kitchen, drinking juice. The Yubari melon flavor has been avoided, she can’t help but notice, except for how there’s a can of it by the door waiting for her. She will never escape the stuff.

She could just tell Bucky she doesn’t really like it, but at this point she’s either gonna develop a taste for it or she’s gonna choke on it.

“Hey,” she says, and everyone looks at her at once. It is . . . disconcerting, definitely. “Don’t mind me, just, you know, just-ing,” she says, picking up the juice and heading over to give Bucky a kiss on the cheek. The entire apartment smells like eight kinds of delicious food, though she doesn’t see anything set out anywhere. “How’s the day?”

“Banner’s threatening me,” Bucky says.

“Um?” Darcy blinks at him.

“Nest rest,” Steve supplies, smiling wryly.

“Oh!” Darcy says in surprise, straightening up. Somehow the chance of a super-soldier getting put on nest rest did not occur to her. “Well, that sucks. Now?”

“Yes,” Bucky says grumpily. “You’re gonna starve.”

“I did feed myself before you came along,” Darcy reminds him, trying not to laugh. That is fucking adorable, though.

“Pop-Tarts and cold cuts ain’t food,” Bucky snorts.

“I mean, they’re edible,” Darcy says. Bucky gives her a pained look.

“I froze a bunch of dinners for you,” he says. “You’re on your own for lunch, unless there’s leftovers.”

“You are way too sweet,” Darcy says, kissing his cheek again. “Seriously, you’re supposed to be on nest rest, you didn’t need to do that.”

“If you get food poisoning, who’s gonna help me with all these brats?” Bucky asks.

“Steve, probably,” Darcy says.

“Steve can’t even hold a pup right!” Bucky says accusingly.

“I’m right here,” Steve says with a low laugh.

“You can’t even hold a pup right!” Bucky repeats just as accusingly, giving him a scowl. Steve smiles at him.

“I’ll figure it out,” he says.

“Not on my litter, you won’t!”
“Nice to see everyone getting along,” Sam says mildly as he and Natasha come into the living room. Bucky gives him a sour look and Steve laughs again.

“Yeah, we’re doing great,” he says.

“I still ain’t letting you practice on my pups,” Bucky grumbles. Natasha sits down between them, briefly making questioning eye contact with Bucky before laying a hand on his stomach.

“You’re enormous,” she observes, like anybody in the room missed it.

“I’d better be, there’s four of them,” Bucky says, putting a hand on his stomach too.

“Is Bruce going to help you deliver?” Natasha asks.

“He keeps saying he’s not that kind of doctor,” Bucky says. “So yes, apparently. I’m locking Stark out, though.”

“That’s fair,” Natasha says wryly. “Steve’ll probably be in heat when you do.” Darcy’s not sure if that’s an apology for not being available or not, though it kind of seems like it must be. “You can ask Clint for help if you need it. His mate’s an omega and she’s had a litter before.”

Okay, definitely an apology, and Darcy still doesn’t understand Bucky and Natasha’s relationship. Maybe one day.

“Wait, Clint has a litter?” Sam asks, his eyebrows popping up.

“Clint has a mate?” Steve asks.

“How big a litter?” Bucky asks.

“Only two,” Natasha says. “Still, I’m sure some of it carries over.”

“Maybe,” Bucky says guardedly. Since as far as Darcy knows Bucky and Clint have spent about five minutes together total, she’s not surprised. Still, Natasha might have a point.

“An Avenger with actual kid experience?” she says. “It’s a miracle.”

“Odds are at least one of us would have to have some,” Natasha says, smiling humorlessly. “They’re a little older now, so he knows the ropes. You might at least want to talk to him.”

“Last time I talked to him was about brainwashing,” Bucky says, making a face. Okay, apparently more than five minutes together, then. “It’s not exactly a natural segue.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Natasha says, patting his stomach before reclaiming her hand.

“But seriously, Clint has a litter?” Steve says.

“I said so, didn’t I? Keep up, old man.” Natasha smirks at him.

“Very funny,” he says. “Does he want us knowing this?”

“He said I could mention it,” she replies with a shrug.

“Clint’s a dad,” Darcy marvels, immediately resolving to ask him about how much pre-pup panic is normal and if his mate let him in the delivery room and how much stuff she should be doing for Bucky. She’s pretty sure the answer is “all of it”, it’d just be nice to have the confirmation. Well,
the answer’s definitely “all of it” now, if he’s gonna be on rest. Hopefully he’ll be a good patient and she won’t have to worry about him sneaking off or anything. A super-soldier would probably still be fine, but she doesn’t wanna test it. Like, not at all does she wanna test it.

Also, she really doesn’t want to set off Bruce. She wants to do that exactly never.

“So’re you, stupid,” Bucky snorts.

“Not a real one,” she says, automatically looking at his stomach. “I haven’t gotten to do anything for them yet, really.”

“You’ve done plenty,” Bucky says. Darcy doesn’t really feel that way about it, personally, but she isn’t gonna start a fuss about it either. She’s been waiting with dread the past few weeks for the hormones to wreak havoc, but so far Bucky’s mood swings seem fairly contained.

Well, he will get crazy horny at the drop of a hat, but that’s not really a problem, sooo . . .

Ahem.

An excessive amount of dinner is in the oven, so they all migrate into the kitchen to eat it. Darcy manages to convince Bucky to stay on the couch and brings him back a plate, which he seems torn between being pleased by and annoyed about. Since he doesn’t do anything but grumble about Bruce a bit between vengeful bites of pot roast, she’s gonna put that one in the “win” column.

They all eat in the living room, then Steve clears their plates and Natasha and Sam do the dishes. Darcy tries not to hover too much over Bucky but probably hovers a bit too much over Bucky. He puts up with her, which is supremely gratifying.

They eat cookies and make small talk, which is still one of the weirdest things Darcy’s ever done with a superhero, and Bucky and Steve argue over something stupid and then both kind of—laugh, a little bit, and then look a little startled to hear the other do it. Darcy pretends not to notice anything weird or awkward about the exchange. They’re really obviously still feeling each other out, even after weeks of talking to each other again. Instead, she gets up and gets more cookies out of the kitchen. No surprise, they eat their way through the new batch too.

Seriously, no wonder Tony has such a skewed idea of how many groceries is a reasonable amount of groceries.

“You guys eat so much,” Darcy says emphatically, on what is admittedly at least her sixth cookie.

“Takes a lot of calories to support superheroics,” Sam says reasonably, taking another cookie himself. “Not to mention four pups.”

“I should’ve made more pot roast,” Bucky says, eyeing the near-empty cookie plate.

“You made two!” Darcy protests with a laugh. “Two big ones!”

“So three, next time,” he says.

“Next time might be a while from now,” Natasha says. “Steve’s heat is coming up again soon.”

“Please actually be in the country this time,” Darcy says. She is not gonna be available for pitch-hitting this time. “Or make sure someone’s in the country.”

“We’ll do our best to avoid any more governments collapsing around us,” Natasha says, possibly
even sincerely.

“At least one of us will be here,” Sam says. “Failing that, Pepper will be here. We already talked to her.”

“The redhead with the . . .?” Bucky gestures vaguely, presumably trying to indicate “fiery Extremis superpowers and fabulous shoes”. At least, that’s what Darcy would be trying to indicate if it were her.

“Yeah, she’s Tony and Rhodey’s heat partner,” she says. “She’s very cool. Have you met her?”

“Only at the baby shower,” Bucky says. “She gave us a pair of designer diaper bags and promised to keep Stark off solo babysitting duty.”

“Sounds like Pepper,” Natasha says, looking amused. “She’s very competent. She’ll be available if Steve needs her.”

“No offense to Pepper, but I’d rather not need her,” Steve says. “I missed you last time.”

“We missed you too, man,” Sam says, smiling at him. Natasha just looks a little puzzled, like she didn’t expect to hear that. Darcy cannot imagine the omega who wouldn’t miss an alpha like Natasha, frankly, so who knows what that’s about. Steve doesn’t seem bothered that she hasn’t answered, at least, and moves on with the conversation.

“I’ll be there if I can, though,” he says to Bucky, who snorts at him.

“Obviously,” he says. “I don’t care whose government is collapsing, as long as you’re not busy getting your brains fucked out you’re gonna be there.”

“That’s the plan,” Steve says with a wry smile.

“The star-spangled one?” Darcy can’t help asking, and Steve sighs as Natasha and Sam snicker.

“That’s the star-spangled man with a plan,” he corrects resignedly.

“That was the worst song,” Bucky says vaguely. “I loved it.”

“Yeah you did,” Steve says. “You had a record of it. It was the most horrible part of the entire damn war.”

Bucky laughs, light and easy, and Steve stares at him for a moment, briefly transfixed. Darcy knows the feeling.

“I bet I could find an .mp3,” she suggests.

“Not if you don’t want to leave Bucky a single mother,” Steve says.

“Actually, Captain Rogers, Mr. Stark has already arranged--” J.A.R.V.I.S. starts, and Steve covers his ears defensively.

“I don’t even want to know, J.A.R.V.I.S.,” he cuts him off, and Bucky laughs again.

“You know, I don’t think I remember what it sounded like,” he says slyly, leaning in, and Steve gives him a betrayed look.

“Bucky,” he says protestingly.
“You heard him, J.A.R.V.I.S.,” Sam says, and the first bars of the song come on. Steve groans and everyone else laughs, and Darcy feels warm and just—just happy, all over. She couldn’t have even imagined Bucky in a situation like this when she’d first met him, and now here he is, safe and okay, teasing Steve like it’s natural and laughing in front of people like it’s easy. It’s—it’s a lot. A really good lot.

And the pups are coming soon, she remembers, her eyes drifting down to his stomach again, fat and healthy and full of little lives. Soon enough they’ll be out in the world, be really real, and she’ll be able to hold them and play with them and take care of them, and they’ll be around for these conversations.

She wonders what they’re gonna look like. Dark-haired, obviously, and obviously pale too. Will they have green eyes? Blue? Are they gonna be big like their mom or small like her? Will they have Bucky’s nose or hers? Will they be alphas or betas or omegas; boys or girls?

She wants to know.

She can’t wait to know.

Steve and Natasha and Sam hang around a little bit longer, and Steve and Bucky hesitantly arrange Steve’s next visit and Natasha arranges Darcy’s next “this is how not to kill yourself with your own tasers” lesson and Sam rolls his eyes a lot at all of them, which as far as Darcy can tell means they’re all doing pretty good, she thinks. They leave, eventually, and Bucky sighs and puts his head on her shoulder.

“I don’t wanna be on nest rest,” he mutters grudgingly. “I’m a super-soldier, I’d be fine either way.”

“Better safe than sorry, right?” Darcy says.

“Better to beg forgiveness than ask permission,” Bucky retorts, still grumpy. Darcy pets his hair sympathetically.

“Did you ever move the bassinets into the nest?” she asks.

“Not yet,” he says, hooking his chin over her shoulder.

“Wanna do that today?” she suggests. “I’ll bring ‘em over and you can make room for ‘em. Give you something to do in there, at least.”

“Sure,” Bucky says, so they do. He stays grumpy for a little while, but tucking the bassinets comfortably into the nest eventually distracts him, mercifully, and then he cares more about that then being annoyed at Bruce. Darcy kind of doesn’t blame Bruce for the nest rest thing, because even though Bucky’s still moving around pretty well all things considered, he’s so big she can’t help worrying anyway. Seriously, there’s four pups in there. Minimizing the stresses of Bucky’s day-to-day can’t hurt.

She doesn’t say that out loud, of course, because she doesn’t want to spend the end of his pregnancy sleeping on the couch, but still.

Bucky gets the nest all rearranged, looking slightly disgruntled by the process but mostly satisfied with his results, and Darcy tries to figure out the best way to keep him happy while he’s stuck on nest rest. She knows there’s got to be--

“C’mere,” he says, and pulls her down on top of him.
Oh. Well, yeah, that’s always an option.

They mess around for a while, until the whole nest smells like them, and Bucky frowns a little and lifts his head to sniff.

“І can’t smell Steve in here anymore,” he grumbles.

“I’ll ask him for a blanket,” Darcy promises. Mollified, Bucky settles back into the nest and they go back to messing around.

They need new habits, obviously, so they make new habits. Bucky does a lot of reading, and Darcy figures out how to reheat frozen dinners without ruining them, and they spend a lot of time in the nest. She keeps up with the taser lessons, and he complains a lot about Bruce--frequently to his face, because now Bruce is making nest calls. Bucky isn’t thrilled, but it’s definitely better than Tony making nest calls. Bruce Skypes him in a couple times and that’s bad enough. Darcy just kind of stays out of the way for those, and mentally promises Bruce a great birthday present. Like, truly amazing.

Thor visits, and Steve stops by a lot too, which is nice of him, but also isn’t there 24/7, which shows a lot of restraint on his part. Darcy’s not sure she could do the same, considering the mere act of leaving for work every day makes her feel like the worst alpha alive. Bucky obviously doesn’t mind, but she can’t help it. What if something happens? What if he goes into labor early, or falls, or gets sick?

. . . well, J.A.R.V.I.S. would tell somebody, obviously. But still. It’s, like, the principle of the thing.

“You’re sure you don’t need anything,” she asks for about the eighteenth time, and Bucky shoves her out the door.

Fair, probably.

One day she comes home to Bucky and Steve both asleep in the nest and curled in towards each other, which it takes literally every ounce of her human strength not to take five hundred thousand pictures of. She restricts herself to like four, which is a much more reasonable number, and immediately makes the best one her wallpaper.

She’s only human, okay?

HYDRA continues to exist. They continue to not know why those old code words didn’t work. Bucky stays on nest rest, and stays unhappy about it. Darcy can’t really complain, since it keeps him safe in the tower. As it is, she ends up going on a lot of basic errands with Avenger escorts or just getting stuff delivered. Since this would be basically the worst possible time to get kidnapped, she is all for it.

She really does not want to get kidnapped right now. Or, like, ever. But especially right now. They’re getting ridiculously close to Bucky’s due date, and she can smell more than a few of the omegas in the tower getting ready to get heated up too. Being kidnapped while half the superheroes were in heat and Bucky was in labor would be just the worst timing.

“You worry too much,” Bucky says, and Darcy sighs and tucks her feet under one of the random pillows placed very carefully around the nest. Probably this is the only nest in New York built to super-sniper specifications, though heck if she knows what the random pillows are for.

“I just want to be sure everything goes okay,” she says. “You do not need any extra stress right
now."

“So quit worrying so much,” Bucky says, leaning over to tug lightly at a lock of her hair. “Everything’s as ready as it’s gonna get. Even if the pups come while somebody’s in heat, Bruce is gonna be able to handle it.”

“I really hope so,” Darcy says, because a stressed-out Bruce in the nest is not a thing she wants to consider. Not at all.

“You’re still worrying,” Bucky says dryly, tugging her hair again. She gives him a sheepish look.

“In my defense, it’s a big thing,” she points out.

“Mmmhm,” Bucky says, and twirls her lock of hair around his finger as he raises an eyebrow at her. He is very pretty, oh man. Not like she didn’t know that, just he’s smelling especially delicious at the moment and--oh. Oh, duh.

“You totally just want to make time right now, don’t you,” she says. Bucky bites his lip in a very telling way.

“Maybe,” he says, and gives her that killer under-the-lash look that she is never, ever going to get sick of. “Don’t you, alpha?”

“Nnngh,” Darcy says, and Bucky laughs as she clambers on top of him, his legs spreading easily-familiarly--and eyes still half-lidded and warm as his pheromones rise. He looks prettier than anything, all heavy and soft in the nest, and she wants very badly to kiss him. Who wouldn’t?

“What’re you gonna do to me, alpha?” he purrs, tilting his head in obvious invitation.

“Pretty much everything I can think of,” Darcy says honestly, and Bucky laughs again. This time she kisses him, and he purrs into her mouth, then sighs in pleasure as she mouths along his jaw and down his throat to the bared bond bites layered there. They’re faint and faded, even though they’re only from last night, but the sound he makes when she puts her teeth in them is like they’re brand-new.

“Good alpha,” he says as he tangles his fingers in her hair, because he knows how to destroy her with two words, now, that is a thing that he knows how to do. Darcy groans into his shoulder and pushes his skirt up, and he makes a happy, greedy noise and nuzzles her in return, arms wrapping around her tight.

“You up for my knot?” she asks as she strokes the insides of his thighs, and he laughs. It’s fair enough, since he’s been climbing her every chance he gets the past few weeks, but she still has to ask. Besides, there’s plenty of things they could do that wouldn’t involve her knot, if they wanted to.

Admittedly, Bucky’s been pretty fixated on the knot as of late.

“I want the full ride,” he says, tugging her in closer and nipping lightly at her ear. She skims a hand over the curve of his belly more out of habit than intent, kissing his bond bites again, and he sighs again and squeezes his knees in against her sides. “Mmm, yeah. Treat me nice, alpha.”

“That is literally everything I want to do,” Darcy promises, giving him another kiss before leaning back and dropping yet another on the curve of his stomach. She just wants to make sure he’s comfortable for it, knowing how heavy his stomach’s gotten and how sore it’s been making the rest of him. Nothing less sexy than a backache. “Did I tell you how pretty you look today yet?”
“A couple times,” Bucky says, smiling down at her as he shifts back more heavily against the pillows. Darcy runs her hands up his thighs again. “You could say it again if you have to, though. I won’t mind.”

“You’re so pretty,” she rumbles reverently, watching the way his smile makes his eyes crinkle and light up and the warm curve of it across his mouth. “Pretty” is honestly not a strong enough word. “Prettiest omega I know. I wanna lick you up.”

“Who’s stopping you?” Bucky asks with a smirk.

“Good point,” Darcy says, and drags her tongue across his stomach. He purrs again, shifting underneath her mouth, and she laughs in surprise as she feels a perfectly-timed little kick under her hand. “Hi, baby,” she coos, wiggling her fingers and grinning widely at another little kick. “It’s me! You recognize me?”

“Way to focus, Lewis,” Bucky says, but he smells even sweeter, his pheromones spiking hotly, and Darcy is not gonna lie, she’s pretty flattered. And very affected.

“I think I’m pretty focused,” she says, grinning up at him instead and skimming her hands over his sides. He gives her a wry, affectionate look, and she grins all the wider. He’s so good. So sweet and fine and good. “You’re so good, momma. I can’t wait for you to whelp. Our pups are gonna be so perfect.”

“Say that again when we’re up all night with them,” Bucky says with a smile, and she thinks about the first time she met him and how different he is now, but still so the same—still that good, good person, doing his best to do what he thinks is the right thing. He’s big and soft now, and his pecs are heavy in her hands and only going to get heavier when his milk comes in, she knows, and she thinks about being up all night with him while he’s nursing their pups and it’s really—God, it’s really a thought, isn’t it.

“I’m gonna,” she says, and nuzzles his stomach again. He purrs. She runs her hands over his thighs and tugs meaningfully at them, hiking his skirt up again. “Grab me a pillow, baby?”

“Yeah, sure,” Bucky says, biting his lip as he tugs one out of the Jenga-situation of a nest without, somehow, disturbing any of the others. Darcy takes it happily and tucks it under his hips, and he sighs and sinks lower into the nest. “Is this the part where you treat me nice?”

“Absolutely,” Darcy says, tugging his underwear down and kissing the inside of his thigh. He makes a breathy, pleased noise, and she chases it immediately, kissing and biting her way to his wet and waiting hole. Bucky gets turned on so easily these days that she barely even has to try, but somehow that just makes her want to try harder—she wants it to be good for him, every time; as good as it possibly can be.

“Alpha,” he purrs, and she drags her tongue across his hole and gets the best noise for it.

“Omega,” she rumbles back, and then gets to work taking him apart as best as she can with just her mouth and hands. Bucky starts moaning immediately and yelping pretty quick after that, which is both gratifying and hot as fuck, as always, and when she curls her tongue inside him he makes a sound that can be best described as “panty-dropping”.

God, he’s perfect. She loves him. She wants a bond bite that’ll stick for good and to mate him in front of the world and the Avengers and to come home to him and their pups every night for the rest of their lives. That sounds like the most perfect way to spend the rest of her life that she could imagine.
She’d tell him that, normally, but interrupting eating out her horny and bred omega just to tell him stuff he already knows is *not* really a priority at the moment. Licking him ‘til his slick is *dripping*, however . . .

“Oh, oh, *oh*,” Bucky pants, pushing up into her mouth, and Darcy slips a couple fingers into him and hums contentedly as he rocks down onto them. Has she mentioned how good he is, because he is *so* *good*. Really, just the best.

She works him up easily, and he responds eager and greedy and *perfect*, just like always. She loves it, just like always. Bucky is deliciously noisy, yelping and moaning without restraint, and her hindbrain very briefly wonders when Steve’s next visit is supposed to be. J.A.R.V.I.S. wouldn’t actually let him walk in on them, of course, but her hindbrain isn’t gonna start caring about logic now.

“You taste so good,” she says, licking her lips, and Bucky whines demandingly and pushes down onto her fingers again.

“*More.*” he insists. “I want your knot.”

“I wanna make you come first,” Darcy says, nuzzling the inside of his thigh. “You come so pretty, baby, I love it. That okay?”

“That’s okay, yeah,” Bucky laughs breathily, shaking his head. “Not exactly an *imposition.*”

“Oh good, I’d hate to be,” Darcy says, grinning up at him before getting back to work. His fingers tangle in her hair, tugging needily, and she curls her fingers inside him and drags her tongue up his cock and relishes the renewed chorus of moans and whimpers she gets in reward. She hears something rip, and assumes his metal hand is pulling at the curtains. That’s what it was last time, anyway. Bucky pretty much always damages *something* when he’s getting eaten out, which is becoming something of a point of pride, Darcy’s not embarrassed to admit. If she gets him to that point, she’s doing good.

She works another finger into him and he groans, fingers tightening in her hair; she rocks all of them in deeper, and he *whines*. It’s the prettiest sound, and it goes straight to her clit.

“Alpha, alpha,” he gasps out, and she licks into him around her slick-sticky fingers and digs the nails of her free hand into the warm curve of his ass. He kicks the pillows with a breathless hiss, jerking back against the wall, and she bears down on him relentlessly. “*Alpha!*”

She rumbles against him, and he moans. She curls her tongue, and he *mewls*. She thrusts into him quick and merciless with her fingers and the curtain rips again as his voice gets louder, the sweetest thing she could ever hope to hear, and he gets wetter and wetter with every thrust. Her clit is throbbing just from the way he’s sounding and reacting, and she presses her hips into the pillows in an attempt to placate her own rising need. She knows she doesn’t have to—she could fuck him right now and he’d love it—but she still wants to make him come first; wants to hear and feel him come apart under her mouth and hands.

“Darcyyyyy,” Bucky keens, and she puts herself totally into the purpose of making him come. It's about the best purpose she could have, so it's not exactly hard to do. And come he does, perfectly, with a cry that fills the whole closet and makes her want to knot like nothing else. She works him through it until he’s trembling, then gently reclaims her fingers and drops a kiss onto his thigh. He’s still panting. She tugs at his hip and he rolls with her direction onto his hands and knees, still shaking from his orgasm, and she hikes up his skirt again and leans up behind him, rubbing her clit against his wet and welcoming hole.
“Good?” Darcy asks, and Bucky rubs back against her.

“Good,” he gasps out, and she pushes into him. He whines urgently, dropping his head, and she braces a hand on his back and fucks into him slow and steady. He makes greedy, eager sounds and fists his hands in the blankets, meeting her thrust for thrust. “Oh, oh!”

“Good boy,” Darcy rumbles, stroking down his back. “So sweet for me, every time.”

“Don’t stop, don’t stop,” he moans.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” she says, then snaps her hips in deeper. Bucky lets out a yelp. “Ooo, sweetheart. You make the prettiest sounds.”

“Alpha, alpha, give it to me, alpha,” he pleads. So she does--obviously. She keeps up the deep thrusts to the same slow, steady rhythm, and he scrabbles at the blankets past a litany of gorgeous little cries and moans. She could go faster, but this pace makes Bucky so much louder.

“How’s this?” she asks, rocking her hips in deeper still and sliding a hand under him to get her fingers on that pretty little cock. Bucky yelps again and she loves it. “That’s my boy. You’re so pretty when you’re horny. You know you can just ask when you want it, right, you don’t need to wait.”

“I want it all the time,” he says, and she buries a breathless laugh against his back.

“Then ask for it, baby,” she says.

“Now,” he says, squirming back onto her clit, and she huffs out another laugh and rubs his cock in time with her thrusts. “All the time. Don’t stop.”

“All the time?” she asks, hiding a smile against his skin. “I think Steve would get lonely.”

“He can help,” Bucky pants, which does some things to Darcy’s hindbrain alright, goddamn.

“Fair,” she says. Her half-swollen knot pops into him, and he yelps even louder; it pops back out and he keens.

“No, no, don’t take it out,” he moans into the pillows, one hand still twisted up in the blankets and the other groping back to tug pleadingly at her hip.

“It’s not even that big yet, baby,” Darcy says, resisting the tugging just to watch him squirm. Sue her, it’s a very pretty sight. “You need a nice fat knot, don’t you?”

“Yours is always nice,” Bucky says with another little begging tug. Darcy lets her knot press against his rim, but doesn’t quite push in, and he shudders all the way up his spine, his nails digging into her hip.

“I love it when you’re greedy,” she says reverently. “It’s so good. Makes me want to give you everything you could ever want.”

“Your knot,” he keens, and she leans heavily forward and slowly--slowly--pushes it into him, watching his body stretch eagerly to accommodate the press of it. “Oh, ohhhhh, ohhhhh--”

He comes like that, pliant and pleading and all clutched up around her clit, and she shudders roughly through it, gripping him tight in response as his slick leaks out wetly over her thighs. She can’t wait until it’s her come.
“Oh, good boy,” she husks. Bucky’s too busy whimpering into the sheets to answer. She grinds her still-growing knot against his sensitive inner walls and he starts gasping. She wonders if she could make him come again before she has to. With how responsive he is right now, she thinks there’s a pretty good chance of it.

God, he’s so pretty. Has she said that yet?

“I’m gonna come in you,” she says, and Bucky shudders. “You like that, baby? Ready to be all full up with me again? You always look so good like that, it’s my favorite.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky moans, metal fingers twisting in the blankets. Darcy kisses his back and gets her fingers on his cock again.

“Good boy,” she repeats, relishing the way it makes him shudder harder. “I knew you’d want it just as bad. You’re so wet for me already. Gonna make you come just like this, and then I’ll let you have it.”

Bucky buries a rush of hot, high-pitched noises in the blankets, and Darcy rolls her hips into his hips and works his cock with her fingers. He gets louder and wetter by the moment, body shaking desperately underneath her.

“There you go, look at you, your pretty hole’s so greedy for me,” she croons, keeping up all the filthiest praise she can think of as she drives him closer and closer to the brink. “You should always have a knot in you, you’re such a sweetheart for a good fuck. I wanna keep you tied ‘til you whelp.”

Bucky comes again with a shout, jerking roughly with it and squeezing her tight, locked perfectly like always, and she only needs a few more moments before she’s coming too. She groans, head dropping forward, and he whines. They fumble at each other for a moment, both overheated and orgasm-clumsy, and then manage to fall onto their sides without too much awkwardness. Darcy’s still breathing fast; Bucky’s still making needy little sounds like he’s being fucked. She is the opposite of complaining.

“You’re so good at that,” she rumbles at him, pressing her mouth against the back of his shoulder and wrapping her arms around his stomach. “You come so good for me.”

“You make it feel good,” he says, looking back over his shoulder at her with a little shiver. Darcy spares one of those brief moments of despising HYDRA, then cranes her neck to kiss him. He kisses back, sweet and easy, and everything is good and perfect and right. Bucky is someplace warm and safe, content in her arms, and his old code words don’t work anymore and she knows a lot more about the functionality of her new tasers and the Avengers would literally tear the building down before letting HYDRA through the door. He’s as safe as she can make him, and when she says things he believes her.

It’s a very, very good moment, kissing him while knowing all that.

They lay together for a while, until long after her knot’s gone down, and Darcy loops an arm around Bucky’s side and nuzzles the back of his neck and he hums soft little songs she doesn’t recognize. Maybe they’re from the forties. Maybe they’re Russian. Maybe Steve gave him a new playlist. It doesn’t really matter; they’re nice songs.

She could pretty much do this forever, she thinks. And well, that’s the plan, so . . .

“Mmm,” Bucky says, turning his head towards her. She kisses his cheek, because it’s there to be

“Pretty good,” he says, reaching back to stroke a hand down her side. She kisses him again, shifting in as close as she has room to, and he lets out a little sigh. “You?”

“Pretty damn good,” Darcy says, and he laughs quietly.

“Mmm, yeah?” he purrs, digging his nails in on her hip. “That a promise?”

“That a come on?” she asks with a grin, and he laughs again.

“Roll over,” he says, and she rolls onto her back as he pushes himself up and leans over her. She grins again, and he grins back--beautifully, wonderfully, perfectly--and then kisses her. She can think of very few things in the world better than this. Actually, maybe none.

“I love you,” she says, running a hand up his arm. She says it whenever she thinks it, really. He kisses her again.

“I believe you,” he says, leaning back enough to tuck that eternally-loose lock of hair behind his ear, biting back a wider smile. “And I love you too.”

He shifts into her lap, kneeling over her, and she runs her hands up his thighs and over his hips. He sighs again, settling into place, and “into place”, it turns out, is directly on top of her clit, which responds immediately to the attention.

“Nnngh,” Darcy says. Bucky grins down at her wickedly and just sort of... *rubs*. “Oh, you are incorrigible. Please never change.”

“All the time, right?” he says, biting his lip again and still grinning. It’s... it’s a sight. Oh man, is it ever.

“Absolutely every time,” Darcy says feelingly, and they don’t leave the closet for the rest of the night. Darcy can reach the minifridge from the nest--they never actually moved it back after Steve’s heat, so it’s still right next to the door--and that’s pretty much all they need to worry about, really. Also, even if there were anything else they needed to worry about, Bucky is really, really distracting. Like, very much so.

She has priorities, okay, and most of them revolve around him, soooo...

So they stay in the nest for the night. It’s nice, and she’s definitely not complaining. They’re just about out of nights alone, so taking advantage of them while they’ve got them is definitely the way to go. The nest’s really comfortable, too, between all the work Bucky put into it and Steve’s contributions during his heat. Bucky hasn’t rebuilt much since then even though it’s practically time for Steve’s next heat, which is not particularly surprising and also not something Darcy blames him for.

She kind of wonders if Steve would come to them for his heat again, if Bucky weren’t so close to his due date. She isn’t trying to elbow in on someone else’s relationship or anything, just--it was nice, getting to finally *do* something for him. Exhausting, but nice. She wouldn’t mind getting to do it again.

She’d really *like* to get to do it again, more accurately.
They sleep all cuddled up, because that is a thing Darcy gets to do in life, she gets to cuddle a sexy super-soldier every night, and she wakes up to Bucky lying in her arms and feels immediately warm and stupid and happy. It’s hard to feel anything else.

“I love you,” she says sleepily, reaching up to push a hand into his hair. He’s frowning, for some reason; the automatic reaction is to soothe it away.

“I think I’m having contractions,” he says. She freezes. So far as wake-up calls go, that’s a literal bucket of ice water.

“Um?” she says.

“Yeah,” Bucky says, visibly wincing. “Pretty sure these are contractions.”

“Oh my god,” Darcy says, and throws herself out of the nest. “J.A.R.V.I.S! Call Bruce!”
J.A.R.V.I.S. calls Bruce, who shows up with a bag while Bucky is laying out the birthing sheet and Darcy is trying not to freak out and also help him lay out the birthing sheet. Neither goes very well, honestly. Clint told her to expect to feel useless, but it’s still kind of upsetting. She just hopes she can do something.

“How close are your contractions?” Bruce asks.

“Not very,” Bucky says with a shrug, pushing his hands into the small of his back. He looks really good in today’s pretty little housedress, all neatly done up with his hair braided back off his face. He also looks entirely unconcerned. “Maybe twenty minutes apart?”

“You’ve been having contractions for twenty minutes?!” Darcy asks, trying very hard not to look freaked out. Her voice is maybe a little bit too loud, for how small the nest is. Even walk-in closets are still closets.

“For a couple hours,” Bucky says. “Started after I got up to take a shower. I figured I didn’t need to wake you up unless they started getting closer together. Might still be false labor, anyway.”

“Probably not, if you’re having them regularly,” Bruce says. “Let’s take a look, though.”

“Sure,” Bucky says, then glances at Darcy. “Will you go get Steve? He’s gonna fuss whether they’re real or fake, might as well get him up here.”

“I can do that,” Darcy says, immediately springing into action and nearly running into the doorjamb. She recoils and tries to look competent and supportive and like a good, reliable alpha. Bucky stifles a snicker.

Well, she’s not that married to her dignity anyway.

“I’ll be right back,” she says, and darts out of the room. “J.A.R.V.I.S., where’s Steve?”

“In the penthouse common area, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. informs her.

“Does he know yet?” she asks.

“Highly unlikely,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says. “Dr. Banner and Mr. Stark were the only ones in the fabrication lab when I informed them, and Mr. Stark has yet to make his way upstairs. He seems to still be sulking a bit about not being allowed in the nest.”

“Yeah, sounds like Tony,” Darcy says. Also, kinda fair. She doesn’t blame Bucky for not wanting him there, though, everything she’s read about labor and delivery is just--messy. And Tony has a way of making messy situations a lot messier, best intentions aside. “Will you keep him in the loop anyway, though?”

“Of course, Ms. Lewis,” J.A.R.V.I.S. says. Darcy heads to the elevator and heads up to the penthouse, shifting restlessly in place as it goes. She wonders what Steve’s doing upstairs and hopes the answer isn’t “starting his heat early”. She’s not sure if it’s good or not that Bucky seems to be delivering early, but if it means Steve can be there she’s pretty sure they’d both prefer it that way. Bucky probably always expected Steve to be with him when he whelped, one way or another.

Fingers crossed he’ll get that, she thinks, and the elevator door slides open. She sniffs reflexively
and smells a vague hint of apple-pie pheromones in the air, but nowhere near enough to be approaching full heat anytime soon. She also smells Natasha and Sam, and when she steps out onto the landing finds the three of them all sitting very close on the sofa, talking quietly together. Clint’s in the back of the room, and they all look up before she even gets to the railing.

“Um,” she says, remembering the last time she came up here to talk to Steve about Bucky and how incredibly poorly that had gone. This is definitely a different situation, though. “Okay, so we’re not sure, but Bucky might be in labor. He said I should come get you.”

“Coming,” Steve says, immediately jumping to his feet and already halfway to the stairs, wow do super-soldiers move fast. “Did his water break? Is he having contractions?”

“No and yes. Twenty minutes apart,” Darcy says, sparing a glance back to the others. “Um, this’ll probably take a while, but if you guys wanna swing by at some point and hang out in the living room or something . . .” It’s not like there’s really anything they can do, but she kind of feels like she’d feel better with a few Avengers on the door. It’s just a thing, she guesses.

“We’ll come by later,” Sam says, smiling easily at her. “Once J.A.R.V.I.S. gives us the go-ahead, so we don’t get in the way.”

“Okay, cool,” Darcy says. Steve’s already in the elevator, looking as politely impatient as a six foot tall omega who’s built like a brick house can. Darcy feels about as impatient as a five foot three alpha who’s built like a Coke bottle can, so understands the feeling and hurries in after him. J.A.R.V.I.S., bless him, starts the elevator before either of them can say a word.

“He’s okay?” Steve asks.

“Already handling it better than me,” she says. “He’s definitely giving birth in the nest, I didn’t even try asking if he wanted to go to the lab.”

“I don’t think that would’ve been the best idea,” Steve says.

“No, not really,” Darcy agrees. Bruce does all of Bucky’s checkups in the fabrication lab, last she heard, which is full of hot-rod red and shiny gold and looks as little like an actual lab as it possibly could. It is definitely not a place to whelp, though.

J.A.R.V.I.S. takes them back to the Thor floor, and they immediately run into Jane, who’s looking flustered in the common kitchen.

“Bucky’s in labor, probably,” Darcy tells her.

“I know,” she says. “J.A.R.V.I.S. told Thor to head over. And Bruce said we should boil water?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s a myth, but I’m willing to help,” Darcy says. Steve and Thor sound like the perfect combination of birthing partners, frankly; she’s mostly just hoping not to fuck anything too important up here.

“No, no, I’ll leave it outside the bedroom when it’s ready,” Jane says, waving her on. “Unless Bucky’d mind?”

“I don’t think so?” Darcy says. “I mean, we talked about it a little, he said he’d be okay with people being in the suite as long as they stayed in, like, the common areas. We really should’ve talked about it more, I am currently realizing, that seems like a thing we should definitely have talked about more.”
“Darcy,” Steve says restlessly, his eyes flicking towards the suite.

“Right, yeah, good point,” Darcy says, and they leave Jane to boil the water and head in. She doesn’t hear any screaming, so that’s a good start. Which, well--labor lasts a while, right, so there wouldn’t be any yet anyway. Ideally. Hopefully.

Geez.

“Baby?” she asks, sticking her head in the bedroom door. Thor’s standing next to the closet and peers back at her. Bucky leans out beside him.

“It’s labor,” he informs them. “I’m dilating.”

“Agh,” Darcy says.

“What do you need?” Steve asks, as clearly the much better alpha in the room. Bucky shrugs.

“It’s whelping,” he says. “What does anybody need?”

“Bruce?” Darcy guesses. Bruce seems like the thing to need, to her.

“Already got him,” Bucky says.

“More water?” Darcy tries. “Because I could help Jane with that, that’s a thing I could do.”

“Relax, alpha,” Bucky says. “It’s gonna be hours before anything happens, at this rate.”

“We’ll find out the hard way, as usual,” Bruce sighs. Darcy resists the urge to run back out for Jane. She seriously needs some backup in this situation.

“Okay,” she says. “So we just . . . wait?”

“Pretty much,” Bucky says.

So they wait. It’s not exactly as rushed and panicky as TV always made the process look, although it helps to have some time to settle down, even if Darcy’s not feeling very settled. Bruce times Bucky’s contractions, and Steve and Thor wait patiently in the bedroom, and Darcy--well, hovers, honestly. Every contraction makes Bucky make this pained face she wants to soothe away, even knowing it’s just going to happen again in a few minutes and also that it’s kind of her fault. At least, Bucky didn’t get himself bred.

“Holding up okay?” she asks.

“Holding up okay,” he promises her, then grimaces in pain again. “Well. Pretty okay. This is fucking uncomfortable.”

“Childbirth tends to be,” Bruce says, checking his watch.

“I’m gonna get you something to eat,” Darcy says, and retreats to the mini-fridge in pursuit of snacks and water. Probably she jumped the gun a bit on calling Bruce, she’s realizing, but on the other hand, super-soldier babies. Who knows what’s gonna happen? Definitely not her. Definitely not What To Expect When You’re Expecting. It’s way better to be safe than sorry.

She feeds Bucky, who eats. Steve and Thor are making quiet small talk and Bruce is checking things in his bag. She resists the urge to worry too much and presses a kiss to one of Bucky’s bond bites.
“Where do you want me for this?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” he says, taking another bite of granola bar. “Where do you want to be?”

“Wherever I’m useful,” she says. “So, like, really up to you, baby.”

“You’re gonna be useful wherever you are,” Bucky says, then reaches out and takes her hand to squeeze. She squeezes back, a little mollified but still feeling extraneous to the process. Bucky’s read his books inside and out, and Bruce is Bruce, and Steve and Thor look ready for anything, and she mostly just feels about as freaked out as she did the moment he told her he was pregnant to begin with.

Obviously she doesn’t have room to be freaking out right now, though, so she takes a deep breath and lets it pass through her. Just--later. Later she can freak out, once it’s all taken care of. Right now Bucky needs an alpha who can reassure him, or at least not have a panic attack on him. No way she’s gonna let him down that easy.

“That’s sweet, but not really helpful,” she says. “You want me to stay in here? Wait in the bedroom? Wait in the living room? Honestly I’ll wait in the gym if that’s what you want.”

“Not the gym,” Bucky says, smiling wryly at her. “Maybe the bedroom. So close, but not, you know, right on top of things.”

“I can do that,” Darcy says despite a twinge of disappointment. She’d really rather be in the nest with him. Maybe that’s a bit too new-fangled or whatever for Bucky, though, with the forties being the way they were and all. Or maybe he just doesn’t want anyone extra in his space. She isn’t gonna protest either way. “You want more water?”

“Yeah,” he says, so she goes and gets him more water. He starts fussing with the nest a bit, making sure the rubber-lined birthing sheet covers everything it needs to cover and everything else is arranged just so. She stays out of the way with the others, though Bucky sends Steve and Thor both for extra pillows. Specifically, their pillows. Darcy guesses the nest still doesn’t smell right to him.

Bruce leaves his bag by the closet door, then goes into the hallway and calls up a holo-screen to talk to Tony on. Tony is cranky, unsurprisingly, and even less surprisingly talks Bruce’s ear off about everything from contraction lengths to birthing positions. Darcy’s actually kind of impressed. But, well--it is Tony. If anyone was gonna do the research . . .

She lingers outside the closet, wondering what to do with herself. Maybe she should grab Bucky his tablet or some of his books? Maybe she should grab her tablet and books and do some last-minute cramming for the whole “what to expect” thing. She’s read them all, but a quick refresher course never hurt anybody. She knows she needs to be supportive, to keep him fed and hydrated and be available for whatever he needs, but “whatever he needs” is a little less clearly defined. She wants to make this as easy for him as she can, but he doesn’t really seem to need her right now.

It’s sort of amazing, actually, that he doesn’t seem to need her. It makes her inner alpha feel kind of useless, but the rest of her is honestly overcome. He doesn’t need her. He wants her close and he wants Steve and Thor here and Bruce to help, but that’s not need.

She wants him to need her, but she’s so glad he doesn’t.

“Do you want your tablet?” Darcy asks. “Or a book or something?”

“I’m okay,” Bucky says. “Little too distracted for that.”
“You’re not supposed to focus too much on it yet, right?” she says.

“There’s not much else I wanna focus on,” Bucky says, sparing her a wry smile. She steps into the nest and takes his hands, pushing herself up on her toes to drop a kiss on his lips. She feels his smile spread wider against her mouth, and then he kisses her back. “Mmm, trying to distract me?”

“Doing my best,” Darcy replies with a sheepish grin. “C’mon. How about we walk around the floor?”

“Okay,” he says, and lets her lead him out of the nest and past Bruce. Steve and Thor still aren’t back, so she assumes Thor’s gotten distracted with Jane. Steve has the excuse of needing to go farther.

Bucky follows her out of the suite, holding her hand, and sure enough, Thor and Jane are together in the common kitchen, Thor looking puzzlement at the huge pot of water Jane’s gotten to a simmer. Darcy’s pretty sure that even if they do need water, they’re not gonna need this much of it, but she’d probably have done the same if it were her. The idea of tiny Asgardian pups is a whole other thing, though, so that one can wait for later. Like, much later. They don’t need two litters that young in the tower, no matter how many family suites Tony built.

“That’s a lot of water,” Darcy says.

“Do you think I should get more?” Jane asks worriedly.

“. . . maybe, yeah.” Darcy eyes the pot. They could fill it a bit fuller.

“You really don’t need to,” Bucky says, resting a hand on his stomach. He still looks largely unaffected, but he’s a little paler than usual. Maybe she’s imagining that, though; she knows she’s still a little more worried than she should be. Bucky’s pregnancy has been pretty smooth, all things considered—the nest-rest was as much paranoia on Bruce and Tony’s part as anything else, at least the way Bucky tells it. She just doesn’t want this to be the part where that all goes to hell.

Seriously, Bucky is still really overdue for nice things. There are not enough nice things in the world to make up for what he went through. At least labor can have the decency to go well.

“Are you sure?” Jane asks fretfully, petting Thor’s arm like she’s trying to soothe him. Darcy, again, would be doing the same thing in her position. Being unable to do much of anything for an omega in need is seriously stressful.

“I’m sure,” Bucky says. “Ask Banner if you’re not.” Jane gets a look that makes it clear she is definitely gonna ask Bruce, which, again: Darcy is not blaming her at all. She and Bucky keep walking down the hall, because maybe it’ll help him be distracted and maybe it’ll hurry up the process. If nothing else, it gives them something to do. She just hopes he doesn’t have any really bad contractions while they’re out here.

“Thought any more about names?” she asks, squeezing his hand as they walk. They’ve been waiting until they get to actually meet the pups to make any official decisions, but it’s come up a few times.

“I like Ruth,” he says. “If there’s a girl.”

“Guess that’s what we get for wanting to be surprised,” Darcy says, smiling wryly at him. For all they know, they’re about to have four boys at once. Hopefully they’ll get a mixed bag, sex and gender-wise, but who knows? She guesses it doesn’t really matter if they don’t. Though, uh, four alpha boys might be a bit rough. Four of anything might be a bit rough, really.
Yeah, she’s holding out hope for the mixed bag.

“Do you care what they are?” Bucky asks, glancing over at her.

“Not really,” Darcy says with a shrug. “It’d be nice to have at least a couple betas, I hear that usually makes things easier. But alternately, that kind of generalizing’s probably full of shit anyway.”

“You just doomed us to four alphas,” Bucky says, mouth quirking in amusement.

“What, you want four more of me?” Darcy teases.

“I wouldn’t mind,” he says, still smiling.

“What if we get four of you?” she asks. She wouldn’t mind either, all things considered. “What would I do, how am I gonna keep you all in truffles, huh?”

“I believe in you,” Bucky says with a laugh, which—yeah, he’s joking, but it still sends a warm current through her to hear. Then he winces, putting a hand on the small of his back again.

“Contraction?” she asks. He nods, biting his lip.

“It’s not that bad,” he says. “Not like losing an arm.”

“Well, you’re not in the thick of it yet, don’t get too optimistic,” Darcy says frankly. He laughs again, still wincing.


“I’m pretty sure we’re gonna fuss, babe,” she says. “Like, you’re gonna get so fussed on. I cannot even begin to explain how fussed on you are gonna get.”

“Can it at least wait until I’ve actually gotten through the annoying part?” Bucky asks.

“You’ve got four pups to deliver, I really don’t think we’re gonna make it that long,” Darcy says. “Like—really, all best efforts aside. I actually don’t even know how long that might take?”

“Let’s just leave it at ‘longer than I’d like’,” Bucky says with a grimace.

“Yeahhhh, we’re definitely gonna fuss,” Darcy says. “You want more water? You should drink more water.”

“I want anything but water,” Bucky says, so they go back to their suite and she gets a couple cans of juice out of the fridge. She grabs Yubari melon for herself without even thinking and has to repress a laugh when she realizes.

“This is gonna be a wild ride, isn’t it,” she says, then knocks back the juice. Bucky huffs, taking a more delicate sip of his.

“That’s one way to put it,” he says, then winces again. “Ahhhh. Damn, that does not feel good.”

“Do you need to sit down?” Darcy asks, already grabbing for a stool to push over to him.

“Apparently,” he says, mouth quirking in amusement. He takes the stool, though, hissing softly at what’s probably another wave of pain. Darcy frets, and resists the urge to hover.
“Might as well be safe about it,” she says, grabbing him another juice and a couple protein bars. Can’t hurt, right? Bucky chews his way through the protein bars slowly, one small bite at a time, and drinks the juice in little sips. It’s probably the slowest she’s ever seen him eat. It takes a lot of willpower not to grab him anything else yet.

They sit at the counter for a while--or, well, Bucky sits. Darcy jumps up and down a few times for various reasons, most of them totally unnecessary. They definitely end up with a stack of books neither of them are reading and more snacks than Bucky is even remotely interested in eating. It’s something to do, though, so she does it.

Bruce and Jane come out of the hall; Thor and Steve do not. They missed Steve, Darcy’s guessing, because he’s got to be back by now.

“Are they in the bedroom?” she asks, and Bruce nods confirmation.

“How far apart are your contractions?” he asks.

“Ten minutes,” Bucky says, taking a careful little bite of apple. “Steve messing with my nest?”

“Definitely,” Bruce says. “Is that, uh, a problem?”

“At least it’ll smell right,” Bucky sighs. “Meddling little punk.”

“It has been kind of a bit since you made it,” Darcy hints. Not that it’s a bad nest, just she’s pretty sure it could use some fluffing at this point.

“He’d do it no matter what,” Bucky snorts, then grimaces in pain and sets down his half-eaten apple to push his hands into the small of his back. “Ow.”

“Was that ten minutes?” Bruce asks, checking his watch.

“Maybe a little less,” Bucky says. They all get up and move to the bedroom, leaving Jane in the kitchen to clean up. Thor’s standing by the bed and greets them with a nod; Steve’s in the nest, holding the lime green marshmallow pillow with a critical expression. Darcy really hopes her high school sewing holds up to inspection, but seriously doubts it.

“How’re you feeling?” Steve asks.

“Better than Darcy,” Bucky says, heading into the nest and taking the pillow from him to tuck under the birthing sheet, then testing the give of the other pillows. “Did you fluff the entire nest?”

“Not the entire nest,” Steve says, looking embarrassed. Darcy tries not to laugh.

“You’re an idiot,” Bucky says, kissing his cheek. “Thanks.”

“It seemed like the thing to do,” Steve says. “How’re your contractions?”

“Getting pretty close,” Bucky says, making a face. “Water hasn’t broken yet, though.”

“What do you want us to do?” Steve asks.

“The usual. Hold my hand, make sure I don’t fall over, get stuff Bruce wants,” Bucky says with a shrug. “Darcy’s gonna wait in the bedroom, probably.”

“If you want,” Darcy says, still kinda hoping he’ll let her into the nest. She’s not gonna press, though; today is definitely a “full support of everything Bucky wants” day. To a fault, it is. Also,
he’d probably break her hand, so she definitely gets why he wants Steve or Thor for that part. Like, she definitely also wants them for that part.

“I’d like to take another look, check how dilated you are,” Bruce says, and Bucky hums agreement. Bruce gets down to doctoring--well, midwifing, more like--and Darcy resists the urge to go get more snacks for Bucky. The mini-fridge is already stocked, for one thing, it’s definitely covered. She doesn’t need to be cramming even more stuff in there.

It’s kinda tempting, though. It’s not like she can be very helpful right now. But Bruce does his thing, and Steve sits in the nest with Bucky, and Thor comes over to Darcy.

“You seem anxious, my friend,” he says.

“I am definitely,” she says. “I’ve literally never been anywhere near a whelping before, I have no idea what to expect. Also what if something goes wrong? This is not the environment for a C-section.”

“Stark and Banner have arranged several emergency backup plans, I have been informed,” Thor says. “And there is no indication of trouble, either.”

“I mean, true,” Darcy says. “Like, very true. I can’t help worrying anyway, though, you know?”

“It must be quite intimidating,” Thor says understandingly, putting a hand on her shoulder and squeezing.

“Just infinitely, really,” Darcy says, though she appreciates the gesture. “Have you done this before?”

“I’ve sat with several shield-brothers in their time,” Thor says with a nod. “This is a less auspicious birthplace than a battleground, admittedly, but I am sure it will suit.”

“At least if there was a battle going on I’d have something else to think about,” Darcy says wryly.

“Spoken like a true warrior,” Thor says, smiling at her. She’s really not, of course, but it’s flattering all the same.

“I think Bucky’s the one with the fight ahead of him,” she says.

“He will meet it bravely, I am certain,” Thor says.

“Of course he will,” Darcy says. “He’s the bravest person I know.”

“I can hear you two, you know,” Bucky calls from the closet. Thor laughs; Darcy would be embarrassed, but it’s not like she wouldn’t say it to his face, soooo . . .

“Also the cutest and nosiest!” she calls back.

“Very funny,” he says, then hisses in pain. Darcy stomps on the urge to barge into the nest, but does lean in a bit. Bucky’s sitting down, holding Steve’s hand tightly and looking pained, face flushed and sweaty. “Guess what, I hate contractions.”

“They’re getting pretty close,” Bruce says warily.

“They’re getting pretty bad,” Bucky grunts.

“Well, that’s good,” Bruce says. “Er. That is, it means things are, uh, progressing.”
“They’d better be,” Bucky says, grimacing painfully. Darcy wants to lay him down and feed and pet him until he feels better, but that would obviously not be helpful this time. The temptation’s still there, though.

“What do you need?” she asks.

“These pups to hurry up and come,” Bucky says.

“Okay, what do you need that I can reasonably be expected to get for you?” Darcy amends. He laughs past another grimace, shaking his head.

“Nothing,” he says. “I’m okay, Darcy.”

“Of course you are, you’re rocking this,” she says. “Try not to break Steve’s hand, though. He needs that for Avenging.”

“There’s a reason he ain’t holding the left one,” Bucky snorts, then nearly doubles over with a moan.

“I am never getting bred,” Steve mutters.

“Very helpful, punk,” Bucky says through gritted teeth.

“You’re the one who didn’t want an epidural,” Steve reminds him.

“I am not giving birth in a fucking hospital bed, Steve,” Bucky says in exasperation, though he still sounds audibly pained. “I didn’t build a perfectly good nest just to laze around in the thing.”

“I don’t think medically-recommended nest-rest counts as ‘lazing’,” Darcy says.

“Might as well,” Bucky says witheringly before hissing in pain. “Goddamn, this hurts.”

“It’s going to get worse before it gets better,” Bruce warns him.

“Do tell,” Bucky deadpans.

They hurry up and wait. Bucky’s contractions get closer and worse, and Thor joins him in the nest, and Darcy frets more and more, pacing outside the door. Bucky hasn’t chased her off, so she’s not going anywhere else. His increasingly frequent moans of pain are distressing, especially since she isn’t close enough to really soothe him, but she’ll handle it. Them. Whatever. She wouldn’t be much of an alpha if she couldn’t.

She makes him laugh a couple times, which feels like the best she can do right now. He’s in pain and she can’t make it any better, but she can at least do that much. Small favors, and all.

Steve and Thor hold Bucky’s hands. Bruce fusses over his bag a little more and then fusses over Bucky a lot more, taking his blood pressure and timing his contractions and doing, well, a few more invasive checks. Darcy does a bit more pacing; Bucky keeps handling things better than her. It’s all very--

“I think my water just broke,” Bucky says conversationally, and all Darcy’s traces of keeping it together immediately vanish.

“You think?!” she demands.

“Pretty sure you think right,” Bruce says.
“Also I want to push,” Bucky says.

“Is it time for pushing?” Darcy asks, a little frantic. Already? Already time? It feels like he just started having contractions.

“Not quite,” Bruce says, peering over at her as he pushes his glasses up. “Are you alright, Darcy, you look a little pale.”

“Oh sure, all good over here,” she lies. Pushing means pups. Pushing means pups soon. All the reading and talking things over with Bucky aside, she’s not sure she’s prepared for either the process or the results--the results being, obviously, four people who are about to depend on her and Bucky for literally everything.

Yeah, nothing intimidating about that at all.

“Ow,” Bucky says through gritted teeth, looking very pale. Darcy stomps on the urge to rush in there and baby him, since for one thing she’d just be in the way and for the other, “babying” him is kinda what got him in this situation to begin with. Or, uh--exactly. Exactly what did it.

No, like . . . pun intended.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“According to--ah--Banner,” Bucky says, still grimacing in pain. “I’m just, I’m taking his word for it right now. *Fuck.*”

“Bruce knows what he’s doing,” Steve says.

“Bruce still isn’t this kind of doctor,” Bruce mutters under his breath.

“That was very reassuring, Bruce, thank you,” Steve says dryly.

“Oh my god,” Darcy says, pacing in front of the door again. She knows Bruce can handle this--obviously Bruce can handle this, he’s a genius--but it’s still scary as hell, and Bucky’s pained sounds and stressed pheromones aren’t helping her calm down. It’s all she can do to keep her own pheromones in line before they make anything worse.

Okay, maybe she can see why alphas aren’t always invited to the delivery. Maybe.

This is *so* stressful.

“I want to push,” Bucky says again.

“Not yet,” Bruce says. “You really want to save your strength.”

“I’m a super-soldier,” Bucky says scornfully. “I’m not gonna wear out that easy.”

“Childbirth is, uh, usually more exhausting than people are expecting,” Bruce replies carefully.

“Is it worse than a HYDRA training program?” Bucky asks.

“. . . fair point.” Bruce pushes his glasses up. “Still, it’s worth being careful with yourself.” Bucky laughs at him, then looks surprised.

“Oh, you’re serious,” he says.
“Yes,” Bruce says, looking pained.

“Oh my god,” Darcy says. Bucky is definitely handling this better than her, but that’s kind of its own kind of worrying. Like, she’s glad he’s doing well, but she’s also worried he’s taking things too lightly. Then again, he’s also the one who most intimately knows how things are going, so . . .

Bucky groans in pain, bending forward. Darcy once again stomps on the urge to barge into his nest. It would be very not cool of her.

“Let me check your blood pressure again,” Bruce says, and once again it’s hurry up and wait time. Honestly Darcy always got the impression that labor was a much faster process, though she’s definitely read enough literature that made it sound like it could take a lot longer than it has so far. She doesn’t remember if her mom ever told her how long it was for her, first or second time, although who knows how the super serum might either complicate or simplify things. This could be over in an hour or take another couple days.

Really, she would love for this to be a more A-to-B process. Like, really. So much.

Bucky hisses in pain. Darcy frets, and paces. They all hurry up and wait, and things get increasingly stressful as Bucky’s sounds of pain get louder and louder and turn into outright cries. Considering the kind of pain he’s been through in his life, it’s a little concerning thinking about what could make him cry out like that. And by “a little”, she means “very”.

That’s normal, though, she reminds herself; whelping is like that. She doesn’t need to worry about normal things.

She is absolutely still gonna, of course.

“Okay, you can start pushing,” Bruce says, and Darcy nearly jumps out of her skin.

“Finally,” Bucky groans, moving to his knees.

“Oh my god,” Darcy says.

“Remember your breathing,” Steve says mindfully, giving his hand a squeeze, and Bucky gives him a dirty look.

“Talk to me about my breathing when you’re the one about to whelp,” he says.

“Yeah, no thanks,” Steve says. Bucky opens his mouth like he’s about to say something back, but then another contraction hits him and he bites a strangled cry in half instead.

“Now for the battle!” Thor says cheerfully, putting his free hand on Bucky’s back to steady him.

“Battle hurts less,” Bucky says sourly, his breath coming fast and heavy.


"Obviously,” he says, and then another contraction comes and he cries out again, digging his fingers into Steve and Thor’s hands. “Fuck! This better be fucking worth it!”

“Usual consensus is yes,” Darcy says. Bucky scowls at her.

“Says the one who gets to be a parent without dealing with contractions,” he growls breathlessly. She holds her hands up in surrender, because she is not dumb enough to do anything else with an omega in labor. “Ah!”
“You got this, baby,” Darcy says, trying to sound soothing. That’s still not one of her strong suits, but Bucky doesn’t tell anyone to slam the closet door in her face, so hey, maybe she’s doing alright. “You’re doing great, I’m so proud of you.”

“This is your fault,” Bucky snarls.

“Absolutely and entirely,” Darcy agrees, because again, omega in labor. “You’re still doing great. You’re gonna rock this.”

“Fucking shit fuck,” Bucky says as he rides out the rest of the latest contraction, which she is almost sure is a reaction to the pain. Like, sixty-five percent sure, at least.

“Just stay focused,” Bruce says. “Four pups would take a lot out of anyone. You’re gonna want to be as, uh, efficient as possible.”

“No shit, Banner,” Bucky huffs roughly, shifting his weight to spread his knees a little wider. Steve and Thor keep him steadied at his sides, and Bruce keeps a careful eye on things. Darcy resists the urge to start pacing again.

“Do you need anything?” she asks, because some things are just too hindbrain to resist.

“No,” Bucky says.

“Okay,” she says.

“Fuuuuck,” he says, squeezing his eyes shut and tightening his grip on Steve and Thor again. Darcy wishes she could be in there with him, but her bones are definitely not super-soldier durable.

“You got this,” she says, because if there’s one thing she can do it’s talk. So she talks, and she keeps talking, just letting every remotely useful thing she can think of to say out, and Bucky curses and moans and cries out, gasping for breath. He might not really be listening, but this is still the most she can do for him, so she keeps it up. It’s the best she’s got. “Baby, Jamie, you’re so good.”

“I’m still not forgiving you for this,” he grits out.

“Oh, I am on diaper duty for weeks,” Darcy promises.

“Gonna--ah!--gonna hold you to that, Lewis.”

“I love you,” she says, and he keeps panting and cursing. “You’re the best guy I know. But seriously, don’t break Steve’s hand, I’m pretty sure it’s already bruising. I cannot imagine him spending his next heat in a cast being particularly enjoyable for anyone.”

“I’ll heal,” Steve says dismissively, brushing Bucky’s sweat-sticky hair back off his forehead with a distant look in his eyes. Darcy wonders what this is reminding him of. Maybe it’s just making him think about what they wanted before. Probably, really. She’s thinking about it, so of course Steve would be.

“Idiot,” Bucky grunts, and then grits his teeth around another cry of pain. Darcy wants to soothe him so bad, but the best she’s got for that is still just her voice.

“I’d say it’ll be over soon, but we just had to have four,” she says. He laughs, breathless and pained, and then cries out again. She paces in front of the closet, doing her damnedest to keep her pheromones calm. “You’re handling this so well, baby, you’re doing great.”
Bucky doesn’t answer, too busy with a fresh wave of pain—and, obviously, pushing. Darcy, for the umpteenth time, restrains herself to watching. The whole process of giving birth is ugly as hell, except it’s Bucky and it’s gonna be their pups, so it’s sort of beautiful too. After everything he’s gone through, he’s here, doing this, and it’s just so . . . it’s a lot, is what it is. Darcy doesn’t really have a better way to sum it up.

Bruce is giving instructions, and Thor is saying something reassuring, and Steve is humming a quiet little song, but all she’s really looking at or hearing is Bucky on his knees, panting and cursing and still trying to bite back his cries. He’s definitely beautiful like this. He’s beautiful all the time, obviously, but this—this is something she might only get to see this once, and it’s worth all her attention.

She just wishes it weren’t hurting him so much.

“There we go,” Bruce says, and Darcy refocuses, and stills. “That’s good, you’re doing great, just a few more pushes—”

Their first pup comes into the world crying at the top of their lungs, red-faced and miserable, and Darcy watches, transfixed, as Bruce cleans them up and deals with the umbilical cord and wraps them in a blanket. They’re so tiny. All that, for something so tiny?

The next thing she knows her arms are full of wrapped-up pup, and then they’re not so tiny anymore; then they’re the biggest thing in the world. She holds them close and noses hesitantly behind their ear, taking in their scent—a beta girl, so tiny and so enormous, and just the sight of her is hypnotic. She’s like nothing Darcy’s ever seen in her life.

This, she assumes, is love at first sight.

“Oh, look at you,” she says, crooning and dumbstruck. “Look at you.”

The rest of the delivery is textbook-perfect. Bruce delivers three more pups—two alpha girls, and then an omega boy—and settles the girls into Steve’s careful arms while Bucky, exhausted, slumps back into the nest with the boy curled up on his chest. They’re all so small. Darcy can’t get over it.

She’s already jittering to meet the others as closely as she’s met their sister, but she stays out of the way while Bruce and Thor clean up. Four pups are a lot to juggle at once, but right now she’s willing to try.

The moment Bruce and Thor are done and taking the birthing sheet to be washed, she’s leaning against the doorframe and shifting restlessly.

“May I come in, omega?” she asks.

“Obviously, alpha,” Bucky huffs, giving her a tired smile. She’s beside him in a flash, and he lifts a hand to stroke down their little girl’s back. “Hey, little girl. Guess you’re the big sister.”

“And you’ve got the baby of the litter,” Darcy says, leaning in to gently scent their boy, who shifts against Bucky’s shoulder. He’s a little smaller than his alpha sisters, but not much. The beta girl’s definitely the biggest of them all, though. Darcy doesn’t even know what to do with her hands, with so many pups. She wants to be holding all of them at once. “Steve, stop hogging my kids.”

Steve laughs, and then Darcy’s got one alpha girl in her free arm and Bucky’s got the other, and she breathes a sigh of relief, because--she doesn’t know, really. Because everything smells right; because she’s never felt like this before and it’s so, so much. She’s sort of thinking about crying, to be honest.
“Jamie, baby, you did so good,” she says, kissing his forehead. He laughs weakly, resting his head on her shoulder.

“I think I’m gonna pass out,” he says.

“You have absolutely earned it,” Darcy says. “Just, uh, hand off the pups first if you’re gonna.”

“I might,” Bucky says.

“They’re beautiful, Bucky,” Steve says, smiling at them.

“Course they are,” Bucky says. “Lewis and I are charmers, you thought we’d have ugly pups?”

“And so modest, too,” Steve says wryly. “What are their names?”

“We didn’t decide for sure yet,” Bucky says.

“I still like Eli Grant,” Darcy says, glancing at their boy. The girls are all squirming, but he’s curled up small and almost definitely asleep. It’s fucking precious. Although so are the girls, obviously, so she suspects she’s gonna be thinking everything they do is precious, at least for the next little while.

“Grant?” Steve asks.

“You heard her,” Bucky says, turning his head towards their boy and nuzzling him gently. “I like that too. Hey, Eli.”

“Cool, one down,” Darcy says, smiling a little painfully. She really might cry. Steve looks like he’s about to himself. “Carolina for the beta?”

“Carolina Rebecca,” Bucky says decisively. “And Hannah Natalia for this one.”

“Ruth Margaret for the other?” Darcy suggests, and Bucky nods.

“Didn’t decide for sure yet, huh,” Steve says wryly, though he’s still smiling like he might cry.

“We had some ideas,” Bucky says. “Just had to meet ‘em first.”

“Yeah,” Darcy says, smiling a little stupidly at him and Hannah and Eli and the picture they all make. About the only thing that could improve it would be fitting in Carolina and Ruth, although that might require Bucky to have a couple extra arms.

They have names, Darcy realizes, a warm feeling spreading through her. They have names and they’re real and really here, and nothing went wrong or even a little bit complicated for the pups or Bucky. Everything is perfect.

Really. It’s perfect.

“I love you,” she says, suddenly overwhelmed with the feeling, and Bucky smiles at her, warm and easy.

“I believe you,” he says.
It’s naptime, also known as “three out of four pups are miraculously asleep at the same time” time, which is about the best they’ve managed in the past three months. Ruth’s still fussing, but quietly enough that Darcy’s managed to keep her from waking up the others. They’re all very heavy sleepers, fortunately. They’re all in their bassinets in the nest, except for Ruth who she’s walking around the living room with while the quieter part of Steve’s playlist plays. It helps the babies sleep, or at least it seems like it does. Considering how many times Bucky listened to it while he was pregnant, Darcy’s pretty sure it helps.

Ruth fusses. Darcy hums along with the song, moving to the rhythm of it. She still can’t dance, really, but she can manage that, and the pups like it. Bucky’s better at it, of course.

“What’s wrong, baby girl?” she croons, nuzzling Ruth. She’s grown so much in three months, Darcy can hardly believe it. “You’re all clean and fed and warm, what else do you need?”

Ruth whimpers restlessly, and Darcy nuzzles her again. She’s still unsure about parenting more often than she’s not, but she’s at least learned how to soothe a distressed pup. They’ve been pretty lucky in that most of the pups are good sleepers, but unfortunately they are not all on quite the same sleep schedule.

It’s the quietest the tower’s been in a while, even with Ruth’s fussing. Bucky’s out shopping with Thor--Darcy’d practically had to kick him out, but he’d definitely needed the break--Tony and Bruce are in the fabrication lab with Jane and Erik, she owes Ian a phone call, Rhodey and Sam and Natasha are busy cleaning out yet another HYDRA hideout. She’s not sure when to expect either them or Bucky and Thor back, although it’ll probably be soon for both. This month is looking suspiciously like the one where all the Avengers are finally going to be on the same heat cycle, judging by the pheromones she’s been picking up, so that’s gonna be a whole thing. A very soon whole thing.

Oh boy, does she hope the Earth isn’t gonna be in any peril that the Hulk and Hawkeye can’t handle anytime in the next week. Like, really hope.

Ruth fusses again, and Darcy presses a kiss to the crown of her head with a low, soothing rumble.

“It’s okay, baby girl,” she says. “Do you just miss Momma? He’ll be home soon. He loves you so much, you know he couldn’t be gone for long.”

Maybe she should get J.A.R.V.I.S. to record some of the lullabies Bucky sings to the pups, come to think of it. It couldn’t hurt. The pups all love her, she knows, but Bucky is their favorite, although she suspects Carolina likes Thor better than either of them. Admittedly they’re a little young for things like that to be too obvious, but they throw up on her more than they do on Bucky, they sleep better when he’s the one who puts them down, and they definitely prefer nursing to bottle-feeding.

There’s so much to do lately, with so many pups to juggle and taser lessons and wedding plans all going on at once, not to mention the usual scientist-wrangling and occasionally checking in on Steve to make sure he’s not being too Steve about anything. It’s busier than Darcy could’ve ever imagined wanting her life to be, but it’s amazing, too. She always feels like she’s doing something that matters, these days--there always is something that matters to do these days.
It’s pretty heavy, but it’s pretty great too.

The door of the suite opens, and Darcy looks up at the scent of familiar cinnamon-sweet pheromones to find Bucky stepping in with a few shopping bags.

“Hey, Jamie,” she says, and he smiles at her and Ruth and comes over to kiss them both.

“The other three sleeping?” he asks as he sets down his bags and Ruth grabs eagerly at him.

“By some miracle,” Darcy says, letting him take Ruth. “They all tuckered themselves out.”

“Not you, though, baby doll,” Bucky croons, nuzzling Ruth, who babbles happily at him and puts her hands all over his face. “I bet you won’t sleep ’til at least two of them wake up, will you?”

“I’d take that bet,” Darcy agrees wryly, pushing up on her toes to kiss his cheek. It’s about how things have been going, pup-rearing-wise. “Did you find a dress?”

“I kind of hate it, actually,” Bucky says. “I am not walking down the aisle in anything strapless. I am definitely not walking down the aisle in a mermaid cut.”

“I’m sure you’ll find something,” Darcy says, wondering what the hell a mermaid cut is. Meanwhile tux-shopping took all of an afternoon. But they’ve got well over a year and a half before Bucky actually needs the dress, so there’s plenty of time. The pups’ll be walking and talking by the time they actually tie the knot.

Honestly, Darcy would’ve banged out a civil ceremony over the weekend any time in the past few months and been done with it, but a: she’d like the pups to be old enough to at least enjoy the reception and b: Tony Stark was never hugged as a child, like, ever. She’s stopped asking what things cost, for her own sanity. She’s also made a mental note to hug all four pups at least once a day for the rest of her life.

Considering how big Tony’s insisting on their wedding being, though, she’d hate to see what he’d do for an actual Avenger’s wedding. Iron Man suits would probably be involved. Between him and Thor, Mr. “every party I have ever attended was either a royal feast or thrown by Tony Stark”, they’re gonna be drowning in wedding prep.

At least they’ll get really nice wedding gifts. That’s definitely gonna be a thing.

“I’m gonna get dinner started,” Bucky says, nuzzling Ruth one last time before returning her to Darcy. Ruth whines mournfully, so Darcy follows him to the kitchen. She probably would’ve anyway, really.

“Cool, what’s tonight?” she asks.

“No idea,” Bucky says, pulling a Yubari melon juice out of the fridge for her and a water bottle for himself. “Something low-effort, I don’t feel like pulling out all the stops.”

“Stir fry?” Darcy suggests as she glimpses a package of noodles on the shelf behind him. “That’s pretty easy, right?”

“Yeah, okay,” Bucky agrees, taking a quick drink before starting to rifle through the fridge. “Beef
“Beef,” Darcy says immediately, rocking Ruth gently as she starts to fuss again. Bucky could use the iron. “Will you put a couple bottles in the warmer too, the others are definitely gonna wake up hungry. You pumped before you left, right?”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, setting aside a bag of snow peas in favor of getting out the bottles. “I should do it again, though, I’m getting a little sore.”

“Want me to get chopping so you can?” Darcy suggests.

“Ruth’ll cry if you put her down now,” Bucky says, which, fair and probably true. “I’ll just--”

A little cry comes from the bedroom, and their attention immediately sharpens and shifts. Bucky’s already halfway across the kitchen before a second one joins in.

“Uh-oh, baby girl, sounds like your litter’s waking up cranky,” Darcy sighs, nuzzling Ruth and turning to follow him. Well, the food’s not in the middle of cooking, at least. This time. Then the doorbell rings, and she groans as all three pups in the nest start crying. “Jamie--”

“I’ll get the pups, you get the door,” he says. Fair enough, since her arms are already half-full. She adjusts her grip on Ruth and heads to the door, and Ruth smacks her in the face with a deceptively-powerful little baby fist, possibly because her litter-siblings crying is upsetting her but possibly just because she likes to smack people. It’s fifty-fifty.

She opens the door and finds a sheepish-looking, sweet-smelling Steve standing there flanked by Natasha and Sam, and blinks up at them in surprise. Well, up at Steve and Sam. Natasha’s a little more on her level.

“I totally thought you were all still off punching Nazis,” she says.

“Just got back,” Steve says. “Sorry if we woke the pups.”

“They were already waking up, it’s no big,” Darcy says, stepping back to let them in. “Give us a sec, though.” She leaves them in the living room and heads back into the bedroom, where Bucky’s in the nest and crooning soothingly to the pups in their tucked-in little bassinets as he changes them. “Need a hand?”

“Always,” he says wryly, then passes a fussy Carolina to her and finishes up with the even fussier Hannah and Eli before scooping them up himself. He’s much better at carrying multiple babies than she is, but she makes it work. At the rate they’re growing, though, that’s gonna be a mom thing for sure. “Was that Steve?”

“And Sam and Natasha,” Darcy confirms. “Not actually sure what they want.”

“I can make extra dinner,” Bucky says, because again, Tony Stark was never hugged as a child and their fridge is bursting.

“Sure, why not, we’ll make them entertain the pups,” Darcy says. They head back out into the living room, where any remaining quiet is destroyed and Bucky immediately dumps Hannah on Natasha, who as always looks--very briefly--both hunted by the gesture and touched by his trust. She pats Hannah’s back carefully, and Hannah sniffles wetly on her shoulder and then starts tugging at her bright red hair. Darcy has learned to love ponytails, personally.

“Wanna stay for dinner?” Bucky asks.
“Sure,” Steve says, smiling at him. “Did you find a dress?”

“Not even close,” Bucky says, giving him Eli, who he holds gingerly. Sam gives Darcy a hopeful look, and she hands over Ruth, to his obvious delight. Sam loves babies, it’s actually really fucking cute. Not as much as Thor loves babies, but they would be hard-pressed to find anybody who loved babies as much as Thor does. “Did you take out a lot of HYDRA bastards?”

“Definitely,” Steve says, still smiling. “I like your hair like this.”

“You say that every time,” Bucky says, tugging self-consciously on his braid. “I’m making stir-fry. Beef.”

“Sounds good,” Steve says, and follows him into the kitchen with Eli. Darcy sits down with Natasha and Sam and they entertain the other three with a few stray toys she forgot to pick up earlier. She can hear Bucky and Steve talking while Bucky gets to chopping, but it’s not about anything important. Sam and Natasha are both more interested in the kids, who she would agree are definitely the most interesting people in the room, precious little bundles that they are.

The bottle warmer dings, and Bucky comes back over with a bottle for Hannah and Carolina. Natasha looks very slightly panicked—she is not super-great at child-care—so Darcy and Sam handle the feeding and leave her to keep Ruth happy. Steve isn’t much better, so Bucky instructs him through the dinner-making process while Eli nurses. Eli likes bottles a lot less than the girls, who might prefer nursing but don’t really care long as they get fed in the end, but they try to take turns with nursing vs. bottle-feeding for all of them anyway.

It’s nice. Darcy really likes nights like these, where somebody comes over for dinner and they all hang out with the pups and talk about whatever and hardly ever get interrupted by alien invasions or hostage situations. It feels good, being all together like that. Even when it’s just Tony talking their ears off about a project or Bruce is being worryingly quiet or Bucky’s having a bad day—it’s still good, being like that. Darcy wishes every night were that way, sometimes, although four pups and a mate make for a pretty full house as it is.

They get the pups fed, and Bucky and Steve get dinner on the table and the rest of them all migrate over. Darcy’s gotten very good at eating while holding a baby; the pups rarely want to be put down for long. It’d be easier to deal with if there weren’t four of them, as would a lot of things, but Darcy doesn’t regret a single one of them—they’re all too perfect, too exactly right. She already can’t imagine their lives without even one of them. Anyway, tonight they’ve got company, so tonight it’s easy to pup-juggle.

“So what brings you by?” she asks after they’re all settled in and have managed to get some food in their mouths. Not that she minds the company, obviously, she’s just wondering.

“Oh, well,” Steve says, turning red. Natasha smirks, and Sam lets out a low laugh. “Well . . . I was wondering—your heat’s coming up again, right?”

“Didn’t think it was subtle,” Bucky says, raising an eyebrow at him as he bounces Eli on his knee. He and Steve both smell about as close to heat as anyone can get before officially entering pre-heat, in fact, which Darcy and her hindbrain have both been very good about so far tonight, thanks so much.

“I guess not,” Steve says. “I know it’s only your second heat after everything with HYDRA, so this might be a little much, but I was wondering if you wanted to share a nest again. Like we used to.”

“You want to?” Bucky asks, blinking slowly. Darcy’s higher thought processes short out, for all
the obvious reasons. Guh. Guh.

“Of course I want to, Buck,” Steve says, looking briefly pained. “I miss you like crazy when I’m in heat.”

“Oh, so this ain’t just a con job to get an extra knot in your nest?” Bucky asks with a smirk.

“Very funny,” Steve says wryly. Bucky smiles at him, looking just . . . looking so pleased. Darcy is thoroughly wooed.

“You okay with that?” he asks her. Darcy has an extremely brief and extremely intense flashback to the last time Steve was in their nest.

“I can think of very few things I would be okay-er with,” she answers feelingly, and Bucky laughs, then smirks at Steve again.

“I guess that’d be alright, then,” he says. “Long as you don’t hog the alphas. And I’ve got first dibs on Darcy.”

“As long as I keep first dibs on Sam and Nat,” Steve says, amused. Darcy briefly pictures sharing a nest with all four of them and is immediately immensely grateful for the size of the rooms Tony has given them all. Also, a little intimidated, because sharing a nest with two really great alphas and the two best omegas she knows.

Okay, mostly intimidated by Natasha, but really that goes without saying.

“You realize Tony’s gonna complain like hell when he finds out about this,” she says.

“If he wants in next time, he can ask,” Steve replies primly. Darcy glazes over a little.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” she says, clearing her throat. “Clint’s still good to babysit, right?”

“All four at once?” Sam asks.

“Yuuuup,” Darcy says. What, Clint’s an experienced dad, he can manage.

“He’s still good,” Natasha says. “As long as the Fantastic Four don’t need to go off-planet anytime soon, anyway, apparently they’re fairly short on babysitters right now too.”

“There’s always the moon,” Darcy says with a shrug.

Also, god their lives are weird. She’s really got to update her slideshow.

“The moon’s kind of out of the way,” Bucky says, leaning over to kiss her cheek. “Let’s stick with Barton for now.”

“Dunno, at least the moon definitely doesn’t have HYDRA,” Darcy says.

“. . . point,” Bucky says, pursing his lips in thought. “Hm. Does Crystal know anything about pups?”

“We could ask,” Darcy says. “Clint definitely knows about pups, though, and J.A.R.V.I.S. and Tony know about security, so we’re probably okay.”

“Probably,” Bucky says, touching the little red-and-gold bracelet on Eli’s left wrist. It matches all
his sisters’, a rounded chunky gold strip with hot-rod red stripes and a matching star. It just looks like a bracelet, and unless J.A.R.V.I.S. detects trouble, it won’t be any different from one. They don’t really need to wear them inside the tower, but Bucky prefers that they do and honestly Darcy kind of agrees. Sue her, she’s still a little paranoid.

Anyway, they’re cute bracelets.

“So we’re covered, then, all clear for heat-time,” she says, sneaking a glance at Steve, who smiles back at her. Guh. She’s not sure exactly what sharing a nest is gonna amount to yet, they’ve still gotta talk that part out, but if it’s anything like his heat was, well . . . anyway. “Awesome. Our place or yours?”

“I liked your place last time,” Steve says. “But we can use mine if moving the pups is too inconvenient.”

“Already moved the spare bassinets onto Clint’s floor,” Bucky says, shaking his head. “Just gotta grab their go-bags and go, when it’s time.”

“Is that what we’re calling the diaper bags now?” Sam asks in amusement.

“Same difference,” Bucky says with a shrug. “Either way we’re already ready to move them, so might as well stay here.”

“Okay,” Steve says, smiling at Bucky, who smiles back a little tentatively. Sometimes he still hesitates over little things like that. It’d be sad, but watching him do it anyway is just too good.

“Awesome,” Darcy says, a warm feeling bubbling up in her chest as she looks around the table, Carolina a comfortable little weight in her arms. The other pups are securely tucked into safe arms and Bucky and Steve are smiling at each other, and Sam and Natasha are both smiling too. It’s so good, and so much better than she ever would’ve expected from chasing down a stranger’s scent just in case.

Well, she’d clearly been right to, just like Bucky’d been right to follow her in and then come back in. She sneaks a hand under the table to grab his, even though it’s gonna delay both of them finishing their dinners, and he turns that perfect smile on her instead. He looks so pretty, braid a little disarrayed and that one ever-escaping lock of hair in his eyes, a pup in his lap and a warm satisfaction in his expression and her mating bite on his neck. It’s a little overwhelming, but definitely in a good way, and Darcy’s pretty sure she’s reflecting that same warm satisfaction right back at him. It’s just too good not to.

“Hey,” she says to him, and his smile widens, easy and perfect.

“Hey,” he says. “All good?"

“Oh, definitely,” she agrees, and leans in to kiss him.

She can’t imagine better.

Chapter End Notes

And we’ve reached the end! Thanks so much for reading, and for still supporting this story even after such a long hiatus. I really appreciate every comment and kudos you
guys have given, you’ve all been very kind and patient.

I hope you enjoyed the story! It took a really long time in the end, but I loved writing it and I’m so pleased I could finish it.

End Notes

Tumblr gonna tumbl!

Works inspired by this post:

Read you're holding back, she said shut up and dance with me by suzukiblu

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!