Knowing she had two soulmates comforted Darcy Lewis during the toughest moments of her life.

Then she met them.

Notes

Anything you recognize does not belong to me.

- Inspired by Words on my skin, love in my heart by amusewithaview
“Hold the elevator!”

Darcy Lewis could barely see above the plastic food storage containers balanced precariously in her arms, but managed to catch the “Sorry, not sorry” smirk on the man’s douche nozzle’s face seconds before the elevator doors closed.

“Great.” She shifted her precious cargo so to elbow the button for the next elevator. Her phone chimed, signaling what was most likely another “Where are you?” text from her boss and friend Jane Foster. Okay, so she was nearly an hour late for work, but how was she supposed to know that her smoke detector would choose today of all mornings to go off, forcing her to climb on top of her kitchen counter to try and shut it up only to find out she was too short to reach the stupid red button? She had to search her apartment for something she could use to jab it, yelling at her neighbor pounding her door that she was well aware of the noise, so sorry her brush with death disturbed his beauty sleep and thank you so much for your concern. (It turns out the metal baseball bat she kept by her bed made an excellent arm.)

Darcy’s misadventure in the kitchen meant she missed the subway and while she loved her job as a self-described Science!-wrangler, it didn’t pay enough to justify taking a cab from Brooklyn to Lower Manhattan, hence dashing through the Avengers Tower lobby at the time she was usually pushing a second cup of coffee and food of some kind in Jane’s hands.

“I know, I know,” she muttered as her phone chimed again. Tucking her chin on top of her cargo, she swung her oversized messenger bag around her body to try and dig it out from the mess of papers and folders stuffed inside -- Why couldn't Jane use technology like a normal person? - - rolling her eyes at the quiet ding that signaled the arrival of the elevator. Shuffling carefully into the car, she hitched her arm up to elbow the button for the floor she needed, but missed, the momentum making everything in her arms jerk to the side.

“Need a hand?” An amused voice asked.

“What was your first clue?” Darcy's huff of frustration dissolved to a sigh of relief as a hand shot out to straighten the containers. Trusting her unseen hero to not let her down, Darcy held her thumb against the button for the sub-basement laboratories, the infrared reading her thumbprint before the car started its quick descent, arriving just as Darcy opened her mouth to thank her mysterious helper.

“Finally!” Clint Barton pulled Darcy out of the elevator without acknowledging the person standing behind her. “A man could starve waiting for you!”

“Dude! That’s the thanks I get for responding to your asinine request for cinnamon apple muffins in the middle of the night?” Darcy shoved the boxes of baked good in Clint’s arms, jerking the messenger bag higher on her shoulder as she marched down the hall to Jane’s lab, her maroon Chuck Taylors making no sound on the ceramic tile, Clint at her heels.

“Eleven o’clock isn’t the middle of the night," he argued.

“It is when you have to run to the grocery store for Granny Smith apples.”

Clint snagged the sleeve of Darcy’s gray wool coat. “You went out in the cold for me? Aw, I knew you loved me.”
The man on the elevator watched the scene silently, blue eyes narrowing slightly when Clint kissed her noisily on the cheek. The doors slid shut before he could see her laughing as she pushed him away.

“Does Barton have a girlfriend?” James “Bucky” Barnes asked before he even closed the door to the apartment he shared with his best friend and soulmate, Steve Rogers. Steve looked up from the eggs he was scrambling; his attention shifting from breakfast to focus on the image Bucky in gray sweatpants and a navy blue hoodie, his dark hair damp with sweat. “Hey, punk,” Bucky snapped his fingers. “Eyes up here.”

Smirking, Steve turned off the stove and moved the skillet to the back burner before grabbing a fistful of Bucky’s hoodie and pulling him in for a kiss, still not believing he was there, that they were there. Together. “Mmm … missed you,” he murmured, his left hand tangling in Bucky’s hair. Bucky leaned his forehead against Steve’s, breathing in his lover’s scent. Part of him was impatient to tell Steve what happened and the other part, the part still coming to terms with who he was now, told him to keep quiet, let it go. They were happy. Finally, they were happy. Why change it?

“What’s wrong?” Steve pulled away, his forehead creased in concern. “You’re tense.”

“Barton’s girlfriend,” he repeated gruffly. “What do you know about her?”

Steve turned back to the stove and divided the eggs between two plates while Bucky refilled Steve’s coffee cup and grabbed a mug for himself. A plate of bacon and a bowl of grapes, blueberries and strawberries were already on the table, along with several pieces of toast on a yellow ceramic plate. The serum that flowed through the men’s bodies demanded that they eat lots and eat often, but the sheer sight of the food crowding their small table could still overwhelm them. There was a time even a fourth of what was waiting was a luxury but, as everyone kept reminding them, that was long ago.

“I didn’t know Barton had a girlfriend,” Steve remarked.

“Short dame, long brown hair. Has a mouth like a sailor.”

Steve grinned around a bite of toast slathered with butter and strawberry jam. “Sounds like your type back in the day.”

“She said my words.”

Steve dropped his fork, the metal clattering on the plate before falling to the floor. “What?”

Bucky stood and pulled the hoodie over his head, tugging the damp T-shirt he wore underneath off, too. Turning around, he heard the squeak of wood over ceramic as Steve pushed his chair back to stand behind him, large fingers tracing the five words written in a cursive on his right shoulder blade: “What was your first clue?”

Steve had “Now, tell the nice man thank you” in matching script on his left shoulder blade.

“Did she …” he swallowed nervously. Their soulmate. Their second. Bucky met her. She was real. She was there. “What’d she do when you said hers?”

Bucky turned around, frustration on his face. “I didn't see her face when I spoke to her. Barton grabbed her before I could talk to her.”

Steve stepped back. “But you believe she said your words,” he said carefully.
“She did!”

“Maybe you didn’t say hers. It could just be coincidence.” Steve didn’t want to bring Bucky down, but ever since he learned he had another soulmate, he’d been obsessed with finding the woman whose handwriting graced his skin. Their skin. Theirs.

He shook his head stubbornly. “It’s her.”

“All right,” Steve replied. “So we’ll go talk to her. We’ll finish breakfast, you’ll take a shower, we’ll find her and talk to her.” It was a plan. Not a great plan, but a plan. Steve could handle a plan.

“Fuck that. JARVIS!”

“Yes, Sergeant Barnes?” Tony Stark’s AI answered.

“Does Barton’s girlfriend work here?”

“I am not privy to Agent Barton’s personal life.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. What good was having a robotic servant who observed everything in the tower if he couldn’t answer personal questions? “Fine. The woman Barton greeted this morning in the elevator. Who is she?”

“Miss Lewis is Dr. Foster’s lab assistant.”

“Another scientist?” Bucky had his fill of scientists.

“Miss Lewis graduated from Culver University with a degree in political science. She was Dr. Foster’s intern and advanced to assistant after her graduation.”

“That’s an odd career choice,” Steve remarked.

“I’m afraid I don’t have a response for that, Captain Rogers.”

“No response needed, JARVIS. Thanks.”

“You are welcome.”

Steve agreed to do the dishes while Bucky took his shower, filling the stainless-steel sink with warm water and dish soap despite the kitchen’s dishwasher. There was a comfort in the familiar chore. Running a sponge over the plates, Steve could almost imagine he was back in the tiny apartment he had shared with Bucky before he enlisted in the Army.

Miss Lewis. Their potential soulmate. She was there, practically right under their noses. And possibly Clint's girlfriend.

Steve wasn’t sure how he felt about Bucky’s discovery. He couldn't remember a time when he didn't have Bucky’s words – “How stupid are you, punk?” – on his left hip. He spent hours tracing the familiar cramped handwriting again and again with his fingers after he "woke up," the words a reminder of all that he’d lost. The doctors told him the words would fade away – that's what happened when a soulmate died – but Bucky's never did. No one had an explanation why and blamed it on the serum.

Neither Steve nor Bucky had a second soulmark before, but both woke from their time in the ice
with a second mark. Steve’s initial reaction was anger. He didn’t want another soulmate. He was Bucky’s! He would always be Bucky’s! He swore to himself he would not respond if and when he heard “Now, tell the nice man thank you” out of deference to Bucky. But then Bucky returned, not as the man Steve remembered, but as the Winter Soldier. Captured, tortured and brainwashed, the man Steve had loved for most of his life had become the world’s greatest assassin. The months that followed their reunion were agonizing as Bucky fought to regain his memories, to forget what others forced him to become.

As much as Steve hated to admit it, the words helped.

“These are ... these are new?” Bucky whispered hoarsely, fingers ghosting over the words on Steve’s skin, aware of how the blond man shivered at his touch. “I don’t remember ...”

“They’re new, Bucky. I woke up with them.”

“And I ...”

“You have new words, too. Here,” he turned, placing his hand on Bucky’s shoulder blade. “Same handwriting.”

“Do you know ... have you met them?”

“No. Not yet.”

“She might not be ours,” Steve repeated as they walked down the hall to the elevator. Bucky rolled his eyes at his caution. Drop the man in the middle of a war zone and he’d rush into battle with no thought of his personal welfare, but force him to talk to a woman ...

Both were silent as the elevator descended beneath the tower’s upper levels, Bucky watching the numbers decrease on the panel above them while Steve stared straight ahead. “Stop the elevator, JARVIS.” Bucky spoke suddenly. The elevator paused between floors. Pushing Steve against the cool steel wall, Bucky took the man’s face in his hands and kissed him fiercely. “Love you, punk,” he growled, nipping his soulmate’s bottom lip. “Nothing’s gonna change that. Understand?”

Steve closed his eyes, letting his breath out slowly as his body relaxed. “Yeah.”

They walked into chaos. Smoke was filling the glass-enclosed space. A robot holding a fire extinguisher was whirring about the room, aiming the hose at everything it came across, whether it was engulfed in flames or not. Jane Foster was waving an oversized wrench in the air as Tony Stark stood in front of her, his arms stubbornly crossed over his chest. Neither one acknowledged the bedlam around them.

“Jane, your duct-taped machine is on fucking fire! Could you stop for five seconds and help me?” Darcy screeched as struggled to pull the fire extinguisher out of the tiny robot’s metal claws. When it wouldn’t budge, she kicked its side and pushed past the bickering scientists to grab a second extinguisher off the wall. Bucky and Steve rushed into action, Steve taking the extinguisher from Darcy's hands, pulling the pin and aiming the hose at the metal contraption spitting flames while Bucky pulled her away from the blaze. Seconds later, another robot zoomed into the room with a hose aimed directly at Darcy. She was drenched before Bucky could move in front of her.

“That’s it!” Darcy shrieked as the robot moved back with a squeak. “I’m officially done with this day!”
Jane looked over, eyes widening as she took in Darcy’s soaked form. “What happened?”

“What happened?” Darcy repeated, droplets of water flying as she flung her hands above her head in exasperation. “What happened?! What happened is that I stayed up too damn late baking muffins for a bunch of ungrateful science nerds who never say thank you –“

“I say thank you,” Dr. Bruce Banner spoke quietly from the corner of the lab.

“… but I do it anyway because Pop Tarts weren’t meant to replace the food groups. I feed you, I water you, I make sure you sleep – I fucking keep you alive while deciphering these damn doodles you call notes – and you can’t take five seconds to stop arguing about a piece of machinery –“

“That is not a machine, it’s a monstrosity,” Tony interrupted.

“Hey, I built that!” Jane shouted.

“And it caught fire,” he replied dryly. ”Congratulations.”

“ENOUGH!” Darcy screamed. “Jane, you work for Stark Industries. Take some of their billions and buy equipment that won’t kill you!”

Tony smirked at Jane.

“And you!” Darcy pointed at Tony. “Stay out of our lab! You have your own workspace for a reason, Mr. I-Don’t-Play-Well-With-Others.”

“No, you don’t,” Darcy sneered.

“Not cool, kid. I sign your paychecks.”

“No, you don’t,” Darcy sneered.

“Really?” Tony pulled out his phone and started pressing something. “JARVIS, is that true?”

“Miss Lewis reports to Dr. Foster, sir.”

"But she annoys me," Tony argued. "She's always giving me food. I don't like being handed things."

"She feeds you out of the goodness of her heart, sir," JARVIS replied patiently.

Tony’s head tilted to the side as he took in this new development, never mind the fact that Darcy had been a presence in his life for months. “Huh. Does this mean I can make requests?”

“Shut up,” Darcy took the towel DUM-E brought her and rubbed it over her damp hair, one hand going out to pat the robot in apology for kicking it. “You’re both extremely lucky I’m the only one affected by today’s mishap. Did either of you even think about Bruce?”

Four heads turned toward the man standing as far away as he could from the others and still remain in the room. He raised his hand in an embarrassed wave and took another sip of his tea.

“JARVIS?”

“Yes, Miss Lewis?”

“Would you please ask Thor to come to the lab? Jane is done with Science! for today.”

“No!” Jane cried. “I need to –“
“Your machine is fried and I’m wet,” Darcy told her. “Time to get some sleep, Janey. We can conquer the mysteries of the world tomorrow.”

“But …” Jane bit her lip as she glanced around the lab, looking very much like a child being sent to her room.

“No buts,” Darcy wrapped an arm around Jane and led her to Steve. She was still dripping water on the floor, but the smile she gave him was genuine. “Now, tell the nice man thank you.”

“Thank you,” Jane parroted but Steve barely heard her, his blue eyes wide as he stared at Darcy.

“Those are … I have,” he swallowed. “Holy shit.”

“What?!” Tony’s head whipped up from his phone. “Did Capsicle just swear? Has hell frozen over?”

Darcy ignored the snarky billionaire. Her words. The Adonis-like blond just uttered the words circling her left bicep.

“You OK there, doll?” A second man joined the blond. He was the stereotypical tall, dark and handsome heartthrob with a glint in his eyes that told her he was all kinds of trouble. He had a metal arm. That’s … different.

“He …” Darcy gestured at the first guy, but the other guy’s voice nudged something in her mind. “You. You’re elevator guy, from this morning. ‘Need a hand?’”

He smirked. “What was your first clue?”

Darcy took two steps back. Her words. Their words. Her soulmarks. This was it. This was them. She found them. They found her. Finally, after twenty-four years, she had them. Her soulmates. She wanted to laugh. She wanted to cry. She wanted to throw her arms around both men – Would her arms even fit around one of them? They were built! – and bury her face in their necks. “You’re gorgeous,” Darcy blurted out, making the blond blush and the brunet wink.

“Right back at you, doll,” he said.

She looked down at her dark jeans, black tank top and bulky gray and red cardigan sweater. Correction, her soaked dark jeans, black tank top and bulky gray and red cardigan sweater. “Oh yeah, I can rock the wet look like no one’s business.”

The brunet opened his mouth to say something, but shut it when the blond elbowed him in the side. “I’m Steve, ma’am.”

“Ma’am?” Darcy laughed.

“Miss,” Steve corrected. “This is Bucky.”

“Bucky,” Darcy mused as she tilted her head to the side. It wasn't her first guess for a name, but it suited him. “OK, I can go with …” She trailed off, eyes going wide. Her head whipped back and forth between the men in front of her. Steve? Bucky? In Avengers Tower? No. It couldn’t be. The universe wasn’t that cruel.

Steve took a step forward, one arm reaching out for Darcy. "Are you --"

“Friends!” Thor entered the lab. “I’ve come to take my Jane away. Ah, Steven! I heard you were
back,” Thor reached out to shake Steve’s hand. “And you’ve brought your soulmate. Your mission was a success?”

“IT was,” Steve replied, putting an arm around Bucky's shoulders. “Bucky, this is Thor Odinson, God of Thunder.”

“I’ve heard many stories,” Bucky remarked as he shook Thor’s hand.

“The only one worth listening to is that which includes my shield sister,” Thor reached out and pulled Darcy to his side, not noticing how stiffly she held herself as she stared at her soulmates. “Lady Darcy is quite the warrior.”

“She’s not only a warrior, she’s Capsicle’s and Terminator’s soulmate,” Tony announced gleefully, having put the pieces together.

“Really?” Thor’s smile lit up the room. “This is most wonderful news!”

Darcy felt like the room was closing in on her. She couldn’t breathe. It was too much. They were too much. She needed to leave. She had to leave. “No,” she pulled out of Thor’s hold. “This is not wonderful news.” She whipped her head around, looking anywhere and everywhere but the two men who were watching her. Steve looked concerned. Bucky looked pissed. “I’m sorry, I can’t do this. It’s just … I’m sorry,” she repeated before she turned and ran out of the room.
Darcy didn’t know how she got home. She didn’t remember grabbing her coat and bag from where she’d tossed them on her desk, but she must have because she was standing inside her apartment, wrapped in her wool coat, her keys dangling from one hand, the straps of her messenger bag twisted around the other. Water was slowly dripping from her clothes onto the cheap rug she purchased at the thrift store to hide the gouge marks in the tile.

Moving automatically, Darcy shrugged out of her coat and draped it over the lone bar stool at the counter that divided the galley kitchen from the rest of her apartment, the door to her miniscule bedroom and adjoining bathroom a few short feet away. She walked to it now, peeling off her damp clothes. March was not the time to go running around New York in wet clothing. Darcy’s teeth were chattering and her fingers were numb. She dumped the mess of fabric in the bathroom sink and turned her shower all the way up, stepping inside the cracked and ceramic tub with a sigh as the hot water pelted her skin.

Captain America and the Winter Soldier. Out of all the men in the world – hell, out of all the men and women in the world – her soulmates had to be superheroes. Not just any superheroes, but the original superheroes! They fought in World War II. They were alive during The Great Depression, the invention of the cheeseburger (political scientists weren’t as stuffy about history as people expected), and when Amelia Earhart disappeared. What in the hell did she have in common with two octogenarians who defied death not once, but several times? She considered the day a victory if she managed to get through a meal without spilling something.

She knew their stories. She wrote papers about them. When CNN revealed that Russia’s famed assassin, the elusive Winter Soldier, was actually Captain America’s brainwashed soulmate, Darcy couldn’t be moved from her laptop. She read everything she could about James Buchanan Barnes. She and Jane were pretty isolated in their lab, but Darcy overheard bits and pieces of Captain America’s – “I’m Steve, ma’am.” – efforts to find his lost love. She thought it was romantic. She still did. For so long, all they had was each other and then Bucky was gone. Darcy knows some people think Captain America crashed his plane in the ocean to end his life, that it was the act of a desperate man and not the heroic spin written for the history books. Maybe he did. She wasn’t one to judge. Losing someone you loved sucked. Being alone sucked. Today really, really sucked.

Darcy turned off the water, drying herself in the cloud of steam surrounding the tub before sliding the shower curtain back.

“I had you pegged as someone who sings in the shower.”

“He screamed, one hand clutching the towel to her breasts while the other snatched her robe out of Clint’s hands. “Don’t any of you know how to knock?”

He shrugged and leaned against the sink. Rolling her eyes, Darcy pulled the curtain closed so she could get dressed in private. Bending at the waist, she wrapped her hair in the towel before pushing the curtain open once more. “Coffee?” Without waiting for an answer, she walked to her kitchen. Clint hopped up on the counter while Darcy busied herself with the coffeepot.

“Big day.”
She ignored him, wiping a sponge over the already-spotless counters. Darcy’s apartment was tiny, but it was clean, partially because Darcy was tidy by nature, but mostly because she didn’t own much. She told Clint that’s why she made such a fuss about her iPod. He bought her a new one. Tony regularly threatened to replace it with a StarkPlayer.

“The lab caught fire.”

“Again,” Darcy poured Clint’s coffee into the Hawk-I mug she bought from a vendor in Times Square. The wrong color of his uniform annoyed him more than the misspelling.

“Jane yelled at Tony.”

“Again.” Darcy dumped several spoons of sugar into her coffee and stirred.

“Your came to the rescue.”

“Again.” Darcy sipped her coffee reverently.

“Jane was grounded.”

She felt kind of bad about that. Jane loved Science! She would do anything for Science! Jane was so going to kick Science! ass someday, but Jane also needed to sleep.

“You met your soulmates.” Clint eyed Darcy over the rim of his mug.

“Who told?”

“JARVIS.”

“Nosy gossip.”

Clint snorted. It took him awhile to get used to Tony’s AI. He didn’t like having someone, or rather something, observing him 24/7. He made good use of the privacy protocols, but had to admit JARVIS came in handy when the Hulk made an appearance or Darcy ran out of the tower in the middle of the day. He reached out and caught Darcy’s chin in his hand, the pad of his thumb sliding over her cheek. “He said you were crying.”

“He lied.”

“I don’t think computers lie.”

“I didn’t think people could fly and then I met Thor, so there.” She picked up her mug and moved to the couch, tucking her legs underneath her. Clint sat next to her, saying nothing as he waited for her to start talking. He didn't care how long it took. Patience was his thing.

Pulling the knitted afghan from the back of the couch, Darcy tucked it around her, keeping her eyes on the different shades of blue in the yarn and not the archer who had her in his sight. “I wanted to meet them.” Darcy picked at a loose stitch. “I was dying to meet them. I was born with their words on my skin. I grew up with them, so of course I spent a lot of time imagining how we’d meet, where we’d be and what we’d be doing when I heard them for the first time.” She smiled a little. “I didn’t know if I’d meet them together or separate, so I created scenarios for both just in case. I was so careful not to focus on one set of words more than the other. I didn’t know a lot of people with two soulmarks and I wanted to be fair. My mom told me I got two because I had a lot of love to give.”
Clint’s lips turned up a bit, but he didn’t comment.

“My parents met in high school. Have I told you that?”

Clint shook his head. Darcy rarely shared personal details of her life. He read her file so he could fill in the blanks. She lost her mom when she was ten, her dad when she was twelve and her grandmother at fifteen. She was in and out of foster homes until her eighteenth birthday. She attended Culver on a scholarship, combining a full course-load with several part-time jobs to keep her head above water. Her internship with Jane was supposed to fulfill her physical science requirement. Instead, it thrust her into a world of alien gods and put her on SHIELD’s radar. Some of the agency’s higher ups believe Darcy stayed with Jane because of her connection to the Avengers. He knew it’s because she found something with Jane she’d thought she lost: family.

“They met in homeroom the first day of school,” Darcy’s eyes were soft as she recalled the story. “My dad was in the wrong classroom. They were sorted alphabetically and he was with the Rs instead of the Ls. Mom told him ‘I don’t think you belong here’ and he said ‘I belong with you.’ Totally cheesy, especially for a teenage boy, but that was my dad. His words were wrapped around her wrist, hers were on his calf. They just clicked. I know soulmarks don’t guarantee a happy ending, but they were the fairy tale. I saw what that had. I wanted it, too.”

“You can still have that.” Clint took her empty coffee cup and set it by his on the floor. Tugging Darcy’s arm, he pulled until she was curled next to him, her cheek against his chest, the towel slipping from her head. He pushed the damp strands off of her face. “Steve’s a good guy and Barnes … He’s working through things, but Steve wouldn’t have brought him to the Tower if he didn’t think it was safe. You can trust them.”

“Duh. They’re freaking superheroes,” she mumbled against his sweatshirt. “Safety and trust is kind of their thing. They’d be kicked out of the club if it wasn’t.”

“Do you have a thing against superheroes? In my experience, most women –”

“Oh my God, stop!” Darcy slapped her hand over Clint’s mouth. “I do not want to hear about your skanky – gross! You licked my hand! How old are you?”

“Training, babe. I do what the situation calls for.”

Darcy rubbed the palm of her hand on his jeans. “Hand-licking is in the SHIELD Handbook?”

“Section forty-seven, paragraph three, bullet six.”

She wanted to call bullshit. Clint was a professional liar, but who knew what the hell SHIELD taught its agents? First Phil Coulson was dead, then six months later, he’s formed his own team and living on a plane he called a bus.

“What’s really bothering you, Darce?”

She shook her head. How could she explain it? One day, she was a regular kid with two parents living outside of Garden City, Kansas, and the next her mom was gone, killed in a car accident on a Tuesday afternoon. Her dad couldn’t handle it. He spent the first six months after the funeral bedridden, lost in his grief, unable to get himself up to take care of himself, let alone Darcy. He lost his job, then the house. They moved to Darcy’s grandmother’s farm in Indiana, the same farm on which her father was raised, but he didn’t find comfort in the familiar surroundings. He started drinking at night and then during the day until Darcy never saw him without a bottle in his hand. She’ll always be grateful he was the only one on the road that night, that he didn’t hurt someone
else when he lost control of his car. The police called it an accident. Darcy knew even then that
they said it to be kind.

Darcy’s grandmother didn’t grieve for her son, telling Darcy he was gone to her long before she put
him in the ground. She begged Darcy to remember who he was before she lost her mother.

“He loved your mom, little girl. They were meant for each other, even without their soulmarks.
Sometimes fate really gets it right.”

“That same fate also took her away from him!” Darcy fought the urge to scream, to rail against
fate and destiny and soulmarks. “If that’s what all of this means, then I hope I never meet mine.”

Wrinkled fingers traced the words wrapped around Darcy’s ankle. “You don’t mean that.”

She didn’t. She wanted to, desperately, but part of her still believed in soulmates, still believed that
the universe paired her with two individuals who would love her enough to make up for taking her
parents away.

“Darcy?”

She ignored him and instead reached into her bag on the floor to pull out her phone. It had been
steadily buzzing with texts and phone calls since she left the lab. She scrolled through her

“Look at me; I’m growing,” Clint said dryly.

There were two numbers she didn’t recognize. She didn’t need to guess who they belonged to.

The phone vibrated in her hands.

_Dammit Darcy, if you don’t let me know you’re OK, I’m coming over there. With Natasha._

Darcy looked up from her screen. “Nat’s still out of town, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Good,” she breathed, fingers flying over her phone as she replied to Jane.

_I’m fine. Just need a day or two to decompress._

_FINALY! Do NOT go dark on me._

_Sorry._

_It’s OK. So. Wow._

_Yeah._

_Want to talk about it?_

_No._

_Want company?_  

_Clint’s here._

_Want more company?_
You need sleep, boss lady.

I meant Thor.

No!

There was no response.

Jane?

Jane?

JANE!

Thor walked into her apartment before she could finish typing her threat to remove all Pop-Tarts within a five-mile radius of the lab.

“Your dwelling is easy to infiltrate,” he remarked as he closed the door.

“So I’ve been told,” Darcy sighed.

Darcy liked to braid hair. When she was little, she played beauty shop with her dolls. She’d spend hours in the bathroom, her dolls lined up in front of the tub as she moved down the line, twisting and weaving until each one had a different style. Jane liked it when Darcy braided her hair because it helped her relax. Thor let Darcy braid his hair because it helped Darcy relax. Lightening sister wasn’t simply a nickname to Thor. Darcy was his sister. He would fight for her as much as he would fight for Jane, but sadness was not something he could combat, so instead he sprawled on the floor in front of Darcy’s couch, eating Pringles while the three of them watched *SpongeBob SquarePants* on TV and Darcy played with his hair.

“I’m digging this one.” Clint leaned over and tugged on the finished fishtail. “Keeps the hair out of your face while fighting.”

“I’m too fast for my hair to be a hindrance,” Thor answered smugly.

“You’re just jealous Pantene didn’t ask you to be their spokesperson.” Darcy told Clint. She was still upset Jane talked Thor out of saying yes. The freebies alone would have been worth it.

“I’m a sniper, babe. I can’t be on TV saying ‘Gray? What gray?’”

Darcy snorted. “You keep telling yourself that.”

Thor finished the chips, tilting the canister back to get the last few crumbs. “As much joy as I’ve had in your company, my Jane would be most upset if I returned home without knowing why you fled this morning.”

“Nice segue way.” Clint mocked. Darcy ignored him, her fingers swiftly undoing Thor’s blond strands. Taking the elastic from her wrist, she pulled his hair into his usual ponytail.

“I know you’ve not met the Captain and his Sargent before, but you wear each other’s words,” Thor turned until he was facing Darcy. “The universe has spoken.”

“The universe can bite me.”

“Is it because they’re damaged?” Thor asked.
“What?”

“The Captain mourns for his past. The Soldier is still trying to remember. Do you not wish to help them through their grief?”

“No!” she exclaimed. “I mean, not no, I don’t want to help them, but no, that’s not why I ran.”

“Is it because Barnes was brainwashed?” Clint’s face was unreadable but Darcy and Thor knew he was thinking about Loki.

“No.” She leaned over to take one of Clint’s hands in both of hers and squeezed. Tight. “I’d never turn my back on someone for something they couldn’t help.”

“Is it their age?” Thor asked. “Both are approaching the celebration of their 100th year on Midgard, but I’ve been alive much longer –“

“No!” Darcy jumped up from the couch. “Jesus, I don’t care how old they are! I don’t care that they are scientific wonders! I don’t care that they’re in love with each other! I don’t care that Steve stands for all that is good in the world and Bucky has a metal arm! I don’t care about the millions of other reasons you’ll come up with because none of them will be the reason I ran!”

“Why did you?” Thor asked.

“Because they don’t!” she shouted. “People like them, like you -- they run to trouble! They jump into it without thinking because someone has to and that someone will always be them!” Her shoulders slumped with the knowledge of who her soulmates were. "I know what they did during the war. I know what Captain America has done since he returned and what he’ll continue to do as long as there’s an enemy to fight. I know Buck – Barnes – will be by his side because that’s how it’s always been with them. And that’s great for the Avengers and for SHIELD -- hell, it's great for the whole damn world -- but I can’t handle it! I’m sorry if that makes me bitchy and selfish, or if you think I’m a coward, but I lost my parents, not because of aliens or doom bots or Hydra, but because some guy was late for work and ran a red light! It was an accident; a stupid, senseless accident and it took both my parents away from me because my dad never got over my mom’s death!”

“Darcy –“

“They weren’t special. They didn’t have magical powers or genius brains, but they were mine. I loved them so much and we were happy.” She wiped away the tears on her cheeks. She hated crying. “All I wanted was someone to love me, someone I could love. I wanted normal. I wanted quiet. I wanted boring. I wanted a house away from the city, where the highlight of our week was a new episode of The Walking Dead. I didn’t want national heroes and icons and the damn leader of the Avengers!”

Abandonment issues. Clint could relate. He was more than happy to leave memories of his fucked up family in the past, but the hurt never truly went away. He looked down at his right hand, at the blank spot on his palm where the words of his soulmate used to be. He missed her. He missed her every goddamn day, but he’d never regret the time they had together, no matter how short.

“Don’t you think this is something you should say to them, your soulmates, before you walk away?” Thor asked. “I imagine they are confused, wondering what they did wrong.”

“Steve’s confused,” Clint clarified. “Barnes is probably beating the shit out of something.”
Darcy flopped back on the couch with a sigh. Thor was right. She’d have to talk to them. It wouldn’t change anything, but it was the kind thing, the fair thing, the adult thing to do. Being an adult sucked. “Wanna get out of here?” She was suddenly desperate to leave the confines of her apartment. She didn’t do deep feeling time. That was the one thing she and Tony could agree on. “Grab some food and do something?”

Thor got to his feet, knowing Darcy was done talking for now. “Can we return to that place with the games of feat?”

“The arcade in Times Square?” Clint groaned when Thor nodded excitedly.

“Fine, but remember what the manager said last time,” Darcy said. “You break it, Tony buys it.”

Chapter End Notes

Wow! I did not expect such a huge response out of the gate. A big thank you to everyone who has commented, left kudos, etc. Right now, the story is writing itself, so I'll update as long as the muse allows. After that, I'll post weekly until the story is finished.
Steve pounded the bag in front of him, the chain groaning under the force of his punches. Sweat dripped down his back and chest, and his arms trembled from overuse, but he kept hitting. He could feel Bucky watching him, having burned the brunt of his frustration on the mats earlier. Now, he was still as he sat against the concrete wall, his arms resting on his bent knees, saying nothing as Steve worked through his aggravation.

"I’m sorry, I can’t do this. It’s just … I’m sorry."

He wasn’t supposed to feel rejected. He was going to reject her. He had a soulmate. He didn’t need another one. He didn’t want another one! He and Bucky were fine on their own. He should be relieved. She wasn’t going to insist on a relationship, not even a platonic one. He and Bucky would be free to live their lives as they always hoped to do. But Miss Lewis – Darcy, according to Tony – touched something in him. It was ridiculous. He just met her, spent fewer than five minutes in her company, but there was something about her that spoke to him. She was feisty and fearless and, judging by her actions in the lab, probably more than a little reckless.

“She’s you.” Steve didn’t cease his movements, but acknowledged Bucky’s words with a slight shift in his stance. “Don’t you see it?”

“See what?”

Bucky pushed himself to his feet. “Little scrap of thing not afraid of those around her who are bigger or smarter or richer. She saw an out-of-control situation and took charge without thinking of the consequences. Sound familiar?”

Steve ignored him. He focused on the bag, on his punches. He was nothing like Darcy. She ran. He’d never run.

A metal hand stopped his next hit. “Enough.”

“I don’t tell you –“

“Bullshit.”

Steve dropped his head, chest heaving as he sucked in air. “She left. We barely had a conversation and she left.”

“I scared her.” The look Steve gave him was sharp. “What? She’s not stupid. She saw the arm, put two and two together … Not many dames out there who want to be linked to the Winter Soldier.”

“If that’s true, then she’s not the girl for us because I plan in being with the Winter Soldier until the day I die.”

“Again?”

“Shut up.”

Bucky grinned, a quirk of the lips that, for a second, made him look like the Bucky
remembered. He still didn’t smile much, and he rarely laughed, but each day Steve saw less of the world's greatest assassin and more of the boy from Brooklyn. He wouldn’t ever be the same, but neither would Steve. Too much time had passed. They'd experienced too much, seen too much. They'd deal with it together. That’s what they did. “Why are you upset, punk? I know you didn’t want to find her.” Steve started to shake his head, but Bucky put a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t lie to me.”

Steve sighed. How did he explain something he didn’t understand? “It was important to you.”

“Well, me. Not you. But here we are, both feeling like shit.”

“Misery loves company?”

There may be holes in Bucky’s memory, but he didn’t recall Steve being this mouthy. He blamed Stark. Sarcasm was the man’s first language; Steve had to adapt or stay lost. He tossed a towel at Steve and walked to grab their bags from the floor. He didn’t like thinking about Steve alone. It made him anxious. Steve didn’t handle loneliness well, getting stuck in his head if he didn’t have a distraction.

They walked to the elevator. Most of the team used the fancy-ass gym close to the Avengers’ living quarters. He and Steve preferred the setup in the basement with mats on the floor, punching bags hanging from the ceiling, and a roped-up ring in the corner. When he was on edge, the Winter Soldier close to the surface, they’d come down and go a few rounds. Fighting worked out the worst of the flashbacks. Sex took care of the rest.

“I didn’t expect to feel a connection,” Steve spoke quietly, as if he was trying to explain it to himself. “Not this soon.”

“You did with me,” Bucky pointed out.

“That’s ‘cause your special, jerk.”

Bucky said Steve’s words to him in a back alley in Brooklyn on a Saturday afternoon. It was one of the rare days in which Steve felt well enough to go outside, at least for a little bit. He was walking around the neighborhood when he saw a group of boys a few years older than him, definitely bigger than him, throwing things at a stray dog. He told them to stop, they told him to get lost. Bucky came across the scene as Steve struggled to remain standing after several punches, leaping into the fray.

“How stupid are you, punk?” The boy with floppy brown hair growled as he held a hand out to help Steve to his feet.

Steve smiled around his split lip. He knew those words. “Better a punk than a jerk.”

Bucky cocked his head to the side, eyes narrowing as he took in the small boy before him. Blond hair, blue eyes, the face of an angel and the stance of a boxer, as if he knew the world would be unfair because of how he looked and he was ready to take it on. “I’m going to be dragging you out of trouble for the rest of our lives, aren’t I?”

“Maybe I’ll save you.”

They walked down the hall to their apartment, Bucky stepping aside as Steve entered their access code on the small panel located by the door. An image flashed in his mind of the two of them in front of the warped door of their Brooklyn bed-sit, coming home after a date with a couple girls who failed get his blood boiling like Steve did. That door had a tarnished brass key. For a second,
he could feel the weight of it in his hands. He missed that apartment, even if it they could fit the whole thing into the kitchen they had now.

The memory was gone as quickly as it came. Bucky squeezed his eyes, knowing he couldn’t force it. Trying to make himself remember was worse than not remembering at all. “Water?”

“Yeah.” Steve flopped onto the couch, catching the bottle Bucky chucked at him without looking.

“You said you felt a connection?”

Steve swallowed, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. He was still trying to sort out what happened in the lab. When they’d walked inside, he was too focused on everything that was happening to pay much attention to Darcy, but when she spoke, it was almost as if something shifted inside of him. He could swear he heard the click of a lock as he looked into her blue eyes. Everything would be all right now. “Didn’t you?”

“I noticed her tits. You can’t hide breasts as great as those in a sweater.”

“Bucky.”

“What? She’s a dame, Stevie. She’s got tits, fantastic ones. She’s also got long hair that we can wrap around our hands several times and I know you noticed her lips.”

He closed his eyes, remembering. She was small, the baggy clothes she wore somehow made her look shorter, with a waterfall of dark hair that streamed down her back. Even soaked, she was beautiful. He wanted to sketch her, wanted to try and capture the flash in her eyes, the defiant lift of her chin, the natural pout of her lips. “Red lipstick,” he sighed.

“Mm-hmm,” Bucky hummed. “Full red lips. How long has it been since you’ve had lips like hers wrapped around your cock?”

“Jesus.” Steve stood up, one hand running through his hair in frustration as he paced their living room. “You can’t talk about her like that, Bucky! We don’t know her!”

“Never stopped me before, according to the stories you tell.”

“But she’s not just some girl; she’s our soulmate!” He stopped as the words burst out of his mouth, knowing he spoke the truth. She was theirs. No, he didn’t want to want her, but if he’s learned anything in how many years he’s been alive (sometimes he counted the 70 years he spent on ice, sometimes he didn’t), life didn’t always give you what you wanted.

Bucky got up and put his arms around Steve. “Wanting her doesn’t mean you want me less,” he pressed his lips to Darcy’s words. “I don’t want you less because she’s in the picture.”

“Is she?” Steve’s tone was bitter. “She couldn’t get away from us fast enough.”

Bucky wished he had an answer, wished he could say something to stop Steve’s feelings of rejection. Maybe his arm did scare her off, but he was willing to bet anyone who tried to reason with people and robots while a fire burned around them wasn’t the timid type. “The Steve I remember was a stubborn punk who refused to take no for an answer. You gonna let her break your streak?”
Steve turned and pushed Bucky against the wall, his lips going to his throat. “And what do you suggest we do, jerk?”

“You’re the tactician,” he arched his neck to give Steve more room, his hands gripping his hips to pull him closer. “Come up with a plan.”

“Only plan I’ve got right now is fucking you on the floor.”

“I like it.”

“I need a plan.”

Clint looked up from his buffalo wings. Darcy was trying to wipe the sauce from her fingertips, but failing miserably. Filching a damp cloth from the service station by their table, he passed it over.

“Plan for what?”

“I’ve gotta talk to Steve and Buck – I can’t do it.”

“Can’t talk to them?”

she shook her head. “I can’t call the Winter Soldier Bucky. It doesn’t fit.”

Clint shrugged. “Steve’s the only one who does.”

“I’m going with James,” she announced.

“Whatever makes you happy, babe.”

Not having to explain her actions to Steve and James would make her happy, but that wasn’t in the cards, so she’d do what she always does in a crisis: consume enormous amounts of bar food, drink until her problems seemed fixable, and tell herself tomorrow would be a better day. Clint and Thor were great company for that. They'd already spent an insane amount of money playing video games – Thor was surprisingly adept at pinball once he figured out how to stop making the machine tilt – and were now working their way through the bar’s appetizer list.

Thor studied a wing. “I have seen images of the buffalo. I don’t understand the connection between those large beasts and this.”

“It’s not a buffalo, it's chicken,” Darcy told him.

Thor furrowed his eyebrows. “That does not explain the name.”

“They originated in Buffalo, New York.”

“They’re delicious, big guy,” Clint finished his beer and signaled the waitress for another pitcher. “Trust me.”

“I’m never trusting Clint again,” Darcy pressed her head against the window of one of Stark’s many cars left to the Avengers' disposal, hoping the coolness of the glass would help her throbbing head. Wisely, she kept her eyes shut, not needing the see the lights of Manhattan streaking by in her current state.

“Why would you say that? It was a joyous celebration.”
“That’s because you set a new bar record,” she muttered.

Thor grinned at the certificate in his hands. “Free wings for a month. A fitting reward for such a feat. Do you think Jane would like to go there tomorrow?”

Darcy groaned. “Can we please stop talking?”

“As you wish.”

She had her doubts, but Thor managed to stay silent for the rest of the ride to … not her apartment. “Why are we at the Tower? I don’t live here.”

Thor ignored her as the car entered the Tower's private entrance. He opened his door, rounding the car to help Darcy out of her side. “Clint and I agreed you shouldn’t be alone tonight.”

“Huh. Easy for him to say after ducking out early,” she grumbled halfheartedly. Clint’s phone rang when Thor was working his way through his third plate of buffalo wings. He’d glanced at the screen and stepped away from the table, coming back a minute later saying he had to go. “I’m fine,” she continued, tripping over nothing. Thor refrained from saying anything, choosing to lift her into his arms instead.

“I know you are, but my Jane worries. It would please me if you’d stay with us tonight so she could rest well.”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed as she took in Thor’s innocent expression. “Oh, you’re good.”

“Thank you.”

She looped her arms around his neck. “I’ll stay, but only because of Jane.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m a good bestie.”

“I don’t know what that is, but I’m apt to agree,” Thor said as he stepped into the elevator.

“Bestie is slang for best friends. You know, BFFs. Girl power. Sisters before misters. Chicks before dicks. Fries before guys.” Darcy tended to ramble when she drank.

“Ah, then yes, you are a great bestie,” Thor soothed as he carried Darcy down the hall to the apartment he shared with Jane. He didn’t put her down until he reached the guest bedroom, carefully setting her on her feet next to the king-sized bed. “Do you wish for me to procure clothing from Jane so you can rest?”

“Nothing of hers will fit the girls. OK if I snag a shirt from you, big guy?”

“Of course. I’ll be back shortly.”

Darcy considered crawling into bed and falling asleep, but knew she’d regret it in the morning, so instead she shuffled to the second bathroom for a shower. This wasn’t the first time she crashed at Jane and Thor’s apartment, so the cabinet held duplicates of her bath items, including a toothbrush and toothpaste. She was in the shower, soaping the bar smell off of her skin when there was a knock on the door. “Yeah?”

“It’s me,” Jane walked inside.
“Thor still hasn’t grasped the concept of quiet?”

Jane rolled her eyes. Thor’s size made it impossible for him to be silent. The more he tried, the louder he was. “I’ll leave the stealthy type to Natasha. I like hearing someone before they’re in front of me.”

“No offense, Jane, but when you’re in the middle of Science!, a freight train could roll through the lab and you wouldn’t notice.”

“I’d take offense, but that would only make you want to prove it and I’m already a day behind, so let’s agree to disagree,” Jane said as Darcy turned off the water. “I’m leaving you a shirt, water and aspirin.”

“You are the best friend a girl could have,” she sighed.

“I know.”

There were always missions that didn’t feel right. The intel was unreliable or the setting less than ideal. Clint learned to trust his instincts, to go against his handler when the field wasn’t what they’d planned for. He regularly was reamed for going off book, but staying alive was the best “I told you so” in the world.

So why was he willingly walking into a situation he knew wasn’t good?

“I’m not getting involved,” he announced the minute Steve and Bucky got out of the cab.

“You agreed to meet us,” Bucky pointed out. “What would you call that?”

“Stupidity,” he grumbled, walking up the cracked steps of the battered brownstone. Gesturing for the super soldiers to follow him, Clint led them up two flights of stairs to Darcy’s apartment.

“She lives here?” Bucky looked around the hall with a sneer. The lighting was low. The window on the landing wasn’t secured. Her door looked like it would crack open with one strong kick. Steve merely raised an eyebrow as Clint jimmyed the lock.

“Don’t look at me,” he said. “Thor’s been asking her to move in with him and Jane for months.”

“Why doesn’t she?” Steve asked.

Clint snorted. “Stubborn doesn’t begin to describe Darcy. If you’re serious about her, you’ve got your work cut out for you.” Leaving the two standing in the living room, Clint moved to her bedroom to grab the bag Darcy used for overnights. He picked through her clothes without shame, knowing she wouldn’t have time to return home before work tomorrow.

“Is going through our girl’s things a regular occurrence?” Bucky asked from the doorway.

“Not your girl yet,” he pushed the bag in Bucky’s arms and walked back to the living room. Steve was skimming the titles on Darcy’s stuffed bookshelf. A framed photograph of Darcy and Jane outside of a motor home was crammed amongst the books. She had a great smile. “Remember, you called me. If you want a chance to re-do this morning’s meet-cute, you need my help.”

“I thought you said you weren’t getting involved,” Steve told him.

“I’m not. This conversation never took place.” No one would ever call him a genius like Tony, but he wasn’t an idiot. Steve’s phone call proved he wasn’t, either. “I can’t tell you why she ran –“
“Can’t or won’t?” Steve interrupted.

“Both,” Clint answered. “Her reasons are just that: hers. You want to find out, you’ve gotta ask her.”

“Hard to do when she won’t stay in the same room as us,” Bucky muttered as he poked around Darcy's kitchen. The girl had an obvious sweet tooth and favored cereals with cartoon characters on the box. One cupboard will filled with coffee.

“She won’t keep running. She can fight dirty, but at the heart of it, she’s fair,” Clint said.

"So what do we do?" Steve asked, fighting the urge to pack up Darcy's things and haul them to the Tower. He wasn't actively casing her apartment like Bucky, but he identified several safety concerns looking around the small space. She was exposed. Vulnerable. He didn't like it.

“Let her come to you. She knows where you are, knows how to find you. You seek her out, she’s going to get defensive. Let her approach you and she’ll talk.”

“Talk as in ‘Let’s work this out’ or ‘Have a good life?’” Steve questioned.

“That remains to be seen. So don't fuck it up.”

Chapter End Notes

I was prepared to write a cliffhanger for this chapter, but everyone has been so receptive to this story, I didn't want to be mean. Yet. (Ha!)

Thanks for reading!
There were many Midgardian gadgets Thor admired, but the coffee maker was by and far his favorite. Darcy gifted him with the programmable twelve-cup machine after he made the near-fatal mistake of drinking her latte. It was obvious from the panicked expression on Jane’s face that she expected Darcy to do something violent, but instead she put down her laptop, picked up her coat, grabbed Thor’s hand and walked out of the lab. They took a cab to Macy’s, going directly to housewares, where Darcy calmly asked for “the biggest coffee maker you have on this and every other realm.” She called it a belated housewarming gift.

Thor was enjoying his third cup of the morning when there was a sharp rap on the door.

“Clint.”

“Thor.”

He looked down at the STAY ANGRY AND HULK OUT duffle bag in Clint’s hand. “Darcy’s?”

“Yeah.”

He glanced at the even bigger plastic bag dangling Clint’s opposite hand.

“Donuts?”

“Yeah.”

Thor opened the door wider. “Coffee?”

Clint smiled gratefully. “Yeah.”

Darcy was not a morning person. Mornings were wicked, vile and if she ever decided to join the bad guys, the first thing she’d do would ban mornings from existence. (She knew the good guys wouldn’t do it because most of them -- the ones she knew, anyway -- were morning people. It was annoying.)

“Ugh ... ‘s too early,” a voice grumbled behind her.

Darcy rolled over. “Jane?”

“Mmm?”

“You’re in my bed.”

“Mmm.”

“You stayed with me instead of sleeping with the hot Norse god?”

“Mmm.”

Darcy patted the pillow that covered Jane's head. “You are the bestest friend in the world!”
Jane brought her hands up, one accidentally smacking Darcy in the face, before encircling her neck. The two remained like that until the scent of coffee permeated their not-quite-awake-and-functioning brains. Coffee was the opposite of evil. It was joy, rapture, and everything good in the world, plus a pile of puppies.

“I love your boyfriend, Janey.”

“Can’t have him. You already have two hot super soldiers to play – oompf!” Darcy’s first strike with the pillow got her right in the face. She blocked her second attempt with her arm before rolling out of reach. “Too soon?” she asked as Darcy gathered ammunition.

“Light years too soon!” She let the pillows fly.

Clint leaned against the doorway, watching the battle with interest.

“Is this a female morning ritual I’ve not yet witnessed?” Thor asked over his shoulder.

“This, my friend, is the holy grail of female rituals.” Clint’s voice was awed. “I’ve been told it doesn’t exist, that women having pillow fights in their underwear is a male fantasy, but it isn’t. It’s true. We’re witnessing history.”

Thor winced as Darcy tumbled off of the bed. “Should we help?”

Clint punched him in the shoulder, immediately regretting his decision as it was like punching a brick wall. “Are you crazy? You never break up a chick fight! What would Sif do if you helped her?”

Thor grimaced. He had had a point.

“Hey! No ogling if you don’t have coffee,” Jane panted from her kneeling position on the bed, a pillow clutched to her chest defensively as Darcy got to her feet.

“Aw,” Clint whined.

“Pervert.” Darcy stuck her tongue out at him.

“If that were true, would I come bearing gifts?” He tossed the overnight bag in her direction, nodding in approval when she caught it easily.

“How would you like it if I broke into your apartment and went through your things?” she grumbled, setting the bag on the bed. Coffee now; getting dressed and facing the day later.

“Are you kidding?” He draped an arm around her neck as they walked to the kitchen. “I have dreams about that, babe.”

“Pervert,” she repeated.

Thor plucked a feather from Jane’s hair. “You fought well, my Jane.”

“Thanks, honey.”

Darcy met Clint in New Mexico soon after Thor hitched a ride to Mario’s Rainbow World. He oversaw the return of Jane’s stolen requisitioned equipment, staying on in case Thor or world-destroying robots returned. It wasn’t a fun time in Darcy’s life. Jane was heartbroken. Most women would have turned to ice cream and chick flicks to ease the pain — things Darcy could
totally help with -- but Jane turned to Science! Her dedication to the field took on new meaning (re: obsession), leaving Darcy desperate for company.

Clint didn’t say no when Darcy played music. He didn’t say no when she made him lunch. He didn’t say no when she asked him to meet her at the only bar in town for beers and pool. He didn’t say no when she kissed him, but the lack of chemistry stopped both from going further and that really sucked because Darcy had entertained several fantasies about Clint’s arms. Now most of her Clint-centered daydreams involved hitting him in the forehead with the Nerf darts he was so attached to, but she still went out of her way to touch his arms whenever she could. They were amazing.

She jumped up on the barstool next to Clint and nudged him in the arm (sigh!). Making grabby hands at the box of donuts, Darcy chose the frosted glazed donut with pink sprinkles.

“Nice shirt,” Clint smirked at Captain America’s shield. He recognized it from the Avengers-themed collection Pepper Potts had everyone sign off on a few months earlier. Proceeds from sales funded the city’s never-ending clean-up bill. Evil never wanted to fight in the middle of nowhere. Damn egos.

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not mine, moron.”

He grinned and took a large bite of his jelly-filled donut. Thor was on his fourth donut, Clint his second. Jane was picking at her chocolate glazed pastry half-heartedly. JARVIS had just informed her that her lab would be inoperable for at least another day.

“You are the only person I know who looks at an unexpected day off as torture,” Darcy spoke around a mouthful of frosting.

“I suppose I could use the downtime to triple-check some calculations,” Jane mused.

“That’s the spirit!” Darcy cheered. “Do you need me for that?”

“No.”

“Then you should definitely do it! In fact, I’m going to get dressed and get out of your hair so you can get on it! And hey – it’s Friday, so I guess that means no work for me until Monday, right?”

“Huh?” Jane already had that glazed look she gets when Science! takes over. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Yay! I mean, boo. Darn.” Darcy hopped off of her barstool, half of her donut in hand as she slowly backed into the living room. “But hey, calculations. Math. Figures. I don’t want to get in the way of that.”

Jane had pulled a notebook from somewhere and was scribbling furiously. Darcy took the hand she waved in her general direction to mean “See you in a few days” and retreated to the guest bedroom. She was back minutes later, wearing her favorite pair of blue jeans, a gray tank top and well-worn flannel shirt. (It was hard to be annoyed with Clint when he knew her so well.) Her hair was in a loose braid down the middle of her back. Slipping on her shoes from the night before, she gave Thor a hug for his hospitality and dropped a kiss on top of Jane’s head. Clint guzzled the rest of his coffee and snagged a third donut, joining Darcy in the hall.

“What are you going to do with your free day? Laundry? It looked to me like you’re past due.”

“Hey, people who break into other people’s apartments don’t get to judge,” she snapped, forgoing the elevator for the stairs. The chances of running into people you wanted to avoid were less if you
avoided confined spaces.

“‘You can’t hide from them forever.’

Darcy didn’t bother denying it. “Watch me.”

“I’ve heard the truth works wonders. I don’t have personal experience to draw from, but Steve
seems like the type to buy into that.”

Darcy stopped at the landing to Clint’s apartment. “I know you’re right, but I need to do this my
way on my time, OK?”

“OK. Want company doing laundry?”

She gave him a kiss on the cheek because even though he could be an annoying ass, he was her
annoying ass. “I think you’ve seen enough of my personal things for one day.”

“Heartbreaker.”

Darcy left Clint at his apartment. Her plan was to take the stairs until she was past the residential
floors before taking an elevator to the lobby and catching the subway home so she could sleep the
day away. She and Jane had stayed up for hours, perfecting what she would say to Steve and
Bucky when she saw them again (and, if she was completely honest, waxing poetic about what she
would do with them if it wasn’t for the pesky soulmarks), but the strength and bravery that was so
prevalent after a night of drinking waned in the morning light. She’d take the weekend. She
deserved it.

“JARVIS, where are Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes?”

“They are out of the Tower, Miss Lewis.”

She paused on the stairs. “Are they on a mission? Wait, are you allowed to tell me that?”

“That would depend on the severity of the situation and SHIELD protocols. However, the Captain
and Sergeant aren’t on a mission. They’re running.”

“Running?”

“Yes,” JARVIS confirmed. “They run every morning.”

Darcy rolled her eyes. The universe expected her to spend her life with two men who went running
first thing in the morning? Just thinking about it made her tired. “So it’s safe to swing by the
communal kitchen for to grab a coffee to go?”

“I detect no imminent danger.”

“Thanks, J!”

Darcy didn’t visit the communal floor often despite having clearance to do so. Her friendship with
Jane and, by default, Thor granted Darcy access to a lot of awesome things. Some she took
advantage of (hello cool Stark technology not yet available in stores) and others she ignored, not
wanting to give SHIELD more control over her life. She used the swoon-worthy kitchen to make
food for her scientists when they’ve consumed too much takeout and leaves treats on the counter
after one of her insomnia-induced baking stints, but that was it. Unless she was in the presence of
an Avenger or doing something for her scientists, she stayed away. However, Tony just installed a
new Keurig in the kitchen, but it wasn’t your run-of-the mill Keurig. He took it apart and rebuilt it, incorporating some of the kickass suggestion she had while hanging out in his lab. (Darcy learned early on that she could get Tony to eat if she joined him and asked questions about his projects. Their love of caffeine led to the Great Keurig Rebuild of ’14.) He sent her a text last night telling her it was ready to go. She told herself it would be rude not to take it for a test drive.

Darcy was in the pantry, searching for the to-go cups she’d seen Natasha and Clint carrying, when someone cleared their throat. Turning, she saw Bucky watching her with a guarded look. Steve was standing a few feet behind him, his own face just as cautious. Crap. She backed out of the pantry, closing the door softly. “Hi.”


“I was looking for a to-go cup for coffee. You wouldn’t know where those are, would you?”

Bucky reached into the cupboard above Darcy’s head and pulled out an Iron Man travel mug. He rolled his eyes at the image, but handed it to Darcy.

“Thank you, I …” She let out a breath. “Look, about yesterday … You caught me off guard and I didn’t handle it well. I’m sorry if running away hurt your feelings.” Neither man said anything. “I’m sure you were freaked out, too, right? From what I’ve heard, well not that I’ve really heard anything, I don’t want you to get the idea that people are talking about you, but from what I’ve seen on the news and stuff, you’ve had a rough time of it.” She focused on Bucky. “Um, I’m glad you’re doing better. Or is it I hope you’re doing better?”

“Bit of both,” he said stiffly.

“Good days and bad days, huh? Been there. Well, not there in the sense that I know what you’re going through because I have not been captured and tortured and brainwashed and thank God for that because it would not end well.” Shut up, Darcy! “I’m sorry. I don’t really know what to say to you right now.”

“You don’t have to say anything.”

“I kind of feel like I do. Actually, I know I do because there’s a million and one ways yesterday could have gone, but of course I picked the worst one and now we’re all weird and uncomfortable, and everyone keeps saying talking will make things better, but I don’t really want to talk because I don’t want to make things worse, and I know it doesn’t seem like things could get worse, but they could. Believe me. I have a gift at making tense situations unbearable. No tact whatsoever. I think that’s my superpower, which sucks because if I had a superpower, I’d totally choose invisibility because then you’d always know what people are saying about you. That so would have come in handy during high school, let me tell you. But, yeah, talking. Big fan except when I need to do it and then I either clam up or my mouth runs away from me. And really, why should this be a big deal? So we have each other’s words. That doesn't mean anything. Thor and Jane aren't soulmates and they're totally happy together. Plus, it’s not like either one of you needs a soulmate ‘cause you have each other and that’s great because no one wants to be alone and after all the shit you’ve gone through, no one deserves to be happy more than you two and yeah.” She took a deep breath. None of what she just said was what she practiced with Jane. “I babble when I’m nervous. Sorry.”

“We don’t want you to be nervous around us, Miss Lewis,” Steve said quietly.

“Darcy,” she told him. “My name is Darcy.”

He smiled. He was even cuter when he smiled. She tried not to stare. “Darcy, then. I’m –“
“Steve. Yeah, you said that yesterday.” She moved around Bucky and held out her hand. “Hi.”

He shook it, amused. “Hi.”

She turned towards Bucky. “Is it OK if I call you James?”

His body lost some of its tension as he took her outstretched hand. “You can call me whatever you want, doll.”

She gave a little laugh. Yeah, he was trouble. “You’re a smooth one, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea,” Steve said dryly.

Letting go of Bucky’s hand, she observed the two men. They were dressed in gray sweatpants and sweatshirts; Steve’s was navy blue, Bucky’s was black. Their cheeks were flushed and their hair was damp. Both were tall with broad shoulders and narrow hips. Darcy had an urge to leap into one of their arms, just to see what happened. She pushed it away. “Um, Thor mentioned you just moved into the Tower?”

“Yes. We stayed at a cabin Tony owns while Bucky got better.”

“He means until I got the urge to kill people under control,” Bucky translated.

“Wow. Um, OK.” She fought the urge to take a step back. “Hey, how’s that going?”

“Haven’t killed anyone yet.”

Darcy told herself he was joking, not about not killing people, but joking about killing them. She hoped. “Do you want a gold star?”

“Gold star?” Steve asked.

“Stupid saying; never mind.” She fiddled with the lid of the travel mug. She wanted to grab her coffee and run, but they looked so earnest. It made her feel guilty. She hated feeling guilty. “Um, so you just got here, right?”

“A couple of days ago,” Steve confirmed.

“Have you had a chance to go grocery shopping, stock your kitchen and such?”

“Tony made sure we had the essentials. Miss Potts gave us the tour and explained how things worked, but it’s a little overwhelming. We thought we’d see if there’s anything to eat down here before we attempted to make sense of it. In our day, you didn’t order groceries through a robotic butler.”

Darcy beamed. Food she could handle. “To be fair, most people still don’t.” Setting her cup on the counter, she started opening cupboards. “You’re in luck, gentlemen. I’m an expert when it comes to breakfast and this is one of the best-stocked kitchens I’ve seen outside of Chopped, so if you sit down, I’ll feed you before I go on my way.”

“What’s Chopped?” Steve questioned.

“Where are you going?” Bucky asked.

“Chopped is a television cooking competition,” she said as she took the ingredients for waffles out of the pantry. “Has anyone explained reality TV to you yet? Most of it is crap, but I highly
recommend you watch that one. And because Jane’s lab sadly remains out of commission, I have an unexpected day off and will be going home.”

“You don’t have to make us breakfast, Darcy.”

She smiled at Steve, pleased the decency and manners associated with Captain America weren’t a publicity stunt. Finding out he was a jerk would have been right up there with learning the truth about Santa Claus, not that Darcy ever believed in Santa, being Jewish and all, but still. “I know I don’t have to. I want to.”

“Change of plans.” Natasha Romanoff walked into the kitchen, Clint behind her. Both were wearing SHIELD uniforms and their “Don’t fuck with me” faces. Natasha had one of Tony’s StarkTablet prototypes in her hands. She placed it on the counter, pushed a button and hologram of Nick Fury -- a pissed off Nick Fury -- appeared.

“We have a problem,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

This is the evil cliffhanger I alluded to in the last chapter. Sorry! I had to end it there or else we were looking at a REALLY long chapter.

Thanks everyone for reading and commenting and being awesome!
Darcy balanced on her knees in the soft leather chair as she peered out the window, the soda she took from the plane’s refrigerator after Natasha and Steve vetoed the champagne (Tony promised to open a bottle on the flight home) ignored. Bucky couldn’t stop watching her. From the second they boarded Tony’s private jet, she’d been in constant motion, exploring the cabin, flipping through the selection of in-flight movies, twirling in her seat – even calling Jane to tell her there was cookie dough ice cream in the freezer. She insisted on making that call from the plane’s phone, saying it wouldn’t be special if she used her own.

“First time on a plane?” He finally asked after she tested how far back her chair would recline. The answer? Far.

She gave him a dirty look. “I’m not a hick, James. I’ve flown before -- on this very plane, in fact.”

“Why so wide-eyed then?” He pressed, filing away his body’s response when she said his name, even in a slightly pissed off tone (especially in a slightly pissed off tone), to examine later.

She pushed the button to return the small table in front of her chair to its storage spot underneath her seat. “I was a bit out of it last time.”

“Airsick?”

“Drunk.”

“You got drunk on Stark’s plane?” He pictured it, liked it and wanted to see it happen again.

“I was drunk before I got on the plane,” she glared at his smirk. “No judging! It was after London, our apartment was trashed, I lost nearly everything I owned and the guy I was seeing decided I was too much of a liability. Jerk. One I mean, come on! One near-death experience and he bails? Never mind that was the first almost-dying-moment I’d been involved in since New Mexico, and that happened two years earlier, so it’s not like it was an everyday thing and anyway, statistically, people are more likely to die in a car crash than an alien attack, if there were such a statistic, but he thought once was too much, so that was that.” She took a deep breath. “Thor was gone, Jane and I were sad, so we drank. We didn’t know Tony Stark was going to show up on our battered doorstep and take us to Manhattan or else we would have delayed the tequila shots.” She paused. “Maybe. Probably not. Anyway, so rather than appreciate the luxury of having Tony Stark’s plane whisk me away, I was curled in a ball on that couch right there.” She pointed to where the Avengers were clustered near the cockpit, talking in voices too low for her to overhear.

Bucky leaned forward in his chair. “You were seeing someone?”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s your takeaway?” He shrugged. She kicked her legs to make her chair move in a lazy circle. She spun around with her eyes closed, peeking only when the chair stopped. Closing her eyes, she did it again. “Why aren’t you huddling with the others?” she asked when the chair slowed.

“Guess I don’t see myself as part of the team.”

Her expression softened. “Welcome to the Island of Misfit Toys. Population: me.”
“Huh?”

She rolled her eyes again, getting up to walk to the kitchen at the back of the plane, her gait just slightly off balance. She returned a minute later with a handful of cocktail napkins. She dug a ballpoint pen out of the massive bag she called a purse, pushed the button for the table and started scribbling. He peeked over her arm. “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer?”

“Christmas cartoon from the 1960s. Well, not really a cartoon. It’s more Claymation.”

“Claymation?”

She sighed heavily and kept writing, lines of blue ink covering the collection of napkins. “We need to get a notebook or something,” she muttered to herself. “Moleskine, probably.”

Bucky didn’t bother asking what Moleskine was. He saw Darcy jot it down as soon as she said it. Content to sit and watch, he did just that until the pilot’s voice came over the intercom, informing them that they’d be landing in twenty minutes.

“Here.” Darcy thrust the napkins in Bucky’s hands. “This will get you started. Tell Clint I went to the bathroom, will ya?”

He ignored the stab of something (Jealousy? Anger?) in his stomach when she said the agent’s name and focused on deciphering Darcy’s handwriting instead.


“What’s that?” Steve asked over his shoulder.

“No idea. Seems important to Darcy.” He folded the napkins carefully before putting them in the pocket of his hoodie. “Heard anything more from SHIELD?”

“No since we left the Tower. Fury is mad we took Tony’s plane and not the Quinjet, but I’m with him on this one. Until we know what they want, I’d rather not have to depend on SHIELD for a ride home.”

He didn’t say it, but Bucky knew Steve was worried. This wasn’t a mission. If SHIELD needed the Avengers, they would have left directly from the Tower and Darcy wouldn’t be along for the ride. Neither would he. He was doing better, feeling more like himself, a person, not the Winter Soldier, but that didn’t mean he was ready to jump into the fray, even if it was for the good guys. Maybe SHIELD didn’t look at him as a good guy. Who could blame them? He had trouble believing it sometimes, too.

“Hey,” Steve’s voice was low, soothing, as he settled on the arm of Bucky’s chair, his arm going around his shoulders to pull him in for a hug. “You’re gonna be fine. They won’t touch you, I promise.”

“We don’t know it’s about me.”

“Even if it isn’t, I’ve got you. I’ve always got you, Bucky.”

He nodded, his hand, his real hand, coming up to squeeze Steve’s. Yeah, he got him. He took him in when he was on the edge, a broken asset who knew his purpose, his mission, was to kill Steve, but a nagging memory stopped him. It stopped him every time.

Bright sun. Warmth. Outside. A city. He was younger, shorter. He heard kids, boys, laughing. No

“Bucky?”

“How stupid are you, punk?” he murmured.

Steve smiled, the worried lines on his forehead smoothing out as he leaned down to press his cheek against Bucky’s. “Better a punk than a jerk.”

“I’m not nervous. I’m not nervous.” Darcy murmured the words as she applied her make-up. Natasha had her guns. Clint had his bow. She had lipstick. (Clint made her leave her taser behind. She’d be talking to him about that later.) She had no idea why Fury wanted her at SHIELD. She didn’t think the others did, either. If they did, they weren’t talking.

Clint and Natasha were in full agent mode when holographic Fury made his demand. She was putting the breakfast things away, more disappointed than she was comfortable admitting, when she heard Fury say her name.

“Whoa, back up. Bring Lewis where?”

The image turned in her direction. Darcy fought the urge to duck behind Natasha. “SHIELD,” he bit out. “Now.”

“Uh …”

“Director Fury, Miss Lewis is a civilian.” Steve protested.

“I’m well aware of what she is,” he barked. “Two hours!”

His image disappeared.

“What was that about?” Darcy asked. No one answered. Clint was on his phone. Natasha’s fingers were flying over the tablet. Steve moved towards Darcy, but Bucky’s hand on his arm stopped him.

“Thor and Bruce are on their way,” Clint announced, his phone still at his ear. “I’m calling Tony.”

“This will go well,” Steve muttered.

Clint seemed to agree, putting the phone on speaker. It went to voicemail three times before Tony finally picked up.

“The hell, Barton? I’m sleeping!”

“We’re going to SHIELD.”

There was a heavy sigh, followed by a thump. “Is the world ending? I’ve been awake since Tuesday. The world better be fucking ending.”

“Fury called us in.”

“Fuck Fury.”
“Dude. You’re on speaker.”

There was a pause. “Is he there?”

“No.”

“Fuck Fury,” Tony repeated.

Darcy laughed.

“Who’s that?” Tony demanded. “Who am I talking to? I feel like I should say ‘Good morning, angels.’ Wait, I definitely want to do that. Call me back, Legolas.”

“No time.”

“Doing it anyway! Good morning, angels.”

“Good morning, Charlie!” Darcy and Natasha replied in unison. Darcy held a fist out to the red-headed assassin. She tapped it gently with her own fist and kept typing.

“Why the command performance?” Tony asked.

“Fury’s not saying.”

“Shit. I hate when shady secret government agencies act shady. Romanoff, cancel the quinjet.”

“Tony—”

“Shut it, Cap. We’ll go, but on my jet. Consider it insurance.”

SHIELD headquarters were located in an imposing glass building just outside of the nation’s capital. It looked like a bank from the outside. An extremely fancy, you must have at least $10 million dollars to even think about walking inside, bank, but Darcy knew looks were deceiving. She tightened her grip on Thor’s arm as they walked across the marble floor in the lobby. Natasha and Clint bypassed the security check points, heading straight to an elevator guarded by two men decked in combat black holding machine guns.

“Fury’s expecting us.”

Natasha’s words parted them like the Red Sea and they crowded into the elevator. It was a large, but Thor’s size made everything seem small. Darcy ended up in the corner, Steve on one side of her, Bucky on the other.

“Are you all right?” Steve asked quietly. “You seem nervous.”

“I thought I was faking it pretty well.”

“Fury’s all bluster,” Bucky muttered.

“Easy for you to say. You probably know twelve ways to kill someone using only your pinky.”

“Fourteen,” he corrected.

Darcy looked over. “Is that a joke? ‘Cause if it was, cool; the Winter Soldier made a joke. If not, still cool, but also holy crap!”
Bucky didn’t reply, but he might have smirked for a second. The elevator stopped. Darcy watched, captivated, as most of the group (Bruce was the exception) shifted into superhero mode. It was fascinating. Most of them weren’t in uniforms and no weapons were visible (though Clint and Natasha likely had the equivalent of a small arsenal hidden on them), but the way in which they held themselves made it clear they could and would fuck you up if necessary. Clint and Natasha exited first, followed by Steve and Bucky. Thor took Darcy’s hand, and Tony and Bruce brought up the rear. They were met by a man in a dark gray suit, a bland expression on his face. Agent Coulson 2.0.

“Agent,” Steve said.

“Captain. Director Fury is waiting in the conference room.” Turning, he walked, not bothering to see if they were following. Darcy briefly wondered what would happen if they didn’t. The hallway was plain, with a gray on gray color scheme. There were no signs of security cameras, but they had to be there. The silence was deafening.

The group approached at a set of gray steel doors. The agent knocked once, standing aside to let the others enter, looking straight ahead as they passed. The doors closed behind them, the quiet click making Darcy jump involuntarily. Thor squeezed her hand (she managed not to wince) and led her to a seat around the circular table, sitting on her left side. Clint took the seat to her right. The room was empty except for the Avengers, Bucky, Darcy and the man standing at what would be the head of table. Darcy had never met Nick Fury before. She never had a reason to and now that it was happening, it was taking every bit of control in her possession not to ask where he found such a kickass leather coat. She also wanted to know if he owned more than one eye patch.

“Miss Lewis,” he said coolly.

Don't make a pirate joke. Don't make a pirate joke. “Um … what’s up?” Oh yeah. She totally handled that well.

His gaze swept over her and away. Darcy had the feeling he was looking for something and didn’t find it. Crap. Clint nudged his leg against hers. It didn’t help.

“Sir, why were we called today?” Steve managed to sound both respectful and intimidating. Darcy was impressed. This must be Captain America. She was completely out of her element, but at least she had a front row seat at what promised to be an entertaining show.

Fury clasped his hands behind his back. “It’s come to my attention that Captain America and the Winter Soldier found their soulmate.”

“Dammit,” Clint muttered under his breath. Darcy felt Thor shift on her left. Tony pulled out his phone and Bruce looked uncomfortable. Natasha’s expression was unreadable, as was Bucky’s. Darcy was pretty sure her face was beet red.

“With all due respect, that has nothing to do with Captain America and the Winter Soldier, but Steve Rogers and James Barnes,” Steve said stiffly.

“Our enemies won’t differentiate between the two, Captain. SHIELD won’t either.”

“So Capsicle and Ice Age added a firecracker to the mix.” Tony didn’t bother looking up from his phone. “She won’t burn them. Much.”

“She’s a liability.”

“Hey!” Darcy cried. "Get to know me before you say something like that!"
"You dare say such a thing?" Thor boomed.

"She's a distraction, the weakest link, untrained and unable to protect herself," Fury continued as if Darcy and Thor never spoke, his words slicing Darcy like a knife. "That was fine when she was only Foster's lab assistant. She had enough access to make her a potential target, but not enough knowledge to cause damage. That's changed. Something happens to her, we're vulnerable."

"Wait," Darcy interrupted. "Are you saying if I was attacked or kidnapped before, SHIELD would have cut its losses, but now that I'm linked to Captain America and the Winter Soldier, I'm worth saving?"

"Exactly."

"Fuck you," she seethed as Bucky and Steve shot to their feet, Steve's hand on Bucky's arm the only thing keeping him from leaping over the table to tackle Fury to the floor.

Fury didn't even flinch. "I believe that little demonstration proves my point." He picked up a remote from the table. The wall behind him shimmered into an oversized screen.

"It proves nothing," Steve argued.

"I don't even know them!" Darcy added.

"They wear your words. You wear theirs."

"So? How many people sitting here have soulmarks they don't allow to dictate their lives? It doesn't mean anything unless we want it to and who's business is it anyway?"

"SHIELD's," Fury said. "This team is the Earth's last defense. It was formed to fight the battles we cannot --"

"We've heard the speech, Fury," Tony interrupted.

"You can't do your job if you're distracted."

"Who's distracted?" Darcy looked around the room. "Besides Tony, I mean."

"Thanks, kid."

"Darcy --" Steve started.

"No. This is ridiculous. We just met! The damn plane ride to this building is the longest we've spent in each other's company." Darcy was flushed, anxious. Please, don't make her go away. Please, don't make her go away. "How the hell can I be a liability?"

"You're ours." Bucky's voice was soft, but his face was fierce. Darcy ignored the tingle at the base of her spine at his possessiveness. "That's how."

"Again, just met, very little conversation, with a high possibility of even less in the future if you don't drop the caveman act, James."

"Not an act."

Her eyes narrowed. "You're really not helping right now."

"Like I said, she's a liability, a civilian with no means to protect herself, and don't even bring up
the damn taser that put you on SHIELD’s radar in the first place,” Fury threatened when Darcy opened her mouth. “Thor wasn’t immortal then.”

“It still hurt,” Thor murmured.

“Director Fury, I understand how this situation could be cause for concern, but I do think you’re worrying over nothing,” Bruce spoke up. “No one knows about this except for the people in this room –“

“And Lady Jane,” Thor interrupted.

“And Dr. Foster,” Bruce acknowledged. “If you don’t want it to leave this room, it won’t go any further.”

Fury crossed his arms over his chest. “And if something happened to the girl? How do you think they’ll react?”

All eyes turned towards Steve and Bucky. They’d returned to their seats. Steve’s face was unreadable. Bucky was staring straight ahead, jaw clenched.

“I think you’ve been watching too many *James Bond* movies,” Darcy told him. “I’ve been connected to the Thor for years without being labeled a liability, thank you very much.”

“Soulmates are a serious business, Lewis.”

“We are not fucking soulmates!” Darcy shouted.

“Yes, we are!” Bucky yelled at her.

Fury pushed a button on the remote. A building appeared on the screen.

“That’s my apartment,” Darcy said.

“Show of hands. How many people have visited Miss Lewis’ apartment?” Fury asked.

Clint, Natasha and Thor raised their hands. Steve’s hand twitched. Bucky kicked him.

“And how many people have broken into Miss Lewis’ apartment?”

Clint, Natasha and Thor raised their hands.

“That’s not fair,” Darcy protested. “Clint is incapable of using doors like a normal person and Natasha is a freaking ninja.”

“And Thor?” Fury asked.

“He’s a Norse god! Like a brownstone walkup is going to keep out a Norse god!”

“You live in an unsecured building, in an apartment that can, and has, been breached without your permission several times.”

“By my friends! My somewhat strange and creepy friends, but friends nonetheless.”

Fury held a finger to his ear. “Do it,” he ordered. Seconds later, the image shifted from outside of Darcy’s building to the hallway outside of her door. She watched as someone, she had no idea who, entered her apartment.
“You’re training people to break into apartments? What kind of top secret government agency is this?”

“That was a new agent, Miss Lewis; second week on the job. He was in your apartment in less than a minute, your bedroom door at sixty seconds. Do you think you’d be able to get to your taser, or your baseball bat, before his gun was at your forehead? Would you move before he pulled the trigger?”

_Don’t get scared. That’s what he wants._ “Someone would have to know about me in order for that scenario to become a concern. Like Bruce said, we’ll keep it under wraps.”

Fury gestured to Steve and Bucky. Both men were glaring at the screen. Steve’s hands were fisted, his knuckles white with the pressure. Bucky was muttering something under his breath. “The damage is done. You’re linked to two men who were born to protect. Do you know why Captain Rogers was chosen for Dr. Erskine’s experiment? Because he threw himself on a fucking grenade! He did it to protect a group of people he barely knew. What lengths do you think he’d be willing to go for you?”

Darcy shook her head. She didn’t want this. She never wanted this. She wanted nice, normal. She didn’t want heroics. "Stop it."

"Sergeant Barnes is no different. When he and the Captain were trapped in a burning building, he refused to leave without him. Together or not at all. That’s who they are. They’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe and it’s only a matter of time before someone figures that out.” He planted his hands on the table. “Something happens to you, Lewis, and my team is incapacitated.”

“So what now?” Darcy scoffed, ignoring the cold grip of fear at her very core. “Are you going to force me to go into hiding? Am I going to live on some remote farm in the middle of nowhere or take a desk job in some super-secret government building under the guise that it’s for my own good?” Alone. She’d be alone. Again. Still. She jumped to her feet. “Fuck that! I signed the NDA for Thor. I signed it for the Dark Elves. I’ll be dammed if I sign anything about this!”

“I don’t need your consent,” Fury threatened.

“The hell you don’t!”

“Enough!” Thor roared, making Darcy jump. His hand circled her arm and he tugged, gently. “Darcy, you need to sit.”

“You need to sit,” she grumbled, but did as he asked.

“Thank you,” he told her. “This concern the director brought to our attention, it is not new. I worry about my Jane every day. I worry that our relationship puts her in danger.”

“But you haven’t made her go away!”

Thor looked insulted. “I wouldn’t! Anywhere she goes, I go.”

Darcy glared at Fury. “See? Evolution, dude. Look it up!”


Darcy didn’t like where this was going. She opened her mouth to derail his train of thought, but Tony spoke up.
“We’ll move Darcy to the Tower, get a security team on her when she needs to leave it for any reason. That’ll work, right?” He looked around the room. “Right, guys?”

Steve nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He nudged Bucky.

“It’s a start.”

“Self-defense,” Natasha spoke up. “I’ve talked to Pepper about showing her a few things. I’ll teach Darcy and Jane, too.”

"Thank you," Thor told her.

“Shooting,” Clint chimed in. “I’ll give her a gun –“

“NO!” Darcy couldn't tell who shouted it. Some of them? All of them? She'd be insulted if her own voice wasn't among them. She's played darts. Aim is not her friend.

“So we’re good, right?” Tony tucked his phone inside his jacket. "Darcy to the tower, Natasha on self-defense, various superheroes on guard duty until –“

“Until when, Tony?” Darcy asked. “I’m not going to spend the rest of my life with a damn shadow.”

“Shooting,” Clint chimed in. “I’ll give her a gun –“

“How about until Fury’s satisfied you can defend yourself in an attack?” Bruce suggested.

“No,” Bucky said. “Yes to all of the above and it’s until I’m satisfied she can defend herself.”

“Bucky –“ Steve started.

“Don’t start,” he warned. “You may be America’s superhero, but I am – was – the world’s greatest assassin. If I say Darcy can defend herself, then you know it’s true.”

Darcy looked around the table, torn between the wave of affection for the people willing to go out of their way to keep her around and angry that they basically planned the next few weeks (Months? Years?) of her life without her consent.

“Darcy?” Steve asked. “Are you OK with this?”

She closed her eyes briefly. “Does it matter if I’m not?”

“No,” Fury replied.

“Then I guess I’m moving to the tower,” she sighed.

“Excellent!” Tony exclaimed. “There’s a suite on the same floor as Thor and Jane; I assume that works for you.”

She shrugged. “I’ll need to swing by a grocery store or somewhere when we get back in the city, grab some boxes and –“

“No need, Lewis.” Fury gestured to the screen. Several figures were putting Darcy’s belongings in boxes.

“You make your new agents play moving men?”

“We make new agents do a lot of things.” With that, Fury left the room, his long coat billowing
behind him.

“Damn bastard knows how to make an exit,” she muttered.

“Cheer up,” Clint rolled his chair into Darcy’s. “We’ll be neighbors! We can stay up late, bake cookies –”

“Jesus Christ, Barton, stop acting like a 12-year-old girl,” Tony disparaged. “Let’s get out of here before the make us fill out a form. This damn building is filled with forms.”

“True story,” Clint agreed. “They have forms for more forms.”

“Kill me now,” Tony groaned as he pushed back his chair.

The team left the conference room. Darcy waved Thor ahead so she could talk to Steve and Bucky. “I’m sorry Fury played on your instincts like that. That wasn’t fair.”

“He’s right, though.” Steve’s face was grim.

“But you don’t even know me! We're nothing to each other.”

"Doesn't matter," Steve said. "This could be our last conversation and I'd still fight like hell for you."

She wanted to believe him. It was crazy how desperately she wanted his words to be true. "Why?"

“Already told you, doll; you’re ours.” Bucky placed a hand on the small of Darcy’s back and guided her to the elevator.

“And I told you to drop the caveman act. I can take care of myself. I don’t need anyone to protect me.”

The look he gave her was pure predator, like she was his next meal and he hadn’t eaten for a week. Darcy swallowed her next retort and focused on keeping her trembling legs upright.

“Prove it.”

Chapter End Notes

Yup, totally referenced The Avengers in the chapter title. It was the only thing that came to me.

So, all our players are in the same building now. Things will get interesting.

Protective Steve and Bucky? Yay? Nay? Please, sir, may I have another?
The flight home was tense. Darcy claimed the single seat tucked in the back of the plane, putting in her earbuds before takeoff. Her only acknowledgement of the others came when Thor crouched in front of her chair and she deliberately twisted to face the wall. Thor walked to his own seat dejectedly. Tony looked up from his tablet long enough to shoot Darcy a considering look before unearthing a notepad and pen from somewhere. Uncapping the pen with his teeth, he started writing, tucking the pad under his tablet when they landed.

If the flight was tense, the drive from the small airport to the Tower was practically torture. Darcy snagged the passenger seat in the first car, rebooting her “Mad as Hell” playlist, turning the volume so high that the faint sounds of Metallica could be heard by the others. Jane was waiting in the garage when the cars pulled in, taking Darcy’s hand and walking her to the elevator without greeting the others.

“Looks like you’re in the doghouse,” Tony taunted in response to Thor’s crestfallen face.

“We do not own a canine.” Thor was glum.

“It means your woman is pissed,” Clint translated. “Expect a lonely night or two.”

“I can stay with you, if you’d like.”

Darcy joined Jane in the living room after taking a cursory look around her new digs. It was similar to Thor and Jane’s layout – open floor plan with the kitchen and living room divided by the breakfast bar, master bed and bath, and a smaller second bedroom. Her apartment was smaller than theirs, but she wasn’t complaining. She was one person, not a Norse god and his girlfriend. Plus, she was pretty sure she could fit her old place into the bathroom with room to spare. “Thanks, but I want to be alone.”

“To pout?”

Darcy stuck out her tongue. “Regroup. I totally got steamrolled.”

“It happens.”

“Not to you. Not to Pepper. The two of you are hooking up with Iron Man and Thor, and SHIELD is all ‘Go fornicate with our blessing’ while I get dragged in like some kid out past curfew for not doing more than looking at their golden boy and his boyfriend.”

Jane snorted. “Are you serious? Darcy, remember the symposium we attended in Polynesia last fall?”

Darcy leaned against the sofa with a sigh. “I remember going to Polynesia.”

“Do you remember Clint and Tony going with us?”

“Duh. The three of us got drunk at the welcome dinner and Tony told the –”

“My point,” Jane interrupted, “is that they didn’t go because they wanted to learn more about
particle astrophysics and cosmology. Well, maybe Tony wanted to so he could poke holes in my theories later, but Clint was there because Thor was in Asgard and Natasha had a mission.”

“Bummer for them.” The open bar had been awesome.

Jane shook her head. “Now I know you’re feeling better because you’re being stubborn and refusing to see the truth. Sweetie, we don’t go anywhere without some kind of protection; you just don’t have put two and two together because they’re our friends.”

“I was told there’d be no math.” Darcy considered Jane’s words. It was true that when she and Jane went out, Thor was always in attendance. Girls’ Night included Natasha and sometimes Maria Hill. “Still, your ass didn’t get dragged into SHIELD.”

“I live in the Tower. I spend most of my time in a lab connected to Iron Man and, on a bad day, The Hulk. I share a bed with Thor. What else could Fury ask me to do?”

“Nat’s going to teach us self-defense; you, me and Pepper,” Darcy informed her, feeling slightly better when Jane slumped against the wall. “See? Not so fun when free will is no longer an option, is it?”

Jane groaned. “I flunked gym in high school.”

Darcy gestured to her breasts. “Do you think these things helped me ace the volleyball unit? Shit. I’m going to have to wear three sports bras to keep from giving myself a black eye!”

Jane snickered at the visual. “Maybe that can be your Superpower.”

Darcy’s eyes lit up. “Yes! I would totally wear one of those bra tops Madonna rocked back in the day. It’s a bird! It’s a plane! No, it’s Boob Woman!”

“Sold,” Tony strolled inside, the notebook tucked under his arm, a bottle of champagne in his hands. Setting both on the bar, he wandered around the suite. “Is this going to work for you, kid? It’s a bit on the cozy side.”

She rolled her eyes. The rich really were a strange breed. “Cozy, yeah. That’s my complaint.”

“I’m not crazy about the white-on-white lack of color scheme. Too pure. Take some time, get your bearings, unpack you’re collection of teddy bears, then let JARVIS know of any changes you want to make.” He pulled a cell phone out of his pocket. “Happy says the truck’s here. Jane, put your boyfriend’s muscles to good use and get him to help hauling Boob Woman’s stuff up here.”

Jane ignored Tony. “Darcy?”

“Yeah, sounds good; thanks.”

“All right. I’ll be in the lab later if you need me. Coming, Tony?”

“In a bit.” He waited until Jane left before he turned to Darcy, peering over the rim of his ever-present sunglasses. “Fury’s an ass.”

“Noted.”

“Listen, what he said, what he did, he crossed a line. Hell, the man’s crossed so many, he doesn’t even see the damn lines anymore, but what happened … It shouldn’t have gone down like that.”

She leaned against the bar. “Tough talk, Tin Man. Where was that attitude when I was being
treated like some stray brought in from the street?”

He held up both hands. “I’m not the bad guy! I don’t know how he found out about you and the super soldiers – Barton and Romanov are sweeping for bugs in the lab – but we both know your living here makes sense. So does learning how to protect yourself.”

“Are you expecting me to thank you?” She was incredulous. “You bitch about being handed things. I don’t like people making decisions for me.”

Tony leaned against the marble counter. “So you’re saying if we had asked nicely, you would’ve said yes? ‘Cause I remember the subject coming up a few times and a certain lab rat giving speeches about independence versus the sounds a god makes when he’s in the throes of passion.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I like to think I have an open and understanding mind, and that had I been asked my opinion rather than a group of heroes getting all up in my business, I would have come to the same conclusion with less drama.”

He tilted his head, as if trying to picture that conversation. “Really?”

Probably not. “We’ll never know, will we?”

Shaking his head, Tony picked up the bottle of champagne. “You forgot this on the plane.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t feel like drinking with you right now.”

“Be pissed, Lewis. That’s your right and it’s deserved, but know this: none of us agree with Fury. Are we glad you’re here? I’m going to speak for the whole team and say yes, but not because we see you as the weak link. You’re one of us, kid. We look out for each other. And what Fury said before, about SHIELD cutting its losses had something happened to you? Fuck that. We would’ve come after you.” He stuck the bottle in the refrigerator and walked to the door.

“What about now?”

He turned around. “What?”

“If something happened now, would you still come after me?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Hell yes, only we wouldn’t be as subtle.”

Steve adjusted the bag of frozen peas on his eye. It was throbbing like a bitch. “Feeling better?”

Bucky glared at him from across the room. “A fucking grenade?!”

“It was a dud!”

“So you’re saying if one came crashing through the window right now, your ass would stay on that couch?” Steve closed the eye that wasn’t swollen. “Dammit, Steve! Did the fucking serum take what little sense you had?”

Steve snorted, then immediately wished he hadn’t. He was pretty sure his nose was broken. Bucky’s metal arm packed quite a punch. He knew Fury’s Come To Jesus talk was going to have ramifications, but he’d hoped Bucky would wait until their next sparring session to express his displeasure. Instead, he’d punched him as soon as they exited the car.

“What the hell were you thinking?”
Thor and Natasha went to break them up, but Steve yelled at them to back off. “I was thinking people were going to die!”

“Jesus, Steve!” Bucky grabbed Steve by the collar of his shirt, pulling him forward until they were nose-to-nose before pushing him away. “It’s not your job to save the fucking world!”

“You were willing to die in a fire!”

“You crashed a fucking plane!” Bucky roared.

That’s the punch that broke his nose. He could feel it healing, bones slowly shifting into place. He leaned his head back on the couch and closed his eyes. A second later, Bucky’s fingers were in his hair. “Still hurt?”

“I’m gonna be bruised for a few hours.”

“Poor Stevie,” he tutted.

“Fucking jerk.”

Bucky chuckled and sprawled in the oversized chair across from the couch with a sigh. He was twitchy; had been since Fury’s call. Bastard. To suggest SHIELD was willing to sacrifice Darcy to advance their endgame. He had issues with that. Even if her words weren’t on him, he’d have issues with that.

“She’s pissed.”

Bucky flexed his fingers. Steve’s face was like granite. “She’s more than pissed. Gonna take a lot of sweet talking before she offers to make us breakfast again.”

“Don’t care about breakfast. Just don’t want her to be sad.” That’s what she looked like when Fury was talking. Sad. Worried. Scared. She tried to hide it, tried to mask the effect Fury’s words had on her. The fact that she didn’t strike back with some smartass retort spoke volumes. The girl had issues. At least she was in good company. He and Bucky had tons of baggage.

“Give her a day or two before you apologize,” Bucky advised. “She’s too mad to listen right now.”

Steve removed the peas from his face. The swelling was nearly gone. “What about you?”

“She’s more pissed at me.”

"Who's fault is that? I keep telling you, Buck; there aren't many women who go for the overprotective act. Peggy never did."

"Nat can use that anger. It'll help Darcy's training."

Steve gave him a considering look. “Huh.”

“What?”

Steve grinned. “Nothing. Just never thought I’d see the day where James Buchanan Barnes was afraid of a dame.”

It didn’t take Darcy long to unpack. The agents Fury roped into clearing out her apartment were efficient, putting her things in neatly-labeled boxes. What little furniture she owned was hauled in
by Thor, who actually walked into her bedroom with her mattress under one arm, dresser in the
other. She thanked him for his help, not able to keep up the silent treatment when he gave her his
puppy dog eyes. She even texted Jane to tell her she could end her no talking ban, too.

She stretched out on her couch, which managed to look even shabbier against the non-color scheme
Tony bitched about before. The remains of a loaded medium pizza and a nearly empty bottle of
champagne were on her kitchen counter. She picked up the notebook Tony left behind. He’d
started a pro/con list of living in the Tower. His pros outnumbered the cons 5 to 1. Darcy tried to
even the columns, but the fact of the matter was Tower life wouldn’t be so bad. Free rent. Free
groceries. Super easy commute, which means at least an extra hour of sleep every morning.
(Numbers two through four on the pro side of Tony’s list. Living with him was number one.)
Surely she could put up with seeing Things 1 and 2 in the hall (Tony’s top con) in return for some
stability in her bank account. Besides, pranking Clint (number five) had potential. She’d see how
the first day of kicking ass went before deciding if it would remain number six on the pro list or
get added to the con side of things.

Chapter End Notes

So the last chapter had a mixed response. Fury is on everyone's shit list and many people did not like Darcy's passive behavior. I agree she wasn't the usual kickass girl we love, but you've got to remember, she has abandonment issues and sees Jane (and to some extent, Thor) as her family. She doesn't care about Steve and Bucky at this point, but she loves Jane. I think she'd do anything to stay with her.

I'm ready to move on from the angst. Expect some humor in future chapters!

Thanks for reading!
Chapter Notes

This is a long chapter. It got away from me. Somehow, I don’t think anyone will mind.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Con. She was moving kicking ass to the con column.

As soon as she had the strength to lift her arms.

“I kind of hate you right now,” she panted from where she was sprawled on the mat, Natasha standing over her with her arms crossed over her chest. Jane didn’t bother with words, but raised a shaky fist in a sign of solidarity from her own face-down position. Pepper was out of town and absent from that morning’s torture training session. Darcy was pretty sure she scheduled the last-minute trip on purpose. When she shared her thoughts with Natasha, the assassin replied that Pepper already maintained a fitness regimen and was checking in regularly.

“Teacher’s pet,” Darcy grumbled.

Three weeks. For three weeks, she’d woken up to JARVIS soft yet oh-so-annoying reminder that she was expected in the gym at 6 a.m. So much for sleeping late. Natasha used the ninety minutes Darcy had earmarked for sleep for a cardio and strength training regimen that left her sore and exhausted. She didn’t have the strength to fight a collections agent over the telephone, let alone someone who wanted to physically hurt her.

“You’re building the base.” Natasha sank to the mat gracefully, waiting until Darcy and Jane copied her before beginning the stretching portion of their workout. She said it would help with muscle cramps. She really was a lying secret agent. “You can’t expect your body to change overnight. If this was easy, everyone would do it.”

“God, there’s a joke about the girls I went to high school with somewhere in there and I’m too tired to figure it out,” Darcy bitched as she tried to touch her nose to her knee. Natasha was flexible. No wonder Clint was so damn cheerful. “That’s what you’ve done to me, Nat. You’ve beaten the snark out of my body. I hope you’re happy.”

Natasha didn’t respond. She simply moved into the next stretch, holding the pose until Darcy and Jane mirrored her actions.

If Darcy had to be truthful -- and short of being forced to take a lie detector test, that wasn’t happening -- the almost-daily workout sessions (Sunday was officially her favorite day of the week) weren’t horrible. Waking up at 5:45 a.m. was horrible. Having your calf cramp in the middle of the night was horrible. Running was horrible. Running was the worst. The thirty minutes Darcy spent on the treadmill every morning were the most abhorred thirty minutes of the day. But the rest of it -- realizing she wasn’t as out of breath on the treadmill as she used to be; sleeping better; reaching to scratch something on her arms and discovering muscle – was kind of cool. She’d probably never be able to strangle a man with her thighs, but Natasha said that wasn’t her goal.

“I was trained to fight, to kill,” Natasha told them that first morning. “You will be trained to
“survive. There’s a difference.”

“That’s a difference.” Darcy raised her hand. “Will I learn how to flip someone over my shoulder?”

“Is that what you want?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll teach you.”

The women usually had the gym to themselves. Darcy learned that Steve and Bucky used a difference setup in the tower, Bruce was content to do yoga in his room, and Tony worked out in a private gym connected to his suite. Jane asked Thor to stay away during their workouts for fear he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from being too supportive of their efforts. (Or too protective. Darcy remembered how much he hovered that time Jane’s finger was bandaged due to a paper cut. She did not want to be around when Jane explained the bruise she got from forgetting how to block a punch.) Sometimes Clint was around, other times he wasn’t. If he was there, he was usually focused on his own workout or waiting for Natasha to finish up so they could go a round of two. Sometimes, though, he was recruited to help with a demonstration. Darcy loved those mornings.

“You looked good today.” Clint tossed Darcy her water bottle.

She guzzled half the contents “I look good every day,” she huffed as she mopped her face with the bottom of her ragged Culver University T-shirt. She wasn't kidding about wearing more than one sports bra, but two contained the girls well enough.

Nodding to whatever Natasha murmured in his ear, Clint walked with Darcy to the elevator, following her to her room. When he didn’t leave at the door, she opened it with a “Come in” gesture and went straight to the refrigerator for the fruit smoothie she blended the night before.

“What’s up?” she asked, splitting the blender’s contents between two glasses.

“You tell me.” Clint hopped onto the counter. “I thought I’d see more of you now that we share a street address, but if you aren’t in the labs or the gym with Nat, you’re locked in your room.”

“I’m kind of loving JARVIS’ privacy protocols. It’s nice to live in a place where you know no one will break in whenever they feel.”

Clint had the decency to look sheepish as he drank his smoothie. “You seem to be settling in well enough, but Nat and I were talking. You don’t have to stay here if you don’t want to.”

“Where else am I going to go? I’m not an agent, so joining Coulson on the Bus is out and I already told Fury how I feel about SHIELD’s off-the-radar research facilities.”

“SHIELD isn’t the only one capable of making you disappear.”

Darcy set down her glass. She knew what Clint was saying, or rather, what he wasn’t saying. “A new life?”

“A new life,” he confirmed. “No SHIELD. No soulmates. No fear of threats.”

“And you can do that?”

He nodded. “I have a few scenarios mapped out. It would take a day’s notice to get one up and running, but it’s doable.”
Darcy bit her lip, considering the offer. “You don’t have one of those Men in Black flashy things, do you? I choose to disappear and I’m gone, but my memories stay intact, right? I’d never see Jane again, but I’d remember her. Remember you, Thor, Nat—“

“Steve and Barnes.”

She took a deep breath. “Yeah.” She hadn’t seen James since their visit to SHIELD’s headquarters. JARVIS informed her that he was on the premises, but he was as intent on avoiding her as she was on avoiding him. She tried to dodge Steve, too, though she wasn’t as diligent. He sought her out the day after she moved into the Tower and apologized for his actions at SHIELD, telling her that he would leave her alone.

“I don’t know what I feel for you, Darcy, or what I’m going to feel in the future, but something happened when you said my words, a connection of some kind, and I can’t ignore that. I know this makes you unhappy and I’m sorry. I wish we’d met under different circumstances, or maybe you’d be happier if we never met at all, but I can’t change what’s happened. What I can do is give you your space. I’m not saying we won’t accidentally see each other, but I promise I won’t seek you out.”

Steve kept his word. She’d run into him less than a handful times since moving into the Tower – twice in the communal kitchen, once in Tony’s lab and once on the elevator. Each time he smiled and said hello, then left as soon as he could. She spent more time than she would admit to anyone analyzing their run-ins, the way his face seemed to light up when his eyes locked on hers, how he’d hesitate after she’d said hello back, as if he wanted to say or do something before leaving once again.

She thought about what Clint was offering. It was tempting, extremely tempting. If he had mentioned to her the day she met Fury, she probably would have said yes out of spite, but deep down she knows she’d regret it. The only reason she didn’t fight harder was Jane. She didn’t want to leave her. And she didn’t want to be the kind of person who ran from her problems. She was the kind of person who faced them head on and then later kicked herself for not running when faced with a gigantic death robot. OK, so she ran away from Steve and James, but she had her reasons and someday she’d explain them to them so they could stop feeling whatever it was they were feeling (Hurt? Confusion? Anger?) and she could stop feeling guilty. It would be kind of hard to do that if Darcy Lewis no longer existed.

“Darcy?”

“Do any of your scenarios involve a tropical island and a cabana boy named Dante?”

He grinned. “No.”

“Any chance you’ll go with me? You don’t have to change your name to Dante, but that’s what I’ll call you. Nat could come, too.”

He finished his smoothie and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Sorry, babe.”

Darcy threw him a towel. “No beach? No cabana boy? What the hell kind of scenarios are you planning? I thought you were a spy! What kind of a spy doesn’t plan a new life where I can rock a bikini all day, especially now that my arms are starting to look amazing?” She held them out to her sides so he could see. She loved watching her arms when she brushed her teeth. They didn’t jiggle (that much) anymore. She once had a foster brother who lifted weights and spent hours checking out his muscles in the bathroom mirror. She got it now.
Clint indulged Darcy’s pose and made the appropriate impressed sounds as he tested her bicep.

“Ow! Not so hard, arrow boy!”

He hid his smirk. “So you’ll stay?”

She shrugged. “Nat’s going to teach me how to flip someone over my shoulder. Said I could practice on you instead of Jane.”

“Small price to pay for keeping you around.”

She stepped between his legs and pressed her face against his chest, smiling when his arms wrapped around her. “Yeah, yeah; you just want me to start baking you cookies again.”

He pulled back and gave her his version of puppy dog eyes. They weren’t as great as Thor’s, but Thor was basically a giant golden Lab, so it wasn’t a fair comparison. “Please? I’ll be your best friend.”

“Sadly, you already are.” She took his glass to the sink. “You know, I used to be way more picky about those in which I bequeathed BFF status.”

“You love me.”

“Eh. My options are limited these days.”

“Fair enough. Let’s go out.”

She spun around, her face lit in up in excitement. “Out? Like outside? Like away from the Tower, where there’s new people to see and new things to look at?”

He hopped off of his perch. “You’re not a prisoner, Darcy. As long as you have one of us with you, you can go wherever you want. All you had to do was ask.”

“ Asking kind of went against my whole pouting and making others feel bad plan.” She pulled out a couple piece of bread for toast. “It worked great the first few days, but then I got bored.”

“OK, so Saturday. You and me. After Nat releases you from the gym —“

“I hate that she makes me work out on Saturday!”

“—we’ll go out, do whatever you want.”

She smiled mischievously. “You might regret that.”

He pulled her close and pressed a kiss on top of her head. “I already do.”

Bad guys really were bad. No, they were more than bad. They were mean, evil, and completely disrespectful of other people’s plans. Darcy’s Saturday morning workout was interrupted by an announcement from JARVIS over the Tower’s intercom system that something alien was wreaking havoc in Boston. Darcy initially celebrated the early end to the morning’s torture – Jane was happy to escape to the lab – but it hit her as she walked to the kitchen for a glass of orange juice that a call for the Avengers included Clint.

“You look upset.”
“Jesus Christ on a cracker!” Darcy yelped, jumping back from the refrigerator. Bucky raised an eyebrow as she glared at him, one hand pressed against her chest where she could feel her heart beating double time. “Seriously, all of you need to start making noise around here or I’m investing in bells.”

“We were out of eggs,” he offered as an excuse. “You’re usually not here this time of day.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You know when I’ll be in the kitchen?”

“Your schedule is consistent, with few variations. Makes it easy to stay out of your way.” That also made it easy for someone to grab her, but he’d get Natasha to talk to her about that.

She pulled a glass from one of the cabinets. Holding it up with a questioning look, she grabbed another at Bucky’s nod. “Taking the whole ‘Give a person space’ idea to the next level, don’t you think?”

He took the glass she handed him. “Would you prefer I didn’t?”

Darcy didn’t know how to answer that. This was the first she’d seen Bucky in weeks. He didn’t look any different. Same tall, fit frame, same dark brown hair in need of a trim, same blue eyes that looked as if they’d seen too much. She remembered how his face changed when he grinned at her on the elevator at SHIELD. She saw, briefly, the Bucky of old – confident, bordering on smug; a whole lot of trouble in a very appealing package. “Still not part of the team?”

“Island of Misfit Toys, population two.”

She laughed at the reference. “You watched Rudolph.”

“Yeah, Steve and I saw it a couple weeks ago. We know the song, but didn’t know there was a cartoon or whatever that was.”

“Stop motion. I told you claymation on the plane, but I looked it up. What’d you think?”

He shrugged. “It was cute. Probably would have had a bigger impact if we watched it in December. Steve liked it. He went around humming the songs for a few days after.”

She liked the indulgent look on Bucky’s face. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. He’s too damn serious most of the time.”

She scoffed. “And you’re a ray of sunshine?”

There it was; the smile. Darcy found herself returning it. “Right,” she said, coming back to herself. “Well, I’m going to go and watch TV. Hopefully I’ll see some live coverage of the good guys kicking alien ass. They deserve nothing less after ruining my day.”

“How so?”

“Hmm? Oh, Clint and I were going to go out. Do some shopping, grab a bite; basically get out of dodge for the day, but hero duty calls.”

Bucky looked confused. “Get out of dodge?”

“Yeah, it means take off, scram, clear out. I’ve been under house arrest for weeks. I was looking forward to a day away.”
Bucky’s eyes narrowed as he studied Darcy. He was well aware that she hadn’t left the Tower, but he didn’t realize that wasn’t by choice. “Do you need Barton to go with you or will anyone do?”

“Huh?”

“We already established I’m not on the Save the World roster. I have the day free. If you want to go out, I can be your protection, if that’s why Barton was going.”

“Oh. Clint wasn’t going for protection, he was going … well, yeah, he was on Darcy duty, but it was more of a friend thing.”

Bucky nodded his head slowly. “Right. And we’re not friends, so the thought of me going with you isn’t appealing. Forget I said anything.” He moved to leave the kitchen, but stopped when he felt Darcy’s hand on his arm. His metal arm. He looked at her. She didn’t look scared. She looked curious, but she was looking at him, not his arm.

“You mean that? You’ll spend the day with me?”

“I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t mean it.”

Her face lit up. There was no other way to describe it. Beaming, she let go of his arm and pushed past him to rush out of the kitchen. “I’m going to shower and change. We’ll meet back here in an hour, OK?”

He opened his mouth to respond, but she was already gone.

It’s been awhile since Bucky willingly spent time in a woman’s company. According to Steve, he was quite the ladies’ man when they were younger. He had few memories of the dames Steve would describe, glimpses of girls in a dance hall or in his bed, but nothing concrete. He wasn’t sure which memories belonged to Bucky and what belonged to the Winter Soldier. He didn’t particularly care. Steve came first; always had, always will.

Darcy was true to her word, meeting him in the kitchen a few minutes before an hour passed. She was dressed in jeans, her red Converse sneakers and a navy blue T-shirt, white letters proclaiming “Stand back! I’m going to attempt Science!” She was pulling on an oversized gray cardigan, the handles of her bag clutched in her teeth as she wrestled with the sleeves. Bucky took the bag out of her mouth and set it on the counter before helping her with her sweater.

“Thanks,” she said breathlessly, taking a knitted cap from her bag and pulling it on her head. She took in his dark blue jeans, olive green T-shirt, black boots and black leather jacket, gave him a thumbs up, and took his arm – again, his metal arm – and pulled him to the elevator.

Darcy was a tactile person. Bucky added that to the mental list of things he was learning about her. She held on to his arm during the walk from the Tower to a used bookstore about a mile away, calling hello to the young woman behind the counter, reaching over to exchange a brief hug, not noticing how Bucky stiffened at her actions. The store was tiny, cramped, every available space covered with books. Bucky waited until Darcy was settled on the floor in the literature section before checking the perimeter. There was only one exit; the miniscule window in the bathroom was nailed shut. Two other customers were browsing the stacks – a 20-something male with a face full of hair and skinny jeans, and an older lady in her 70s who beamed at Bucky when he picked up the book she’d dropped on the floor.

“A little young for you, don’t you think?” Darcy joked after the lady patted his cheek and shuffled to the front of the store.
“Hilarious, doll,” he said dryly, reaching out to take the stack of books in her arm. “Are you ready to go?”

She bit her lip. He really wished she’d stop doing that. “Are you getting bored? I know we’ve been here for an hour, but it’s been so long since I’ve gone on a book binge and Kelsey told me they got some new history titles the other day and –“

“Darcy, it’s fine,” Bucky cut her off. “I promised you the day. Whatever you want, that’s what we’ll do.”

She beamed. That was the right answer. She took the sleeve of his jacket and pulled him to the corner of a store. Gesturing for him to set her books on a rickety wooden chair, she perused the shelves, skimming the back covers, flipping through the pages, adding a few to her pile. Curious, Bucky picked through the books that made the cut. Her tastes were eclectic – fiction, biographies, a couple cookbooks and a book of poetry. He flipped through a worn copy of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.

“Have you read that?” she asked.

“No. Have you?”

“Many times. It’s one of my favorites. It seems I’m always buying copies to replace the ones I lent.” She gave him a considering look. “I’ll let you borrow it. We live in the same building, so the odds I’ll get it back are good.”

“Appreciate it.” Bucky set the book down and picked up a copy of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. “Stark gave me and Steve a couple tablets, loaded a ton of books on ’em, but it’s not the same as holding a book in your hands.”

“Exactly!” she cried, smacking him on the shoulder in a sign of solidarity. “I love my iPod more than life itself and I totally get the convenience of eReaders, but there’s something about a book -- the way it feels, the way it smells -- that’s almost magical.” She sat back on her heels and grinned up at him. “What do you like to read?”

Bucky crouched down so they were nearly eye-to-eye. “A bit of everything. Steve was always a fan of pulp fiction. Reading to him got me hooked, too.”

“You read to him?”

“Yeah. I don’t know how much you know about us, but when he was pretty sick when we were kids. Asthmatic, anemic, couldn’t put on weight to save his life and caught every virus imaginable. Stubborn little shit would never tell me he didn’t feel well until he’d was hacking something fierce in the middle of the night, so I used to tuck him in bed and read aloud to keep him warm and still; told him I wanted to know what happened, too, so he wouldn’t fight me too much. Sometimes it worked. Most of the time, he was humiliating me.” He fidgeted under Darcy’s unwavering gaze, shifting to distribute his weight even though it was unnecessary. He could maintain a position for hours if needed.

“You really love him,” she said softly.

“It’s always been me and Steve,” Bucky looked down. “I don’t remember falling from the train, not really, but I can hear Steve yelling my name sometimes. I hate that he was alone. When he found me, when I started remembering, I saw your words and instead of being jealous, I was glad; glad he had someone, the idea of someone, while I was gone.”
“James ...”

“Sorry, doll.” He got to his feet. Too much. He said too much. "You don’t want to hear that."

“It’s just that –“

“It’s fine,” he interrupted. “To get back to your question, Bruce gave us a list of the bestsellers by decade, so we’re kind of picking and choosing our way through those; wasn’t much else to do while I was getting my head straight. The Harry Potter books were good. Steve liked the Lord of the Rings trilogy. We hated Lord of the Flies.”

“If kids killing kids isn’t your thing, you should probably avoid The Hunger Games,” Darcy advised. “Have you read The Catcher in the Rye? Personally, I thought Holden was a whiny little shit, but to each his own. I preferred A Separate Peace. Oh! Steve draws, right?” At Bucky’s nod, she got up, took his arm and tugged him to the graphic novel section, pulling a slim novel from the shelves. “You’ve gotten a crash course on world history, right? I’m not going to be responsible for springing the evils of man on you?”

“We’re well aware of the evils of man,” he answered wryly.

“Right,” she said, handing him the book Maus. “It’s about the artist’s father, who was a Holocaust survivor. He wrote it like a comic book, making the Jews mice and the Germans cats. It won the Pulitzer. There’s a second book. I’ll ask Kelsey if she has it; wait here.”

Bucky did as requested, though he stepped into the aisle so he could watch Darcy as she spoke to the blond behind the counter. They disappeared to another section, but he heard them talking, so he kept one eye on the front door, another on the book, eyes widening at the stack of books in Darcy’s arms when she rejoined him. “I thought you said there was only a second book.”

“There is; Kelsey found it, but then I started thinking about all the other books you need to read and here we are.” She piled them in his arms. “Here. Go through and pull anything you haven’t read.”

Bucky joined her on the floor, sorting through what she selected. He didn’t dwell on why it made him feel good to tell her he’d read some of the books she picked. He simply enjoyed it.

“All right,” she announced a few minutes later. “I’ve officially done enough damage to my bank account today. You ready?”

Bucky looked up from where he was writing a few of the titles on paper napkins. “Yeah.”

“Is that the list I started on the plane? Why are you still carrying that around? I thought I told you to get a notebook.” He shrugged and tucked them inside his coat. Darcy rolled her eyes, waiting for him to pick up her books and his before leading the way to the front counter. She picked out two miniature notebooks from a stationary display with a pointed look in his direction, adding them to her purchase. Once their books were packed into the canvas tote she pulled from her bag, she gave it to him to carry. “I need coffee,” she announced as they left the store, her arm linked through his. “How about you?”

“Lead the way, doll.”

She chose a coffee shop tucked between a florist and an office supply store a few blocks from the Tower. They’d passed two Starbucks on the way, but she wrinkled her nose and shook her head when he pointed them out to her. “There’s coffee, James, and then there’s coffee.”
She snickered at his pedestrian order of a large black coffee and insisted he try a sip of her medium black eye. He raised an eyebrow at the drip coffee and espresso combo. "No plans to sleep tonight?"

“It’s Saturday, James! I’ve got a bag full of books and a promise from a redhead that I won’t have to step a foot in the gym tomorrow. I live dangerously," she announced.

He leaned back in his wrought iron chair, his eyes sweeping the street. He would have preferred sitting inside, at the table in the corner table near the back, but Darcy had pulled him to the outdoor patio, proclaiming the need for fresh air and Vitamin D. Not wanting to blemish what was possibly one of the best days he’s had in months, he acquiesced, but led her to the seat against the brick wall, dragging his own chair around until he was at her side. She pulled the small notebooks out of the tote, writing his name on the inside cover of one, Steve's name on the other. She held out a hand.

“What?”

“Napkins, James; hand ’em over.”

He hesitated. She waited. He reached inside his leather jacket for the napkins, watching as Darcy smoothed them on the table before copying her words into the notebook bearing his name, adding the titles he’d jotted down at the book store. Nibbling on the pen, she looked out at the street, deep in thought, before she started writing again. He tried not to stare at her lips slicked in her usual red.

“This is your guide, James Buchanan,” she said, handing him the notebook. “Anytime someone says you need to watch a movie or read a book, write it down. Someone makes a reference you don’t understand; make a note so you can look up later.” She slid the second notebook across the table. “I got one for Steve, too. Between the two of you, you should be able to compete in a pop culture Trivial Pursuit night in no time.”

“What’s Trivial Pursuit?”

She smirked and took another sip of her coffee. “Add it to the list.”

Taking the pen she offered, he did, his precise handwriting a stark contrast to her loopy scrawl. She left the napkins on the table. He picked them up, folded them carefully, and slid them inside his notebook before tucking both in his jacket. She watched without saying anything, but gave him a soft smile before shrugging out of her sweater, leaning back in her chair with her eyes closed, her face turned toward the sun.

Chapter End Notes

I really wanted Darcy to connect with Bucky first. I'm not sure why, but there you go!
“Tell me something, Jane.”

“If you drilled a tunnel straight through the Earth and jumped inside, it would take exactly 42 minutes and 12 seconds to get to the other side.”

Darcy paused in the act of dipping her French fry in her vanilla malt; a habit Jane told her several times was disgusting. Jane was a firm believer that fries were made to be dipped in chocolate malts. “Really?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Jane confirmed around a mouthful of her patty melt.

The two were sitting in the communal kitchen, Darcy having used the scent of grease and promise of her homemade malts to bring the petite brunette out of her Science! daze. Darcy considered asking Bucky to join them, but he must have sensed her hesitation because before she could open her mouth, he told her his head was spinning from the amount of sugar Darcy made him consume at Dylan’s Candy Bar and he needed to rest. It was a weak lie for a super soldier, though it was possible he spoke the truth. Once he informed her of how much he ate due to his super metabolism, she might have made it her mission to see how much of the city they could consume in one afternoon.

“What do the Avengers do for fun when they’re not avenging?”

Jane looked up from the cookbook she was paging through. “Huh?”

“Fun. You know, that thing people do when they aren’t working or sleeping. We’ve tried it a few times. I still litter glitter when I wear my favorite pairs of jeans.”

Jane held her malt up for a toast. “That was an awesome night. What I can remember of it.”

“Ditto, girlfriend.” Darcy clanked her glass against Jane’s. Not only did the kitchen have a malt maker, but one cupboard was filled with glassware of any shape imaginable, including old-fashioned malt glasses. Darcy was totally going to sneak one of fancy wineglasses to her apartment; it was so much cooler than her Hello Kitty tumbler. “But, yeah, fun. This place is tricked out like crazy, but I never see anyone taking advantage of it.”

“That’s ’cause you’ve been pouting in your room,” Jane told her.

“Really?” Darcy asked. “You’re consumed by Science! most of your waking hours, yet you were aware of that?”

Jane shrugged. “Everyone’s allowed a good sulk now and then. Another week, though, and I was coming after you.”

Darcy dipped a fry in the blob of ketchup resting on a pile of paper napkins. Yes, she had been sulkng, but it was completely justified, and she would defend her actions to anyone who dared question them. But all good things must come to an end. After Darcy finished watching every episode of Buffy, the Vampire Slayer, she realized she was beyond bored and ready to take advantage of the insane amenities that were the Avengers Tower.
Darcy's apartment was located on the top floor, as well as Jane and Thor's. It made sense, seeing as Thor was the only one who could fly. Clint and Natasha's apartments (they each had their own, but Darcy doubted they were fooling anyone) were one level below, followed by Tony's floors. Bruce had an entire floor to himself for safety reasons, with Steve and Bucky's apartment beneath his. Darcy imagined Steve saw himself as the first line of defense, should the residence floors ever be breached.

The gym, sparring ring, swimming pool, hot tub were located beneath three floors of guest apartments that had yet to be used. Darcy wasn't sure what was on the other Avenger-specific floors. They weren't off-limits to non-Avengers like Darcy and Jane, but considering one had a firing range and another stockpile of weapons, Darcy was OK not knowing the details.

The kitchen on the communal floor was Darcy's favorite part of living in the tower, even more so than the rec room – large, plush couches situated around an oversized television screen above a cabinet that included every game system imaginable. The stainless steel side-by-side double ovens, eight-burner gas stove, and a refrigerator were fit for a billionaire who shared his home with a god, and yet no one spent a lot of time on the so-called family floor.

“I'm usually in the lab.”

Darcy rolled her eyes. She was a champion eye roller. “I’m well aware, Jane. But what about Thor? What does he do when you’re trying to open wormholes?”

“Train? Go to Asgard? Watch Real Housewives of Beverly Hills with Clint?”

“It’s not a multiple choice exam.”

Jane pushed the cookbook aside. “I don’t know. It’s not like we spend a lot of time socializing with the others. Clint and Nat have SHIELD. Tony has his company and high society, and Bruce has yoga, I guess. Steve works for SHIELD, or he did before Bucky. I don’t know what those two do in their down time, but Thor has another realm to check on every so often.”

Darcy leaned against the counter. “Don’t you think it’s sad that the only time they get together is when they fight evil?”

“Not true. I seem to remember Thor winning a Buffalo wing-eating contest with you and Clint not that long ago.”

Darcy smirked. “How many times has he taken you there?”

“I hate you.”

“That many, huh?”

Jane rolled her eyes (she was runner up) and took a long pull of her malt. “Why so concerned with
team dynamics?”

Darcy shrugged. It wasn’t that she cared about what superheroes did in their free time, but she got the feeling that James was … not bored, exactly, but restless. She was well aware of how aware he was of their surroundings. The man could appear relaxed and at-ease, but his eyes were constantly assessing, his body posed to fight. When his stomach growled outside the café, Darcy laughed until she noticed the grayish pallor of his face.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m fine, doll; just a bit hungry.”

She glanced at her phone. “I guess we could find a place to eat. This time of day, though, places will be packed.”

“I’m fine,” he repeated.

She remembered Clint joking about the number of pizzas Steve once consumed after a mission. The serum apparently gave him the world’s fastest metabolism. He had to consume an ungodly number of calories just to keep his body going. Shit.

She jumped to her feet. Bucky was on his less than a second later. “Stay here,” she commanded, walking into the café. She could feel him watching her as she bought the heartiest sandwich they had – turkey and provolone on a croissant – a bottle of orange juice, and two chocolate chip cookies the size of her hand. Thrusting the white paper bag containing what most people considered a meal – she thought of as a midday snack in his hands, she gathered her things and hailed cab. “Eat,” she insisted once they were driving to the all-you-can-eat buffet she once made the colossal mistake of taking Thor to. He was asked not to return. After watching James plough through several plates of food, she was certain his name was added to the list, too. It was a shame. They had a chocolate fountain. She loved those things.

“I don’t know. It seems weird that Tony went through all the trouble to get everyone here and they all kind of do their own thing.”

Jane hummed non-committedly. “They work well together when they have to. That’s what important, right?”

Darcy crumpled the grease-stained wrapper into a ball before tossing it in the garbage. “I guess.”

Bucky stuffed the last bite of his bacon double cheeseburger in his mouth, chasing it with a pull from his beer. While the level of serum in his body didn’t result in forced sobriety like Steve, it did make it a lot tougher for him to get even the slightest buzz. These days, he drank because he liked the taste of alcohol; no more, no less.

Stretching out on the oversized couch, he picked up the copy of Maus Darcy made him buy. He was nearly finished. The way his night was going, he’d have the second one read before Steve got home. He’d texted while he and Darcy were picking up dinner for themselves and Jane, saying the fight was over, everyone was fine, and they were sticking around to help the locals before heading back. That was three hours ago. Bucky was pretty sure Steve was sporting a few bruises from the battle. He always delayed his homecoming when he was injured, wanting to give his body a chance to heal before Bucky saw him.

He wondered what Steve would say when he told him he spent the day with Darcy. Steve kept him apprised of Darcy when he ran into her around the Tower – “She looks less likely to murder us in
our sleep” was a step in the right direction – but he never imagined she’d be amendable to spending several hours in his company; not now, if ever. Granted, it wasn’t as if she had many options when everyone else otherwise occupied, but she looked as if she enjoyed herself. After lunch, she towed him to the subway, getting off a few blocks from Central Park. They spent an hour in the park, Darcy reading, Bucky people-watching (that’s what she called it; the both knew his level of observation skills was not nearly so innocent) before their visit to the candy store. He had five pounds of gummy bears in a plastic bag on the kitchen counter. Darcy insisted on buying it for him as a thank you for the day. He wanted to tell her the smile on her face was thanks enough, but he remembered the look she got when he mentioned her words on Steve’s skin. No soulmate talk. No flirting. She didn’t say it out loud, but he didn’t survive decades in captivity because he was stupid.

He finished his beer. He liked her. She was so much like Steve. Not the “aw-shucks, ma’am” persona he adopted for the public, but the little shit who was always ready to fight for the underdog. She was a mouthy thing, just like Steve. Bucky sighed as memories of the countless fights Steve’s mouth had gotten them into flashed in his mind. Some he knew without a doubt happened. Others were more blurred, not as strong, but they invoked feelings of nostalgic exasperation.

Pushing off the couch, he walked to the kitchen, tossing the empty bottle in the bin for recycling before grabbing a second out of the refrigerator. It still gave him a shock every time he opened the door to packed shelves. Christ, what he and Steve would have done for even a quarter of what they now had at their disposal. Steve informed him that they didn’t need to worry about money, not anymore. Their apartment was free. SHIELD covered their amenities in exchange for Steve’s services and apparently Uncle Sam considered the years he was brainwashed and Steve was asleep meant for hazard pay, resulting in extremely healthy bank accounts for both.

He sort of remembered days working in a factory, trying to earn enough money for Steve’s medical bills, a little bit of food and enough oil to keep their one-room apartment heated. He’d come home dirty, exhausted, his muscles screaming from overuse, and it wasn’t enough. It never was. Enlisting in the Army, knowing it was Steve’s dream, felt like an act of betrayal, but there was no other way to ensure their survival. His job and what little illustration work Steve would get wasn’t cutting it. The night he admitted what he did, Steve clasped him on the shoulder, telling him how proud he was. Both pretended not to notice how Steve’s voice broke, nor did they acknowledge the stiffness in his shoulders when he walked Bucky to the train depot, standing on the platform as wives and girlfriends waved goodbye. How Bucky wanted to grab Steve for one more hug, one last kiss. Same sex soulmates happened, even then, but no one talked about it and that was fine. What Bucky felt for Steve and vice versa wasn’t anyone’s business but theirs.

Bucky fiddled with the brightly-colored twisty tie around the bag of gummy bears. Darcy had yelled at a man on the subway that afternoon for not giving his seat to an obviously-pregnant woman, questioning his manhood as well as his taste in music, which could be heard out of his oversized headphones. She didn’t stop, even when a man three seats down gave his seat to the woman. It was strange how comfortable he felt, standing with his arms crossed behind the smaller person ranting over the world’s misdeeds. He was prepared to step in if the man decided he had enough, but Darcy spun away before it came to that, clearly disgusted, her clasp on his hand tight as they exited at the next stop, several women applauding as they slipped through the doors. She tugged him up the stairs, still grumbling under her breath. He listened, entertained and amused, until she got it out of her system. He bought her lemonade and a pretzel in celebration of her victory. She shot him a dirty look but accepted the snack, giving him half of the pretzel as they walked, once again her arm linked through his.

She had no qualms touching him, flesh or metal. She didn’t just touch, she latched on, pulling,
dragging, tugging. She knew where she wanted to go and he was along for the ride. He was perfectly content to follow her. He wore a black leather glove over his hand, the rest of his arm covered by his jacket. She asked if he was trying to replace Michael Jackson as the King of Pop, then stood with an expectant look until he took out his notebook and added that name to his list.

“You ould just tell me who this Jackson guy is, doll.”

“'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.'”

He looked up Michael Jackson after JARVIS informed him Darcy was in the kitchen, having dinner with Dr. Foster. Bucky wasn’t sure why his glove prompted Darcy’s comment until he clicked on a link for a music video. A silver glove? Really? If the public accepted that as a fashion choice, maybe he shouldn’t go through such lengths to hide his arm in public. It would be summer soon. He’d trained his body to withstand extreme heat and cold during missions, but it would be nice to be normal again.

Darcy couldn’t sleep. She knew the team was fine, Jane having shared the text she received from Thor, Clint’s own message appearing on the screen of Darcy’s phone seconds later. This wasn’t the first time any of them had gone out on a mission since she moved into the Tower, but it was the first time all of the Avengers were called. Except Bucky. Darcy frowned. Was he an Avenger? Did he want to be? Did the others want him to be? She rolled over; the idea of Bucky feeling unwanted giving her pause. She knew what it was like to be on the sidelines, to watch everyone go about life with friends, family, wanting so desperately to have what they took for granted. He had Steve. She knew that, but was it enough? Strength in numbers and all that.

She tossed back the covers. It was decided.

“Yo, JARVIS.”

“Yes, Miss Lewis?”

“What’s the baking situation in the kitchen? Do we have what I need to make a chocolate sheet cake the size of Texas?”

“After perusing several chocolate sheet cake recipes, I can assure you the ingredients you require are in stock.”

“Excellent. What’s the cake pan situation?”

“Most sheet cake recipes call for a 15-inch by 10-inch by 1-inch pan, of which the kitchen has two. Might I suggest doubling your recipe?”

“You’ve read my mind, J-Man.”

Steve was tired, his body sore from being thrown against a building. Sometimes these little fights, the ones that popped up out of nowhere and are over just as quickly, were worse than longer missions. They’re more physical, at least.

“I am famished!” Thor’s booming voice echoed in the elevator, the others so used to his lack of indoor voice that no one reacted. “Who would like to join me for wings of the buffalo?”

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers, wishing Thor hadn’t mentioned food. He
was hungry. The energy bars they stocked on the quinjet kept him and the others from falling over in hunger, but they were a poor substitute for actual food. He glanced at his phone. Bucky would be awake. He knew that. He should go to their apartment, say hello, maybe make both of them a midnight meal.

“Why am I smelling chocolate? JARVIS, who has chocolate?” Tony pushed his way off the elevator, head turning left and right as he searched for the rich cocoa scent that assaulted them the second the doors opened on the communal floor.

“Sir, Miss Lewis has left cake for the team in the dining room. I’ve taken the liberty of ordering pizza. It will be here shortly.”

“We have cake?” Clint’s eyes snapped open.

“We have a dining room?” Bruce echoed.

Minutes later, the group was seated in the plush cream-colored chairs around the large walnut table in a room off the kitchen, plates of cake in various stages of consumption in front of them. One sheet cake was demolished, the other a third gone. Tony sat at the head, his feet propped up on the table’s surface, no idea how or when it got there, but as grateful for its appearance as he was for the cake Darcy left with a note that said “Congratulations on saving the world again.”

“Sir, the pizzas are here. Shall I have security deliver them?”

Steve got to his feet. “I’ll come down.”

Tony waved his hand. “Not necessary, Cap.”

“It is,” he replied, not comfortable with the thought of someone besides those who lived in the Tower’s residences having access to the floors. He knew Tony employed a cleaning service, but he trusted Pepper’s vetting capabilities when it came to something like that. After the fiasco with Fury, he was inclined to see anyone outside of the team (Pepper, Jane and Darcy were the exceptions) as a threat until proven otherwise.

“Captain Rogers.”

Steve looked up. He knew he didn’t have to, but it was habit. “Yes, JARVIS?”

“Miss Lewis asked me to relay a message.”

“Is she all right?” Steve asked, one hand going out to stop the elevator.

“She’s fine, sir, and in her apartment. She asked that you invite Sergeant Barnes to join you and the others for food.”

Steve paused. Bucky had spent a little time with Natasha. The two of them often spoke quietly in Russian. He sometimes sparred Thor, as he and Steve were the only ones who could take the full power of Bucky’s arm. Tony was desperate to get his hands on Bucky’s arm, so Bucky avoided him. He tried to remember if Bucky had ever conversed with Bruce or Clint. “Did she say why?”

“She thought it would be nice.”

Steve thought it over while he walked to the lobby, exchanging a few pleasantries with the night guard before hoisting ten extra-large pizza boxes in his arms. He agreed with Darcy. It would be nice to see Bucky in the company of others. Out of the two of them, he’d always been the social
one, dragging Steve to the movies and clubs, determined to bring some excitement to their lives. Shifting the pizzas to one hand, he pulled his phone out of his pocket.

Bucky answered on the second ring. “Hello?”

“It’s me.”

“I know, punk; who else would it be?”

“Jerk. Tony, well technically JARVIS, ordered a ton of pizza. Come and eat with us.” There was a pause. “There’s chocolate cake, too.”

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

Chapter End Notes

I suck at coming up with chapter names. I admit it.

I'm glad so many of you likes the book store scene! Reading is sexy! I say this not as someone who works in a library and a book store (which I do and love every minute of both jobs), but as someone who knew she found the guy she was going to marry when we spent hours at a book store on one of our first dates.

I hope everyone had a lovely weekend! I spent mine painting bedrooms, but seeing as it was 95 degrees outside, that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.
The cake was only the beginning.

The morning after the team gorged themselves on Darcy’s late night chocolate dessert – which somehow turned into nearly three hours of eating, drinking, and sharing stories around the rec room of past missions, battles and Science! experiments gone wrong (Bucky even managed to recount a story from his and Steve’s past that made Clint fall off the back of the oversized chair in laughter) – a plate of blueberry muffins the size of Thor’s fists appeared in the communal kitchen. Monday afternoon, it was peanut butter chocolate chunks cookies in a ceramic cookie jar shaped like Mjolnir.

“Why is there a container of cookies with Barton’s name on it?” Tony complained. “That’s favoritism!”

Tuesday brought brownies, both with and without nuts, though the official-looking document propped in-between the matching white platters (it was even notarized) provided a clear argument about why nuts in baked good, especially brownies, was wrong. Bruce’s lips twitched when he read it. He followed a relatively healthy diet, limiting caffeine, alcohol and sugar in effort to keep The Other Guy calm, but brownies were a personal weakness. Darcy discovered it after bringing a a dozen to the lab one rainy morning. He eyed them for hours, but said “No, thank you” every time she offered him one. His face fell when he saw the empty container near the end of the day, but when he returned to his desk, there was a single brownie on a napkin with a sticky note that said some things were worth a risk. Apparently, she wasn’t willing to play this time, adding nuts to one batch to make them somewhat (if you squint) nutritious. He took several to his lab, swinging by Jane’s workspace first to leave a yellow Post-It on Darcy’s laptop: “I’m nuts about brownies. Thank you.”

She stuck it on her refrigerator.

Wednesday – “Happy Hump Day!” announced a crudely-drawn pony (“It’s a camel!” Darcy yelled at Clint before throwing the note at his head.) on a now-crumpled light pink piece of paper – brought cinnamon rolls. Clint was on his second roll and Tony his third cup of coffee when Steve and Bucky walked into the kitchen post-run. Bucky picked up the note, gave one of his blink-and-you-missed-it smiles, and put two cinnamon rolls on a plate, passing it to Steve to warm them in the microwave while he got their coffee.

“You really are an old married couple, aren’t you?” Tony asked.

Bucky ignored him. Steve rolled his eyes. Clint expected the pair to take their breakfast to their apartment, but instead they each took a seat at the bar stools in front of the extra-long granite counter that divided the kitchen from the rec room. Tony raised an eyebrow, but kept his mouth shut as he tapped away at the tablet in front of him. Clint helped himself to more coffee, holding the pot up in silent question to the others, filling Steve’s cup as his nod of assent. Natasha watched the scene from the entryway.

“I know what you’re doing,” she told Darcy Thursday. It was chocolate mocha muffins that morning. Tony had three before Pepper cut him off. Bruce allowed himself to enjoy third of one. Thor finished it for him and six more before the caffeine kicked in. Steve was elected to take Thor...
to the park to run off some of his excess energy and JARVIS politely informed Darcy that she was no longer allowed to bake caffeine-infused muffins.

“Dying?” Darcy gasped. Natasha had not only increased her time on the treadmill to 45 minutes, she boosted the speed, too.

“Relax your shoulders; you’re too tense,” Natasha corrected. “And I was referring to the treats in the kitchen.”

Darcy tried to shrug it off. She baked when she needed to think, or not think. It relaxed her. Knowing that the treats she whipped up in her kitchen made her not-wanted-but-she-still-kind-of-liked-them roommates happy was a bonus. “I’ve done it before.”

“No every day.”

Darcy risked taking her eyes off her feet – JARVIS promised he erased the footage of her nearly falling off the treadmill not once, but three times – to shoot the redhead a look. “Is this a bad thing? Am I hurting the team? Lowering morale?”

“The opposite. They’re bonding.”

Darcy tried not to grin, but her poker face was shit.

“I don’t want you to get your hopes up,” Natasha continued. “We’re not a sentimental group. You’ve hacked into SHIELD’s computers—“

“For the record, that was Tony’s idea. I just didn’t stop him.”

“—and read our files. You know we don’t come from normal backgrounds, let alone happy backgrounds. There’s a reason for that. SHIELD tends to seek out individuals without family or close friends. The lack of personal connections makes for a better agent.”

Darcy understood SHIELD’s line of thinking, but that didn’t make it right. Yes, she read their files – what information she could reach. Their deepest secrets were well and truly buried, but skimming the surface was enough to get an idea of the depth of their demons. If she shed a tear or two or swore a blue streak for the comments made by those who only knew the Avengers from debriefings, observations and media events, that wasn’t anybody’s business but hers. They didn’t know about the times Clint would crash on her couch after a mission went south, unable to talk, but not wanting to be alone, or Tony’s decision to renovate the tower for the team as a coping mechanism for his anxiety. Thor still got teary over Loki. He didn’t want to, but he couldn’t separate the boy he called brother from the man who tried to take over the world. All of them, each and every one, was broken in some way, and yet rather than let that destroy them, it made them strong. They might have been chosen to protect the world from the worst of what mankind, what the universe, had to offer because of their specialized skills, but none of them were obligated to do so. They could walk away any time they wanted, and yet they stayed.

Steve slouched on one of the couches in the rec room, his feet propped up on the cushioned ottoman in front of him, Maus II in his hands. Bucky had handed the books to him Sunday morning, saying Darcy recommended them.

“When did that happen?”

“Yesterday. Barton promised her a day out, but Boston happened. I took his place.”
Steve stopped flipping through the pages to study his soulmate. “You spent the day with Darcy?”

Bucky smiled. A real smile. The smile Steve grew up with and worried he’d never see again. He was showing it more. Steve wondered if Bucky realized that. “She’s something, Stevie.”

He didn’t want to be jealous. He wasn’t jealous. Not really. Bucky and Darcy forming a connection was a good thing. It would make life in the Tower better. Simpler. Easier. And yet he couldn’t help being envious of the hours Bucky spent with Darcy alone; at places she loved and shared with him. Steve didn’t know she enjoyed reading. He didn’t know what books she considered favorites. He didn’t get to sit with her outside a café and have coffee with her, or watch her face light up with childish glee in a candy store.

“She got you this.” Bucky handed him a notebook.

He opened the cover and saw his name written in her familiar script. “What is it?”

“Our guide. We hear or see a reference we don’t know, we write it down to look up later. Movie recommendations, books, movies – it all goes here.”

Steve grinned. He started something similar when he first woke up, but then SHIELD gave him a laptop (which Tony scoffed at before replacing it with a tablet), enrolled him in Computer Basics 101 (otherwise known as meeting with an agent in a tiny, windowless office in-between missions and debriefings), and considered the issue handled. Overwhelmed at the amount of information at his fingertips, Steve lost several days to exploring the Internet (Were people always this obsessed with cats?). He then put the tablet away, got a library card, and started reading his way through the history section. “What do you have in yours?”

Bucky passed it over. He’d filled several pages already, but nothing was familiar. Steve took a deep breath. It had been months since the enormity of his life hit him. In the beginning, the changes were too much. The world was so much bigger, louder, and brighter than what he remembered; couple that with the grief of losing Bucky, it was a struggle to get out of bed every morning. Picking up his shield, donning the Captain America costume and fighting the good fight helped, but he couldn’t fight forever. That wasn’t living. He forced himself, if not to embrace the 21st Century, to at least accept it, and after he let go of his anger, his frustration over the injustice of all that he lost, things slowly improved. Finding Bucky alive – Steve felt like it was the universe’s way of trying to give something back, to make up for what was taken away. It took nearly a year for Bucky to reach a place where he felt comfortable with what he remembered and what he didn’t, but Steve would do it all over again if it meant they would be together.

And still there were times when this life, his life, was overwhelming. Bruce called them panic attacks and taught Steve ways to calm his body and mind, to build control so that he wouldn’t get lost. He closed his eyes, took a deep breathe, and let the air out slowly as he counted silently to ten. He was at seven when he felt Bucky’s hand over his.

“I’m here, Stevie,” he squeezed his hand. “I got ya.”

They spent the rest of the day in their apartment. Bucky read. Steve did for a little bit, then got out his sketchpad. The bag of gummy bears sat in-between them on the couch, the pile of colorful treats getting smaller as the day progressed. It was peaceful, relaxing; exactly what Steve needed.

“I think you’d like her,” Bucky commented as they made dinner.

“Never said I didn’t.”
And he didn’t. How could he dislike someone he didn’t know? Yes, the idea of sharing Bucky with a second soulmate was not something he wanted, but he couldn’t deny that Darcy Lewis stirred something in him. Bucky said she reminded him of Steve. Steve thought she was more like Bucky. She was charming and outgoing, brash and daring. She could hold her own with Clint and Tony; hell, she had no fear yelling at Fury, backing down only when his threat of sending her away sank in. Steve would never forget how she looked at that moment, her face closed off and shoulders shifting as if she wanted to curl into herself. He wanted to go to her, hold her, promise everything would be all right, that he’d never let anyone hurt her. He wanted … he didn’t know what he wanted. A chance? A chance to get to know the person the cosmos wanted him and Bucky to be with; a chance for her to get to know Steve Rogers, not Captain America. He wanted to see if he could make her smile or roll her eyes, or take him by the arm and drag him to someplace he simply had to see.

He wanted to thank her. It never would have occurred to him to ask Bucky to join the team for a post-mission meal. It wasn’t something they did, but watching everyone eat, the stress and tension of battle eased by food and conversation, he flashbacked to the drinks he and Bucky shared with the Howling Commandos. Locking eyes with Bucky, he knew he was thinking the same thing and for the first time in a long time, Steve felt like he was part of something bigger than Captain America, that maybe the Avengers could be more than a name. Maybe they could be a team.

“That’s quite a pensive look. Do you not like the book?”

Steve smiled at Darcy as she sat in the loveseat adjacent to the couch. She was wearing black yoga pants with an oversized SHIELD sweatshirt he recognized as Clint’s. He pushed aside the automatic jealousy at seeing her in another man’s clothing and focused on the strip of red cotton against creamy white skin on display when the shirt slipped too far down her shoulder. She had her ever-present phone in one hand, a notebook and tablet in the other. “No, I love the book. I mean, it’s a terrible time in history and a heartbreaking story, but it’s an amazing tale of survival and the way the artist chose to tell it …” his voice trailed off as he tried to find the right words, to describe what he felt when Bucky said Darcy chose the books for him. “It’s great,” he finished feebly.

“Thank you for the recommendation. If you have more …”

She chuckled, flipping her dark hair over her shoulder before sliding the glasses she’d pushed up on top of her head to her nose. Steve liked the glasses. He liked her without the glasses. He liked her. It was that simple. “I’m a wealth of opinions, Cap. You might regret those words.”

“I don’t say things I don’t mean.”

The smile she gave in response was somewhat playful before she focused on her notebook. He watched her write, her eyes going back and forth between the tablet and paper, his book forgotten. She had a habit of biting her lip while she was thinking, white teeth sinking into plump lips painted bright red. He wondered what other quirks she had and if he’d ever get the chance to discover them.

“Am I bothering you? I can leave.”

“No,” he protested, his voice sounding a bit desperate in his head. “I … I’ve wanted to see you, but I promised not to seek you out, so --”

“Yeah. If it’s all right with you, can we put the whole forced-total-life-change thing behind us and move on? I’m great at holding grudges, but once I’m done, I kind of want everyone else to be done, too. And I can be adult enough now to admit that this,” Darcy waved a hand around the room, “wasn’t your doing. You didn’t ask for this soulmate thing anymore than I did and we didn’t know SHIELD was listening in on Jane’s lab and that Fury was going to go all forceful and SHIELD-like
about the whole situation. I mean, when you think about it, it’s not too terrible. My new apartment is way bigger than where I was living before and free, so yay! I got to practice punching Clint this morning and that was way fun. Oh! Last night I discovered Tony has all of the Nintendo gaming systems, including Super Nintendo! Classic! Thor is surprisingly good at video games; did you know that? All in all, not too shabby for Darcy.”

Steve waited for her the take a break. “That’s it? You’re not mad? Just like that?”

“Just like that. I’m like an onion, layers and whatnot, though I prefer Donkey’s parfait analogy. ‘Parfait’s gotta be the most delicious thing on the whole damn planet!’ Everyone rather have a parfait than an onion, right?”

He had no idea what she was talking about. “Huh?”

“Got your notebook?” He shifted, pulling it out of the back pocket of his khakis. “Write this down. Shrek. Just the first one. No need to waste a few hours of your life on the others. Trust me.”

“It’s a movie?” he asked as he made the note

“Yep,” she replied, popping the p. “It’s about an ogre who falls in love with a princess.” Darcy pulled her legs up so she was sitting cross-legged in the chair. “On second thought, there are a lot of references you probably won’t get, so maybe hold off until you have a few decades of pop culture knowledge under your belt.”

“Oh,” Steve ventured, “we could watch it together? You can fill me in.” He hoped she couldn’t see how nervous he was. He’d never asked a girl out before. Bucky was the one who could talk a dame into anything, including bringing a friend along for his boy Steve.

“Movie night!” she cried, scribbling something in her notebook. “That’s perfect! Oh, I’ve got to talk to Jane. Thanks, Steve!”

He watched her rush off, not sure what just happened or why she thanked him. He got his answer the next morning.

“Movie Night Tonight at 8 p.m.,” the note propped up next to the theater-style popcorn maker declared. “Be there!”

No one needed to know how much time Darcy wasted trying to think of an appropriate threat for superheroes before deciding the effort wasn’t worth it. After the headache of finding a movie that wouldn’t confuse the hell out of Bucky and Steve (which eliminated half of the movies in Darcy’s collection), make Thor cry (Old Yeller is always a terrible idea), inspire Tony to do something stupid (the other half of Darcy’s movie collection), piss off Clint and Natasha (watching James Bond and Mission Impossible with two spies was like watching a medical drama with doctors), or make Bruce think too hard (he really needed to give himself a break already), Darcy did not have the brain power for cleverness.

“Janey! I need that big brain of yours to help me make a final decision.”

Jane looked up her laptop, blinking owlishly at Darcy and her attire of plaid purple and gray cotton pajama pants and a short-sleeved gray T-shirt with the words “I woke up like this” in black capital letters. “Where have you been? What time is it?” She looked around the lab. It was empty.

“Seriously, what time is it?”

“Almost eight. I came to drag you upstairs so you could change into your pajamas for our first-ever
Avengers Movie Night, only I still don’t know what we’re watching. Hence my need for you, genius girl.”

Jane rubbed her eyes tiredly. “Didn’t we have this conversation already? I distinctly remember you yelling at me for making Thor watch Old Yeller even though that was a year ago.”

“He still gets choked up whenever he sees a Golden Lab at the park. How do you sleep at night?”

Jane smirked. “Pretty well because I share a bed with the surprisingly sappy God of Thunder.”

“Ugh!” Darcy threw the paperclip necklace she spent most of that morning constructing at her best friend. She was pretty proud of it. It had three tiers. “Didn’t we make a rule that certain female astrophysicists don’t get to brag about their fantastic sex life if their lab assistants are going on one year of forced celibacy?” Darcy did the math. “Fuck. More than a year.”

Jane flinched. “Bummer.”

“Yeah. That’s why I nixed romantic comedies, which leaves us with …” She placed three Blue-Rays on the stainless steel lab table. “A League of Their Own, Field of Dreams, and The Sandlot.”

“For someone who claims sports are a form of social Darwinism, you own a surprisingly high number of baseball movies. We’re you even born when these came out?”

“There’s a reason they’re called classics, just like there’s a reason baseball is America’s favorite pastime. I don’t know what it is – probably the beer – but each one has adventure, limited cursing, no nudity, and they are heartfelt enough without being too sappy. Unlike certain people who shall remain nameless, I don’t get my jollies off making grown men cry.”

Jane shot Darcy a half-hearted glare before contemplating the choices. She’d seen each one more times than she could count and would be perfectly happy watching them again. Considering the individuals who would be watching with them, she pointed to the one she thought would be met with the most enthusiasm.

“I concur,” Darcy nodded gravely. “Now get your butt upstairs and into your jammies. I’ve got to figure out how to work Tony’s popcorn maker – who the hell has a movie theater popcorn maker just lying around? – and get the rest of the snack situation organized. I’ll see you in twenty!”

Chapter End Notes

I know family movie night has been done, but I love reading about the movies other writers select and how they imagine the team's reactions.

What movie do you think Jane picked?
Lights, Camera, ACTION

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bucky didn’t know what to expect from movie night and despite being the inspiration for the Avengers and those-connected-to-the-Avengers event, neither did Steve. Still, they weren’t going to let an opportunity to spend time with Darcy pass, so dressed in sweatpants and T-shirts, they made their way to the communal floor ten minutes before eight, the scent of popcorn hitting them the second they stepped off of the elevator.

“Whoever that is, I need a hand!” Darcy shouted from the kitchen, her voice slightly muffled.

Bucky swallowed the words that popped in his head when he saw Darcy kneeling on the ground, her curved ass on display as she searched one of the lower cupboards for something. A quick glance at Steve told him he was struggling to keep his mouth shut, too.

“Hey,” she glanced over her shoulder. “Hands.”

Bucky obeyed automatically, taking the plastic bowls Darcy gave him. Steve got the better end of the deal, helping Darcy to her feet. Smiling her thanks, she took the bowls, lining them up assembly-style on the counter before systematically filling them with popcorn.

“What’s your preference?” she asked. “Jane likes candy corn in her popcorn and Thor will do whatever she wants. Pepper and Tony use this weird-ass Cajun spice. Bruce’s is air-popped, no butter, no salt. Natasha doesn’t like popcorn, which is wrong on so many levels, and Clint eats that cheddar flavored crap you get in oversized tins during Christmas.” She nodded to a container covered with cartoon cats wearing Santa stockings. “Lord fucking knows how old that shit is.”

Steve was overwhelmed by the options. “Um, plain?”

“Plain-plain like Bruce, or with butter and salt like normal people?”

“The latter.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.” Darcy handed him the biggest bowl. “James, pop and alcohol are in the refrigerator. Grab an armful and set them on the coffee table. If people don’t see anything they like, they can get off their lazy asses and help themselves.”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re a natural hostess, doll?”

“Martha-freaking-Stewart; that’s me!” She replied with a saucy wink.

Minutes later, the coffee table was filled with drinks, multiple bowls of popcorn, and a jumbo bag of M&Ms, another of Skittles, a bag of Doritos, and a package of Oreos. Bucky sat next to Steve on the oversized couch facing the television, eyeing the others as they claimed their spots. Tony and Pepper snuggled together on the other sofa (Tony in sweats and a faded Iron Maiden T-shirt; Pepper wearing cotton man-style pin-striped pajamas); Jane was curled up on Thor in one loveseat (she was wearing yoga pants and Thor’s Buffalo wings-eating champion shirt; he was wearing blue plaid pajama pants and a T-shirt with an odd-looking blue thing saying “Me want cookies!”), while Natasha and Clint (both dressed in SHIELD-issued sweatpants and T-shirts) took the other. Bruce, wearing green medical scrubs, claimed the oversized chair and ottoman. Darcy tossed a couple of oversized pillows on the floor before standing in front of the jumbo-sized television.
“Right. Everyone, welcome to our first official Family Movie Night!” Bruce and Jane clapped. Thor whooped. Clint whistled. Tony threw a handful of popcorn at Darcy. “Get on with it, kid!” Pepper elbowed him sharply. Darcy flashed thumbs up in thanks. “As I was saying, this is the first of what will hopefully be many movie nights, so the goal for our inaugural event was to select a film that would appeal to our, shall we say diverse, crowd. I’d like to thank Dr. Jane Foster for her assistance,” she gestured to Jane who blew her a kiss. “I’d like to thank amazon for prime membership shipping, and I’d like to thank the Academy just because I always wanted to say that. Jane, the envelope, please?”

Jane reached for something tucked inside the cushions of the loveseat, pulling out a manila envelope. Tony groaned with impatience. Natasha almost smiled. Bucky looked over at Steve who was watching Darcy fondly. Bucky shook his head and lifted his beer to his lips, wondering if Steve even knew how gone he was over the girl. Their girl. Darcy.

“Oh. Before I open this, if you didn’t bring pillows, I’m not sharing mine, but JARVIS has informed me that there are blankets in the linen closet to the left of the elevator.”

“We have a linen closet?” Tony turned to Pepper.

“You really need to start reading my e-mails,” she told him.

“What’s a linen closet?” Thor asked.

“I’ll grab ‘em,” Steve volunteered.

“Aw, a true gentleman,” Darcy sighed as Steve came back with an armful of blankets. “Clint, take notes.”

“Bite me.”

“Oh my God, let’s go already!” Tony groaned. “You’re killing me, Lewis!”

Her eyes lit up as she hugged the envelope to her chest, making her cleavage even more eye-popping than usual. Bucky never considered pajama pants and a V-neck shirt sexy. He was happy to be proven wrong. “Thank you, Tony, for reinforcing tonight’s movie choice. Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you – “ she ripped open the envelop and pulled out a case – “The Sandlot!”

“Yes!” Clint punched his fist in the air. “Wendy Peffercorn is so hot!”

(The bruise he got from Natasha’s elbow in his stomach wouldn’t fade for three days. It was worth it.)

“Well done, kid; I approve.” Tony raised his crystal tumbler of whiskey in a toast.

“Is there a dog in this movie?” Thor had an apprehensive look in his eyes. Jane patted his hand.

“Yes,” Darcy told him. “But,” she hurried as Thor’s face fell, “he’s fine. Really!” She turned to cue up the movie, tossing the empty case to Bruce.

“For those who haven’t seen it,” Bruce skimmed the back cover, “The Sandlot is tells the story of a group of young baseball players in 1962.”

“Oh, it’s so much more than that,” Clint interrupted, sitting up further in the chair, forgetting the jokes he made about forced teammate bonding in his excitement. He couldn’t wait to see Nat’s reaction to the “You play ball like a girl!” insult. “Really, best damn movie ever. I don’t even
know why you’d have to think about it.”

“What were the other options?” Pepper asked as the disc’s menu appeared on screen.

“A League of Their Own,” Darcy got settled on the floor in front of the couch where Steve sat next to Bucky. She reached a hand over her head to snag some of their popcorn.

“There’s no crying in baseball!” Jane, Clint, Bruce, Tony and even Natasha cried. Steve smiled at Bucky. He rolled his eyes in response.

“And Field of Dreams.”

The change in mood was so sudden; you could hear a pin drop. Bucky had no idea what caused it. Steve and Thor looked just as lost. He glanced around the room, hoping for a clue, but no one was making eye contact. Bruce sipped his tea. Clint focused on his beer. Tony finished his drink in one swallow.

Darcy pushed play on the remote. “Yeah, good call not choosing that one, Janey.”

Steve wasn’t as behind-the-times movie-wise as people (re: Tony) liked to believe. He went to the cinema whenever he and Bucky could afford it before he joined the Army. After waking up, watching DVDs was one of the easiest ways to pass a night when sleep was elusive. He started with a few movies he’s already seen before moving on to those released after his pseudo death. The Internet proved helpful, providing lists of the best movies of the decades and he slowly starting working his way through the years. Finding and de-programming Bucky threw his viewing schedule off track. Perhaps it was time to get back to it, to resume some type of normalcy. Bucky liked movies so he’d be up for it. Maybe they’d ask Darcy to join them. Bucky would find a way to word it so that the invitation didn’t result in a second Family Movie Night, not that the evening wasn’t enjoyable. He glanced down at where Darcy was leaning against his leg. He wondered if she realized she was doing that. He’d offered her his seat several times, but she always shook her head, her eyes never leaving the screen. She had the film memorized, mouthing along at certain scenes. It was adorable. She ate some of their popcorn, snagged a sip of his cream soda (and promptly made a face, choosing to wash it down with a root beer), and was currently working her way through the bag of Skittles, though it was obvious she had something against the green ones, leaving those in a small pile on the floor. When Bucky held out his hand, she wordlessly tipped the bag into his cupped palm, then passed the bag to Steve.

“That is a canine worthy of such a name,” Thor announced when The Beast was introduced.

“We should have a dog, Tony.”

“Shut up, Lewis.”

“We can teach it to fetch the paper and bring you your slippers.”

“Fuck off, Barton.”

“I always wanted a dog.” Pepper’s tone was wistful.

Tony groaned.

Darcy shifted on the floor, pressing more of her weight against Steve’s leg. She had one pillow under her butt, but it wasn’t enough cushioning against the hardwood floors. She wished she hadn’t
refused Steve’s offer to trade seats. Maybe she should grab another soda from the kitchen. Yeah, she’d get up, get her drink and then take a seat on the couch completely casual-like, only crap! This was the chewing tobacco scene. She couldn’t leave during that.

She looked around the room. Jane was asleep in Thor’s arms, several days of Science! binging having finally caught with her. Thor was watching the movie with an adoring look in his face. Darcy made a mental note to take him to a baseball game. It wouldn’t even have to be a professional game, though Tony could probably make that happen. She’d ask him later. Bruce looked relaxed, or as relaxed as he’d let himself be. Tony was sprawled on the couch, his head in Pepper’s lab, his ever-present glass of booze balanced on his stomach. Clint was currently sitting on the back of the loveseat. For someone who made a living perched in one place for long periods of time, he was terrible as sitting still when watching television. It drove Darcy crazy. Natasha didn’t seem to mind. She couldn’t see Steve or Bucky, but it sounded like they were enjoying the movie. She’d heard both chuckle several times and once Steve murmured to Bucky something about handball or stickball, and whatever he said in response made Steve laugh.

She uncurled her legs, but before she could shift to a different position, a hand was under her elbow, pulling her to her feet. “What –”

“Switch spots with me.” Bucky spoke quietly, not wanting to disturb the others.

“I’m fine,” she spoke automatically.

“I’m not; need to stretch my legs.”

He took her spot, back against the couch, his legs stretched in front of him. She gave him one of her pillows, which he tucked against his lower back before picking up her discarded green Skittles and eating them, one by one. She held up the second pillow at Steve questionably and he nodded in assent, which is how she ended up with her head on a pillow resting on Captain America’s legs. It was something she could cross off her Bucket List, if she had a Bucket List. Her hand absently went to Bucky’s head, her fingers running through his dark locks for the rest of the movie.

“I liked it,” Natasha announced as the credits started rolling. Darcy pushed herself off the couch, taking the empty popcorn bowls to the kitchen.


Steve nodded in agreement. He looked down to ask Bucky what he thought, but his eyes were closed, head resting against the back of the couch, looking completely content. Tony was on his tablet, muttering something about Tinkertoys.

“The s’more looked like a most enjoyable snack,” Thor remarked.

“Ugh,” Jane groaned, rubbing her eyes as she sat up and surveyed the wrappers, and various cans and bottles littering the room. “I’m never eating again.”

“Wrong movie, babe,” he strode to the elevator. “We’ll meet you guys up there!”

Natasha watched the scene with a bemused expression. “I guess we’re making s’mores. You ever
had ‘em, Cap?’

“Can’t say that I have. You?”

“I like camping,” she replied. Steve took that to mean yes, pulling Bucky to his feet and following the others to the elevator. “Do we know what balcony they’re on?”

“Knowing Katniss, as high as they can go,” Tony told him. “JARVIS?”

“Agent Barton and Miss Lewis are on the penthouse balcony, sir. Miss Lewis asks that someone bring matches. She also requested a jacket before she freezes her ...” there was a slight pause as JARVIS reconsidered repeating Darcy’s verbatim. “Miss Lewis is cold,” he finalized.

“I’ve got the matches,” Bruce said.

“I’ll get her a coat and meet you up there.” Steve took the stairs to his and Bucky’s apartment, grabbing his navy blue sweatshirt from the hook by the door.

Darcy sprawled in the cushioned patio lounger situated around the balcony off Tony and Pepper’s living room. She looked up at the darkened sky, the lights from the city making it impossible to see any stars, but that didn’t mean they weren’t there. “Why don’t we do this more often?” she mused.

“Do what?” Clint tossed a marshmallow in his mouth.

“Keep that up, we won’t have any for s’mores. And I meant sit outside, watch the stars.”

Clint snorted. “Someone’s in a mood. Have fun snuggling with your boyfriends?”

“Shut up!” she hissed, swinging her legs over the chair so she could smack Clint in the arm, hoping he’d take the blush she knew was staining her cheeks as anger and not embarrassment. “We were watching the movie.”

“Mmm-hmm. You had your head in Steve’s lap and your hands in Barnes’ hair.”

His hair was soft. She’d seen photos of him with shorter hair and he looked good, but he could also rock the longer locks, though he needed a few inches lopped off to shed the remainder of his homicidal assassin look. “Big deal,” she ignored Clint’s knowing look. “I’ve fallen asleep with you in more compromising positions.”

“But I’m not your soulmate.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but the balcony filled with the others before she could say anything. She settled for beaming a marshmallow at Clint’s smug face before thanking Bruce for the matches, taking on the task of teaching Thor the proper way to toast marshmallows as Jane preferred blacker than black. She thanked Steve for the hoodie when he got there, handing him her skewer while she shrugged it on, taking it back to continue twisting it above the flames until her marshmallow was a golden tan. She whipped out her phone to take a picture of Thor’s face after his first bite, and another of Pepper looking less-than-perfect with smeared chocolate and melted marshmallows on her lips. She texted it to Tony.

“It’s still early.” Tony licked his fingers clean. “We could watch A League of Their Own.”

“Ha!” Darcy crowed. “Movie night wasn’t so lame, after all.”

“I never said that,” he lied.
“I did,” Clint volunteered.

Natasha caught Darcy’s eye and winked.

Jane yawned widely. “Get me a cup of coffee and --”

The chiming of the Avengers’ phones interrupted. Resigned, Jane and Pepper started picking up the remains of the s’mores ingredients while the others read their screens.

“Wheel’s up in ten,” Natasha slid her phone into the pocket of her sweatshirt. “Sorry, Darcy.”

“No big,” she smiled. “That’s why I didn’t plan a double feature.”

Thor kissed Jane and left, the others following suit, Pepper walking with Tony. Clint said something to Darcy and she thinks she nodded, but her eyes were on Steve and Bucky, who were talking quietly. Steve had his hand on Bucky’s shoulder, his face intense as he spoke. Bucky shook his head, once, twice, then shrugged Steve off and approached Darcy.

“Are you --“

“I’m going with them.” He was brisk. “They need eyes and Barton can only cover so much.”

Steve’s behavior suddenly made sense. “Are you … are you ready for that?”

“Can’t hide forever. It’s mostly surveillance. If I have to take the shot, I’ll take the shot, but …” he shrugged.

“Right.” Darcy had no idea what to say. The man standing in front of her wasn’t the James she was getting to know, but Sergeant Barnes. She didn’t know how, but he looked bigger, taller. It was a visual reminder of who he was, what he did. Duty first. She almost forgot. “Well, be safe and all that.”

His expression changed from cool to smug instantly. “You worried about me?” She rolled her eyes and went to hit his arm, but he caught her hand easily. “Need to work on your speed, doll. Don’t skip the workouts with Nat gone. I’m gonna test you when I get back.”

“Excuse me?”

He smirked, yanking her arm until she was flush against him, his metal hand settling on her waist. “It’s your chance to show me what you’ve got.”

“I’m going to kick your cocky ass, Barnes.”

“That’s my girl,” he hummed just before he ducked his head to brush his lips against hers in a soft, reassuring kiss.

Darcy froze. It was not expected, the kiss or the way in which he kissed her, all smooth and debonair. She could actually feel her knees tremble. Fucking hell, no man had ever made her legs weak. There was no way she’d admit that to him. She needed to think about this, but she couldn’t think while he was kissing her, didn’t want to think while he was kissing her, and then he wasn’t. He was walking away, her lips still warm from his, and – “What the hell was that?” She turned to Jane, but a hand was quick on her arm and she was spun around to face Steve. “Why did your boy kiss me?”

“Cause when it comes to dames, Bucky was always the smart one,” Steve replied. “I’m forever
trying to follow his footsteps.”

She should have taken that as a warning. That’s what Darcy told her herself later, when Steve’s lips weren’t pressed against hers, swallowing her muffled sound of surprise. Her hands rested on his chest, fingers curling in the fabric of his shirt as his lips plundered, took. His kiss wasn’t suave. It was hard, hurried, so not what she expected from Captain America. She moaned when his tongue tangled with hers and he responded by pulling her closer. She felt her body lean into his without thought.

“Fuck, Darcy,” Steve groaned against her lips. “You taste –“

“Cap! We gotta go!” Tony shouted.

Steve looked over his shoulder, then back at Darcy. “Go,” she pushed away, telling herself it didn’t bother her one bit that he left without looking back. She felt Jane’s arm wrap around her waist and leaned into her with a sigh.

“Margaritas?” Jane asked

“Several.”

Chapter End Notes

To everyone who guessed The Sandlot, well done! It was a toss up between that and A League of Their Own (I was never going to choose Field of Dreams; who wants to read about a bunch of Avengers crying?), but I remembered reading a story where Steve watched A League of Their Own, and wanted to choose something new.

If it wasn't obvious, I have issues with the green apple-flavored Skittles.

So the guys took a step forward. I figured ten chapters in, it was time for some sort of physical contact.
“Feeling better?”

Bucky glanced at Steve and shrugged his shoulders, but he couldn't keep the stupid grin off his face. He could still taste her, a combination of chocolate and candy mixed with something that was undeniably Darcy. Kissing her was not what he planned on doing when he told her he was going, but she’d looked at him with so much worry, so much concern, that he couldn't resist. When was the last time someone (besides Steve) worried about him? It was nice. No, it was better than nice. It was comforting. Reassuring. It was fucking normal. “Could ask you the same question,” he shot back.

Steve leaned against his seat with a dopey sigh. “This is the first time I was the last one on the helicopter. She makes me forget myself, Buck.”

Bucky’s hand rested on Steve’s thigh. “She reminds me who I am.”

Steve covered Bucky’s hand with his own, smiling when Bucky turned his hand over to lace their fingers together. Part of Bucky had wondered how Steve would react, watching him kiss Darcy, but judging by the look on his face when he ran to the helicopter, still wearing his sweats, his shield and uniform in his arms, he didn’t have to. Steve had stowed everything under his seat, buckled in, and then grabbed Bucky’s face between his hands, kissing him forcefully as Clint and Natasha navigated the controls. Bruce, sitting on Bucky’s far side, kept his eye on the information coming in from SHIELD.

“Thank you,” Steve said.

“For what?”

“For having the balls to do what I couldn’t. For making us meet her. For showing her we could be more than the overprotective assholes Fury made us out to be. For kissing her and proving that the two of you together doesn’t leave me out of the equation.” He rubbed his eyes roughly. “Though it would be nice if I could get that image out of my head and focus on the job right now.”

“The sooner we get it done, the sooner we go home.” Bucky leaned closer, his breath warm on Steve’s skin as he whispered in his ear. “Wanna bet the welcome back kiss is even hotter?”

Steve groaned.

Darcy’s definition of several was on par with Jane’s and, as it turned out, Pepper’s. The three women made use of Tony’s well-stocked bar, amazing surround sound, and comfortable furniture, transforming Family Movie Night into a drunken slumber party, complete with 90s pop classics and gossip about boys.

“I kissed Rhodey once,” Pepper confessed after a sip of her third margarita.

Darcy had been hanging upside down over the armrest in Tony’s leather chair – she was trying to see if her hair could touch the floor – but Pepper’s out-of-the-blue announcement had her falling off in shock. “How? When? Why? Was it good?” Darcy had met Colonel James Rhodes a handful
of times and thought he was pretty cool. She was sure he had dirt on Tony she could use to her advantage someday.

“It was years ago. Tony was still stuck on his ‘I don’t need a soulmate’ shtick and set us up, knowing James didn’t have a soulmark. Of course, it ended up backfiring because Tony saw us together and realized pushing me away didn’t make him happy. And yes, it was good. Very good.” She had a secretive smile when she lifted her glass to her lips. "That's when things started to change between Tony and I. It didn't happen overnight, but there was a definite shift that, in time, made us both happy.”

Darcy’s narrowed her eyes. Or she tried to. She’d taken up residence in Margaritaville several hours earlier and vision was no longer her friend. “Wait ... are you trying to after-school-special me?”

Pepper shook her head, winced at the movement and then looked abashed. “Maybe a little? I like you. I like Steve. I’m beginning to like James. Is it wrong to want the three of you to be happy?”

Darcy snorted and reached for her glass. It was empty. Damn She rolled over on the floor, wondering if she had the energy to get up and make another pitcher. “Soulmarks don’t guarantee happily ever after, right Jane?”

Jane met her soulmate in college. He was a graduate assistant she dated for nearly two years before she discovered that he had stolen her research and tried to pass it off as his own. Jane had his words – “Eyes on me” – covered by a daisy chain tattoo on her upper thigh.

“They don’t,” the petite scientist replied.

“Ha!”

“But if you were to approach this scientifically –“

“Ugh!”

“—you’d realize you made your conclusion without proving the hypothesis that you and Steve and Bucky would not work as a couple.” Jane looked confused. “I mean a trio. A triad?”

“I believe the words you're looking for is ‘Big fucking mess,’” Darcy supplied.

“Says you. I see the way they look at you when they think no one is watching. Steve’s expression is downright adorable and James …” She sighed. “He is not as good as hiding his thoughts as he thinks he is. I guarantee if his words weren’t on your ankle, you’d have climbed him like a tree already.”

“Nu-uh!”

“Uh-huh! He’s broody, smug and prone to sarcasm.” Jane pointed at Darcy. "That is so your type. Hell, that’s you!”

Darcy crossed her arms over her chest. She was not broody! “So explain Captain America then.”

“I’ll take this one.” Pepper stood up, looking very much like the badass CEO despite the pajamas, tangled hair and empty glass she had clutched in one hand. “Steve tends to act impulsively, take care of people and doesn’t back down when he thinks something is wrong, even if that puts him up against someone in authority.” She paused. “Especially if that puts him up against someone in authority.”
“Again – you,” Jane smirked.

“Yeah, I don’t want to play with you two anymore.” Darcy tried to get to her feet, but ended up crashing into the chair.

“Just tell us one thing. Wait. Two things.” Jane waited for Darcy’s “Fine, whatever” gesture before continuing. “How were the kisses?”

OK, that she could talk about. Was dying to talk about, actually. Darcy made JARVIS promise to kill all audio and visual for the next thirty minutes as she painstakingly described what it was like to be kissed by James Barnes and Steve Rogers.

“You got this?” Natasha didn’t spare Clint a glance, but nodded slightly. “Kay. I’ll be back.” He paused in the act of getting out of his seat. “You know, Darcy would have made a Terminator joke.”

“I’m not Darcy.”

“I know.”

“You’re stalling.”

Clint sat down on the armrest with a sigh. “Yeah.”

Natasha checked the flight plan. They were ahead of schedule. She could spare a few minutes. “You knew this was a possibility. They’re soulmates.”

“Yeah, but this is Darcy. She’s almost as stubborn as you. Almost,” he repeated when she raised an eyebrow.

“But?”

Clint shrugged. Darcy was the sarcastic, snarky, loud ball of energy he didn’t know his life was missing until she pushed her way into it during a routine “We’re SHIELD and we’re going to commandeer your life” assignment. He assumed the initial attraction was physical – there’s no denying she was a knockout – but one disastrous kiss killed that notion, instead pointing him to something better: friendship.

Clint didn’t make friends easily. Never had, probably never would, and yet he considered Darcy Lewis one of his best friends. If he was a middle school girl, he’d probably call her his second best friend after Nat, but he wasn’t thirteen and would never think something like that, no matter what Tony said.

When JARVIS informed Clint that Darcy had met her soulmates in Jane’s lab, his initial reaction was relief. Steve and Barnes were super soldiers, with enhanced strength and years of military training on their side. They could keep Darcy safe in the craziness that was their lives should anything happen to him. Former Russian (trained, at least) assassin aside (and as someone who slept with his own former Russian assassin, he could think that without fear of death), it was a good match.

Then they kissed her.

He wasn’t stupid. Darcy was no more a virgin than he was, and yet seeing Barnes kiss her, seeing Steve swoop in right after, stirred something in Clint he didn’t expect to feel. It wasn’t jealousy. He
loved Darcy, but he didn’t love her. He loved her like a brother loves a sister, a friend loves a friend.

“Stop thinking,” Nat’s voice broke into his thoughts. “You’re giving me a headache.”

“Augh,” Clint groaned. He ran his fingers through his hair. “Maybe Thor should talk to them.”

Natasha didn’t respond.

“He’s just as close to her as I am.”

Still nothing.

“I mean, yeah, she checks in on me after missions and makes sure I’m eating and sleeping when things go wrong, and she bakes me my favorite cookies for no reason at all, but that’s what she does. She takes care of people.”

Natasha didn’t argue for or against his reasoning, but kept her eyes ahead as she navigated the quinjet through the dark sky.

“So yeah. Thor can talk to them.” Clint sat back in his seat, buckled his seatbelt and lifted his aviation headset. Seconds later he was throwing it on the control panel and stomping out of the cockpit.

Natasha rolled her eyes.

Clint marched back to where Steve was studying a map on his tablet, the others looking over his shoulder. “I need to talk to you.”

Steve looked up. “Now?”

“Is something wrong?” Bruce asked.

“Yes. No.” Clint took a deep breath. “No, nothing is wrong with the mission. We’re on course, on time, everything’s five by five.”

Steve looked confused. “Okay …”

“But I need to talk to you,” Clint pointed to Steve, “and you,” he pointed at Bucky, “now. Alone,” he added when he saw Tony’s gleeful expression.

“What? No! I want in on this.”

Thor put an arm around Tony and dragged him away. Bruce looked relieved to not be part of the conversation. “Come along, my friends. The hurt-my-sister-and-you-die speech is a well-honored tradition on Asgard. We will not take away from his moment.”

“You consider her a sister, too,” Tony grumbled, never willing to go quietly.

Thor aimed a steely look at Steve and Bucky. “I do.”

Steve felt Bucky stiffen at his side. Somehow Thor managed to put more threat behind those two words than anything else he could have said. “Clint, I know what you’re going to say –”

“I doubt it,” he interrupted. “Here’s the deal. Darcy is Darcy. There’s no one else like her and despite how fucking weird it was to see the two of you kiss her, I think the three of you make sense
and could be good for each other, but you need to understand, teammates or not, I’m on her side. You fuck this up, I’m coming after you. I hear anything from her that I don’t like, I’m coming after you. You don’t take care of her, you don’t treat her with decency and respect, you don’t worship the fucking ground she walks on, I’m coming after you.” He leaned forward, sniper face on, as he stared them down. “You hurt her and they’ll never find your bodies. Understand?”

Bucky wanted to push back. The urge was strong, but just as he opened his mouth, an image appeared in his head. Rebecca. A sister. His sister. He'd had a sister, a sister he loved and cared for, a sister he would have fought for just as much as Clint was fighting for Darcy. He looked at Steve who nodded in understanding.

“We will never deliberately hurt her,” Steve chose his words carefully, like he was navigating a minefield. “We might unintentionally, this is new for all of us, but never on purpose. I hope you’ll be understanding if that happens.”

“Oh, there’s no 'if' about it,” Clint snorted. “We're talking about Darcy; it'll happen. It’s just a matter of when.”

Steve wasn’t reassured. “And when it does …”

Clint smiled mischievously. “I guess we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Darcy woke up Saturday with the mother of all hangovers and a small puddle of drool on Tony’s couch. Whoops. She flipped the cushion, shrugged into Steve’s sweatshirt, took the elastic off of her wrist so she could pull her hair in a messy ponytail and shuffled out of Tony and Pepper’s penthouse, eyes partially closed to avoid the sunlight streaming through the windows.

“JARVIS,” she whispered. “What time is it?”

“It’s almost eleven in the morning, Miss Lewis,” the AI replied in his normal tone. It was way too loud.

“I have another question, but can you lower the volume first?”

“As you wish,” he said in a much quieter tone.

“Thank you.” Darcy murmured, leaning her pounding head against the wall as she waited for the elevator. “Is the team back?”

“They are not.”

She stepped into the car. “Do you know where they are?”

“I’m afraid that’s classified.”

“Course it is,” she muttered. How convenient is must be to be able to fall back on "That's classified" whenever you don't want to tell someone something. "Can you tell me if they’re OK?"

Jarvis didn't hesitate. “Sir has not implied otherwise.”

Darcy shuffled to her apartment. “Guess that’s as good as it gets. Thanks, J.”

“You are welcome, Miss Lewis.”
She spent most of Saturday laying on the couch, binge-watching *Orange in the New Black* and making a list of potential titles for future Family Movie Nights. Jane stopped by and together they finished Season 2 before wandering down to the lab to take advantage of Tony’s absence and do some work in peace. For once, Darcy didn’t complain about working on a Saturday – a Saturday night, no less. Thinking about Science! kept her from thinking about other things. She told herself not to worry, that they weren't hers to worry about, and flipped to another page of data.

Sunday passed in much the same way. She slept in, killed a few hours in the lab with Jane, and then went to the kitchen to see how many batches of cookies she could make in a four-hour period, filling the freezer with containers of chocolate chunk, molasses, shortbread, and iced sugar cookies. Even after she cleaned the kitchen, it was only nine and she was wide awake. She returned to her apartment, traded her leggings and long-sleeved T-shirt for shorts, two sports bras and an Iron Man T-shirt (which she would never wear outside of her suite if there was a chance she’d run into Tony), and went to the gym.

Pepper left for Washington, D.C., Monday morning; something about a Senate hearing.

“Have you heard from Tony?” Darcy asked.

“He texted last night. Apparently he's in wait-and-see mode with Thor and Bruce while the others are on surveillance. He's bored, as is Thor.”

“Poor Bruce.”

“Exactly,” Pepper smiled. “But everyone is well, so that’s good news.” She finished sorting her papers, sliding them into her black leather handbag that doubled as a briefcase. “Happy is taking me to the airport. Rhodey is meeting me there so he can accompany me to Washington, leaving Happy in charge of security at the Tower.”

“You mean in charge of me and Jane.”

“Precisely.”

Darcy rolled her eyes and poured her third cup of coffee. “You know, my grandmother decided I was old enough to take care of myself when I was eleven. Worked pretty good for a couple decades, I might add.”

Pepper’s smile was indulgent. “I know it’s a pain, Darcy, but if it makes them feel better and allows them to focus on the job at hand …”

Darcy sighed. Pepper was good. No wonder she was the only one who could control Tony.

“Besides, Happy would be great to work out with while Natasha is gone. He used to be a boxer.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” Pepper paused. “He wasn’t a successful boxer, but he could show you some things that might catch James off guard.” Darcy's play-by-play of her kisses included Bucky's challenge to see what Darcy had learned after a month of self-defense training. Jane and Pepper responded as they should be devising ways in which she could kick his ass or, more realistically, appear as if she had some idea of what she was doing. "What can it hurt?"

Darcy grinned. “I so want to be you when I grow up.”
Darcy dated a guy for a few months in college (dated meaning slept with whenever she was bored) who was a huge fan of Ultimate Fighter, so much so that he started training for a chance to appear on the show (which ultimately killed their not-really-a-relationship status). In an effort to appear supportive, Darcy accompanied him to the gym a few times and embarked on a short but sweet love affair with boxing, specifically the way men’s bodies moved while boxing. She’d perch on one of the wood benches that lined the nondescript gym to watch as Jordan took his aggressions out on a punching bag, sighing just a little at the muscles that rippled along his back and arms. It was the only thing that kept her around for a few weeks after the sex stopped.

“This is way cooler than the other gym,” Darcy said.

“The one upstairs?” Happy asked, dumping his bag on the cement floor.

Darcy nodded as she took in the multiple punching bags, ring and speed bags. The weight equipment in the corner looked no-nonsense and ancient. “Does anyone even use this?”

“Tony used to,” Happy dug out a pair of gloves and gestured for Darcy to stand in front of him. “I do sometimes, but it’s mostly the Cap’s space these days. Oh, and Barnes.”

Dammit. She did not need that image in her head.

“What has Romanoff had you doing?” Happy asked as he fit Darcy’s gloves.

“Um, conditioning, mostly. Cardio and weight training. She’s taught me some basic self-defense, how to break out of a hold or incapacitate an attacker so I can run away.”

“Good.” Happy took out a roll of tape to wrap his hands. “What do you want to learn from me?”

"Something awesome?" she asked. "I don’t know how much Tony has told you, but Fury made me out to be the weak link that’s going to get the team killed, so the deal is I learn how to take care of myself and this whole Darcy-can’t-leave-the-Tower-without-a-chaperone situation goes away. Jane and Pepper allegedly have the same level of security, but they didn’t get a dressing down at SHIELD."

Happy was aware of Darcy's aversion to her soulmarks and chose, wisely, to change the subject. “Are you going to learn how to use a gun?”

Darcy shook her head.

“Why not? They don’t trust you?”

“I don’t trust me.”

Happy grinned. “I’ve seen you with your taser. You should have more faith in your abilities.”

“Yeah, well, right now I’d settle for wiping that cocky smile of James Barnes’ face.”

“Ah ha! The truth comes out; vengeance instead of self-defense.”

Darcy shrugged. "Maybe a little? I'm totally cool with learning how to defend myself, a girl can never be too safe, but I've been taking care of myself for almost twenty years. I don't need super soldiers to swoop in and rescue me." She bounced around on the balls of her feet, the memory of Fury’s dressing down giving her a strong urge to hit something. Hard. “I guess I just want to know I can surprise them, that there’s more to me then a lab assistant with a penchant for baking who speaks in song lyrics and movie quotes.”
“Seems like a tall order for boxing lessons, but why the hell not?” Happy walked over to a punching bag and gestured for Darcy to stand in front of it. He helped her with her stance, showing her how to stand and hold her arms, reminding her to plant her feet for more balance, power and control. “You can move around all you want but when it’s time to punch, ground your feet,” he told her, moving behind the bag, hands on either side to hold it steady. “All right, kiddo; let’s show them what you’ve got.”

He had her work for an hour that first day, watching her punch, correcting her technique, showing her the proper way to breathe for maximum results. It was exhausting. She could barely lift her arms up when Happy unlaced her gloves.

“You did good,” he told her.

“I’m dying,” she gasped. "My arms feel like rubber. A ninety-year-old grandmother could mug me right now and she’d get away with it.”

“Good thing we have the Avengers around to keep those pesky senior citizens off the street.”

“Ha-ha.”

Happy grinned. He wasn’t lying, she had good form. With more practice, she just might be able to land a solid hit on Barnes. Even one would make him realize he underestimated her. Happy liked Darcy. He liked talking to her in the lab – she was the only one who regularly used words he could understand – and she had a sense of humor that brought lightness to Tony that Happy hadn’t seen in years. Having her around the Tower full-time was a good thing, in his opinion. If helping Darcy made her life a little easier, he was glad to do it. “Hit the showers. Drink some chocolate milk, have some protein and get to bed. We’ll go again tomorrow afternoon.”

She was still groaning when the elevator doors closed.

Four days after the team left, Thor, Tony and Bruce returned.

“The intel was poor,” Tony said, leaning against Darcy’s workspace as he peeled a banana, offering her half. “More surveillance than action.”

“And subtlety isn’t your thing?” She opened her eyes wide in shock.

“Hey, I did a lot better than Point Break and Big Green.”

Darcy leaned back in her chair. “Somehow, I can’t picture Bruce having issues with the need to be calm and quiet.”

“He does if he has to do it when your bestie is glaring daggers at your boyfriends.”

“They’re not my – wait, what?”

“Oh yeah!” Tony grabbed Jane’s chair and pulled it over. “Legolas totally gave Dumb and Dumber the shovel talk. I couldn’t hear because Thor was going on about Old Yeller – Who the fuck thought it was a good idea for him to see that?”

“Jane.”


“You’re drifting, Tony.”
“Right. OK, so I can’t read lips like Barton – JARVIS, see if you can install something in the suit to make that happen.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Tony!” She punched him in the arm.

“Fine! God, you’re in a mood today.” He rubbed his arm and gave Darcy a considering look. “That had some strength to it. Have you been working out? Wait, I know you’ve been working out, but that was more offensive than defensive. What are you not telling me, kid?”

She groaned. Usually she could keep up with Tony's train of thought, but he had a tendency to ramble when she needed him to stick to one subject. “How much caffeine have you had today?”

“How much have you had?” He shot back.

They glared at each other, neither one wanting to be the first to back down before Darcy sighed heavily, reached into her top desk drawer, and pulled out a bag of cherry licorice.

“You’re forgiven,” Tony told her, pulling out a piece.

“Goody. Finish the story.”

“That’s it,” Tony mumbled as he chewed. “Archer threatened their lives if they didn’t treat you right, one-armed Moody looked pissed but backed down for some reason, and Cap was your typical Boy Scout, promising no harm would come to you unless you’re in to that thing.” His wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. “You have a safe word, right?” She punched him again, putting her weight behind it like Happy taught her. “Seriously, kid, you’ve been eating your Wheaties. Maybe I should give you the shovel talk. Your boys aren’t as young as they used to be, you know.”

Darcy banged her head against her desk. “I can’t believe I actually missed you.”

“I know.” Tony ruffled her hair. “I’m pretty great.”

Chapter End Notes

So I was totally going to have Steve and Bucky be gone for a little bit and then come home and maybe welcome back smoochies, but she’s not that easy and Clint needed to do the "Hurt her, I kill you" thing, so instead we have a longish chapter of fluffy filler. I hope that’s OK.

I am so glad not to be alone in my hatred of the apple-flavored Skittles. Seriously. Why do companies mess with a good thing? Whatever happened to "If it ain't broke, don't fix it?"

As always, thanks for reading and for the comments and the kudos. Everyone is awesome!
Time passed as it always did. Darcy worked with Jane in the lab, snarked with Tony about a number of topics, and tried to drink the tea Bruce claimed would help her relax, but she got gas instead, though she left that piece of information out when Bruce later her if she was sleeping better. Contrary to popular belief, she did have a filter. She just chose to ignore it most of the time because, frankly, she believed it was better to tell someone to their face that they were a dipshit rather than whisper it behind their back. It’s called having balls, thank you very much. But Bruce was so sweet and timid and fluffy. He didn’t need full-throttle Darcy, so she lied and told him it did, then faked a Jane Science! crisis to leave before he gave her more.

“You’re distracted.”

Darcy tried to wipe away the sweat dripping down her forehead before it slid into her eyes because son of a bitch that hurt, but it was impossible to do with boxing gloves. Happy, being as kindhearted as his name implied, tossed her a terry cloth towel that was probably white a few years ago, but it was dry and smelled clean, so who was she to be picky?

“They’ve been gone a week.”

Happy hummed noncommittedly as he pulled on a pair of focus mitts. Darcy was still apprehensive about hitting Happy instead of a bag. He swore he could take it – as if his physical size wasn’t assurance enough – but Darcy, despite her big mouth and bravado, had never hit anyone before. Her superpower was stirring the pot and escaping tense situations before things turned physical. The Destroyer was the only blotch on an otherwise spotless record.

“Come on,” he said, holding the rope up so Darcy could enter the ring.

“I don’t know,” she hesitated, simultaneously wondering why Jane never had a Science! emergency when she needed one and kicking herself for telling Happy she used fake emergencies as an excuse to get out of things. That was stupid.

“You want to learn how to fight. Fighting usually involves another person.”

“Sarcasm? Really?” She ducked under the rope and only stumbled a little when the toe of her left shoe caught the bottom rope. Happy, to his credit, said nothing, just took her arm and led her to the middle of the ring.

“It’s just like the bag. Remember your breathing, your posture. Boxing is about control. Plant your feet when you hit.”

She bit her lip. “What if I miss?”

“You try again.”

“What if I hit you?”

“You will hit me. My hands anyway,” he said, thumping the mitts together.

“Augh! What if I miss the mitts and hit you?”
Happy studied the woman in front of him. He outweighed her by at least sixty pounds. She could take a swing at his face, connect with his jaw, and it would, at best, make him bite his tongue. Still, he chose his words carefully. It was never a good idea to piss off someone who was going to hit you. “I don’t think, unless your aim is very off and extremely low, that you need to worry about hurting me.”

Darcy snorted, his response easing some of her nerves. “I’m short,” she reminded him with a pointed look at the lower half of his body.

“That is true. We’ll rely on my reflexes should it comes to that. Now,” he thumped his hands once more, bouncing lightly before settling in a stance that had his feet planted and his hands up, “this is not just about speed and power, but rhythm, accuracy and timing. Think before you hit. Work on your style and consider your strategy.”

“My strategy is not to get hurt.”

Happy winked. “You might think you’re being cute, but that’s a good plan. Let’s go!”

It took a good twenty minutes before Darcy relaxed enough to actually put some power behind her punches. Happy was as quick to criticize as he was to praise, but she listened and took his comments to heart. When he felt she found her rhythm, he asked JARVIS to cue up the playlist he made specifically for her. Darcy stumbled when the first strains of Survivor’s *Eye of the Tiger* burst from the Tower’s speakers. “Really?” she groaned.

“You’re telling me you don’t picture a musical montage when you work out?”

Fuck. He had her there. Living in a world where musical montages were a real thing was her greatest wish. “But *Eye of the Tiger*?”

“*Rocky*.”

Did he think she was Steve? James? “Duh.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Can you say cliché?”

“Can you say shut up?” He asked, sounding so much like Tony that Darcy looked over her shoulder to make sure they were still alone. “Just for that, you have twenty more minutes.”

Darcy took back every nice thought she ever had about Happy Hogan.

“Why are you walking so strangely?” Thor asked when Darcy hobbled into the communal kitchen Saturday morning, the promise of Tony’s souped-up Keurig dragging her poor, tired and abused body from her apartment. “I thought with Lady Natasha’s absence, your time in the gym would be minimized. I know my Jane has not left our bed so early.”

“I’m sure she’s getting a workout of another kind and Dear God, do not respond to that comment!” She pointed her finger at him. “We’ve had his talk, remember?”

“Lady Jane and I do not have sex,” Thor recited obediently. “If you hear noises in our bedroom, it’s because we’re having a raucous discussion about puppies.”

Darcy smiled at him from behind her enormous coffee cup, pleased the lie she made him memorize
after London still held. It was totally OK for Jane to talk to Darcy about sex with Thor and go into as many details as she was willing to share (and others she normally would not, but once the alcohol was flowing, all bets were off). That’s what girlfriends did. Darcy did not need nor want confirmation from the man himself.

“I understand Jane will be in the lab with Bruce and Tony today.”

“Mmm,” Darcy hummed, opening the freezer to see if the frozen waffles she spotted the other day were still there. Pulling out the kitchen’s four-slice toaster, she held up the box and, at Thor’s nod of assent, inserted four waffles. “Something about gamma waves and energy, but I tuned them out after she told me my help wasn’t necessary.” Actually, what Jane had said was that their project was a little over her head, which meant it was light years over Darcy’s. Rather than force Jane to tell her she wasn’t smart enough to play with the other geniuses, Darcy made up some story about re-designing the grocery shopping program JARVIS had for keeping the Tower residents fed though, in truth, she finished that on Wednesday.

“Would you like to do something with me today?”

Darcy took a plate out of the cupboard and loaded it with Thor’s waffles. “Best offer I’ve had all week. What do you want to do?”

“I would like to spend the day outside.”

Darcy slid the plate over to Thor and turned to make her own breakfast. “That’s pretty vague, big guy. Care to narrow –” She stopped speaking, struck by an idea so brilliant, she wondered if that’s what it felt to be Jane. “I’ve got it! I need to go check something. Do NOT eat my waffles!”

He did eat her waffles – “I apologize. It’s says right on the box that they are hard to resist.” – but because he bought her a coffee and a cheese Danish as an apology, she totally forgave him – after he upgraded her medium latte to an extra-large.

“What is this place?” Thor asked with wide eyes as he looked around the lobby of the animal shelter, the sound of dogs barking in another room nearly drowning out his voice.

“This is a temporary home for animals waiting for their permanent family,” Darcy tapped the silver bell on the long counter. “I have a friend who volunteers here and she said they always need people to help out, especially with the larger animals. We have the day free and you’re a big guy, so we are taking some dogs on a walk.”

Thor’s eyes grew wide. “They will let us take the canines?”

“On a walk,” she stressed. “We can’t have a dog at home. Yet. So, for now, this will have to do.”

The woman in charge of the shelter on weekends, Carolyn, was grateful for their assistance. Normally, the shelter had an extensive screening process for their volunteers, but because Darcy was friends with Emily and Thor was, you know, an Avenger who had saved the world several times over, they got to skip the preliminaries. Within thirty minutes, they were in possession of four extremely energetic dogs on leashes. Thor took charge of three – two Great Danes and a Bullmastiff (Why would anyone have such large dogs in the city?) – leaving Darcy with a Leonberger named, appropriately, Leo. Leo was an extremely sweet and well-behaved dog, Carolyn assured Darcy as she handed her the leash.

Carolyn lied.

“Oh my God!” Darcy cried as Leo tried, again, to pull her arm out of its socket. “Why won’t he
walk like your dogs?” She glared at Thor, then at the dogs, two of which she swore smirked at her. “This was my idea! I should get the good dog!”

“Would you like to trade?” Thor offered, holding out his collection of leashes. Coming from any other person in the Tower, Jane included, Darcy would have called them an asshole and moved on, but Thor was nothing if not sincere.

“No, I can do this,” she grumbled as she was pulled another block, Thor’s stride matching hers, but only because he was so tall. “Are you talking to them?”

“I am,” he reached out to pet the Great Dane called Simon. “You just heard me tell them they were being good.”

“Not that kind of talking,” Darcy puffed, jumping to avoid running into a parking meter because Leo spotted a fire hydrant a few feet away and he just had to pee on that. Gross, but it was better than having to use the plastic bags she had stuffed in the pocket of Steve’s sweatshirt. “Are you doing your Asgardian voodoo?”

Thor looked amused. “I am not a sorcerer.”

“But you are one with the universe.”

“As are you.”

She groaned. “That’s not what I mean.”

He smiled, his eyes twinkling in merriment. Darcy loved seeing Thor happy, even if it was at her expense. Loki’s betrayals nearly killed that part of him. He was still one of the most laid-back people she knew, but whenever something big went down, he tensed, waiting for the news that his brother was behind it. Today, though, he was content. “I know,” he said, wrapping a strong arm around her in a quick hug, his dogs sitting patiently while Leo pulled on his leash. “It’s a matter of belief. You have to believe you are in charge and the canines will respond in kind. Leo can tell you’re nervous and it’s making him nervous. That’s why he’s misbehaving.”

“Thor Odinson, Dog Whisperer,” Darcy muttered, giving her body a shake as she tried to clear her mind. She was in charge. She was Darcy Elizabeth Lewis, scientist wrangler extraordinaire. She tased the God of Thunder, was trained in self-defense by the Black Widow, and had Hawkeye threatening the lives of Captain America and the Winter Soldier on her behalf. She could handle a 130-pound dog. “Leo,” she knelt so she could look into the dog’s dark eyes. “I think you’re adorable and this city is filled with people dying to pet your soft and fluffy coat, but if you insist on rushing, that won’t happen. I have no plans today, so we can walk as long as you’d like if you promise to be the gentle dog I know you are. Sound good?”

He cocked his head as if he was considering her offer before leaping forward to plant his paws on her chest and lick her face, knocking Darcy on her butt. “Christ! Most guys buy me a drink before I let them do that!”

Thor laughed as he helped Darcy to her feet. “He has good taste.”

“I think we have a dog. Or maybe it’s a bear.” Clint peered at the photo on his phone.

Natasha looked over his shoulder. “It’s a dog.”

“Where did it come from?” he asked, Darcy’s only clue being the line of text saying: At the park
with Leo.

“I’ve been stuck on the other side of the world as long as you have,” she retorted, eight days of surveillance and one shitty day of fighting taking its toll on her usual stoic nature. “How should I know?”

Clint had enough self-preservation not to respond, instead sending Darcy a message to let her know they were en route to SHIELD headquarters for debriefing.

_How are you?_

_Good._

_Liar. What’s broken?_

Clint wanted to laugh – Darcy’s bullshit meter was among the best – but laughing hurt his ribs.

_Bruised. Not broken._

_Did you fall off a building? Again?_

_I didn’t fall. I jumped._

_Right._

_What’s with the dog?_

Sitting on the couch in her living room, Darcy smiled at Clint’s not-so-subtle attempt at changing the subject, proving once again that all of his secret spy skills were strictly work-related. She wondered when he’d see the picture. Sometimes Clint stayed in touch during missions, but most of the time he was radio silent. That didn’t deter Darcy from sending him pictures, memes and silly one liners, the notifications chime ding multiple times when he could finally turn on his phone. She once asked him if he wanted her to stop. He said no, but wouldn’t elaborate.

_Psychology 101 would call it a coping mechanism. Darcy called it being a friend._

_Took Thor to play with puppies._

_It looks like a grizzly._

_Puppy-size to Thor._

_Tony let you keep it?_

_Gotta get Pepper on board first._

Clint snorted.

“What is it?” Steve asked from where he was sprawled on the floor of the quinjet, Bucky muttering over the gash in his upper thigh caused by a knife Steve didn’t block with his shield, having decided it was more important to stop the bullet zooming towards his head. It was deep, but the blade didn’t hit anything vital. As far as knife wounds went, it was clean. Steve told Bucky he was fine, that it would be healed by the time they returned to SHIELD. Bucky responded by smacking him on the back of his head and told him to lie down so he could treat it. Steve did so only because he knew Bucky was angry with himself for not taking out the soldier until after he drew Steve’s blood. Also, Bucky used his metal arm to hit him and his head was still ringing.
Clint passed over his phone. Steve scrutinized the screen. It was Darcy and Thor with a dog. He looked again. Yes. Darcy, Thor and a dog. From the way angle of the photo, Thor must have taken the picture (his arms made him quite adept at selfies) because the dog seemed hell-bent on knocking Darcy to the ground. Everyone was laughing, even the dog. Using his uninjured leg to nudge Bucky, Steve passed him the phone. Bucky glanced down, smirked and handed it back to Clint. “I want a copy of that.”

“Text her yourself,” Clint replied, standing carefully before making his way to the cockpit. They had rendezvoused with a few other SHIELD agents outside Algeria, one of whom was a skilled pilot, but Natasha was in a mood and when she was in a mood, she scared people. Normally, it was entertaining, but Clint really wanted to go home. No, first he wanted to eat, then he wanted to shower, and then he wanted to go home. Natasha strangling agents would result in more paperwork and delay all of the above.

Bucky gave Steve an expectant look.

“What?”

“You gonna text our girl and let her know we’re on our way home?”

“One kiss doesn’t make her our girl,” Steve responded even as he drew his phone out of his go bag.

“Doesn’t make her not.”

Not for the first time, Steve wished he had Bucky’s confidence. “Are you done messing with my leg? Can I please sit up?”

Bucky rolled his eyes, but helped him to a sitting position, still on the floor, but with his back to the padded benches that lined the quinjet. Knowing the pain was bothering him more than he let on, Bucky moved to sit behind him, his legs bracketing Steve’s body, his hands on his shoulders kneading tense muscles. Steve allowed himself to slump against Bucky with a long sigh.

“You OK?”

Bucky’s hands paused. He knew what Steve was asking. The mission … he didn’t know who the fuck SHIELD had gathering intelligence, but they could not have been more off the mark. They were told they were going after a weapons cache. Normally, that would not be a job for the Avengers, but they were told the weapons were supernatural in origin. Within one day of watching the alleged control center, Bucky and Clint knew there was something bigger going on.

Bigger was not better. It was worse. It was a fucking pile of worse. Bucky had to kill. He was the one who pulled the trigger, not the Winter Soldier. He knew who he was the entire time and he knew without a doubt that this time he was killing for the right reasons, but that didn’t make it any easier.

“I’m fine.”

“Bucky.”

“I’ll be fine. Just wanna go home.” Home. As fucked up as life in the Tower could be, it was home. With Steve. With Darcy. “How long will the debrief take?”

Steve shrugged. Considering what they uncovered, what they had to do, what SHIELD still needed to do, it could take a while. He thought he’d be less anxious having Bucky with him. Before, when he’d have to leave on missions and Bucky would stay behind, there was always a feeling of loss, as
if he was forgetting something. This time, even if the mission was not what they expected and the image of that … Steve shook his head. He couldn’t go there. He had to be strong for Bucky, for the team. He was the leader. If he lost it …

He turned on his phone, almost jumping when several dings sounded, alerting him to missed messages. Who would text him? Bucky was there. He opened the latest message, hoping it wasn’t Tony sending dirty jokes again.

*Italian or Chinese?*

Steve looked at the number. It took him a second to realize it was Darcy’s.

*Excuse me?*

Her response came a minute later. *Voting for team dinner: 3 for Chinese, 2 for Italian. What do U want?*

Before he could respond, she sent another text.

*Tell James to turn on his phone.*

He couldn’t stop the smile that spread across his face. He switched to his contacts page, changing Unknown Number to My Darcy before tilting his head up to look Bucky in the eyes. “Our girl wants you to turn on your phone.”

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Italian won, four to three, but the dinner itself was delayed, as four members of the team were kept at SHIELD for an extensive debriefing that, according to Tony, was not as sexy as it sounded.

“Can you be serious for one minute?”

“I can. I have. I don’t recommend it,” he said as he pushed aside a jumble of tools on his workbench, not questioning it when Darcy handed him the screwdriver he wanted.

“What happened over there? Where is there?”

“Don’t know all the details –“

“Liar.”

“ – and wouldn’t tell you if I did. Some things suck, kid. This was one of them.”

Darcy jumped down from her perch on Tony’s workbench. Jane and Thor were in heavy snuggle time. Bruce was in the middle of an extensive meditative session and Tony decided to work himself into a coma rather than drink his way into one. Darcy wandered into his lab with the goal of getting him out, but he had that crazed look in his eyes that meant he couldn’t hear anyone he wanted to ignore.

That’s how Tony coped when Pepper wasn’t around. He worked or he drank. Sometimes he did both and that’s when things blew up, but JARVIS was on top of things. Bruce ostracized himself, convinced he would do more harm around others than good. Thor leaned on Jane and vice versa. Natasha either went out on another mission, taking her frustration from the last one on a new batch of evil, or holed up in the private ballet studio Tony had built for her that everyone pretended not to know about. Clint either sought out company – usually Darcy’s because Natasha was usually too involved in what he was trying to forget – or disappeared for days. It was only because he
texted regularly that Darcy let him go with minimal fuss.

She didn’t know how Steve and Bucky coped. She imagined they relied on each other in the past, but then they couldn’t, and now … Did Bucky remember how to deal with the crap that being a hero got you? Was Steve too busy making sure everyone else was fine to take care of himself? Were they still a comfort to each other or had too much time passed?

“Don’t question it, kid.”

“What?”

Tony paused in the act of sliding his welding mask over his head. “Just do what feels right and that will be enough.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He gave her one of his rare I’m-not-joking looks. “Yeah, you do. It doesn’t have to be a life decision, kid. It’s a moment. Live in the moment. If you decide you want another one, you can take that step when you’re ready, but right now, a moment it enough. JARVIS, I need music.”

He lowered the mask over his face as AC/DC blared over the loudspeaker. Darcy walked to the table, scribbled something on a piece of paper, and turned in a slow circle so JARVIS’ camera would see her request to cut Tony off in four hours. Placing it on the table, she scribbled “Thanks, Tony” in the corner and exited the lab.

She had the urge to hit something.

It was late when the helicopter landed on the roof of Avengers Tower. Steve jumped out, his go bag in one hand, his shield in the other, Bucky a few steps behind, the helicopter taking off as they opened the door to enter the Tower. Clint and Natasha chose to remain at SHIELD, which was code for go-somewhere-else-until-the-urge-to-kill-people-passed. Steve asked that they keep in touch before saying he’d see them soon. Bucky said nothing. He didn’t want to hide. He didn’t want to cope with the memories on his own. It was strange, wanting to go somewhere, wanting to be with someone, but the past year had taught him not to ignore his feelings. He was a person, not an asset.

“What now?” Steve asked as they walked down the staircase to the elevators.

“JARVIS, where’s Darcy?” Bucky asked.

“Miss Lewis is in the gym.”

Bucky reached to push the number on the elevator’s panel.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Sergeant Barnes, but Miss Lewis is not at that gym.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Steve replied.

“She’s in the gym located in the basement, Captain.”

Steve looked at Bucky who shrugged in response as he hit the B button. It wasn’t like it was off-limits to her or anyone who lived in the Tower.

The lights were bright, the music deafening. Neither Steve nor Bucky could name the artist, but it had a repetitive beat that Darcy was mimicking with her punches. They left their bags by the
elevator and walked further into the gym, silently agreeing to wait for a break in the music before alerting her to their presence. Moving closer, but staying out of her line of vision, Steve shamelessly watched Darcy’s body move with the force of her efforts while Bucky focused on her technique. It wasn’t bad. He wanted to double-check her wrappings under the gloves, to make sure she wasn’t in danger of hurting herself, but as she continued to attack the punching bag, he found himself focusing less on skill and more on Darcy.

She was wearing black compression pants, black sports bra and a fitted red tank that hugged her generous curves, white letters on the front announcing “I’d hit that.” Her hair was pulled into a thick ponytail near the nape of her neck, several strands sticking to her face, which was drenched with sweat. She was beautiful. He had no idea what he and Steve did to deserve her, but Bucky was damn sure he’d spend the rest of his life showing her how grateful he was to have her – once she finally gave them a shot.

The song ended. Darcy took a step back and sucked in a lungful of air. Bending at the waist, she rested her hands on her knees.

“Darc – ”

Her hand was up and aimed at his face before he finished saying her name. He was faster, though, catching the glove in one hand, his other going up to block her second hit. “Not bad,” he smirked. “You need to work on your speed.”

“Fuck!” she yelled, breaking out of his hold. “Stop sneaking up on me like that! What if I had a gun?”

Steve stepped forward. “Did someone give you a gun?”

“No!” She looked at him like he was an idiot. “It was a rhetorical question! We live in a tower filled with spies and assassins and a guy who gets extremely pissed when caught off guard. You don’t sneak up on people! That’s the first rule!”

Bucky took a step in her direction, one arm going out to pull her closer. “What’s the second rule?”

Darcy wanted to make a Fight Club reference, but she knew it would go over their heads. Besides, it was late, she was tired and they appeared exhausted. Gorgeous as always, but drained. Bucky was wearing his trademark smirk, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes and Steve seemed lost. It hurt, seeing superheroes beaten. The public didn’t understand, didn’t know how personally each one took a loss. Stepping out of Bucky’s arms, she put her hands up in a silent request to take the gloves off. She could do it herself, but they looked like they needed to do something.

The gloves were removed in tandem, Steve working on her left hand, Bucky on her right. Next was the tape, which they took off only after they studied the wrapping, nodding in approval.

“How long were you watching?” she asked.

“Long enough to know you’ve got some power,” Steve murmured, running a calloused thumb over her knuckles. They were puffy, but not bruised. Keeping his eyes locked with hers, he raised her hand to his lips and kissed it, softly, barely a graze of lips to skin.

“What else did you do while we were gone?” Bucky’s tone was casual, but the way in which he held himself wasn’t. He wanted something, wanted her, but he wouldn’t ask and he wouldn’t take. He was a soldier. Steve was a soldier. They fought. They protected. Who took care of them?

She went with her instincts. Linking her fingers with Steve’s, Darcy pulled him to her as she
stepped closer to Bucky, her arm going around his waist. They followed suit, each one wrapping one arm around Darcy, the other around each other, until the three of them were one unit, faces buried in each other’s necks. Darcy knew she was sweaty and smelly; she didn't care. Steve knew he was still too wound up from the mission to be gentle; he couldn't stop. Bucky tightened his grip until he felt his tension fade away. No one spoke. There were no questions asked, no promises made. This was about the moment and, for now, it was enough.

Chapter End Notes

So I was writing away, loving the flow of this chapter, and then halfway through I realized that Darcy had yet to see or talk to or have any kind of contact with Steve and Bucky.

Um, that's the point of this story, right? The three of them?

But I like playing up the relationships. I picture living in Avenger Tower as a college dorm or summer camp, where everyone is in each other's lives. And if I'm going to make stuff up about these characters, I'm going to go all out and make them the way I wish they were in their real (but still fake because they are fictional characters) life.

So that's why this is a long chapter. :)

She woke to the drone of the television and squeezed her eyes shut, wishing (not for the first time) that thinking about something real hard made it happen. In this case, it was making the noise go away. She was tired, stiff and her face was smashed against something that was most definitely not a couch cushion. She shifted in search of a more comfortable position and froze when an arm curled around her waist.

“Stay,” Bucky demanded in a low voice.

He was behind her; his body curled around hers which meant Steve … she raised her arm over her head, her hand cautiously patting around her not-a-pillow. Yes, that was Steve’s leg. Her sleep-addled brain started to put the pieces together. James. Steve. They had surprised her in the gym, two soldiers with slumped shoulders and tired faces, who tried to hide the horrors of what they saw, what they did, behind a gentle smile (Steve) and a challenging smirk (James). She didn’t know what to say, what words could ease the horror she knew they’d relive when they closed their eyes, so she went for comfort, their arms finding each other and holding on. They needed an anchor. She could be that for them, a slice of light in the dark.

“I smell,” she murmured after a few minutes.

“Don’t care,” Bucky muttered, his face buried in her neck.

“Army,” Steve added, his fingers flexing against her waist.

That was fine and good for them, but Darcy recently added another pro to living in the Tower: the completely luxurious and astoundingly large shower in her bathroom with multiple shower heads and never-ending supply of hot water. When she first saw it, Darcy’s mind went straight to the gutter because, hello, Tony Stark, but it turned out to be a Godsend for her increasingly sore muscles.

“I need to take a shower.”

“That an invitation, doll?”

“Moment ruined.” Darcy pulled out of their embrace and socked Bucky on the arm. He didn’t even have the decency to pretend it hurt, but gave her a shit-eating grin in response. Steve rolled his eyes, but his lips quirked as he bent over to pick up Darcy’s bag, tossing her boxing gloves inside as he walked to the elevator. Darcy and Bucky followed, neither one saying anything as they waited for the car to arrive. Once inside, Steve hit the number for their floor, then looked at Darcy with one eyebrow raised in question.

“Dream on, Rogers; one kiss doesn’t change things.” She reached around and pushed the button for her floor.

“It was two kisses,” he reminded her.

“I did the math.”

“Are you mad?”
Sometimes it was hard to picture Steve Rogers as Captain America, to find the connection between
the man who looked at her with so much sincerity and the one who led a team of recluses into
battle time and time again. Was it the uniform? The shield? The once-small Brooklyn boy so
desperate to prove himself?

“No, I’m not mad. I’m …” Scared? Adrift? Vulnerable? She’d been kissed before. Some of those
kisses were great and some were best forgotten, but nothing compared to kissing Steve Rogers and
James Buchanan. She was surprised at how she responded to them, how her body reacted to two
different men, two different styles, with ease. There was none of the awkwardness that usually
accompanied first kisses, but a feeling of surety -- and that terrified her. “I’m confused,” she told
them. “I don’t know what to do with this. With us.”

Bucky, to his credit, didn’t reply with some smartass remark. Instead, he took her hand, pulled her
close, and kissed the top of her head. “You don’t have to do anything. We just … we don’t want to
be alone. Not tonight. Please.”

“You have each other.”

“We need you.”

It was that word that did it. Need, not want. Want she could handle. Want was fleeting, an impulse
feeling that eventually faded, but need … need was deeper, necessary and so much harder to
ignore.

They insisted on walking her to her apartment, leaving only after she promised to meet them on the
communal floor when she was clean. She told them they’d make a night of it – cartoons and ice
cream, pillows and blankets, comfort after distress. She smiled when she said it, but she was
kicking herself as she stripped off her sweaty clothes.

Darcy was many things – stubborn,
impulsive, loud and temperamental – but self-aware made the Top Ten, so she know without a
doubt that the more time she spent with Steve and James, the better the chances she’d lose herself
to them.

And still she couldn’t walk away.

“I wasn’t sure how up-to-date the two of you are with cartoons,” Darcy said as she set a pile of
DVDs next to the entertainment system.

Steve looked puzzled. “Cartoons require a certain level of knowledge?”

“The good ones do,” she said, sliding out a disc. “Animaniacs, for instance, is a treasure trove of
pop culture quips you need some understanding of to appreciate the humor. We’ll work up to that.”
She settled on the couch in-between Steve and Bucky, plucking the container of Ben & Jerry’s
Cherry Garcia from Bucky’s hands. “For now, though …”

She wished she took a picture of their faces when the black and white logo appeared on screen,
accompanied by the Looney Tunes theme song. This was familiar. This they knew. Steve squeezed
her shoulder in silent thanks as Darcy dug into the ice cream, her reward for thinking to purchase
movies and from Steve and Bucky’s era (thank you, Stark Industries’ credit card), and settled back
to lose herself in the adventures of Bugs Bunny, Porky Pig and Daffy Duck.

Darcy felt around the floor for her glasses, sliding them on before patting below once more in
search of her phone.

“It’s on the table.”
Darcy fully opened her eyes to see Tony perched on the arm of a loveseat, a smug look on his face as he sipped what she hoped was coffee. “What time is it?”

“Almost eight.”

She groaned quietly. “How long have you been there?”

“Long enough to feel warm and fuzzy inside.”

“Shut up, Stark,” Bucky growled, his breath warm on the back of Darcy’s neck.

“I second that,” she yawned as she moved to sit up, struggling against the metal arm that refused to let her go. “Stay,” Bucky repeated.

“Bathroom,” she replied.

He loosened his grip with a grumble. She stood, stretched to ease the kinks of her body and glared at Tony’s innocent look. It served him right that she stole his coffee before she shuffled to the bathroom. Considering that a challenge, Tony took out his phone, added a caption to the picture he took of the sleeping trio and tapped send before leaning over to hit the power button on the television remote, Steve’s body shifting at the sudden loss of sound.

“Thought the two of you would be lighter sleepers,” Tony remarked as he slid into the loveseat.

“Just because we didn’t open our eyes when you took that picture doesn’t mean we didn’t hear you,” Steve replied, his eyes still closed. He’d been awake for nearly an hour. He could sleep anywhere, and had, but even his body began to protest after hours in one position. Still, it had been worth it to have both of his soulmates in his arms as he slouched on the couch, his legs propped on the cushioned ottoman, Bucky curled next to him, one arm around Steve’s back while the other held Darcy. She fell asleep with her head on his leg, holding his hand. Steve wondered if she remembered that.

Bucky sat up with a low grumble, a sound Steve echoed as he stretched, joints popping.

“Coffee?”

Bucky eyes Tony suspiciously. “What’s the catch?”

“You come down to my workshop and let me get a look at that thing,” Tony said, gesturing to Bucky’s arm.

“Tony –“

“’S alright, Steve,” Buck was resigned. “Probably due for a tune up or whatever you want to call it. I know enough to get by, but if I’m going to be going out in the field …”

“Excellent,” Tony declared, getting up to fetch the promised coffee, pouring a cup for Darcy, too. He left hers on the bar, but carried Steve’s and Bucky’s to them. “Feel free to get back to snuggle time.”

“Wait; what are you going to do with that picture?” Steve called as Tony walked to the elevator.

“Not important!”

“You sent it to Clint, didn’t you?” Darcy murmured as she gave him his empty mug at the elevator.
He didn’t bother denying it. “Big brother’s not here to keep an eye on you, so time for Uncle Tony to step up.”

“Oh God,” Darcy groaned. “That is the creepiest thing that’s ever come out of your mouth.”

“I seriously doubt that.”

“Please, don’t ever refer to yourself as Uncle Tony again. I’m begging you.”

He smirked and leaned against the wall, arms crossed as studied her. “You OK, kid?”

She bit her lip, considering. She was still confused, but confusion was a familiar feeling these days. “Yeah. I took a moment. Like you said, it felt right.”

“Keep it to yourself,” he told her as he stepped into the elevator. “I’ve got a reputation to protect.”

_Don’t make it awkward, Rogers._ That’s what Steve repeated to himself as he watched Darcy talk to Tony, the scientist saying something that made her laugh before he ruffled her hair and got on the elevator. He tried to appear casual, but the leer Bucky shot him made it obvious that wasn’t working, so he picked up the blankets that had fallen to the floor. He couldn’t make a mistake if he kept busy. Last night was exactly what he needed, what they needed. He didn’t want to say or do something stupid and mess up what little progress the three of them had made.

He watched out of the corner of his eye as Bucky carried his coffee mug into the kitchen, setting it on the counter before pulling Darcy in for a hug. The fact that he was comfortable doing that, and that she was comfortable with him doing that, awed him. He didn’t hear what Bucky murmured in her ear – his voice was too quiet for even his amplified hearing to catch – but she smiled as she ran her fingers through his hair, saying something that made him shake his head. He was grinning while he did it, though. Then he was walking away, sending Steve a pointed look before he disappeared through the door that led to the stairwell.

He piled the folded blankets on the couch and walked to the kitchen, hooking one of the barstools with his feet before sitting. Her back was to him as she cleaned up the remains of their late-night snacking, her brown hair pulled in a messy bun that shouldn’t be attractive, yet all he wanted to do was twist the dark tendrils around his finger. He itched to touch her, to taste her. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair and cleared his throat. “Darcy.”

“Steve,” she echoed the seriousness of his tone, blue eyes dancing in merriment as she turned and leaned against the counter.

God save him from feisty brunettes. They were his weakness. “You’re making fun of me?”

“Maybe a little,” she admitted. “You look so serious. I really can’t handle serious this early on a Sunday.”

“It’s after eight.”

“It’s Sunday,” she repeated.

“Oh,” he nodded in understanding, not understanding at all. “Um … what do you usually do on Sunday?”

“Right,” he nodded in understanding, not understanding at all. “Um … what do you usually do on Sunday?”

“Jane’s schedule comes first ‘cause genius never rests, or so I’m told, but she’s involved in something with the Wonder Twins right now and I’m not cool enough to play. Bright side? More
Darcy time. You?"

“Bucky and I usually go for a run, and then swing by this diner we like for breakfast. They have great pancakes.”

“There’s nothing better than pancakes on a Sunday morning.”

Steve grabbed on to that opening with both hands. “Do you want to come with us?”

“To clarify, is the invitation for running and pancakes, or just pancakes?”

“Is there a wrong answer?”

“Yes.”

“Just pancakes?” Steve guessed.

“There’s hope for you yet, Cap.”

Steve stumbled across the 24-hour diner during the late-night wanderings that were part of his routine after he first woke up. He said he slept long enough whenever he was questioned about his inability to rest, but the truth of the matter was that he didn’t find comfort in the dreams of the people he’d lost. Waking up to an empty bed in an empty apartment after dreaming of Bucky was just as torturous as shouting himself awake after reliving Bucky’s fall from the train. He distracted himself with movies, with books and, eventually, running. He avoided familiar neighborhoods (not that they were familiar anymore), seeking out the unknown, finding comfort in places that held no memories. The diner looked like it had been there for decades, its late-night clientele practically a caricature of the city’s more questionable residents. Steve passed it several times over the months, but never ventured inside. He wasn’t looking for a place to belong. He only wanted to move, to push his body to near exhaustion in hopes for a few hours of uninterrupted slumber.

Then aliens attacked New York and he had to stop running. The world in which he woke wasn’t the one he wanted, but it was his and he would protect it. He picked up his shield, he led his team and, in victory, Steve realized that he could have a life, build a life, in this new time. It didn’t happen overnight. One didn’t get over months of anger and regret in an instant, but slowly, cautiously, Steve sought connections, spending time with Natasha and Clint – and sometimes even Tony. Bruce was a comforting presence as he, too, isolated himself out of self-preservation. They spent hours in each other’s presence saying nothing, but feeling stronger because of it. Steve stopped by the diner for coffee one morning and dinner one night. He did it once a week, then twice. Before he knew it, he was a regular and greeted by name when he walked in the door. He liked it. He didn’t realize how much he needed that familiarity until he had it.

“Well, well, well, look who it is,” an older woman with a mess of white curly hair tucked under a graying Mets cap greeted Steve and Bucky as they entered the diner, Steve’s hand resting on the small of Darcy’s back. “Started worrying when ya’ll weren’t here earlier, thinking you might be on one of those ‘business trips’ you believe you’re fooling me with,” she continued, winking at Darcy’s snort of disbelief as she led the trio to the booth at the back of the diner, waiting for Bucky to take his usual seat facing the restaurant, Steve sitting opposite him. Darcy hesitated for just a minute before sliding in next to Steve. If the waitress – Francine, her nametag read – noticed, she didn’t say anything, passing out laminated menus without a break in stride. “I know what the boys drink. What can I get you, honey?”

“Coffee, please, in the biggest mug you have.”
“Girl after my own heart,” she sighed. “Back in a bit!”

Darcy shifted in the red vinyl booth to look around the restaurant, her knees knocking Steve’s as she turned to take in the battered license plates nailed to the walls, black-and-white tiled floor, and Formica countertop. Ferns hung from cream-colored hooks in front of the windows, while plastic vases filled with equally plastic daisies sat on the tables. Cups filled with broken crayons sat on a tray by the cash register on top of a pile of coloring books. “This is awesome,” she declared. “It’s like every diner you find on a road trip. I bet the burgers are to die for.”

“Meatloaf isn’t bad.” Bucky pushed his menu away, his breakfast order the same since his first visit with Steve.

“Mmm … meatloaf,” Darcy hummed. “Good ol’ comfort food: meatloaf and mashed potatoes, with green beans and carrots. Grandma made it every Tuesday. God, I used to bitch about that. I’d whine about how stupid it was, having the same thing every week. I’d ask for pizza, spaghetti – anything but meatloaf. Never stopped me from eating it; just had to be a teenager and complain about something.” Darcy flipped to the menu’s back side, eyes on the print as she continued her story, missing the look Steve shared with Bucky. “One of the first Tuesdays after she died, my foster family had pizza for dinner and, typical Darcy, all I wanted was meatloaf. Be careful what you wish for, right?”

“You had a foster family?”

Her head came up at Bucky’s question. For a second, it looked like she wouldn’t answer, but then she shrugged. “Yeah. Grandma Lewis took care of me after my parents died. She died when I was fifteen and I was a ward of the state for a few years. Hey, have you tried their milkshakes? Diners have the best milkshakes. Would you judge me for getting one with breakfast?”

Steve covered her hand with his. She glanced down, her small hand dwarfed by his. He waited for her to pull away, saying nothing when instead she turned her hand over to lace her fingers through his. “I’ve seen how you take your coffee, sweetheart. A milkshake has less sugar.”

She nudged him in the shoulder. “Were you always this big of a smartass?”

Bucky shook his head. “You have no idea, doll.”

She ordered a vanilla milkshake, three pancakes, bacon and a large glass of milk. Bucky asked for the same, only double of everything except the milkshake. Steve ordered pancakes, eggs, bacon, sausage and orange juice. Francine didn’t blink once, scribbling everything on a tiny pad of paper before telling them it’d be ready soon. She was back minutes later with her milkshake and the boys’ drinks. Darcy sipped slowly, her eyes on her phone as she scrolled through Facebook. Bucky’s eyes skimmed the restaurant, always alert. Steve pulled a pencil from the pocket of his leather jacket, flipped over the paper placemat in front of him, and started sketching, losing himself in the familiarity of lines and shading. If anyone glanced over, they’d think the three of them had been sharing meals for years.

“What’s that?” Darcy peered over his shoulder, snorting when she saw the caricature of herself. “Taser Girl?”

“Got something against superheroes?” Steve asked.

“Nope,” she grinned, taking the placemat from him so she could see it better. He drew her running down an alley, her hair was loose, windswept; her face fierce, her taser clutched in her hands. She wore a cat suit similar to Natasha’s with a large T on the front and kickass knee-high boots. “No
cape,” she murmured. “Good call.”

“Tony shouts ‘No capes!’ at Thor all the time. I have no idea what he’s talking about.”

“First of all, people rarely know what Tony is talking about, but in this case, I do and you just decided our next Family Movie Night entertainment,” Darcy said, her eyes still on the paper. Bucky nudged Steve’s foot with his own and winked.

“I did?”

“You’ll love it,” Darcy promised as Francine carried a large tray piled with food to their table. “Trust me.”

Chapter End Notes

I struggled with this chapter. I wanted to advance the story without moving things too fast. Here's hoping it worked!
Trust me. Darcy said that a lot, usually before she took Steve by the hand or grabbed his arm, and dragged them to the next thing she wanted them to see, or hear or taste, or do. Little did she know that Bucky would follow her wherever she wanted him to go, that not since Steve was he so willing to put his trust in someone else.

But he drew the line at wasabi peas.

“Come on,” she wailed as she tried to force his hand open. “You’ll like ‘em!”

“No.”

Steve didn’t look up from his sketchbook though he was smiling as he continued to work on whatever he was drawing. It was a Wednesday afternoon and the three of them were at Central Park, having staked out a private, semi-shaded area where Steve could sketch, Darcy could zone out with her iPod and Bucky could finish reading her copy of *Fahrenheit 451*, though he was really splitting his time between watching others enjoying the park and watching them. They grabbed lunch on the way, making a faux picnic (“It’s not a real picnic without a blanket,” Darcy declared.) out of loaded submarine sandwiches, chips, pasta salad, and a plastic container of monster cookies Darcy pulled out of her gigantic bag like a magician. Those, Bucky liked. He ate three. The package of wasabi peas could go straight to the garbage.

“James Buchanan Barnes, you open your hand right now and try one!”

“No.”

“Ugh!” She sat on her heels, blowing a piece of hair that had fallen out of her ponytail out of her face in frustration. “How am I supposed to get you acclimated to the 21st Century if you fight me on the dumbest things?”

Bucky leaned back, enjoying the picture Darcy made when she was frustrated. Her face was flushed, her chest heaving, the swell of her gorgeous tits rising high over the V-neck of her shirt with each gulp of air. Fuck, he wanted her. It was killing him. He had no idea when he last wanted a woman this much, but he doubted that desire came anything close to what he felt for Darcy. It was maddening, the urge to touch, to lick, to taste. He had Steve. He had Steve over and over again, but he wanted Darcy. *They* wanted Darcy. He and Steve would come together in a blur of limbs, teeth and tongues, but they'd think of her, imagine her, Steve’s breath hot on Bucky’s skin as he’d describe in detail what it would be like, the three of them together, as he moved inside Bucky.

“I tried sushi. I liked sushi.”

“Exactly! How do you know you won’t like this?”

“I don’t like peas.”

“These are different!”

“They’re round and green, doll. They’re not as different as you think.”
She glared at him. He smirked at her. He loved winding her up. It was so easy and the payout, seeing her blue eyes flash with temper, was worth it every time. Even when she called him an ass and stormed off, he grinned because it was a pleasure to watch her walk away.

She wasn’t walking now. No, she was thinking, considering. He waited, his eyes never leaving hers as he watched her formulate her plan. Darcy could never play poker. Everything she thought, everything she felt, was reflected on her face. She smiled now, a slow curving of plump red lips that made him think of a dark room and silk sheets. He watched as she got to her hands and knees and crawled -- fucking crawled! -- to Steve, waiting on her knees for him to put the pencil down before she asked him to try a pea.

“And if I do?” he asked with all the innocence America loved.

Darcy hummed as she ran her hand through Steve’s blond hair. Bucky loved when she messed with his hair, her nails scraping against his scalp. She mentioned taking him to get his haircut a few times, but he refused. He wanted her fingers in his hair. He wanted her fingers tangled in his hair as he licked her cunt, her fingers gripping harder as he ate her out until she screamed. After he had that, he’d consider a haircut.

“You decide what we have for dinner?” she offered.

Steve shrugged.

“Control of the remote?”

He tilted his head, considering, but waited for a better offer.

“Back rub?”

“Getting warmer, sweetheart."

Her eyes narrowed. Bucky watched the scene play out, knowing Steve had her where he wanted her. She could back down and admit defeat in regards to the peas or force Steve’s hand. Bucky knew she’d never back down. Darcy was stubborn; he both loved and hated that about her. She had opened up to them in the last few weeks, offering glimpses of her past that gave him a better idea of her mindset regarding their soulmarks. She was afraid. She’d lost people she loved and was scared to go through that again. He got that. Fuck, if anyone understood how she felt, it was him and Steve. They’d lost loved ones. They lost each other! Life was a huge game of chance with no guarantees, but was it worth not even trying? What if Steve had given up on him? What if he had given up on himself?

No. He wasn’t going to go down that road. He’d had too many good days to give in to the dark, to lose himself in snatches of memories best left forgotten. He’d think about Darcy, focus on Darcy. He’d make her the mission; make her happiness, Steve’s happiness, his happiness, the objective. She’d continue to fight them, continue to fight what she was feeling because she was so goddamn obstinate, but that was OK. He was, too. And Steve? He practically invented the word. She didn’t stand a chance.

“What do you want?” Darcy finally asked.

“Kiss me.”

Bucky almost applauded, he was so fucking proud. Finally, the strategist used his powers for good. Darcy wasn’t expecting that, not from Steve. She hid it well, shooting Bucky a coy look over her shoulder, but the way she nibbled her lower lip showed her nerves.
Game on, doll.

“You know we’re not twelve,” she stalled. “You can’t double dog dare me and expect me to cave.”

“Then don’t,” Steve said, turning to a fresh page in his sketchpad, the picture of nonchalance.

She let out an exasperated huff. “Fine.” She held out the bag with a pointed look at his hands. Steve shook his head and opened his mouth. She rolled her eyes, but took a pea between her fingers and set it on his tongue, gasping when he grabbed her by the wrist so he could kiss her fingers before she pulled away.

“Well?” she asked, somewhat breathlessly.


“See?” She gave Bucky a triumphant grin. “Told you so.”

“Oh, you meant the pea? I was talking about you, sweetheart.” Steve brought a hand up to wrap around her neck. “Give me another,” he murmured.

She flushed slightly but leaned forward to brush her lips against Steve’s in a soft kiss. He didn’t try to deepen it, didn’t open his mouth to hers. It was an innocent kiss, and yet it wasn’t. Darcy pulled away and watched his tongue dart out to lick his lips, her own parting on a sigh.

Darcy was big on touching, holding their hands, linking her arm through theirs or scratching her nails along the width of their shoulder, but in the past few days, casual touches gave way to hugs and cuddles on the couch, watching whatever TV show she deemed vital to their understanding of modern culture but this, the chaste press of her lips on Steve’s, was the first kiss she had with either one since that night on the balcony. Bucky loved watching Steve and Darcy together, light and dark. He wanted to see it again. He wanted to be there, with them. Bucky clenched his fingers, his nails digging in dirt to stop himself from reaching, pulling.

“Still saying no, Barnes?” She asked smugly.

Christ, she was sassy. She had a mouth like a sailor, a body straight out of a 1940s pinup and a mind that captivated him. Fuck soulmarks. He didn’t need them to know this was the girl for them. Hell, he’d want Darcy Lewis even without her words on his skin. “Come here,” he baited. It took every ounce of self-control to keep his eyes on hers as she shuffled toward him, on her knees, her breasts swaying with the movement. When she was close, he grabbed, tugging her over and onto his lap, laughing when she punched his chest.

“You’re such an ass,” she growled affectionately.

“Shut up and feed me the fucking pea.”

She did, not with the sweetness she fed Steve -- her fingernail practically poked a hole in his tongue -- but she watched as he pretended to chew, swallowing the tiny thing whole before he bent his head to kiss her -- again, not like Steve. It wasn’t sweet. It wasn’t soft. It was a hard, demanding, his mouth opening over hers, tongue sweeping inside to plunder, to taste. He cradled her head in his hands, pulled her closer, groaning when she pushed the baseball cap off of his head, threading her fingers through his hair.

“Public park, you two,” Steve reminded them.

One more minute. Just give him one more minute and he’d be good. Maybe. God, she tasted
amazing, a combination of vanilla and chocolate. Did she honestly expect him to be satisfied with that? He needed more. He needed to know if her taste changed, where it changed. The sounds she made every time his tongue swept over hers -- would she make them in bed when he was fucking her?

“James,” she murmured as he softened the kiss, not wanting to stop but knowing he had to while her still could. He rested his forehead against hers, his breathing harsh, nostrils flaring and he waited for his heartbeat to return to normal. Her fingers combed through his hair, her eyes steady on his. “You didn’t chew the damn pea, did you?”

He doesn’t remember the last time he laughed that hard.

Stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Darcy stomped down the hall, having made up an excuse to ditch Steve and Bucky at the elevator (she would never tell them Jane was her get out of jail free card) so she could hide out in the labs until she was sure it was safe to return to her apartment. Their old-fashioned manners were cute (at times), but she did not need them to walk her to her door, not in this state, not when her door was so close to her bedroom and in her bedroom was in a bed and in that bed … She was having a lot of thoughts about Steve and James in her bed. “Aughh!” Darcy pushed open the door. She let her bag fall to the floor with a thud. She toed off her Vans and threw them in a combination of temper, sexual frustration and self-flagellation. “You are so stupid, Darcy!”

“I wouldn’t say that, but your aim sucks.”

“You’re home!” Darcy ran across the room and jumped in Clint’s arms, knocking him back several feet. “Ohmigod! Are you OK?”

“Having some trouble breathing – Darce, babe, you’re choking me.”

“Sorry!” Darcy unwound her arms from Clint’s neck and got off of him. A quick perusal showed he was in one piece, aside from the bandage over his eye. “Another scar?”

“Chicks dig ‘em.”

She snorted and poked him in the stomach, his chest and legs, all the while watching his face to see if he flinched. Clint wasn’t a Norse god or a green rage fiend. He wasn’t shielded by a suit of metal or pumped full of super soldier serum. Even his uniform was less protective than Natasha’s since archery required full range of motion.

“I’m fine.” He slapped her hands away after her pokes shifted from concerned to annoying.

“I haven’t seen you in a month!” she cried, smacking him in the shoulder.

“First, ow. Second, I texted.”

“Not the same and you know it. You never leave for that long,” she told him, tugging on his hand until they were on the couch. “How’s Nat?”

Clint ran a hand through his hair. Natasha was tough. No one would ever say she wasn’t, but this last mission … He’s said there were few things in this world that shocked him anymore. He didn’t mean for that to be a challenge. “She’s better,” he said on a sigh. “What we saw brought back some memories for her. She needed to be alone until she dealt with them.”

“Alone meaning with you?”
Clint snorted. “She fought me on it. Where’d you think I got the scar?”

Darcy placed her hand over his. “I’m glad she has you. I’m sorry you guys have to see what you see and do things that stay with you. Steve and James were pretty shattered when they got back.”

Clint swallowed. It was a shitty mission. Shittier than shitty. They were kids, boys and girls who should have been in school, worried about math tests and hoping not to be picked last in gym. Instead, they were in a warehouse, living in deplorable conditions, training to be killers. They were beaten down and built back up. A few tried to run. They took the skills they were forced to learn, the knowledge no one that young should have, and tried to make a break for it. Clint and Bucky saw them first, two boys running out of the compound, firing guns at the guards, throwing grenades not to kill, but distract. They barely made it twenty yards before they were gunned down. Bucky killed the guards, his eyes a cold blue until everyone was on the ground. He covered Clint as he rushed to the kids. The first one was gone. The second one was hardly breathing.

“Hey. Hey, kid, stay with me,” he said, pressing his hand against the wound on the boy’s chest. “Help is coming. Stay with me.”

“More,” the boy whispered.

“I know. More people are on their way.”

“More kids,” he whispered, blood trickling out of the corner of his mouth.

“Clint? Hey, where’d you go?”

He looked over. Darcy was watching him, her eyes wide with worry. “Sorry.” He shook his head. He didn’t want to go there. He spent weeks trying to bury the memories. When he and Natasha woke up that morning, they looked at each other and said one word: home. They wanted their home, their teammates, their – and neither one of them ever thought they’d say this – family.

“I’m here if you need to talk.”

“You know what I need? I need tons of food, loud people and for you to explain Thor’s new obsession with Instagram. The dude posts more selfies than a 16-year-old girl.”

Darcy laughed because she knew that’s what Clint wanted and tugged her phone out of her back pocket. Thor’s Instagram account -- @viewfromabove – was the first Avenger-owned social media account since Pepper banned Tony from Twitter. Thor got hooked after watching Darcy upload photos of him playing with the animal shelter’s dogs – they were the top story on Entertainment Tonight almost two weeks ago and led to an increase in pet adoptions, thank you very much – to her account (@darcylewisland). Tony gave Thor a StarkPhone, she led a crash course in Social Media 101 (Steve and Bucky also attended, though they declared social media a time waste; she would make them see the errors of their ways), and Thor quickly became Instagram’s most followed account, though Tony’s was making headway. Darcy still wasn’t convinced he wasn’t creating ghost accounts to pad his numbers. Tony hated losing.

“Isn’t it awesome?” she said, scrolling through her feed. “Pepper actually asked if I would consider starting a general Avengers account, posting images of the things you guys do when you’re not making the world a better place. She thinks humanizing the team will improve your public image.”

Clint sighed at the photo of Thor eating pizza the New York way – only he didn’t have one piece folded over, but an entire pizza. “There used to be a time when spies’ lives were secret.”

“Doesn’t it suck when aliens attack the earth and ruin everyone’s fun?”
Darcy dragged out her ancient laptop and they spent an hour going through her photos, Clint approving those that featured him for the it’s-not-live-yet-but-if-Pepper-wants-it-it’ll-happen Avengers Instagram account. He pulled out his phone. “Will this one make the cut?”

Darcy looked at the picture of her sleeping on the couch with Steve and Bucky. She was holding Steve’s hand. She didn’t remember that.

Clint raised an eyebrow. “Something you want to tell me?”

“Like I said, they were pretty beat up when you they got back from wherever you all were. We did a late-night cartoons and junk food combo to get their minds off of things.”

He smiled and put his phone away. “And?”

“That’s it.”

He didn’t say anything.

“It is!”

Still nothing.

“Ohmigod, shut up!”

“I didn’t say a word.”

“But you’re thinking it. I can hear you!”

His grin was annoyingly superior. “And what am I thinking?”

“That I caved, that I’m caught up in the whole ‘We’re soulmates and we’re going to live happily ever after’ bullshit.”

“Actually, I was thinking you got some, but given your temper, now I think not.”

“Shut up!”

“Ah ha! So you do want to jump them!”

“I didn’t say that!”

“Yet you stomp into your place throwing shoes and calling yourself stupid, which means you either did something with them that you’re now beating yourself up about or you stopped yourself from doing something with them and you’re beating yourself up about that.”

Darcy groaned and sank further into the couch. “Being friends with spies sucks. I need to find new friends.”

Clint tugged on her arm until she was by his side. “Which is it? ‘Cause if it’s something else entirely and I need to kick their asses, I’m fully prepared to do so.”

She sat up. “Yeah, about that. Who told you it was OK to go all big brother on them?”

“Nat.”

Darcy’s mouth snapped shut. She had been prepared to go off on her tirade about how she was an
independent woman who did not need a man to stick up for her – she’d been working on her speech for weeks – but Natasha was the very definition of a kickass woman who could take care of herself. If she didn’t try to stop Clint, then maybe his giving the shovel talk wasn’t the most embarrassing thing to happen to her. “What’d you tell them?”

Clint shook his head. “Nope. That’s confidential between me and the potential boyfriends.”

“They’re not my boyfriends,” she grumbled under her breath.

“Says the girl sporting an impressive hickey.”

Darcy leapt from the couch to rush to the bathroom, ignoring Clint’s laugh as she flipped on the light to study her reflection. “What the – BARTON!” She stomped back to the living room. “I do not have a fucking hickey!”

“But you checked, which means you were doing something that could have led to one,” he grinned, perching on the arm of the couch. “Spill.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No! That’s girl talk! We don’t do girl talk.”

Clint rolled his eyes. “Fine. I concede. But, seriously, you’re OK? They aren’t pressuring you or anything?”

Darcy laughed. “Really? You think two Brooklyn boys born in 1918 are giving me a hard time? It was a red letter day when Steve held my hand, let alone goaded me into giving him a kiss.”

Clint grinned. Who knew Captain America had game? “Go on.”

Darcy smiled a little. She knew what Steve was doing, playing her to get what he wanted. She wasn’t stupid. It was so cute, how he could appear so sweet and innocent one minute, but smartassy (it’s a word!) and full of trouble the next. She wondered if he ever lost control. She wasn’t ready to admit how much she wanted to see that. “We’ve been spending a lot of time together because Team Science! is on the verge of a breakthrough –“

“Oh God; we’re going to die, aren’t we?”

“JARVIS assures me we won’t,” Darcy promised. “Anyway, so I’ve had more time to myself and apparently the baddies of this world and others are staying low for the time being, so Steve and James have had some free time, and we’ve been spending it together. I’m catching them up to everything awesome – movies, food, music, TV. We had a Chopped marathon the other day. Even Tony sat for a few episodes and then insisted we do a competition in the kitchen. Pepper, Bruce and JARVIS judged.”

“How does an AI judge a cooking competition?”

“Presentation.”

Clint decided that made sense. “Who won?”

Darcy snorted. “Please.”

Clint held up and hand and she slapped it.
“Alright, so what does kissing super soldiers have to do with ‘Welcome to the 21st Century?’ I assume they kissed back then.”

“Smartass. You want to hear the story or you want to make snarky comments?”

“Can I do both?”

She turned as if to leave.

“OK!” Clint’s hand shot out, stopping her. “I’ll be good.”

She gave him a look that clearly said she doubted it, but continued. “We were at the park today and I had snacks in my bag, including wasabi peas.”

Clint made a gagging sound.

“You have the culinary palate of a toddler!”

“Let me guess. You forced them to try one?”

“Yes! Steve did it for a kiss and then James kissed me after he tried his, not that swallowing it without chewing counts as trying, and Steve’s kiss was all sweet, but James was all lips and tongue and – “

“I’m remembering why we don’t do girl talk.”

“—and Steve had to remind us we were in Central Park, so we stopped, but I didn’t want to stop and now I don’t know what to do! I want them, but they are not the kind of guys you just sleep with. They are commitment guys. They’ve been fucking committed to each other since the 40s! Did Steve even date anyone before James reappeared?”

Clint shook his head. “Nat tried to set him up a few times, but he wasn’t having it.”

“See? They totally buy into soulmarks! What they hell am I going to do?” Darcy paced the floor. “I tried to stay away, Clint! I tried not to like them, but it’s hard. They’re both so cute and good and strong and I just want to fucking hold them until that sad look they get in their eyes sometimes goes away. They’re funny and sweet and we get along, like really, really well. They don’t know what I’m talking about half the time, but they don’t make me feel stupid. They listen! Oh, and James laughed today, like a full-on belly laugh. He couldn’t breathe! It was the best thing ever and now all I want is to make him do it again!”

Clint placed his hands on Darcy’s shoulders to keep her still. “Babe, chill. This is not a problem.”

“It is a problem! I could fall for them! I’m so fucking close already! I could totally lose myself to them and what happens when they go off and fight, but don’t come back? Clint, I can’t lose anyone else I love. Not again!”

“You love me.”

She sniffed and rubbed her eyes. “It’s a stupid time to be jealous.”

“Not who’s the smartass?” he asked. “Seriously, you love me and I go off and fight.”

“Yeah, but you’re too stupid to die.”

Clint laughed and pulled Darcy into a hug. Resting his chin on top of her head, he took a deep
breath. “Did I tell you I had a soulmate?”


Clint held out his right hand. “Here. Or it was. I lost it when she died.”

Darcy’s mouth fell open. “I’m so sorry –“

Clint shook his head. “Don’t be. It was a long time ago.”

Darcy led him back to the couch. “How did you meet?”

Clint smiled, remembering. “On a job.”

“Was she an agent?”

“No. Civilian; wrong place at the wrong time. I tackled her in an alley in Pittsburgh. Her words to me were ‘Your landing needs work.’” He smiled at the memory.

“How long ago was that?”

“Twelve years.”

“What happened?”

“We were together for three. I even proposed – got the ring and did the whole down-on-one-knee thing. She knew what I did and she worried, but she was tough. She understood when I had to go and was always waiting when I got back.” He looked over at Darcy. “You would have liked her. She didn’t take shit from anyone, either.”

“What happened?” Darcy asked, though part of her didn’t want to know the answer.

“Cancer,” Clint said matter-of-factly. “She was fine one day, a little under the weather, and the next we knew, a doctor was telling us what he could do to make her comfortable. She was gone three months later.”

Darcy scooted over until she was next to Clint. She wrapped her arms around him. “I’m sorry. That – that really fucking sucks. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah,” Clint took a deep breath. “But you know what? I could have walked away. Thought about it a lot; even tried to once. I gave her the whole ‘I’m just going to get you hurt’ speech and she laughed. Called me an idiot and asked what I wanted for dinner. And I was an idiot, Darcy. She was the best thing in my life and I almost let her go because I was afraid of something that might not have happened.”

Darcy shook her head and buried her face in Clint’s shoulder.

“I know what you want to say. You want to say she died anyway. Yeah, she did. Of cancer. Not on a mission or because of my enemies, but because of a fucking disease. Shit happens. And even if I knew I was going to lose her, if I had a crystal ball that said I was going to be really happy for a few years and then fucking miserable for a lot more, I still would have done it because she was worth it. I don’t know if Steve and Barnes are worth it to you, but I do know this. If nothing happens to them while they’re in the field, if Steve eventually retires the shield and Barnes hangs up the guns, if they spend their afternoon playing canasta and have steak dinners at 4 p.m., and talk about the good old days –“
“They do that now,” Darcy interrupted.

Clint glared at her. “Shut up, Darcy. Yeah, there’s a chance they could get killed on the job. There’s a chance Jane blows you up in the lab tomorrow. We don’t know what’s going to happen, but if they live to be two hundred years old, and have a great, long life together, you’re going to be pissed you didn’t share it with them.”

Darcy wiped away her tears. She hated crying. “They’d do that, too, just to make me mad. Especially James.”

“Bastard.”

Darcy sniffed. “Yeah.”

Clint hugged her. “I can’t tell you what to do, but for what it’s worth, you’re good for them. I think they’d be good for you.”

She wrapped her arms around him. “I missed you.”

“Missed you, too.”

She sniffed and pulled away. “I have half a dozen lasagnas in the freezer, holdovers from the Italian Family Dinner Night that didn’t happen because you and Nat weren’t here. Feel like helping me throw something together for dessert before I institute Dinner and a Movie Night?”

“What’s the flick?”

She grinned. “Two words: no capes!”

Clint laughed and jumped up, pulling Darcy to her feet. “Hell yeah!”

Chapter End Notes

People really want to see the how the next movie night (Pixar’s The Incredibles) plays out. I already have a bit of it written. I’m still giggling over Tony arguing with Clint that Frozone totally sounds like Fury! :D But first I must re-watch the movie. You know, for research.

Many thanks to all of you leaving kudos and commenting. I am having fun with this story and am glad the slow build falls more under entertaining than annoying. We’ll get there, I promise!

Can I just say I love Clint? Like love him!
SPOILER ALERT FOR ANYONE WHO HASN’T SEEN THE INCREDIBLES! The team gives away the plot of the movie while watching it. I apologize on their behalf. :)

Steve learned a long time ago to be careful what he wished for, that fate had a way of giving you what you wanted, but twisting it enough to keep you wanting more. That’s how she kept her power.

When he was picked for Dr. Erskine’s serum, Steve thought it was his chance, finally, to do what was right, to take his place with his brothers in arms and fight. Instead, he was made a performer, a dancing monkey who asked how high when told to jump. Sure, they told him he was doing a good thing, that his efforts resulted in the increased sales of war bonds, but that wasn’t what he wanted when he wished to be different. When he agreed to participate in Erskine’s experiment, it wasn’t for the height or the strength or the speed; it was because he knew he wouldn’t abuse the opportunities that arose from it.

He got his chance to prove himself when he broke the chain of command to rescue Bucky and the soldiers captured by Hydra. It wasn’t about showing off or proving himself, but doing the right thing. Finally, finally, the powers that be saw that and allowed him to take command of his own team. He loved leading the Howling Commandos, loved fighting the good fight with Bucky by his side. It was all he ever wanted.

Of course fate took it away. Steve would never forget how it felt to watch Bucky fall from the train, to hear his best friend, his love, his soulmate, scream as he plummeted to the frozen ground below. Steve wanted to jump after him; there are days he questioned why he didn’t. It was probably the part that the media played up (all-American goodness, self-sacrificing, etc.), that stopped him. That, or the need for revenge. As he flew his plane into the Artic, he knew his actions were a combination of both. He didn’t necessarily want to die, but at the same time, he was at peace with his decision. He’d do his job, he’d save the world, and he’d be with Bucky again.

Fate was a cruel mistress. That’s all Steve could think as he looked around Times Square, head spinning at the sights, the sounds, the knowledge that he was not supposed to be there, and yet he was.

There was anger. There was sorrow. There was beating up numerous punching bags. There was running through the streets, reading books and watching movies. There was isolation. There was pouring through the files SHIRLD gave him, reading about former teammates, former friends. And there were tears. He refused to talk to the therapist SHIELD sent him to. He knew what was wrong with him. Nothing she said would make it better, would make him better.

The bitterness faded. He found a new team, he found a new mission and, according to the words on his shoulder blade, he would find a new soulmate. He embraced the first two and ignored the third as he slowly carved a place for himself in a new time. There were still days he wondered why he was there, why fate was so determined to make him her bitch, and then the Winter Soldier tried to kill him.
He never doubted that Bucky would remember him, remember them, for not even fate could be that malicious. It wasn’t easy. Steve would go so far to say deprogramming Bucky, digging through years of neglect and abuse, pain and torture, was the hardest thing he’s ever done – and he grew up struggling to breathe most days. But it was worth it the first time Bucky looked at him, really looked at him with recognition and whispered “Steve?”

Bucky whispered it now, not in recognition, but in reverence, the fingers of his hands, flesh and metal, stroking Steve's back lazily. Bucky had pounced the moment they walked into their apartment, pushing Steve against the closed door, hands a blur as he undid his belt, pushing his slacks and boxers to the floor as his lips attacked his neck. Steve tried to get him to stop, or to at least slow down, but then Bucky was on his knees, Steve’s cock was in his mouth, and he stopped thinking, his head falling against the door with a thud as he gripped Bucky’s head and held on for dear life.

“We can’t do this to her,” Bucky said now.

“Do what?” Steve murmured, feeling wonderfully loose, the lust that had gripped him the second Darcy crawled to him at the park, a knowing grin on her beautiful face, abated for the moment. He loved Bucky. He couldn’t remember a time when he didn’t love Bucky, but he needed Darcy. He was done fighting it, the disregard he had for his second soulmate a distant memory. She was everything he could want in a woman, everything they could want in a woman, and having her so close, yet still so far, was torture. He’d wait for her as long as she needed, but it was slowly killing him.

“This,” Bucky shifted until he was on his side, smirking as Steve fell face-down on the mattress in an ungraceful heap.

Steve moved his head so he was looking at Bucky. The rest of his limbs refused to cooperate. “What are you saying? You don’t want her?”

Bucky scoffed. “Don’t be stupid, punk. I’m saying when we finally get her in bed, we can’t be like that.”

Steve’s smile was wicked. “You weren’t complaining a few minutes ago.”

Bucky leaned down to kiss him. “Still not, but if we go at her like that … I don’t want to scare her. There’s already so much about me that can make her run.”

Steve forced his arms to lift up so he could pull Bucky close, curling around him as if to shield him from the dark thoughts that tried to drag him back to the darkness. “When the time comes, we’ll be everything she needs. I promise.”

Bucky responded by kissing him, mouthing where his neck met his shoulder, making Steve moan. “Captain. Sergeant.”

Bucky sighed and pulled away.

“Yes, JARVIS?” Steve rolled to his back, hoping this wasn’t a call to assemble.

“I’ve been asked to tell you that Agents Barton and Romanoff have returned, and that a family dinner will be served at 7, followed by a movie. Your attendance is mandatory.”

“Darcy is a bossy thing,” Bucky said with a smile.
“I would not disagree with you, Sergeant.”

“Where is Darcy now?” Steve asked.

“Miss Lewis is in the communal kitchen with Agents Barton and Romanoff, Prince Thor, Dr. Foster, Miss Potts –“

“JARVIS, is everyone in the kitchen?”

“All except Sir, Captain, but he is on his way.”

“We’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Steve knew Clint grew up in the circus. That wasn’t something a person forgot and yet he was still surprised whenever he came across Clint doing something that was definitely circus-like. Tonight, it was juggling tomatoes. Darcy was yelling at him, telling him if he dropped them, he was the one going to the market for more. He ignored her threat and nodded at Thor to toss a bulb of garlic to the lineup, incorporating it without missing a beat. Natasha was oblivious to his antics, focused on slicing the pile of vegetables on the cutting board in front of her while Darcy stood over the standing mixer, adding sugar to whatever was inside. Bruce was pulling plates from the cupboard, Tony was opening a third bottle of wine and Jane was folding cloth napkins into little pockets, in which Pepper added the cutlery. It was a completely domestic scene and it filled Steve’s heart, especially when Bucky seamlessly slid into the mix, removing glasses from one cupboard after kissing Darcy on the cheek. Not wanting to be left out, Steve opened the refrigerator to grab the pitcher of water, knowing Bruce would make the switch after the one glass of wine he’d allow himself at dinner.

“It smells amazing,” he told Darcy as he copied Bucky’s movement, kissing her on the opposite cheek. “What are we having?”

“Lasagna, garlic bread and if Clint would please stop showing off and give Nat the tomatoes, chopped salad.”

“You used to like it when I showed off,” Clint grumbled, effortlessly catching the tomatoes and garlic bulb in his hands.

“I also used to play with Barbies and dream about marrying Justin Timberlake,” Darcy told him. “Now I play Words with Friends and dream about marrying Justin Timberlake.”

“Who’s Justin –“ Steve started.

“N’SYNC; boy band,” Tony interrupted.

“He was their unofficial lead singer and is now a solo artist,” Jane continued.

“He hosts Saturday Night Live a lot,” Pepper continued.

“And he’s best friends with Jimmy Fallon,” Bruce finished.

“I’m both proud and scared by the amount of knowledge in this room,” Darcy remarked as she removed the stainless steel bowl from the mixer, covered it with plastic wrap and placed it in the refrigerator as the oven timer beeped. Thor donned oven mitts to remove the lasagnas and loaves of
garlic bread, everyone working around each other to finish their tasks. The group sat down to
dinner in the dining room minutes later.

It was a lively affair. Steve hadn’t realized how quiet the Tower could be when members of the
team were away. There was a time a person’s absence wouldn’t have an effect on the group as a
whole – he was away more often than not while helping Bucky, and SHIELD was always sending
Clint and Natasha on missions – but that had changed in the past month. Now, instead of retreating
to their living quarters, people sought each other out – and not simply to spar, train or test whatever
Bruce and Tony came up with in their labs. The once quiet communal floor was finally the central
hub Steve assumed Tony wanted it to be when he redesigned the Tower after Loki’s attack. Steve
grinned at the memory of the scene he came across the other day – Darcy and Bruce engaged in a
cutthroat game of Uno that JARVIS informed him was going on its second hour. He watched for
nearly thirty minutes before Bruce finally declared victory.

“How are you?” Steve asked Natasha, keeping his voice low so not to draw attention to their
conversation. Before Bucky’s return, the redhead spy had been the closest thing he had to a
friend. Now that she was no longer trying to set him up on dates, he felt comfortable making the
transition from colleague to comrade.

“Better,” she replied, not offering details though Steve was surprised she said that much. “I see
things continue to improve for you,” she continued, eyes sliding to where Bucky was whispering
something in Darcy’s ear.

Steve hummed noncommittally, not missing the way Natasha’s eyes narrowed as she studied him.
Luckily, Darcy chose that moment to push her chair back and clap her hands to get everyone’s
attention.

“Dessert will be served after the dishes are done –”

“Boo!” Tony shouted.

“—while we watch our second Family Movie Night film.”

“Since Darcy made dinner, she is dismissed from dish duty,” Pepper announced as she rose from
the table, ignoring the chorus of groans that followed her announcement. Darcy shot everyone a
satisfied smirk and left to change into what she called movie-viewing clothes while Pepper put her
CEO/Tony-wrangling skills to use.

The kitchen was sparkling by the time Darcy returned, everyone grabbing seats in the rec room
while she pulled out a tray of chocolate and vanilla parfaits from the refrigerator, the layers of
pudding separated by crushed Oreo cookies. Bucky shot to his feet to help her as she added
homemade whipped cream to the stop of each parfait, licking the whipped cream she held up to
him to taste off of her finger slower than necessary, their antics ignored by everyone but Steve.

“Right,” Darcy said after everyone had a dessert – even Bruce, though his was made with sugar-
free pudding and no Oreos. “Some of you think we’re watching A League of Their Own, as that
was on the shortlist from our first movie night, but tonight’s choice was inspired by the Captain.”
She reached underneath the coffee table and held up a Blu-Ray: The Incredibles.

“I love that movie!” Jane cried as Tony and Clint shouted their approval.

“Do you think we’ll ever stop being the last ones to know?” Bucky asked Steve.

“Probably not,” he replied, moving into a more comfortable position on the couch, knowing Darcy
would spend the movie snuggled against him, Bucky at their feet on the floor where he could rest against Steve’s legs and have Darcy’s fingers in his hair.

“Good thing we have Darcy,” Bucky said before he slid to the ground.

Steve murmured his agreement as Darcy whispered something to Bruce that made the scientist smile before taking the remote and jumping on the couch next to him. “Prepare to thank me, Cap. This is a cinematic masterpiece.”

“You do realize you say that about everything you make us watch.” Steve put an arm around Darcy and pulled her closer, not missing the look Clint shot him before turning his attention to the screen.

“And I haven’t been wrong yet.”

Steve was forced to agree with her, the movie capturing his attention within minutes, chuckling when Mr. Incredible compared saving the world to a maid cleaning the house. He, too, sometimes wished the world would just stay saved.

“I’m surprised we haven’t been sued,” Clint remarked.

“SHIELD has excellent lawyers,” Natasha told him.

“If I was forced to go into hiding and they made me an insurance salesman …” Tony shuddered, unable to finish the thought.

Darcy nudged Steve, her eyes still on the movie. “Can you lift a car?”

“Impressed, sweetheart?”

“I might be.”

Steve tucked that information away for future reference.

“Invisibility. Now that’s a superpower,” Clint said.

“Please. You’d use it to sneak into women’s locker rooms,” Darcy sniffed.

“He does that now,” Tony added.

“Do not,” Clint protested.

“Then explain the time you came through the vent when –“ Darcy started.

“I thought you were being attacked! You yelled!”

“I stubbed my toe!”

“Who screams like that when they stub their toe?”

“In Darcy’s defense, that hurts.”

“Thank you, Janey.”

“Thank you, Janey” Clint mimicked in a high-pitched voice.

Steve tightened his arm around Darcy’s waist to stop her from strangling the archer.
“Call me crazy –“

“You’re crazy,” Darcy, Clint, Pepper, Natasha, Bruce and Jane said at once. Tony ignored them.

“ – but doesn’t Frozone remind you of Fury?”

“That’s racist, dude,” Clint said.

“Bite me, Barton. He sounds just like him!”

“This is a family film, Tony. Frozone isn’t swearing.”

“Not the words, Capsicle. The voice.”

Darcy replayed the scene of Mr. Incredible and Frozone rescuing the people from the fire, Tony yelling for everyone to shut up as the characters argued on screen.

“I can kind of hear it,” Natasha admitted.

“Thank you,” Tony said. “I’m buying you a car.”

She smiled serenely as the others yelled in protest.

“I hate running,” Darcy remarked as they watched Mr. Incredible lope about the island.

“Did you keep up with your training while I was gone?” Natasha asked.

“Yes, Mom.”

Bucky caught the pillow Natasha threw at Darcy. Darcy kissed the top of his head in thanks.

“Ah,” Thor beamed. “That’s why you yell ‘No capes.'”

Tony looked over. “Rethinking your wardrobe, Point Break? I could come up with something a bit less clichéd.”

Thor’s smile was indulgent. “Do not worry, my friend. Mjölnir keeps me safe.”

“Still …” Tony’s voice trailed off in that way it did when he was struck by a thought. Seconds later, he was up, looking for his tablet.

“Tony, no!” Pepper ran after him. “This is a cartoon. You can’t copy Edna’s designs.”

They had to pause the movie until Pepper was able to drag Tony back to the couch, sans tablet. He did have a legal pad and pen clutched in his hands, though. Pepper shook her head at everyone’s look of disbelief. “I’ve had a long week,” she said in a defensive tone.

Bucky nudged Steve in the knee when Syndrome revealed himself to be Mr. Incredible’s spurned fan, Buddy. “You better be nice to your admirers, Steve.”

“I’m always nice. Jerk.”

“I know for a fact that isn’t true.”

Neither one noticed the intrigued look on Darcy’s face.

“Monologue cliché!” Tony and Clint shouted.
“It’s sad how often that actually happens,” Bruce remarked.

Everyone ignored Tony's scribbling except Bruce. He shook his head in amused exasperation.

“Edna Mode kicks ass on so many levels,” Darcy announced. “If I could draw and the shit she comes up with was actually possible, I would totally be a superhero costume designer.”

“Nothing’s impossible, kid.”

“You aren’t suckering me into whatever diabolical plans you’re designing. It took months for my eyebrows to grow back!”

Clint actually did a spit take, coughing as he wiped the beer from his mouth. “I forgot about that!”

Bucky’s head whipped around, a curious grin on his face.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Darcy growled.

Steve kissed her temple and made a mental note to have JARVIS alert him if Tony ever talked Darcy into helping him with an experiment. He’d ask Bruce to keep an eye on them, too.

“I love it when the woman saves the day,” Jane sighed.

“It’s the way of the world,” Thor told her, ignoring dirty looks from Clint and Tony in favor of the knowing smiles Natasha, Pepper and Darcy sent his way.

“Running on water. Another kickass super power,” Clint announced.

“Lady Sif can do that,” Thor told him.

“You’re kidding.”

“I am not. She has a bit of sorcery in her. She does not tap into her power often, but there are moments in battle when it’s quite useful.”

“She is so fucking cool,” Darcy sighed.

“I would love to spar with her someday,” Natasha stated.

Clint’s eyes glazed over at her announcement, as did Tony’s. Bruce looked down, a sure sign he was embarrassed by whatever popped into his head. Even Steve cleared his throat, which made Darcy snicker.

“What am I missing?” Bucky asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” Darcy promised.

“No, you won’t,” Steve replied.

She rolled her eyes and turned back to the movie.

“Yeah, I hear it now,” Clint said as Frozone and his wife yelled back and forth.

“Too late, Barton. Romanoff gets the car.”

Clint sighed heavily.
Steve stiffened during Mr. Incredible’s speech about not being strong enough to watch his wife die again, his hand dropping to Bucky’s shoulder to grip it tightly. Bucky reached up and squeezed it in comfort as Darcy wrapped both of her arms around him in a tight hug.

“Dash acts like you did the first time you were in a limo,” Darcy said to Thor.

“The first time he was in a car,” Jane corrected.

“Are you talking about the car you hit me with, my love? Twice?”

“Oh snap!” Darcy cried as Tony got up to shake Thor’s hand for his perfectly-timed comeback.

Steve caught the pillow Jane beamed at Darcy. Pepper let Tony be hit.

“Can you throw someone like that?” Darcy asked Steve as Elastigirl went flying through the air.

“Why are you suddenly obsessed with what I can or can’t do?”

“Research?”

He smiled naughtily and leaned closer. “If you want to know if I’m strong enough to hold you up while we’re fucking against a wall, the answer is yes,” he whispered, careful to keep his voice low enough so only Darcy and Bucky heard him, and his head angled in case Clint was doing his lip-reading thing. Darcy stiffened in his arms and said nothing for the last couple minutes of the movie, maintaining her silence as they watched the Blu-Ray’s extras.

“Another good choice, kid,” Tony said as JARVIS brought up the lights.

Darcy didn’t respond. Steve looked down and saw her staring ahead, eyes unfocused. He gently nudged her.

“What!?”

Everyone looked at her.

“I was saying we need to do this again.” Tony said slowly.

“Are you OK?” Jane asked. “You look flushed.”

Darcy pulled out of Steve’s hold. “Yeah. Park. Too much sun.”

“You’ve told me that is not safe to go outside without sunscreen,” Thor reprimanded.

“I did and now that you mention it, I do feel hot. Warm. Hot.” Darcy stumbled over Bucky in her rush to get off of the couch. Steve reached out to stop her from falling. She slapped his hands away. “I’m gonna take a shower. A cold – cool – shower and call it a night. Bye!” She ran out of the room before anyone could stop her.

“Even for Lewis, that was strange,” Tony remarked. “Hey Bruce, you up for some Science!?”

“Give me the notebook, Tony.”

“Aw, Pep.”

“Now.”
Bucky ignored the conversations happening around them as he got to his feet, pulling Steve up from the couch. “I thought you said you were always nice,” he said in a low voice.

“We both know that’s not true. Now she knows it, too.”

“How long do you think she’ll wait before she brings it up?”

Steve had no idea. All he knew was that he took a risky step in their fledgling relationship. He hoped the payout was worth it.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I've been neglecting Steve, which is why this chapter is told from his perspective. He just threw down the gauntlet, so to speak. We'll see what Darcy does with it.

Happy Saturday, darlings! (Imagine Edna Mode's voice when you read that, OK?)
When Natasha met Darcy, the brunette had bounced over to her—literally bounced as she had discovered a pogo stick in the wreckage caused by The Destroyer and was determined to master it—and said “Twenty five. Higher or lower?”

“What?”

“It’s a game,” she grinned, stepping off the pogo stick. “I’m trying to figure out how many ways you could kill me, right now. I’m starting with twenty-five; you tell me higher or lower.”

Natasha has never heard of anything so ridiculous in her life—and that’s after Coulson informed her that aliens exist. Yet, she couldn’t not answer the young coed watching her with something akin to hero worship. “Higher,” Natasha said flatly.

Darcy’s eyes lit up. “That. Is. Amazing. OK, so if I were to hand you this pogo stick—“

“Darcy! Where did you put the CCD camera?” a voice called from the back of the auto dealership.

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Ten bucks says its right in front of her,” she muttered before turning to leave, not realizing Clint took the pogo stick from her. “Coming!”

Natasha eyed Clint as he watched Darcy rush off with a dopey look on his face. “You can’t be serious.”

“What?”

“She’s what—twenty? Twenty-one?”

“Twenty-one.”

“And you’re—“

Clint snorted. “Jesus, Tasha, you think I’m into her?”

“I noticed her rack.”

“You know, you’ve really got to stop being so romantic,” he sighed as they walked out of the abandoned auto dealership and into the hot New Mexico sun. “It’s embarrassing.”

“Tell me you didn’t.”

He led her to the black SUV parked along what would have been the curb had the street not been ripped into several pieces, opened the door and tossed the pogo stick in the backseat. “I’m not blind.”

Natasha leaned against the car, too Russian to gloat. “Fine, you’re not into her. Why am I here then?”

He looked embarrassed. Running a hand through his dark blond hair, he glanced around before
answering. “I wanted you to meet her.”

“Why?” she repeated.

“Cause she’s –” he broke off as a cry came from the dealership. Natasha straightened, but Clint’s grip on her arm stopped her from running inside. “It’s fine. That’s her you’re-annoying-the-shit-out-of-me yell.”

“She has different yells?”

Clint grinned. “You’ll learn ‘em.”

Natasha liked having someone in her life who untouched by what she and Clint did at SHIELD and with the Avengers. She wouldn’t go so far as to call Darcy an innocent – anyone who had a five minute conversation with Darcy would agree – but she was safe. There were no games with Darcy; what you saw was what you got. She may hold some things inside, but that was out of self-preservation. She didn't have an agenda. After a lifetime of uncovering secrets, it was a refreshing to be around someone so obvious. Natasha didn’t know how much she needed that until Clint made Darcy part of their lives.

“What’s wrong?”

Darcy shrieked, her feet stumbling as she grabbed the handrails to keep from falling. Natasha reached across Darcy to slow the speed to a fast walk. “Fucking spies,” Darcy muttered as she regained her footing.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Try again.”

“Nothing’s wrong!”

“You expect me to believe you chose to arrive at the gym thirty minutes before our session because you felt like it?”

Darcy took a sip of her water bottle, wiping her arm across her mouth before answering; classic stall tactic. “You’ve been gone a month. People change.”

“You said you hated running last night.”

“A lot of stupid things were said last night,” she grumbled under her breath.

Now they were getting somewhere. Natasha didn’t hear what Steve said to Darcy, but she noted the girl's reaction, from her flushed face, dilated pupils and the stiff way she held herself for the rest of the movie. She didn't move from his arms, though. That was interesting.

“Stop it.”

Natasha cocked her head.

“You’ve got your ‘World’s Greatest Spy’ face going,” Darcy huffed, lifting the hem of her gray Energy = Milk + Coffee T-shirt to wipe sweat from her brow. “Let me save you some time. I’m fine. Nothing’s wrong. I woke up early and decided to go for a run. Wasn’t that the point of all this?” She stabbed her finger at the panel until she was running at a comfortable speed.
“You’re frustrated.”

“Of course I’m frustrated! I’m waiting for the great James Barnes to grant approval for me to live my life as a normal person!”

Natasha smirked. “You’re sexually frustrated.”

“Dammit!” Darcy cried, losing her stride once more. This time she jumped off of the treadmill. “Do you want me to become Internet famous for falling on my ass?”

“It is a nice ass.”

She ran another mile while Natasha moved about the gym. After she finished her cool down, she joined Natasha on the mat to stretch. Well, Natasha stretched while Darcy sprawled on her back with her toes pointed in the air. "I might be a little sexually frustrated,” she confessed after a minute.

Natasha hummed knowingly. “How long has it been?”

Darcy flinched. “London.”

“Ian the intern?”

Darcy nodded. “It wasn’t even that good. I wouldn’t count it, but that means Clint was my last viable options and well …” She shrugged, not wanting to go into detail with the woman who regularly slept with Clint.

“You’re getting along with Steve and James well enough.”

“It's kind of hard to avoid them when we live in the same building. Plus, James has the whole broken man thing going on. It’s my kryptonite.”

“And Steve?”

Darcy snorted. “If we had this conversation yesterday, I would have told you he’s too good for me. I would have said he’s the reason I haven’t jumped James already. Seriously, the dude hits like every entry in my so-not-good-for-me checklist which means I must have him, but the fact that he’s linked to Captain Freaking America made him off limits, only it turns out Captain America is not the Boy Scout the world thinks he is.”

Natasha touched her forehead to her knees. “I don’t think Steve was a Boy Scout.”

“Figure of speech, Nat,” Darcy grunted as she tried to convince her arms they could bend in that direction. “Turns out he’s a bit more tarnished.”

“Oh?”

“Mmm. You don’t expect someone who regularly says ‘Ma’am’ and calls Pepper Miss Potts to turn a simple question about his super strength into verbal porno. Like spending time with them without wasn’t hard enough, innuendo intended, now I have the damn visual of Steve fucking me against a wall!”

Natasha smirked and leaned close to Darcy until their foreheads were nearly touching. “You do
realize he’s playing you, right?”

“What? No, he …” She trailed off. Steve was a tactician. Strategy was his thing. For weeks they’d be straddling the line between friends and the possibility of something more. Yes, she’s had the occasional dream in which she was enjoying the company of two extremely naked super soldiers, but she was a big girl and could control herself in the light of day. Well, control herself in that her touches were numerous, but mostly innocent. Yesterday’s kisses in the park aside, she was practically a nun around those two. Then Steve had to open his big, fat, oh-so-kissable mouth and thanks to his amazingly wicked way with words ... She jumped to her feet. “God fucking damn it! The bastard played me!”

Natasha said nothing.

“I’m going to fucking kill him. Them! No, I’m going to go one better and never fucking fuck them! Yeah, I’m going to live the rest of my sentence in this Tower without any thought of the kinky sex I could be having with two men who make my knees shake and my insides quiver and all that other cheesy crap that’s just Hallmark’s way of saying ‘Do me now!’”

“But you’re not going to,” Natasha said just before she lunged.

“No fucking way!” Darcy cried, blocking the redhead’s attack, spinning on her heel without thought to stop her second strike. “Holy shit! I just blocked you!”

“You did.” If she was pleased, Natasha didn’t show it. “I texted James; told him you were ready to show him what you’ve got.”


“Because you’re a big girl who can take care of herself and they need to see that.”

“But –“

“No buts. You’ve kept up with your workouts in my absence. You even added boxing to the mix.”

“How did you –“

“Thor.”


“Happy tells me you’ve got a strong punch. You have focus. You have anger. He’ll go easy on you this first time. Play on that. Surprise him. Use the frustration you have inside to work in your favor.”

“If you tell me to give in to the dark side –“

“I’m telling you to not be a victim, Darcy.” She sprang, somehow going over Darcy’s head to attack from behind, her arm around Darcy’s neck. Gasping, Darcy struggled to break her hold. “Don’t panic,” Natasha advised calmly. “Recognize that you are under attack and think. What do you do next?”

“What happened to you, kid?”

Darcy limped into Tony’s lab, one hand clutching a cloth tote bag. Snagging the rolling chair by his rarely-used desk, she collapsed in it, using her feet to roll her closer to the engineer. “I brought
lunch. Sandwiches. Chips."

“Kitchen mishap?”

She paused in pulling out Tony’s egg salad on wheat. “Huh?”

“Why are you walking weird?” He pushed his goggles upon his forehead. “Did you finally do it with Things One and Two? Lewis, you've got to stretch before engaging in a threesome! My God, do they teach nothing useful in college anymore?”

Darcy rolled her eyes. "You were a child prodigy. You did not have sex in college."

"Still learned some things."

"Ugh!" Darcy tossed him a bag of potato chips. “I’m too sore to hit you right now. I’m gonna do it later.”

“Noted.”

“And no, I did not have sex.”

“Pity.”

Darcy groaned and laid her head on the cool steel of Tony’s workbench. “I had my first sparring session with James.”

“And you hurt yourself during your victory dance?”

She gave a half-hearted laugh. “Let’s just say I’m going to be taking advantage of your hospitality for longer than I thought.”

Tony ruffled the top of her head, knocking her navy blue beanie to the ground. DUM-E rolled over and snatched it up. “Not a hardship, kiddo.”

She opened her mouth to thank him, but he started rambling about something or other, cutting her off before things got too deep. Tony didn't like to deal with feelings. They were messy. Darcy respected that. Tearing open her bag of corn chips, she piled a few on her chicken salad sandwich, taking a big bite to show Tony she was done talking. Satisfied, he picked up his own sandwich, The Rolling Stones playing at an almost acceptable volume level providing background noise as they ate, Tony’s eyes glued to his tablet, Darcy’s on her phone.

"Whatcha got planned the rest of the afternoon?” Tony asked.

"Jane mentioned some data she wanted me to input, but JARVIS informed me he took care of it.”

"I apologize, Miss Darcy, if I overstepped my bounds,” the AI said.

She shrugged. It wasn't like she wanted to spend her afternoon typing numbers into spreadsheets, but it was difficult to call yourself a lab assistant when all you did was make sure the scientists ate and left the lab every twenty-four hours or so.

"Don't pout,” Tony admonished. “JARVIS told me you were the one who changed his grocery program.”

"There were deliveries coming every day, sometimes twice a day! It didn't make sense. By streamlining the process, I reduced the bill by 15 percent, which is significant considering how
much Thor eats."

"And the dynamic duo."

"Them, too," she said as nonchalantly as possible. "If I overstepped a line --"

"Did I say you did?" Tony asked. "You know, maybe instead of the science minion thing, you
should take Pep up on her Avenger social media manager offer."

Pepper had called Darcy into her office a few days ago to discuss how to capitalize on the
popularity of Thor’s Instagram account. She hadn’t offered Darcy a salary or anything, but made it
obvious that if she took charge of the team’s social media presence, JARVIS would handle her
non-feeding the geniuses’ lab duties. "You know about that?"

"I know everything," he said smugly.

"Debatable," Darcy hummed, picking up one of Tony's screwdrivers and spinning it between her
fingers. He smacked her hand and rescued his tool. "Is it even a job?"

"You're the Millennial. Isn't your generation all about branding?"

"I don't --"

"Come off it, Lewis! Jane's research has moved beyond your grasp of understanding. Instead of
forcing yourself to be enthusiastic about something you don't give a shit about, why don’t you try
doing something you like? You like us. Get on Instagram and Twitter and whatever crazy app
some 20-year-old Harvard dropout sold for a billion dollars and make the world like us." He
leaned forward, brown eyes twinkling deviously. "Fury'll hate it."

Darcy had the Avengers' Instagram account (@TheAvengers) created and verified within minutes.
The first post -- a picture of Clint hanging by his knees from the rafters in the shooting range --
already had three hundred likes.

"For the last time, I'm not using your photo as the account's profile pic."

"Why not?" Tony demanded. "I was named People’s Sexiest Man of the Year."

"In 1999."

He shook his head. "Rude. How about it was my idea?"

"It was Pepper's idea," Darcy said.

"I'm the one who talked you into it."

"So you'll be the second post," her eyes on her phone as she read the comments. "Clint's up to two
dozen marriage proposals."

"There's no accounting for taste."

"Oh, stop pouting," Darcy hopped off the workbench. "I'm going to pop outside and take a picture
of the Tower. I’ll use that as a temporary profile image until I think of something better."

"You're going outside? Alone?" Tony held his hands to his chest. "Are you sure that's safe?"
"Sarcasm noted," she said as she walked to the door.

"No one ever accused me of being subtle," he shot back.

Darcy debated for a second about asking him to come with – they could grab coffee – but dismissed it. She’d be on the street for five minutes. Tops. "I'll be back in a bit," she called over her shoulder.

"Don't get killed!"

Darcy took a screenshot of the post, pausing in the lobby to text it to Clint before pushing the heavy glass doors to walk out on the noisy Manhattan street.

@hawksn01girl wants to do what to me?

Darcy snickered at Clint’s message. She’d bet ten dollars he was scrolling through the comments right now, sharing the racier ones with Natasha. She made a mental note to start a marriage proposal betting pool. Her money was on Nat.

Darcy walked across the street, humming under her breath as she scouted a not-so-cramped spot on the sidewalk so she could get a decent photo of Tony’s I’m-Not-Compensating-For-Anything building. A minute later, her phone was back in her pocket and she was walking back to the Tower, safe and sound. Suck it, Fury.

“Darcy?”

Son of a fucking bitch.

Steve and Bucky were in front of her in seconds, Bucky’s hand cupping Darcy’s elbow as he pulled her to him, automatically putting his back to the street. “Are you alone?”

“No.”

Steve gave her his Captain America look.

“Not anymore,” she attempted a charming smile. Judging by the lack of one on Steve’s face, he wasn’t falling for it.

“Darcy,” he sighed. “I know the situation is frustrating, but you have to understand –“

She fist ed her hands on her hips. “Do you really want to have this conversation, Cap?”

His blue eyes narrowed as he looked down at her. “What’s with the ‘Cap’ business?”

She glared at him. “You talk to me like Captain America; I treat you like Captain America,” she poked him in the chest. Dear God, it was like poking a mountain. “Talk to me like Steve and I’ll play nice.”

Bucky leaned closer. “I’m intrigued.”

“I’m not surprised,” Darcy said dryly.

Steve looked torn as he glanced between the pair. Did he continue to be the lone member of the Safety Squad or follow Bucky’s lead and let it go? Finally, with a deep sigh, he stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jeans and walked into the tower. Darcy admired the view for a second, then
linked her arm through Bucky’s and followed.

“You going to tell me who the flowers are for?”

Bucky looked down at the three sunflowers he had clutched in his right hand. “You,” he passed them over.

“Really?” She told herself to ignore the fluttery feeling in her stomach as she accepted the small bouquet tied with a strand of raffia. “Consolation prize?”

He grunted, though he looked pleased when she brought them to her nose to sniff. “You did good. Don’t sell yourself short.”

“I landed one hit.”

“One more than I thought you’d get, doll.”

She socked him in the arm.

“You’re up to two.”

She laughed and leaned over to kiss his cheek, lingering slightly to breathe in his scent. “Thank you. No one’s ever given me flowers before.” The second she said the words, she wished she could take them back. Bucky looked stunned. Steve looked mad.

“What’s wrong with guys today that they don’t bring a dame flowers when they pick her up for a date?” he asked.

“There are so many things wrong with that sentence,” Darcy told him as they stepped on the private elevator. “Dame? Dude, you’ve been out of the ice for a while now. Update your vocab already. Next, the whole pick a girl up at her place practice has gone the way of the dinosaurs. Most people meet each other somewhere. It’d be weird to bring flowers to a club.” She took out her phone to take a picture of her flowers – she and Jane would squeal over them in private later – missing the look Bucky gave Steve.

Steve cleared his throat. “Go out with us.”

She was not expecting that. “What?”

“We want to take you on a date; a real date,” Steve stressed. “Dinner, dancing – the works.”

Darcy was never speechless. She prided herself on the fact that she had a comeback for every situation life had thrown her, but this? Being asked on a date by Steve Rogers and James Barnes? Yeah, she was going to need a second.

“Darcy?” Steve prodded.

“Shit, yeah, um … I can’t.” Oh God. That face. She broke Captain America. “I mean, I can’t tonight. I’m going out with Nat and Clint and Thor and, well, everyone. Someone was supposed to tell you two.”

Steve reached into his back pocket and pulled out his phone. Swiping a thumb over the touch screen, he furrowed his brow as he read Natasha’s message. Bucky read it over his shoulder.

“What’s line dancing?” he asked.
"You'll see."

Chapter End Notes

Oh Steve. Your last line in the previous chapter threw me for a loop. I loved it, but it also made this chapter difficult. I had four different versions going at one point and two were super angsty. There's enough angst in this story already. They have their issues. Time to start working them out.

Hopefully this fluffy little interlude worked for you. I needed something to set up the next chapter.

P.S. Writing Natasha is hard! Props to all of those who do it so well!
Let it be said that I am a Midwest girl, born in Iowa, who has also lived in Illinois, Missouri, and Minnesota. Therefore, don't get mad at me for writing Tony's hick comments. I know how awesome it is to live here! :)

It was Clint who discovered their bar after a night of paying too much for watered-down drinks in a place that forced the customers to listen to acoustic emo music. Darcy thumped her head on the smooth surface of their miniscule wooden table, unknowingly keeping beat with the heavily tattooed and pierced individual playing the acoustic guitar.

(They'd figured out early that evening that gender identity was fluid, which Darcy totally supported. It was the only thing she liked about the bar. Everything else was crap.)

“I’m dying,” she moaned. “He/she is literally killing me not-so-softly with this song. Can we please leave?”

“God yes!” Clint slammed the rest of his drink, wincing slightly when he remembered how much he paid for it, and slid off his stool. His waited impatiently for Darcy to shrug into her coat and wind her scarf around her neck before slinging his arm over her shoulder. “Where to now?”

“New Mexico?” Darcy wasn’t crazy about places that were attacked by a destructive metal robot, but Puente Antiguo was home to the best dive she’d set foot into, both with and without a fake ID. Clint grunted in response, pushing past a group of fraternity boys on their way to the sports bar on the corner they’d tried the night before. The drinks were decent, but there was no music; only televised sports – and people actually watched the sports. Darcy refused to stay after her scooped top failed to secure free drinks. They were there for an hour and nothing!

“No one’s going to buy you a drink when you’re with another guy,” Clint told her.

Darcy scoffed. “Dude, I’ve had hookups interrupted by guys sending me drinks – and a few chicks,” she added just to see watch his eyes glaze over as he pictured it. Men were so fucking predictable. “Trust me; if my rack fails to make a man see God, this is not the place for us.”

Darcy linked her arm through Clint’s, burrowing closer to his side as they made their way down the barely-lit street, Darcy offering up commentary on every bar they passed. “I feel like Goldilocks,” Darcy snickered, the two cocktails she’d consumed kind of doing their job, though her buzz was more sugar-related than alcohol induced. “This bar is too douchey, that bar was too techno. This bar is too cool for school – oh shit, that bar flat out sucks monkey balls!”

The bouncer standing by the padded faux red leather door glared at Darcy’s insult. “Didn’t I kick you out last month?”

She fisted her hands on her hips and glared at the Van Damme wannabe, ignoring Clint’s persistent tugs. “You wish! I left on my own recognizance.”
“Wait a – you’re the one who started the brawl!”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Tone down the drama, dude. It was not a brawl.”

“You had people throwing punches because you jumped on the bar and yelled Spike was better for Buffy than Angel!”

“Well, he is!” Darcy screamed, ready to fight for one of television’s most misunderstood character. “The dude got his soul back to prove his love for her!”

“Angel had a soul,” the bouncer growled.

“That he got because of a curse!” This guy was pathetic. “That doesn’t automatically make him a good guy.”

“He never forced himself on Buffy!”

“No, he only turned into a murderous monster after sleeping with her! Spike never tried to kill Buffy after they started fucking.”

“He was a murderous monster before that!”

“Key word: was!”

“OK,” Clint wrapped his arm around Darcy, wary of the crowd that gathered to watch. He did not want to have to explain yet another fight caused by the Spike vs. Angel debate to his superiors. It led to some bitter conversations at SHIELD last time and everyone there carries a gun. “Let’s not rehash this.”

“Dude, your girl doesn’t know what the fuck she’s talking about,” the bouncer crossed his meaty arms over his chest. “I suggest you take her home now.”

“Oh hell,” Clint sighed as Darcy stiffened in his arms.

“You suggest? You suggest!?! You want to know what I suggest?!”

Later, as Darcy held a glass of Diet Coke to Clint’s throbbing eye, she told him they probably wouldn’t find their bar in the Meatpacking District. “Really?” he answered dryly. “What was your first clue?”

“Don’t be a baby,” she chided, removing the makeshift ice pack long enough to take a pull of soda before smacking it back on his face. She rolled her eyes at his wince. Wuss. “You handled the situation like a mature and responsible adult. No one can fault you for getting beat up by –“

“I did not get beat up,” he interrupted. “I was trying to disperse the crowd and got caught in the crossfire.”

Darcy snagged an onion ring from Clint’s plate. He’d gotten hit in the face by a 20-year-old music major’s knockoff Fendi shoulder bag. Darcy might have taken a minute or two to admire the purse – It was an amazing reproduction! – before checking on Clint. “Whatevs. The point is our bar isn’t there.”

Clint shivered as a line of ice-cold condensation ran down the side of his face. He pushed the glass away. Darcy’s nursing skills were on par with Natasha’s. “Maybe we should just drink at the Tower. Tony’s booze is free and there’s plenty of room to crash when you overindulge.”
“Please,” she sniffed. “I can totally hold my liquor.” Clint coughed something that suspiciously sounded like “The Macarena.” Darcy chose to ignore it. “There are thousands of bars in this city. Somewhere in this vast metropolis, there is a place we can call our own.”

“If you start singing the ‘Cheers’ theme song, I’m out of here.”

She balled up her napkin and threw it at his face; only she missed and hit the man in the booth behind them. Darcy ducked in her seat as Clint apologized for his clumsiness. He signaled for their check, deciding to call it a night before someone made the mistake of saying Sirius Black’s death was less traumatizing than Cedric Diggory’s (that’s why they ended their search in Hell’s Kitchen). Darcy sighed in defeat, but finished her drink and his onion rings, offering him a piece of gum before they walked outside, her hand wrapped in his. Clint walked closest to the street out of habit, his eyes darting to every alley they passed. Darcy called him paranoid, but even she had to admit the habit had its merits, as that’s how they discovered Last Call.

“Are you sure we’re at the right place?” Steve asked as Happy pulled in front of what appeared to be an abandoned alleyway. Bucky shrugged and followed Darcy out of the car. Clint, Natasha, Thor and Jane exited the car behind them, the petite scientist rushing over to Darcy to grab her hands, Thor grinning broadly as the pair jumped up and down, their conversation reduced to high-pitched squealing. Steve turned toward Tony, hoping the man who claimed to know everything followed through on it.

“Never fear, Cap,” he said.

“You’ve been here?”

Tony brushed non-existent wrinkles from his black slacks, his version of dressing down to mingle with the masses equaling black pants and a royal blue button-down shirt. He’d left his sunglasses behind only after Darcy threatened to program JARVIS to play boy band music for the next seventy-two hours – not the mainstream groups, but one-hit wonders. “Sorry you had to find out this way, but your girl is a bit of a hick,” he said as they moved deeper into the alley where a dully illuminated arrow pointed to a weather-warped wooden door. “Could be worse.”

“What?”

Tony smirked as Steve ducked his head to avoid giving himself a concussion on the low ceiling of the cramped stairway. He was having fun already.

Darcy discovered Clint’s affinity for line dancing purely by accident. Darcy, in attempt to break Jane from her my-demi-god-boyfriend-of-three-days-is-gone slump, had turned on her "Shut Up and Dance" playlist. (It should be noted that it completely different from her "Dance It Out, Bitch" playlist.) Clint joined them on the roof of the dealership midway through the Cha, Cha Slide, moving in-between the laughing duo to finish the song without missing a beat. Boot Scootin' Boogie was next, followed by Hell on Heels. The next night, the trio moved the party to the town’s only bar and spent hours on the floor. Darcy, who had openly mocked line dancing for years, had one of the best nights of her life. It ended with Clint carrying Jane home via piggyback, Darcy walking behind the pair with one hand splayed on her friend’s back to make sure she didn’t fall. Drunk Jane was so much fun.

“Footloose,” Darcy said as Clint leapt over the sagging orange and brown plaid couch they’d picked up at a thrift store for $25 after Jane was tucked into bed with dreams of Thor’s abs crowding her head.
“Huh?”

“The movie. It made line dancing look awesome.”

“That’s cause it is awesome,” he rested his head on her legs and closed his eyes. Jane- and Darcy-sitting was exhausting.

“Careful,” she teased as she played with his hair, fingernails scratching lightly against his scalp. “Your Iowa-ness is showing.”

“Whatever, Kansas,” he replied.

She nudged him, though not hard enough to move him from her lap. “Anyway, I was totally with Miles Teller ‘til I watched Julianne Hough line dance and –“

Clint’s eyes snapped open. “Hold up. Are you talking about the remake?”

“Duh.”

*He shook his head in disappointment. “The original, babe. Nothing’s better.”*

After three nights of obsessively watching both movies, comparing soundtracks, dance moves, clothing, casts, tractor vs. bus showdowns, they agreed to disagree – mostly because Jane contacted Natasha who threatened to put an end to it once and for all. Even via text from some unknown location, Black Widow was scary as shit.

“… and not enough people realize that line dancing is more than stomping your boots and twirling a cowboy hat,” Darcy was saying to Bucky as they finally entered the bar, the dark-haired man listening with barely-concealed amusement as his eyes roamed the interior. It was a yellowish-looking sort of room, as if someone had covered the space in one of those filters Darcy rambled about during her Social Media presentation.

“You’re wearing cowboy boots,” Tony smirked.

Darcy looked down at the brown boots she paired with a strapless cream-colored dress with a sweetheart neckline. The strapless bra she wore underneath cost more than most of her wardrobe, but it was worth it; the girls looked amazing! A wide brown leather belt was cinched around her waist, orange tights and an orange scarf completing the look. “I look good in ‘em,” she told Tony, skirting around the dance floor to the padded U-shaped booth around a rectangular table they’d reserved. It was the perfect distance between the bar, the dance floor and the bathrooms, and big enough to accommodate the super-sized men in their party.

“Darcy! Jane!” A tall blond wearing tight jeans and layered tank tops in red and black touting a loaded tray of empty glasses stopped by the table, plunking it down with a “I’ll get there when I get there!” shout at the bartender before hugging Darcy and waving as Jane, who was sitting in one of the booth’s corners, Thor’s arm around her. “Big Blond’s here, as is Trouble,” she remarked with a wink towards Clint. “Dangerous,” she continued, nodding at Natasha before turning to Tony with a put-upon sigh, “and Difficult,”

“Hey! I resemble that remark.”

The waitress, Erin, laughed because Tony’s tip more than made up for his behavior. She’d be able to make rent that month and sock some cash away for a rainy day. “Who’re the new guys?” she asked, eyes skimming over Steve and Bucky, both still standing by the booth, waiting for Darcy to sit.
“Go easy on ‘em,” Tony advised.

“First-timers?” she questioned, a considering gleam in her eyes.

“Only in some ways,” Bucky promised, slipping into casual flirtation as easily as other men changed clothes. Steve shook his head slightly, a small smile on his lips. Bucky had been acting more like the Bucky he remembered lately, which was great, but he still found himself holding his breath, worried that something would trigger a memory and stall his progress. He felt a tug on his sleeve and glanced down at Darcy, who gave him an encouraging smile. He automatically smiled in response before forcing himself to relax. Tonight was supposed to be fun; he’d never gone out with the team before. (Well, most of the team; Bruce begged off. Tony informed him was par for the course. “Guy’s allergic to fun.”)

“Interesting,” Erin hummed before snapping into work mode. “No DJ tonight, so the jukebox is your friend, but you know the rule, Clint -- _Save A Horse (Ride A Cowboy)_ can only be played once every ninety minutes,” she spoke over his tortured groan.

“I thought it was every hour!”

“It was until someone abused the rule,” she replied in a sing-song voice. “I assume Tony’s picking up the tab, so I’ll be back with a few pitchers of our most expensive beer on tap, a bottle of scotch for the man, vodka for my favorite redhead, munchies for Big Blond and change for the jukebox,” she finished, plucking the $20 bills Darcy, Jane an Clint handed her with a smile.

“Double the munchies,” Darcy requested as she pressed the bill in Erin’s hand. “The new guys eat just as much as Blondie.”

Erin’s eyes went wide. “Tonight will be fun,” she grinned before walking away, shouting out drink orders to the man behind the bar.

Darcy shrugged out of her jean jacket, Steve moving behind her to help, and unwound her scarf, tossing them on the booth before sliding in, setting her leather clutch packed with the essentials – phone, ID, gum and taser – on top of the table. Bucky sat next to her and Steve next to him. It was relatively early, barely 10 p.m., so the bar was quiet. She and Jane did a few pre-going out shots in the comfort of Darcy’s apartment while she ransacked her closet for something to wear that was sexy, yet comfortable and casual enough so that Clint or Thor wouldn’t make comment – there was no stopping Tony, so she didn’t bother trying – but she could always use another drink.

“Some things don’t change,” Steve remarked as he looked around the bar.

“Oh yeah, Cap? Spend a lot of times in bars in your younger days?” Clint teased. He sat on the back of the booth, Natasha in between his legs.

Steve ignored the “younger days” remark as he launched into a description of the bars he and the Commandoes frequented overseas. There weren’t many – it was war, after all – but the few and far-between downtimes helped keep the team’s spirits up.

“I was under the impression that you are unable to get intoxicated,” Thor remarked.

“Really?” Darcy looked around Bucky to see Steve nod. Her face was full of sympathy as she nudged Bucky’s side. “What about you? Are you suffering from serum-induced sobriety, too?”

He rested his arm along the back of the booth, the tips of his leather-covered fingers lightly stroking her skin. They’ve never been able to find out what was done to him when the 107th was
captured, but it was obvious he had some strand of the serum in his body. “Not as much, but yeah.”


Thor nodded sagely. “It is a sad day when a warrior cannot celebrate his victories by indulging with his comrades. I shall acquire a barrel of Asgard’s greatest mead for you to sample.”

“We appreciate it, Thor, but it might not work.” Steve cautioned, not wanting to disappoint his friend. Thor simply smiled and set about pouring beers into the frosted mugs Erin sat on the table.

“Food will be up shortly and these,” she reached for the tray of shots a second waitress was toting, “are from Glenn. He says enjoy.”

“Free drinks!” Clint chirped, leaning over to grab his.

“Wait!” Tony demanded. Clint huffed, but waited until everyone had a drink in their hand. “Before the night becomes a blur, I promised Darcy one soberish photo for our new Instagram account.”

“Then she should’ve taken it this morning,” Clint muttered, wheezing at Natasha’s sharp elbow in his stomach.

Steve and Bucky got up so Darcy could get in a better position to take the photo. Jane climbed over the back of the booth – you learned a few things hanging out with Clint – and helped get the group situated. It was like herding cats. Thor had a big smile on his face. He was fine. Natasha and Steve looked uncomfortable, Bucky refused to face the camera, and Tony and Clint were showboating. After a few terrible pictures, Darcy told them to just drink the damn shots, pushing the button as they automatically clinked glasses before tossing the liquor back.

“Does the group approve?” she asked after everyone studied the image of six people crowded together, drinks in hand, looking very much like the team the world needed them to.

Tony handed Darcy her drink. “Nice job, kid. You’re a natural.”

When Bucky and Steve agreed to go line dancing, neither one knew what that meant, so when they returned to their apartment, they booted up their seldom-used laptop and turned to Google.

“All the videos we saw were country,” Steve told Natasha who nodded. “But Darcy says it isn’t?”

She filled two shot glasses with vodka, giving one to Bucky, lifting hers to him. “За здоровье!” They drank and slammed the glasses on the table. “It’s mostly a country music tradition, but there are other genres that embrace it. Here, anything goes.”

Steve glanced at the dance floor where Darcy and Jane were on the floor with their arms around each other, dancing to Valerie. It was certainly more fluid than the dancing he grew up with, but he was never very good at it, so he didn’t mind the change. Bucky, though; he’d been quite smooth back in the day.

DUM-DE-DE-DUM, DE-DE-DUM-DE-DE-DUM, DE-DAA-DAAAAA


The bar erupted into loud cheers, Clint’s hooted “Whoop!” the noisiest of all as he appeared on the dance floor with Darcy and Jane from who-knows-where. Seconds later, four lines of people were moving to the music in a coordinated dance of feet stomps, hand claps, turns and hips. Their trio
was laughing, Darcy’s head thrown back, dark curls tumbling over her shoulders and Jane struggling to stay upright when the woman next to her missed a turn and stumbled over Jane’s feet. Clint looked … younger, Steve decided. Definitely looser as he hip checked Darcy and she smacked his shoulder in return.

“They’re good,” Bucky remarked.

“They’re our hicks.” Tony repeated as he poured himself a third glass of scotch. “Clint’s an Iowa boy, Darcy’s roots are in Kansas and Jane is from … Indiana?” He turned to Natasha for confirmation.

“Oklahoma.”

“Same thing.”

“And yet,” Natasha said, getting up when the song changed. Taking Thor’s hand, they joined the others for Cupid Shuffle, the assassin a picture of grace as she danced next to Clint. Thor was not nearly as coordinated, but he made up for it in enthusiasm. Judging by the looks Jane was giving him, she didn’t mind.

“This is your song, punk,” Bucky said after a minute. “It tells you what to do.”

Steve rolled his eyes; Bucky’s teasing a familiar comfort. “Go out there and show me how it’s done then,” he dared.

Bucky’s blue eyes lit up at the challenge, his face taking on the familiar smug expression that still filled Steve with a sense of longing. “Happy to.”

The dance floor was crowded, but he made it to Darcy without trouble. She paused in her movements to give him a quick hug before tugging him next to her, her eyes on the ground as they followed the song’s instructions. He picked it up easily to Darcy’s delight. He didn’t have the heart to tell her the dancing he did in the 1940s wasn’t nearly as simple, instead enjoying the press of her body against his as she guided him through the steps of the next song: Fake ID. It was faster and required more energy, but it was repetitive and he mastered it easily enough.

“Isn’t this great?” she shouted, the ends of her hair hitting him in the face as she whipped around. Her face was flushed, and there was a light sheen of sweat on her shoulders and collarbone. Bucky swallowed the image of Darcy looking that way in bed and nodded, grateful when the song ended was replaced with something slow. He didn’t know the title or the artist, but he took Darcy’s hand and pulled her to him. “Dance?” he asked as his arm curled around her waist.

She moved his other hand to rest on her hip before lacing her fingers behind his neck. “Happy to, soldier,” she purred, resting her head on his chest.

They swayed together slowly, breaths mingling. One dance became two, hands sliding from innocent touches to something more as Bucky’s fingers moved across the letters encircling Darcy’s upper arm.

Those are … I have. Holy shit.

“Couldn’t have been easy, growing up with this,” he murmured as his fingers traced each letter in Steve’s familiar handwriting.

Darcy snorted. “My dad thought it was hilarious, seemed to think any person who would say that upon meeting me could handle his little girl. There was a rumor that my first word was shit. Mom
denied it, though.” Darcy smiled at the thought of her mom learning it was Captain America who said those words to her.

“Where’re mine?”

“Huh?”

Bucky’s hand moved over her shoulder, dipping down just enough to trace her collarbone, the teasing touch making Darcy bite her lip. “My words.” He leaned closer, leering, his voice dipping to lower decimals. “Are they somewhere we need to be alone for me to see?”

Alone. Alone with him. Alone with him and Steve. That sounded … God, she wasn’t going to win this, was she?

“Darcy?”

“Ankle.”

“Hmm?” He leaned in to press his lips against hers, so soft it was barely a kiss. She swayed, her body moving into his.

“Ankle,” she repeated, her ability to talk temporarily disabled as Bucky’s hands slid low on her back. So close. Just a bit more and he’d be cupping her ass. She wanted that. She didn’t even question the where or the why, she just wanted his hands on her, pulling her close so she could rub herself against him. “Words. Your words. They’re on my ankle.”

Bucky glanced down at Darcy’s tights-covered legs and boots. “Mmm … you’re wearing too much for me to see ‘em now. Later maybe? I know Steve is dying to see ‘em, too. What do you say, doll? You gonna let us have a look?”

His words, his voice, were hypnotic, the last few weeks one long game of foreplay. She wasn’t stupid. She knew they wanted her and damn if she didn’t want them, too. Maybe not forever, but a taste? Couldn’t she have at least that? Couldn’t she pretend, just for a bit, in happily ever after?

Fuck it.

She moved to her tiptoes, wrapping one hand around his neck to bring his face down so she could whisper in his ear. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

Chapter End Notes

It's the setup! Finally, all of you waiting patiently for the smut shall be rewarded in the next chapter!

Yes, I have gone line dancing. There was only one 19 and over bar in my hometown and it was a country bar, so the summer after my freshman year at college, I learned how to line dance and it was pretty fun. Watching YouTube videos to see what's popular now, I was embarrassed I did this to the characters, but some of the hip hop dances are awesome. I did the Cha Cha Slide in Millennium Park after completing the Chicago Women's Half Marathon and learned the Cupid Shuffle at a Louisville bar on my 30th birthday. Good times!
Here's what they danced to at Last Call:
Amy Winehouse: Valerie (no line dancing, just dancing in general)
Big and Rich: Save a Horse (Ride a Cowboy)
Cupid: Cupid Shuffle
Big and Rich: Fake ID (Thanks Footloose remake!)
Rascal Flatts: What Hurts the Most (one of the songs Bucky and Darcy danced to)

“За здоровье!” – means to your health

I have had the Spike vs. Angel debate before. Word to the wise: don't launch this discussion with your hairstylist if they aren't on your side. The Sirius Black debate happened, too. I had to step away because I was way too invested in my side.

Darcy's outfit is posted to my Pinterest page.
Come Undone

Chapter Notes

Warning: So much NSFW up ahead. There's also humor because I am incapable of being serious for long periods of time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky was behind Darcy when they walked to the table, his hands on her hips flexing every so often. He had her slide into the booth first, next to Steve, before he joined them. She felt Steve’s arm along her shoulders and leaned back slightly, not missing the way Bucky’s eyes glanced down at the cleavage on display. Feigning casualty, she picked up a glass and sipped, disguising her disgust as Tony’s scotch burned down her throat.

“Everything OK?” Steve murmured, head bending low so not to draw attention to them. Thor was in the middle of telling one of his stories, so concern about being overheard was unnecessary.

“Mmm-hmm,” she lied, cheeks burning in embarrassment. Natasha sliding a drink and the platter of nachos in front of Darcy was the single best thing to ever happen to her, especially when she took a sip: vodka and cranberry. Natasha said it was a sin to mix vodka with anything. She nudged Nat’s leg with her foot. “You love me,” she mouthed at the redhead who gave a slight smile in response.

She focused on her drink, her food; Bucky’s hand on her knee and Steve’s fingers playing with the ends of her hair. Every now and then the pad of his thumb brushed against her bare skin. Was it an accident? Deliberate? Her nerves endings were at an all-time high. She was on the edge, knowing she’d topple over with the slightest nudge and damn if she didn't want the rush of the fall. She glanced over at Bucky who winked when he caught her eye. She turned toward Steve, who was listening to Jane talk about something, his face schooled to show interest though Darcy knew he had as much luck following Jane’s theories as she did; he was just nicer about it.

She poked him in the side. “Hey.”

He looked down and smiled. “Hi. Having fun?”

“I would be if you asked me to dance.”

His smile faltered slightly as his eyes went to Bucky before darting back to her. “I’m not really the dancing type. Bucky –“

“I danced with James,” she interrupted. “Now I want to dance with you.”

Bucky slid out of the booth, one hand going out to help Darcy stand. She smoothed her dress and turned toward Steve with an expectant look. “Well?”

He cleared his throat and stood. Ignoring everyone (Tony), she took his hand and led him to the dance floor, moving to the corner furthest from the prying eyes of those left behind. Steve seemed ... not nervous, exactly, but a bit out of his element. It soothed her own her nerves, seeing Steve Rogers off his game, so she played her advantage, stepping into him, one arm going around his
waist while the other hooked around his neck. “I don’t bite,” she told him. “Of course, that’s
negotiable.”

His eyes darkened just a bit, his hands on her hips pulling her into the juncture of his thighs. He
was firm. Warm. She’d never need her bulky sweaters with him around. They swayed slowly to the
music. Darcy had no idea what song was playing. She didn't care. “They’re watching, you know,”
he said, his eyes darting behind her briefly. His sigh was full of resignation. “They’re not even
trying to be subtle.”

She didn’t have to turn around to know he spoke the truth, but she only cared about two sets of
eyes – one pair at the table, the other looking down at her. “Worst spies ever.” She tugged Steve
down till his head was level with hers and whispered in his ear. “Want to give ‘em a show?”

“Darcy.”

She shivered at the warning tone of his voice. Did he honestly expect her to behave now? “Play
along.” She stretched to the tips of her toes and nuzzled his neck. He smelled like sandalwood and
barely hesitated before sliding his hands down and over her ass. She broke character and let out a
quiet moan.

“What do you want?” he asked. “Do you want to keep dancing? Do you want to go back to the
table with our friends? If we go back, will you let Bucky and I touch you under the table while you
talk to Jane? Would you like that?”

“Oh, God.” She felt herself getting wet at the thought.

He chuckled softly. “I think you do. We can do that, Darcy, or we can take you home. We’ll lay
you in our bed and take our time as we learn what makes you feel good, and then we’ll do it over
and over until you’re weak and trembling.” He pulled away and stared at her. “I know what I want.
I know what Bucky wants. What do you want?”

Both of her hands were in his perfect hair, her grip getting tighter as he spoke. She was fighting the
urge to wrap her legs around his waist, to demand he take to the bathroom and fuck her against the
door before she exploded. “I can’t think,” she confessed. “You make it impossible for me to think
when all I can picture is you and me and James and –“ He was kissing her again, slower this time.
Soft. This was seduction. This was Steve thinking things through, laying the groundwork to get
what he wanted. She wondered, briefly, if he ever seduced someone as Captain America then dismissed it. The worlds’ bad guys and girls totally would have surrendered by now if that was an option. “Steve …”

“Hmm?” He licked his way down her neck.

She tilted her head back to give him better access. “You need … to put … me down.”

“No.”

She leaned in, her lips a breath away from his. “We might get less crap from everyone if you aren’t carrying me when we say goodbye.”

He loosened his hold, letting out a soft hiss as she slowly slid down his body. “‘Say goodbye.’ Do you mean …’” His voice trailed off.

She rested her hands flat on his chest. “Do I need to spell it out for you, Rogers?” she teased.

“Yeah. You do.” He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. “I’m barely holding on here. The last thing I want is to get our signals crossed and –”

She grabbed a handful of his plain white button-down shirt and yanked, smacking her lips against his in a kiss that was wet, sloppy and left no room for error. “Bucky wants to see his words,” she told him. “I want to see my words on the two of you. I kind of have this urge to trace them with my tongue to see what part of me tastes like on you.” His mouth dropped open slightly. Ha! Take that, Cap!

“Fuck. Darcy --” He didn’t finish the thought, his mouth on hers once more.

“That too, soldier,” she winked when they came up for air.

She sat in-between them in the back of the car, someone from Tony’s security detail – Robert? Louis? – in the driver’s seat. Bucky had one of her hands clasped in his, the fingers of his flesh hand drawing shapes on her palm. Steve had an arm around her. Every so often he’d lean down, kiss her cheek or nuzzle her neck. Innocent touches. Sweet touches. Dear God, how long did it take to get to the Tower?

“What did Tony mean when he told you to remember to stretch?” Steve asked, pulling Darcy from her thoughts with a snort.

Their good-bye had been just as awkward as expected. Jane gave her a not-so-subtle thumbs-up. Natasha slipped something in Darcy’s purse; a quick peek a second ago confirmed it was condoms. Her hand on Clint’s knee kept him in the booth but he still warned the super soldiers to “Remember what I told you” as Bucky helped Darcy into her jacket. Thor, with complete sincerity, wished them well (which, for some reason, embarrassed Darcy more than Clint’s big brother moment). She should have known it was too good to be true when Tony said nothing because the minute they got to the stairs, he yelled “Remember what I said, Lewis; stretch!”

“Do you really want to know?” she asked now.

“On second thought, no.” His head fell back against the leather seat with a sigh.

Bucky glanced at the driver’s back before leaning close to Darcy and pressed his lips to her ear. “I can’t wait to touch you, doll, to feel how soft you are and discover the places that make you moan.
We’re going to strip that dress off you and take our time exploring every inch of your skin, first with our hands, then our lips. Or maybe I’ll touch while Steve tastes. Would you like that?”

She couldn’t answer. A strangled noise was the only sound that came from her as she clutched Bucky’s hand. Seriously, how long did it take to get the Tower?

“She likes it when you talk dirty to her,” Steve murmured from her other side. He had one hand on her knee and was moving it slowly up her leg. “Notice how her breath changes? Her eyes darken?”

“Hmm,” Bucky hummed as he nuzzled her neck, his hand on her other knee. “I can’t wait to find out what she does when she comes. Are you a screamer, Darcy? I want to hear you say my name when you come; mine and Steve’s.”

She was up and over Bucky in seconds, her legs on either side of his thighs, his face cupped in her hands. “You talk too much, Sarge; anyone ever tell you that?”

He wasn’t saying anything when the car pulled into the Tower’s underground garage, his mouth too busy swallowing Darcy’s moans as she pressed herself closer to him. Steve blocked the driver’s view of the pair as they straightened their clothing before exiting the car though, honestly, the man worked for Tony. He’s seen worse. At least, that’s what Darcy told herself to explain her temporary loss of sanity.

Bucky’s hand was warm on the small of her back as they waited for the elevator. Steve was standing stiff beside them, eyes up as he watched the floor numbers light up on the panel. Darcy swallowed, nerves returning as her eyes darted from one man to the next. Shit. This was real. This was happening. She was no blushing virgin, but two guys. Two! And not just ordinary guys, but superheroes. Super soldiers. Fuck, fuck, fuck!


“What?”

He pushed her hair behind her shoulder and mouthed the mark he left on her skin moments ago. “We do whatever you want to do, doll. You’re in charge, right Steve?”

She looked at Steve as a soft chime announced the elevator’s arrival. They walked into the car as a unit, Steve punching the number to his and Bucky’s apartment floor before he turned to Darcy with an unreadable expression. “Privacy, JARVIS.”

“Yes, Captain.”

The second the tiny red security light in the corner of the elevator turned dark, he was on her, large hands under her thighs grasping, lifting, until they were at eye-level. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he pressed her against the cool surface of the elevator. “You’re in charge,” he parroted. “Anything we do that you don’t like, tell us to stop and we stop.”

She ran a hand through his hair, still slightly mussed from their make-out session on the dance floor. “So if I told you to shut up and kiss me?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he grinned just before he claimed her mouth was his. “God, Darcy, I can’t wait to get inside you,” he practically growled against her lips. “Watching you and Bucky – never saw anything so amazing. You’re so sexy, Darcy; perfect for us. We’re going to make you feel so good.”

“Still talking,” she moaned as she tried to work her hand between their bodies to touch him.
“He’s a talker, doll,” Bucky smirked from where he stood opposite the couple rutting against each other. “Takes a lot to shut him up. You up for it?”

The elevator arrived at their floor before she could answer, but Steve didn’t let that stop him, adjusting his hold to keep Darcy in his arms, lips still fused together as they made their way down the hall. Bucky rolled his eyes as he darted around them to punch in their access code and open the door. “Allow me,” he said sarcastically as Steve carried Darcy inside.

“We’re leaving someone out,” Darcy told Steve as he carried her into the living room.

“Can’t have that,” he agreed, reluctantly letting her slide to the floor. Before the heels of her boots touched the ground, Steve had Bucky pulled next to him, the two of them sharing a kiss that was so hot; Darcy was surprised she wasn’t a pile of melted goo on their carpeted floor. She knew they were together, everyone knew they were together, but knowing and seeing …

“Shirts,” she demanded, sliding her denim jacket off her shoulders. “Off.”

“Bossy,” Bucky remarked.

“You love it,” Steve countered, undoing the buttons on the sleeves of his shirt. Darcy stepped forward to help, pushing the soft cotton from his body, failing to keep the moan inside as he pulled his white undershirt over his head. Bucky was already naked from the waist up, having worn a long-sleeved navy blue Henley to the bar.

“Huh,” Darcy said as she took in their bare chests, both men broad shouldered with lean waists.

Bucky raised an eyebrow. “Problem, doll?”

Was he honestly asking her if she had problem with perfectly-sculpted chests and washboard stomachs? “I’m good,” she murmured, unable to tear her eyes away from the perfection in front of her.

“We’re feeling a bit lonely here,” Bucky leered.

Right. Naked. They were going to get naked and she would be expected to get naked, too, because that’s what happened during sex. Lots and lots of nakedness. Shit!

“Darcy?” Steve looked concerned.

“I’m good,” she repeated. “It’s just that …” She looked down at herself. “Tights aren’t really that sexy to remove, you know?”

“Try me,” Bucky challenged.

“Bathroom,” Darcy picked up her purse from where she dropped it on the floor. “May I?”

“Through the bedroom,” Steve directed.

Darcy took off, her phone in hand seconds after she locked the door. She texted Jane.

_Hot guys. Cold feet. Help!!!_

She toed off her boots and took off her tights while waiting for a reply, absently running a hand up her legs to ensure they felt smooth.

_Get the hot guys to warm the feet_, Jane’s response said.
Not helping! They took their shirts off.

Pics or it didn’t happen!

Bite me!

Pretty sure that’s what they want you to do to them. ;)

JANE! I’m seriously freaking out!

Why?

They’re perfect!

They’re not perfect.

They’re Thor perfect.

He’s not perfect.

My body doesn’t compare.

It’s better.

Darcy stared at her phone’s screen. Liar.

Do you want to read my texts about your awesome boobs and butt, or do you want two SEXY soldiers telling you that?

Darcy bit her lip. Jane was a genius.

You’re sexy, Darcy. I’d do you.

Aw. Best friend ever.

I know. Go get ‘em. Take pictures!

Darcy tucked the phone in her purse, her brief moment of panic – hey, every girl was allowed to have one – allevied by Jane’s pep talk. She stuffed her tights in her purse, picked up her boots and opened the door. It was a sign of great maturity that she did not grab her phone and take a quick picture for Jane because in front of her was quite possibly the sexiest thing she’d ever seen and she’d seen Thor naked – twice. (The first time was purely by accident. The second time was to ensure she hadn’t imagined what she saw the first time.)

Steve and Bucky were standing by the massive bed in the middle of the bedroom, Bucky’s metal hand fisted in Steve’s short hair as he mouthed his soulmates neck. Steve’s hands fiddled with the buckle of Bucky’s belt, tugging every so often; a move that made Bucky’s assault on his neck that much rougher. Darcy leaned against the door jam and watched the beauty that was the two men together, Steve’s light hair contrasting with Bucky’s dark.

“She’s watching us Buck, watching you kiss me,” Steve gasped as his eyes locked with Darcy’s. “She’s wondering where she fits in all of this. She doesn’t believe that she belongs with us. You gonna help me show her she belongs right here, in-between you and me? Over us? Under us?”

Bucky groaned and pushed Steve backwards on the bed before he stalked toward Darcy, tossed the boots she gripped in one hand aside, and hoisted her over his shoulder. She was on the bed, his
body over hers, before she caught her breath. He pressed his erection against her stomach, his expression smug at her gasp. Steve brushed her hair away from her face and kissed the side of her neck, her shoulders, while Bucky repeated achingly slow thrusts against her core.

“James,” she whispered, her hands moving to his belt.

Both of her hands are captured in one of his, then lifted over her head for Steve to grasp. When he’s sure Steve has her where he wants her, he slides down her body, hands moving underneath her dress to fondle the part of her that ached for his touch.

“She’s wet.” He was talking to Steve though his eyes were locked on hers. He ran his knuckles down and then up her silk-covered slit, letting out a sigh at her shiver.

“How wet, Buck?” Steve asked, one of his hands kept hers trapped above her head while the other ghosted over her breasts.

“Not enough,” Bucky said just before his hands pulled down her panties and his head was under her dress, chuckling as she jumped at his first taste of her. “Hold her still,” he told Steve as he backed off to kiss her inner thighs, nibbling gently at the skin before returning to where he knew she wanted him. Breathing in the scent of her, he used the flat of his tongue to lick her, first soft, then hard, varying his touch by her response. When he found a place that made her moan, he stayed, sucking and nibbling until her body begins to quiver. He backed away, smirking at her hiss of frustration, choosing instead to drag a finger through her now dripping pussy.

“Buck, I want to see. I want to see you look like licking our girl.”

Bucky nuzzled Darcy’s clit, his tongue darting out to circle the tiny nub. She gasped and bucked her hips hard, dislodging him. He raised his head with a growl. “Thought I told you to hold her,” he said to Steve.

“Thought I told you I wanted to see,” he sassed.

Darcy pushed away from both men and rolled off the bed, tugging the zipper at her back low enough so she could whip the dress over her head. Her strapless bra followed and she stood at the foot of the bed, hands on her hips. “There. I’m naked. Everyone can see. Happy now?”

Steve’s smile was slow, predatory, as he got to his knees and moved toward her with a mischievous grin. Seconds later, she was sprawled on her back, her right foot in Steve’s warm grasp. “Look, Buck,” he said, one finger stroking the words circling her ankle.

Bucky smiled at his handwriting on Darcy’s skin: Need a hand?

“I think you should do what the words say,” Steve told Bucky.

Darcy opened her mouth to ask what he meant by that, but Bucky’s hand was on her, his fingers in her, making her moan instead. Steve got off the bed and stripped off his dark jeans and boxers, his eyes glued to the image of Bucky fingering Darcy. Her face and chest were flushed, her hips bucking upwards to meet Bucky with every plunge, her generous breasts bouncing. Bucky lowered his head to take one perk nipple in his mouth. Steve moved back to the bed and did the same on the other side, both men licking, sucking and nibbling as Darcy gasped and whimpered beneath them.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Steve whispered against her skin. “Fuck Bucky’s hand. Let him make you come because once you do, it’s my turn. I’m going to go down there and lick you until you come again, make you so loose and wet before I slide inside, but I need you to come first. Can you do that for me, baby? Come on, Darcy. Let us hear you.”
His words were addictive, almost as addictive as what Bucky was doing to her. He had two fingers inside her now, both curled up, searching for—“Yes!” she screamed, her hands grasping both heads to hold the men to her breasts. “There! Don’t stop. Don’t stop! Oh God, don’t stop!” She screamed the last word before she exploded, Bucky’s hand moving from her only to be replaced by Steve’s tongue. “Fuck!”

“No yet, doll,” Bucky laughed, standing up so he could take off his black jeans and boxers. Darcy watched him with heavy eyes, darting back to Steve who had his head between her legs, tongue licking, tasting, lapping her again and again until it was thrusting inside her like Bucky’s fingers were moments before. “She tastes good, doesn’t she, Stevie?” Bucky whispered against his lover’s ear, nuzzling the side of his neck. Steve moaned in response, but didn’t stop his movements, grunting in approval when Darcy clasped his head, bringing him closer her. “He’s good, ain’t he?” Bucky leered as he crawled up the bed, his back against the headboard. He reached out and pulled Darcy to him, over him, ignoring both of his soulmates’ sounds of protest as he situated Darcy in front of him, her back to his front. He hooked his ankles around her and spread her wide, his hands moving to her breasts, his fingers rolling, plucking and pinching her nipples.

“Bucky,” Steve said crossly.

“You want to fuck her, don’t you?”

“I was getting there,” he huffed.

“Yeah, he was getting there,” Darcy groaned. “He was really, really close.”

Bucky kissed her cheek. “I’m glad, doll, but you’ve got to remember, we’re not built like you. Steve can go at me for hours and still be up for rounds three and four. I don’t think you have that in you yet.”

Steve sat back on his heels. Taking a deep breath, he raked his hand though his hair. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying we both want a chance to be inside her tonight, so get her ready and do it,” Bucky said, one hand trailing down to finger her pussy. “Actually, she’s ready, so grab a condom and fuck her, Steve. Make her come so I can have a turn.”

“That’s how we’re doing this?” Darcy asked, amazed she was able to pose a coherent question with Bucky’s hands at her breasts and clit. “Tag team?”

“This time,” he whispered in her ear as Steve leaned over to grab a packet of condoms at of the nightstand. Not wanting to be a passive partner, Darcy snatched the small foil packet from Steve and opened it with her teeth. Taking Steve’s cock in her hands—Holy shit, they were big everywhere!—she moved up and down his shaft slowly, loving the rumble in his chest as he let his hand fall forward, eyes watching as her small hands stroked him.

“So soft,” he murmured. “I’m gonna let you make me come like this someday, gonna sit back and watch you work me over.”

“Mmm,” Darcy murmured at the image. She didn’t consider hand jobs all that sexy, but the thought of bringing Steve off, of cleaning him up after, and she was willing to change her opinion.

“Condom, baby doll,” Bucky growled. “Now.”

She laughed as she slid the condom on Steve’s cock. “Getting impatient, soldier?”
He grabbed a handful of her hair, making her gasp as he twisted it around his hand as he tugged, forcing her to look at him. “You know my name,” he said, leaning forward to suck on her bottom lip. “Say it.”

She considered refusing, not wanting to give in too quickly, but realized that being naked in his arms left little room for debate. “James.”

He traced the outline of her lips with his tongue. “Again.”

“James,” she sighed.

His kiss was softer, sweeter, the grip on her hair loosened, though his fingers remained buried in the dark locks. “That’s my girl.”

“Our girl,” Steve said as he pushed inside her in one smooth stroke. “So good,” he murmured, pulling out slightly before pushing back in. “So fucking good.”

Darcy couldn’t even speak, having never felt so full. She brought her arms up to encircle Steve’s neck, her legs wrapped around his waist, and held on as his hips thrust in and out in a steady rhythm that soon had her saying his name on repeat. She knew, she knew, it would feel like this with him: strong, full. She locked her ankles at the small of his back and raised her hips to meet his thrusts. She wanted more. She needed more. As if he heard her, he started moving faster, pounding into her. It wasn’t what she expected from Steve and yet it was. He was so in control every other second of his life. She loved that here, with her and Bucky, he wasn’t. “More,” she moaned, her blunt fingernails digging into his shoulder. “YES!” she cried as he hit her g-spot. “Fuck, yes!”

“Baby,” he groaned. “So good. So fucking good! I’m not gonna …” She felt his hand move in-between their bodies, calloused fingers rubbing her clit. She gasped, turning her head to kiss Bucky. “That’s it,” Steve crooned. “Come on, Darcy; let me feel you.”

She ripped her mouth from Bucky’s. “Steve!” she cried just before she toppled over the edge, her pussy milking Steve’s cock as he continued to push inside her, the break in his rhythm the only sign that he wasn’t far behind. He collapsed on top of her, his head resting on her breasts, two pairs of hands stroking his hair, his shoulders, his back, as he caught his breath.

“Still with us, punk?”

Steve chuckled softly. “Just barely.” He lifted his head to smile at his soulmates; one watching him with a smug grin, the other an almost shy smile. He leaned down to kiss her, a soft kiss meant to soothe but then her tongue stroked his and he groaned.

“No,” Bucky shifted until Steve rolled off of them and onto his back. “My turn.” He had her turned around and above him. “How do you want it, doll? Can you ride me?”

Her legs felt like jelly, but she wasn’t going to turn down an offer like that. She balanced herself on her knees, just above his swollen cock. She was a little sore, but seeing Bucky disheveled made her forget everything but the need slowly building inside her once more. She leaned forward to swipe a condom from the pile Steve left on the nightstand, the move bringing her breasts to Bucky’s face. He latched on to one nipple, sucking deeply as she fumbled with the wrapper.

“Be good, Buck,” Steve cautioned.

“She likes it, Stevie,” he argued, switching to the other breast. Darcy moaned as he pulled just as hard, her pussy rubbing against his cock as her hips moved on their own accord. “God, Darce …”
She sat up and rolled the condom on, taking him in her seconds later with a loud moan. She leaned back, taking him deeper as she moved. Bucky’s eyes were half-closed in pleasure, but still watchful.

“She looks great, doesn’t she?” Steve rolled to his side, his lips seeking Bucky’s. They kissed, Darcy’s body jerked at the sight. Bucky’s hands shot out to her hips, pressing her to him. Her hands covered his.

“So tight,” he sighed, letting his eyes close completely. “So fucking wet.”

“You’re missing a great show, jerk,” Steve’s eyes heavy as they locked on Darcy’s. “The way her tits bounce as she fucks you …” He sat up and moved behind her, his legs bracketing Bucky’s thighs as he balanced on his knees. His large hands engulf Darcy’s breasts, nimble fingers rolled her nipples.

“Steve!”

“Right here,” he murmured, his tongue tracing the shell of her ear. “You keep working Bucky, baby. Make him feel good and I’ll make you feel good. You ride him and I’ll touch you, ‘kay?” She nodded frantically, her movements quickening as her legs pushed her up, Bucky’s hands on her hips bringing her down. She clenched her hands around his, her pussy around his cock. Steve murmured his approval with each slap of their bodies. “Tell him how he makes you feel, sweetheart. He likes that.”

“So good,” she moaned, her head falling back. “You’re so hard inside me, James …”

Bucky planted his feet on the bed and thrust harder, her moans and sighs coming spurring him on. He heard Steve’s laugh, knew he loved seeing him lose control like this. Next time, he told himself. Next time he’d be gentle and smooth and – Jesus Christ, he needed to come inside her. Now! “Touch her, Steve,” he groaned.

He complied, one hand moving over her belly straight to her clit, knuckles brushing over where she and Bucky connected to flick the hard nub. “Next time,” he whispered, his voice a dark promise, “it’ll be my lips right here while you’re riding Bucky. Would you like that, baby? To be fucked by his cock and my tongue?”

“Shit!” she shrieked, her movements frantic as she chased her release.

“Yes!” Bucky shouted, his back arched as he continued his assault on her body. “Just like that, Darcy! Come on. Harder! Give it to me harder! Let me feel you come all over my cock, baby girl!”

She heard herself begging, heard herself pleading. Maybe she’d be embarrassed later, but not now. “More,” she cried. “Moremoremoremore!” She came with a shout, a combination of his name and Steve’s as the walls of her pussy fluttered, then tightened around him. She slumped, would have fallen if not for Steve’s strong arms holding her. Bucky’s hands gripped her even tighter – she’d have bruises for days that he’d apologize for later though secretly, she loved it – as he continued his onslaught. “Darcy!” he cried as he let go.

His arms moved up to pull her down, Steve following, the three of them rolling so the soldiers were on their sides, Darcy in the middle. Bucky disposed of the condom and pulled her into his embrace, kissing her forehead, fingers pushing aside the dark hair clinging to her damp face before sliding his hand down her body to rest on her hip, Steve’s hand over his.

“I’m dying,” Darcy’s words were slurred, her eyes closed.
“You’re not dying,” Bucky told her.

“Uh-huh. ‘S okay. This is how I want to go.”

Steve kissed the top of her head. “We’re not ready to let you go, sweetheart,” he said softly. “We waited a long time for you.”

Bucky’s head snapped up, wondering how Darcy would react to something Steve’s words, part of him wanting to hit the blond for saying something so serious so soon, the other part wanting to echo the sentiment. She was theirs. This proved it. Never had anyone fit with them so well. If she thought they’d walk away now … A soft snore interrupted his thought process.

Darcy was fast asleep.

Chapter End Notes

So that happened. :)
Thanks so much for the positive feedback on the last chapter. Writing the first smut scene is always a challenge because there's all this build up (and in the case of this story, a LOT of chapters leading up to it), that you want to get it right.

I think they did.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy’s had her fair share of morning afters and if experience was anything to go by, they were an awkward affair, best handled by getting them over with as quickly as possible, so when she opened her eyes, she had one thought: go!

Only it wasn’t so easy when there were three people in the bed. She was curled up with Steve (curled up is a loose definition for practically laying on top of him; despite the hard body, he made a surprisingly comfortable mattress), with Bucky at her back though, from the lack of body heat, there was several inches between them. Steve had mentioned Bucky had issues with innocent intimacy, such as cuddling, adding that the night the three of them slept on the couch the first time he’d let anyone touch him in sleep since before falling from the train.

The room was dark, not even a hint of light coming from the tiny gap of the shades covering the window. She moved to crawl over Steve, letting out a surprised squeak when a heavy hand dropped on her shoulder. “Where’re you goin’?” Bucky asked, his voice thick with sleep.

Note to self: super soldiers are light sleepers. She felt Steve shift under her. Very light sleepers.

“You are home,” she whispered.

“You are home,” Steve pulled her back to him.

“I meant my apartment,” she clarified, moaning in contentment as he rubbed her lower back. A back rub was a great way to wake up. Not quite as good as sex, but the way her lady parts were feeling, sex was off the table for now.

“Why?”

“Why what?” Darcy arched into Steve’s touch.

Bucky sat up. “Why do you need to go back to your apartment at –“ he glanced over at his phone on the nightstand. “six in the morning.”

“Shit!” Darcy sat up, dislodging Steve’s hands and nearly head-butting him in the process. “It’s six?”

“Ten ‘til.”

“Shit!” Darcy repeated. She crawled to the end of the bed. “JARVIS, lights.”

Both men groaned at the bright illumination while Darcy picked up pieces of her wardrobe from
the floor. She shimmied into her underwear, pulled on her boots, and rolled her bra and dress into a ball. She paid no attention to the men now sitting up in bed, two pairs of blue eyes – one pair the color of the sky on a clear day, the other the shade during an approaching storm – watching her hungrily, as she yanked open the closet door and grabbed the first shirt she saw – one of Steve’s button-down plaid grandpa shirts. She pulled it over her head.

“Darcy, not that you don’t look amazing in my clothes, but why –“

“I have to meet Nat at six,” she was breathless as she finished buttoning enough of the shirt to contain her assets. She picked up her purse from where she dropped it by the bathroom the night before and hustled to the bedroom door.

“She can’t honestly expect you to show up this morning,” Bucky said.

She turned around. “It’s Friday. Even when she’s gone, my ass better be in the gym six days a week, the Friday after sex included. But hey, if you want to take her on …”

Steve shook his head, hands held up in surrender. Bucky’s lips were scowling – why Darcy felt the urge to kiss him when he looked like a petulant toddler, she had no idea – but he didn’t protest. Waving a hand over her shoulder, she left, the slam of the heavy door echoing throughout the apartment a few seconds later.

Bucky looked at Steve. “I know I’m still missing some things, but isn’t the guy usually the one who makes excuses to leave?”

Steve laced his hands behind his head. “I remember you coming back to our place in the wee hours of the morning a time or two,” he said ruefully. “Maybe it’s karma.”

He snorted. “If the universe was really going to punish me for past sins –“

“Stop it,” Steve demanded. “We’ve been over that. It wasn’t you.”

Bucky closed his eyes, wanting to believe Steve, but with each piece of Bucky returned to him came a piece of the soldier. He knows the destruction he caused wasn’t of his own free will, but that doesn’t completely absolve him. He felt Steve tense, knew he was gearing up to give some version of the same speech he’s heard since escaping from Hydra. He didn’t want to hear it; not again, but especially not today.

“Bucky –“

“I guess it was naïve to think one night with us and she’d get over herself, huh?”

Steve forced himself to relax. He knew Bucky was deliberately changing the subject, but he wasn’t going to call him on it. He woke up minutes ago to Darcy sprawled on top of him, her hair in his face and a bit of drool on his chest, and when he looked over to see Bucky awake and watching them with an air of contentment, he had returned his (most likely dopey) smile. Last night was incredible. Darcy had been everything he could want in a partner – passionate, responsive, assertive, sexy … It was a struggle to hold back from exploding the second he was inside her. He wasn’t ashamed to admit he recited battle tactics to keep from coming too soon, though the minute he felt her tighten around him, he was lost. And then to see her with Bucky – they’d shared girls before, but they didn’t compare to Darcy. No one ever would.

“She’ll come around,” Steve got out of bed and stretched, his body feeling pleasantly loose.

“Wish I had your confidence,” Bucky grumbled.
“It’s not confidence when it’s the truth.” Steve tossed a clean pair of boxers and a pair of athletic shorts in Bucky’s direction. They hadn’t planned on running that morning, but with Darcy up and gone, they might as well get a start on the day.

“You really think so?”

Steve paused. It’s true that fate had not been kind to him in the past, but he figured everything she’d put him through led to where they are now and he’d be damned if he’d let her fuck with him again. “Know so, Buck. Come on; we can swing by that coffee shop Darcy likes after.”

It was five after when Darcy rushed into the gym, her shoes in one hand, an elastic clenched between her teeth. She managed to get to her suite, dump her stuff, hop in the shower for a one-minute wash, brush her teeth, and pull on her shorts and two sports bras before running out again, blindly groping for the elevator as she wrestled with her top. “I’m here!” she cried, collapsing on the empty yoga mat on the gym floor, beads of sweat forming on her forehead as she wrestled her curls into a messy bun. “Before you freak out, I’d like to remind you I was here before you yesterday and said nothing. In the spirit of sisterhood, I’d say we’re even. Deal?”

The redhead didn’t move from her Warrior pose, though her eyes glanced over to Jane who sighed dramatically and plucked a $20 bill from the pocket of her baggy shorts. She handed it to Natasha before moving to Downward Dog.

“Someone needs to explain what that’s about,” Darcy demanded.

Natasha tucked bill under her sports bra strap with a smug look. “A friendly wager.”

“Sure; it’s friendly when you win,” Jane huffed. She lifted her head to glare at Darcy. “I was positive we wouldn’t see you. Crap! I bet Tony you wouldn’t make it to the labs before noon.” She stood up, looking panicked. “Feel like taking the morning off, my lovely assistant? Do so with my blessing! JARVIS, you can lie to Tony for me, right? Erase this footage?”

“Wait, wait, wait! Why are you forcing the AI to lie? And why are you making bets about what I will or won’t do today?”

Natasha gave a very un-Natasha-like snicker. “She assumed you’d be too sexed over.”

“Hey!”

“Well, there are two of them!” Jane huffed defensively, hands on her hips. “They are super soldiers! They are super-hot super soldiers! Their metabolisms burn four times faster than the average person and, oh yes, there are two of them!”

“What’s their refractory period?”

Darcy and Jane stared at Natasha.

“It’s the only thing Cap won’t let them test,” she said as if that explained everything.

“You don’t have access to his medical files,” Jane told her.

Darcy shook her head. “Janey.”

“What?” She looked at Darcy, then back at Natasha. “Oh. Spy. Gotcha.” She bit her lip and cocked
her head at Darcy. “What *is* their refractory period?”

“OK, when I start to marvel at the lack of maturity, be afraid,” Darcy said, pushing her shoes to the side before stretching out on her mat. It didn’t look like they’d be working out any time soon. “Can we get back to the subject at hand? Specifically, the exchange of goods tied to my sex life.”

“Of course,” Jane said. “Why are you here?”

“I *just* had this conversation with the two soldiers,” Darcy groaned. “It’s Friday. We work out with Natasha every morning except Sunday, even when she isn’t here because she’s mean like that and JARVIS is scared of her.”

Natasha nodded in agreement. Darcy imagined JARVIS was nodding somewhere, too. If he could.

“Well, I feel today could have been an exception,” Jane sniffed.

“You only feel that way because you lost the bet,” Darcy told her.

“Besides,” Natasha said, gesturing for Darcy to stand, “exercise will help you keep up with your super soldiers.”

Jane burst out laughing. Darcy crossed her arms over her chest. “I expected better from you, Nat.”

Natasha sighed deeply. She blamed Clint. “I did, too.”

Darcy trudged back to her apartment, pleasantly sore after an hour of yoga and gossip. She was grateful the women refrained from commenting excessively on the marks dotting Darcy’s neck and shoulders – Natasha did ask for confirmation that they were consensual and was sympathetic when Darcy complained that any marks she left on Steve and Bucky were likely healed by now – though Jane did use them as her Get Out Of Losing A Bet With Tony Card.

“You know he won’t be able to let it go,” Jane said, her voice slightly muffled as she bent to touch her knee to her nose.

“It’s not like they’ll magically disappear in six hours, Jane.”

“Yes, but that’s enough time to go out and buy some cover-up.”

“I have cover-up.”

“No, you don’t. You were complaining about it last night, remember?”

Dammit. She was right. Normally she’d steal some from Jane, but she was being weird. Darcy debated about wearing a scarf to work. Sure, it was late May and JARVIS always kept the labs at a pleasant seventy degrees, but … “What did you bet him?”

“An hour in my lab, no bars held.”

Darcy fell out of her plank. “You what?!?”

Jane looked horrified at the prospect. “There are two of them! I thought it was in the bag!”

This is why Darcy was sneaking into her apartment under the cover of darkness (otherwise known
as taking advantage of JARVIS’ privacy protocols) where the plan was to take a real shower, get dressed, grab some food, and wait around until Jane deemed it safe for her to come to work. Normally, she would love the unexpected gift of a free morning, but not today. She didn’t want to think about what happened last night. Thinking about it would lead to daydreaming. Daydreaming would lead to longing. Longing would lead to obsession. Obsession would lead to … She wasn’t sure what that would lead to, as she's never made it past that stage, but she wasn’t in a hurry to find out. Sex with Steve and Bucky had been phenomenal. Part of her had hoped it would be bad so the three of them could go back to being friends without the whole soulmate thing clouding the issue, but nope. It was hot. It was more than hot, it was scorching. It was a multiple orgasms (a first for her!) inferno. They’d been attentive and thorough, and toed the line of aggressive just enough to leave her wanting more.

So if the shower was cooler than her usual preference, well, that was her business. If she spent some time staring at her naked reflection in the mirror, remembering the way both men had praised her body as they explored every inch of her, she told herself she was doing it in support of curvy women everywhere. And if the purplish bruise at the base of her neck made her grin wickedly, remembering how Bucky had groaned when she told him to fucking bite her already, could you really blame her?

(Steve didn’t bite, but he did suck. She got the feeling he held himself back a bit, which was both insulting – she was a big girl; she could take it – and overwhelming. If that was him holding back, what was unrated Steve Rogers like?)

She pulled on yoga pants, a black and white T-shirt that claimed “I heard that Oxygen and Magnesium were going out, and I was like OMg,” and shuffled into the kitchen to refill her coffee cup, unsurprised to see Clint and Thor sitting at her kitchen table, an empty storage container of pumpkin streusel muffins on the counter.

“You know you have your own kitchen,” she commented as she made her way to the coffeepot. “Two, if you count the communal one.”

“Do you want to have this conversation in front of the others?” Clint asked.

“We’re not having this conversation at all.”

“Darcy –“

“Nope,” she said, popping the ‘P’ emphatically.

“We are not here to intrude,” Thor said, glaring at Clint. “We are here to ensure your well-being.”

“So this is just a courtesy call? No locker room talk, ‘cause I gotta tell you, I got enough of that from Jane and Nat earlier.”

Clint looked intrigued. So that’s why Nat told him if he got within two floors of the gym, she’d make him pay. “Girls really talk about everything,” he mused.

Darcy smiled slowly. “Mmm-hmm.” She leaned against the counter, sipping her coffee slowly as she waited for Clint to put the pieces together.

“Oh fuck,” he groaned, laying his head on the table.

“One word: Budapest.”

“We remember it differently!”
“When did they start adding whipped cream to coffee?” Bucky grumbled as they walked down the hall to Darcy’s apartment, Steve carrying a plastic cup holding Darcy’s large iced white chocolate mocha.

“’Bout the same time they started charging five dollars per cup,” Steve replied. He and Bucky understood inflation, but they still suffered from sticker shock at times. Living with a billionaire didn’t help. Tony’s generosity made both men uncomfortable. It had no limits, from him loaning Steve his cabin to help with Bucky’s recovery, to housing and feeding them now. Steve tried to contribute to his household budget, they both did, but Tony walked away every time he approached the subject.

“Let him be,” Miss Potts had advised. “He doesn’t know how to say the team is important to him. This is his way.”

Shaking his head, Bucky knocked on Darcy’s door. They knew she wasn’t in the lab because Jane had texted Steve to say Darcy was taking the morning off and that she’d be grateful if all three of them would lay low until after lunch. When he texted back why, she told him to ask Darcy.

“Women are still confusing as hell,” Steve said as he stole another sip of Darcy’s drink. It was pretty good. “That hasn’t changed.”

“Only for you punk,” Bucky smirked, knocking a second time. “JARVIS, is Darcy sleeping?”

“Miss Lewis is not in the Tower.”

Both men looked at each other.

“She’s not?” Steve repeated.

“What the hell is she?” Bucky growled.

“She left with Prince Thor and Agent Barton. She said she was in need of puppy therapy and liquid cover up and, should you ask, that she was going to make you pay for it,” the AI replied. “I assume she meant the cover up.”

Bucky blew out an exasperated breath. He wanted to see her. He knew it was only a couple of hours since she left their bed, but he missed her. He glanced over at Steve, who looked mollified only because he could finish Darcy’s coffee without remorse.

“What?” Steve asked.

Bucky shook his head. “There’s two of you. Hard enough keeping tabs on one,” he muttered, leaning forward to lick the whipped cream on the top of Steve’s lip. “Let’s go back to our place and put that caffeine buzz to good use.”

"What do you mean he was returned?"

Darcy jumped at Thor’s outrage. The woman behind the reception desk at the animal shelter sent her a panicked look. “Thor, buddy, calm down.” Darcy wrapped her arm around his. “What’s going
“I have just been informed that Leo has returned to the shelter’s care,” he snapped.

“Returned? But he was adopted.” Darcy turned towards the woman. It was not someone she had seen before. “People saw the photo of Thor with the dogs and they all got adopted. It was on the news!”

“They did, but the couple that adopted Leo said he was too rambunctious.”

“He is a lively spirit who does not deserve such treatment!” Thor roared.

“I agree, sir, but we can’t force people to keep animals. It’s better that he’s in our care than with someone who might neglect him.”

Thor waved his hand regally. “Then I shall adopt him. Please allow me to complete the given tasks so that I can bring Leo home.”

“OK,” Clint pushed away from the wall where he’d been watching the theatrics play out, texting the highlights to Nat. “Thor, buddy, I understand you’re upset, but we can’t just bring a dog to the Tower.”

“This isn’t a dog, my friend. This is Leo. He is a loving creature and will bring us great joy.”

“And the guy who feeds and shelters us; what do we tell him? That some dog followed us home?” Thor’s face lit up. “That is a brilliant plan!”

Darcy rolled her eyes as Clint smacked his face with his hand. “When are you people going to realize that he doesn’t respond to sarcasm?”

If there’s one thing Darcy has learned hanging out with superheroes, it’s that people who save the city (and the world) get perks. Clint complained that those perks don’t extend to free parking, or parking at all, but even he couldn’t maintain his keep-me-out-of-this stance when Carolyn appeared from the back with Leo on a leash, his adoption papers in hand. The shelter waived its waiting period saying that Thor’s status as a frequent visitor and volunteer met their background check requirements.

That’s code for world saviors perk.

“I shall share many photographs of our adventures,” Thor promised, signing his name to the papers with flourish, smiling fondly at the dog that had his large paws on Darcy’s shoulders and was licking her face with unbridled joy.

“Getting flashbacks to last night, Darce?” Clint teased.

“Bite me.”

Carolyn had the threesome pose with Leo under the shelter’s “I’m Going Home Today” sign (Darcy most definitely did not get teary when she saw that), and agreed to be photographed with Thor and Leo for the Avenger’s Instagram account.

“I don’t know when I’ll be able to post it since Leo’s arrival is a bit of a surprise,” she told Carolyn.

Clint snorted. “Understatement.”
“I am so happy for you and for Leo,” Carolyn said, shaking Thor’s hand. “My only concern, and it’s purely selfish on my part, is that we won’t see you anymore.”

Thor shook his head. “Do not worry, Lady Carolyn. I have pledged my support to your establishment and that will not change.” Giving the shelter director one of his bone-crushing hugs, which she took like a pro, Thor turned to Clint and Darcy, Leo’s leash in one hand. “Come, friends. Let us purchase everything Leo needs before we bring him home. Lady Carolyn has been so kind as to provide a list of food preferences.”

“Any chance booze is on it?” Clint muttered under his breath. “We really need to get Stark hammered.”

“No worries,” Darcy took out her phone. “I’m calling for backup.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm going out of town tomorrow and will be gone for a few days, so I'm posting this without extensive editing and will correct glaring grammatical errors when I return. I'm posting it now because you all are the best and I wanted to give you something sweet and funny as a thank you for your support of this story.

Have a great weekend!

Darcy's T-shirt is posted to my Pinterest account.
“You called them?”

Darcy looked up from the pet treat buffet where she and Clint had spent the last ten minutes selecting canine goodies that resembled human cookies. It wasn’t that they were planning to pass dog treats off as people food, but like Clint pointed out, if the reason to do so ever arose (ahem, Agent Sitwell), it would be nice to be prepared. (This was after Darcy flat out refused to try one of the snacks and would not be goaded into daring Clint to do it. He never had to be dared to do something stupid.)

“When you said ‘backup,’ I assumed you mean Pepper,” Clint continued as a swarm of children crowded around Steve. Bucky rolled his eyes as Steve good-naturedly crouched down to pet the cats, dogs and ferrets (yes, there was more than one) the little pet store customers wanted to show off to Captain America. One kid even held up a plastic baggie holding two goldfish. Darcy took a picture of Steve carefully cradling the bottom of the leaking bag in his large hands while the boy’s panicked mother rushed off to grab a bowl.

“Yeah, well, Pepper’s in Asia,” Darcy replied as she posted the photo to Instagram. “It’s not like I knew Thor was going to choose today to make all of us parents!”

“Want to repeat that, doll?”

Darcy threw her arms around Bucky. “Congratulations honey; it’s a boy!”

Bucky accepted Darcy’s hug, tightening his arms when she would have pulled away – he missed her – while looking around the pet store for some clue about what she was talking about. Clint decided to play nice and help the guy out.

“Thor adopted a dog today,” he said, folding over the lid on their box of dog treats. See, Darce? He could be mature.

“I see,” Bucky said, though he really didn’t. “And you needed us because …”

“Tony doesn’t know.”

“Ah.” That made sense. “Is this a good thing? Are we fulfilling some long-suppressed childhood dream?”

Darcy watched as Steve struggled to contain two kittens climbing up his leather jacket, kids giggling and mothers (and a couple dads) swooning at their antics. “Steve’s not allergic to animals, is he?” she asked suddenly.

“Not anymore. Serum.”

Darcy nodded thoughtfully. She had no idea if Tony ever longed for a pet as a little kid, but she had the feeling it was once something on Steve’s wish list. No doubt Leo was going to be the most loved dog on the planet.

“Where is this dog?” Bucky wrapped his arm around Darcy as he glanced around the store, his
need to do his usual sweep abated because of Clint. Both men were snipers. They understood how the other thought. If Clint was relaxed, that meant the threat level was nil.

“There.”

Bucky studied the monstrosity that sat next to Thor as the massive blond checked items off a piece of paper, the sales clerk standing next to him with an awed look on his face. “Looks more like a bear. Wait, is this is dog from the picture?”

“That’s Leo,” Darcy exclaimed, the dog’s ears going up at her words, his large head whipping around, brown eyes lighting up in delight as he bounded over. “Uh oh.”

“Stopp,” Bucky commanded, his sharp tone making Leo freeze immediately. “Sitz!” The large dog plopped on the ground, never taking his eyes off Bucky. “Guter Hund,” Bucky murmured, rubbing behind Leo’s ears. The dog’s tongue lolled in delight.

“You speak German?” Darcy asked.

“The dog speaks German?” Clint questioned.

Bucky shrugged. He had no idea how many languages he spoke. The words just came to him. Most of the time he wasn’t even aware he slipped into another language until someone said something. “Leonberger is a German breed,” he said as if that explained everything. “If Leo’s a purebred, it’s likely he was trained with German commands.” He had no idea how he knew that and they didn’t ask.

“Thor doesn’t speak German and he listens to him,” Darcy said.

“I’m not going to try and pretend I understand the scope of his abilities.” Bucky picked up Leo’s leash with one hand, took Darcy’s with the other and walked over to Thor. Clint stayed behind to rescue Steve who had that “Captain America can’t disappoint people” look of desperation in his eyes.

In the end, it took four sales clerks, three shopping carts, two cabs and one impromptu photo session once people realized Steve wasn’t the only Avenger on site to purchase everything Leo needed to get settled in his new home, including several chew toys (there’s no way Pepper would take their side if Leo attacked her Louboutins). Darcy was delighted to see a few Avenger-themed items among the selection, but agreed with Steve that the sight of Leo slobbering on Iron Man would probably make Tony despise Leo rather than endear him to him, so she ended up choosing The Hulk and a squeaky Mjolnir.

“That’s not going to get old,” Clint grumbled as he hoisted another bag of dog food into the cab’s trunk. Thor decided to walk home with Leo, telling the others it would help calm him after the excitement of the morning. (They weren’t sure if “him” meant Thor or Leo, but either way, a walk seemed like a good idea).

“I think it’s adorable,” Darcy said, squeezing the toy a few more times before Clint snatched it away. “Rude.”

“I hate when you sound like Tony,” Clint grumbled. “Alright Cap; meter’s running. What’s the plan?”

It was always fun see to Steve caught off guard since it rarely happened. “What?”

“You’re the ‘man with the plan,’ right? How are we sneaking this stuff to Thor’s apartment?”
“I have access,” Darcy said. “And JARVIS likes me, so we’re good there.”

“So all we really need is something to guarantee that Tony will stay in his lab.” Steve's eyes slid over to Bucky.

“Oh no.”

Steve shrugged half-heartedly. “You told him he could.”

“What?” Darcy asked.

“Tony wants some one-on-one time with Bucky’s arm,” Steve explained.

“Oh.” Darcy studied Bucky. He didn’t look thrilled at the prospect, his face taking on that blank look when he was trying to distance himself from whatever panic was building in his mind. She didn’t want Bucky to do anything he wasn’t ready for, but she noticed he was flexing his hand more often, as if something didn't feel right. Say what you will about Tony – and there was a lot – the man was a genius. If Bucky’s prosthetic was acting up, he’d be able to fix it. “OK, let’s do this. We all take cabs back to the tower. Once we’re there, I’ll go with James to see Tony and you guys get all of this up to Thor’s place. I’ll text Jane and have her meet you.” She reached out and took Bucky’s hand, squeezing gently. “Does that sound OK? Between you and me, we should be able to keep Tony occupied.”

He linked his fingers with hers. “Yeah, doll. Sounds good.”

He lied. She probably knew it. Steve definitely knew it. After years, decades, of silencing whatever he felt or thought, Bucky knew he should embrace the freedom of telling others whatever he wanted, but it wasn’t an easy habit to break. He wasn’t sure he wanted to break it. Hydra had used his feelings to break him once. He didn’t know if he’d survive a second time.

“I know you don’t come to the labs that often, so brace yourself.”

Bucky tensed. “For what?”

The elevator slid open and they were assaulted with Metallica had an ear-shattering level. “JARVIS, can you lower it about eighty percent, please?” Darcy asked as the music quickly reduced to an acceptable volume.

“The hell?” Tony slid out from under something large, grease staining his once-white tank top and well-worn jeans. “Lewis? Metal man?” His eyes took on a manic gleam. “J, what time is it?”

“Nearly one, sir.”

“Damn,” he groaned, sitting up and running his hands through his hair. “Thought Foster would be the one to come in and gloat.”

“We’re not here because of some idiotic bet,” Darcy dragged Bucky further into the lab. “We wanted to know if you had a minute —”

“Nope. Quite busy, in fact; genius and all that. Sorry.”

“—to look at James’ arm.”

Tony’s mouth didn’t drop open. He’d challenge anyone who said otherwise. “Really?”
Bucky shrugged, wishing Stark wasn’t leering at him. “You said you could handle a tune up or whatever you want to call it, so…”

“Hells yeah!” Tony jumped up, looking very much like a child with an unexpected new toy. “Have a seat there while I…” Tony tailed off, looking for something among the tools spread across his work station. Bucky glanced at the tall stool Tony pointed to, his back automatically stiffening. It didn’t look anything like the chair Hydra used. Tony’s lab didn’t look, sound or smell anything like Hydra, but it was still a lab and he was going to be examined like some experiment, and the chair was positioned so that the only exit, was at his back.

“Hey, Tony,” Darcy piped in, “any chance we can do this on the couch?”

Tony glanced over at the sofa situated in the corner of the room, a low table in front of it. He sometimes crashed there after a science bender. “Yeah, sure. Whatever.” He tossed a few more gadgets in a metal toolbox.

Darcy pulled Bucky to the couch, pushing him to the left side so he had somewhere comfortable to rest his arm while Tony did his thing. If she noticed how rigid he held himself, she didn’t comment, “I’ll be here this whole time,” she promised, digging through her bag, pulling out her StarkPad, a package of grape-flavored bubble gum, a Gray Widow (another Times Square Avengers knockoff) water bottle, and her phone. “The minute you want to stop, he’ll stop,” she said, her tone completely casual as she kicked her Keds off, tucking her legs underneath her. Bucky wrapped his arm around her back, tugging until she was curled next to him. “In the meantime, we never watched The Incredibles’ short about Jack-Jack’s powers. You’ll love it.”

Bucky let out the breath he didn’t realize he was holding. He wouldn’t say he was relaxed, but he felt traces of the Winter Soldier sliding back in the recess of his mind. “Thanks, doll.” He kissed her cheek.

“Anytime,” she murmured as Tony rolled over on his stool, dumping the toolbox on the table.

“Shirt off, Barnes.”

“Ooh.” Darcy sat up. “This just got interesting.”

“Keep it in your pants, Lewis,” Tony muttered as Bucky took off his navy blue long-sleeved T-shirt. Darcy immediately snatched it from his hands and balled it up for a makeshift pillow under her cheek. “First thing, your arm needs to be cleaned, so I’m going to do that before opening it up, deal?”

Bucky shrugged.

“Your enthusiasm is distracting, so knock it off,” he said, taking out a small brush and pressurized can of air. “If you want to do this on your own after, let me know and I’ll get you what you need. For now, though, pay attention to Lewis’ cat videos. You’ve got the height of sophistication with that one.”

“Shut up,” Darcy grumbled good-naturedly as she passed Tony a piece of gum. She held the pack out to Bucky and he automatically took a piece, nearly choking on the sugary sweetness. Soon, their corner of the lab was filled with the scent of grape and the sounds of cats meowing as Darcy queued video after video. (Has the world always been this obsessed with felines?) Bucky’s eyes darted from the lab door to Tony to the tablet in a continuous pattern that was less frantic as time passed. By the time Darcy switched from videos to an actual movie, Tony had finished cleaning Bucky’s arm, had the shell open, and was scanning the technology into JARVIS’ system while
mumbling lines from the movie — Three Amigos! — under his breath. Bucky would have rolled his eyes, only Darcy was doing the same thing.

“How many times have you seen this?” he asked out of curiosity.

“A plethora,” the mechanic and lab assistant answered in unison.

Darcy was asleep when Steve walked into the lab thirty minutes later, her face pressed against Bucky’s thigh. He was still watching the movie, snorting over what Tony claimed was a cinematic classic. Saying nothing, Steve settled on Darcy’s other side, lifting her legs to rest over his, the whirl of Tony’s tools barely heard over The Singing Bush on the small screen.

“Damn, I’m good,” Tony announced nearly an hour later, pushing back from the couch with a smug look. Standing to stretch, his bones cracked in protest. “JARVIS’ scan will give us a better understanding of your arm’s tech, but you’ll do for now, Barnes.”

Bucky flexed his hand, metal plates whirring smoothly as he felt everything slide into place as it should, the low throbbing he’d nearly gotten used to gone. “Thanks,” his voice somewhat gruff.

“Don’t mention it,” Tony snagged the last piece of Darcy’s gum and walking out of the lab.

Bucky’s eyes slid over to Steve. “Kind of expected him to gloat a bit more.”

Steve slid the tablet back into Darcy’s bag before bending over to lift her into his arms. “He’s an enigma,” he said, walking to the lab’s exit, Darcy stirring long enough to nuzzle against his neck with a contented sigh. Bucky trailed after them, her bag over his shoulder. Neither one thought twice about pushing the button for their floor, bringing Darcy to their room, laying her on their bed, and settling in around her, Steve at her front, Bucky at her back.

“Are you OK, James?” she murmured sleepily, her breath coming out on a sigh as he pushed her hair away from her face to nuzzle her cheek.

“Fine, doll. Go back to sleep.”

“I should check on Thor, see if Leo needs anything,” she mumbled as she pulled Bucky’s (metal) arm around her waist, her fingers twining with his as she snuggled deeper into him, simultaneously throwing a leg over Steve as he shifted closer to her.

“Later, sweetheart,” Steve whispered as he pressed his lips against her forehead.

“Mmm … ‘kay.”

Darcy didn’t like naps. Correction. She didn’t like waking up from naps. She had no problem killing an afternoon (or an entire day) watching a zoo’s live feed of baby pandas, scrolling tumblr or watching Seasons 1 and 2 of Alias for the umpteenth time. That was productive laziness. That left her feeling refreshed. Naps made her feel groggy and in desperate need of a shower. A nap in-between two men whose body temperature was on par with the freaking sun left her sweaty on top of groggy and in need of a shower. Of course, Steve didn’t know that’s why she suddenly slapped both of her hands on his chest and pushed him away.

“What’s wrong?” He grabbed her wrists. “Are you hurt? Cramp? What is it?”

“No,” she sat up, piling her damp hair on top of her head. “You’re like a sauna, dude. I can’t breathe.”
“Oh. OK.” He flopped onto his back, trying not to laugh as Darcy fanned herself with her hand. Bucky didn’t bother, snickering from his spot on the opposite side of the bed.

“Ass,” she said good-naturedly. “You know we have central air, right? And that Tony built this Tower as an example of clean energy, so there’s no need to feel guilty about turning it on.” The two men exchanged a quick look. “What? What was that? What am I missing?”

Steve rubbed the back of his neck. “We’re not that crazy about the cold, Darcy.”

“Kind of had our fill,” Bucky added.

Frozen in ice. Cryogenically frozen in between missions. Shit. She was an idiot.

“Hey.” Steve sat up and put his arm around Darcy, gently tugging until she was lying down once more. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Kind of is,” she muttered into his chest. “I wasn’t thinking. I’m –“

“Don’t apologize,” Bucky interrupted. “It’s our hang-up; it has nothing to do with you. If you’re going to be uncomfortable in our bed, then we'll fix things so you’re not. We're not planning on letting you leave anytime soon, doll.”

Darcy chose to ignore the little flip in her stomach at his words. “I hope your definition of soon is about thirty minutes because I need to take a shower before dinner.”

Steve ran his hand over her hair, slipping underneath the damp curls to cup her head. Flexing his fingers in a slow massage, he smiled at Bucky when she snuggled deeper in his arms. “Use our shower.”

“Mmm … I need to change clothes.”

Bucky moved over so he was next to them. He propped himself up on one arm and ran his hand up and down Darcy’s back. “Grab something from our closet.”

Steve brought his head up and met Bucky for a quick kiss over her head. “Think you’re out of excuses, doll.”

She rolled over, catching the tail end of their kiss. “Seems like it,” she murmured. “Now, what are we going to do for the next half hour?”

Steve was on her before she finished talking, a fusion of lips and tongues as he cupped her ass and moved her over him, on top of him as if she weighed nothing and damn if that wasn’t the hottest thing ever. He pressed against her, leaving no room to question how he thought they could pass the time. Darcy was in full agreement, only she didn’t plan to be a passive participant. Bracing her hands on his chest, Bucky watched as balanced on her knees on either side of Steve's thighs, a contemplative smirk on her face as she ran her hands down his plain white T-shirt.

“This needs to come off,” she told him, tugging as he raised his upper body up to pull the shirt over his head. “Better,” she murmured, fingers tracing his abdomen, watching how his muscles moved at her touch. She jumped when Bucky’s hands settled on her back.

“Don’t mind me,” he said against her ear. “Just keep doing what you’re doing with Stevie, doll.”

She raised one arm to twine it around his neck, twisting her head to trail kisses along his chin, nibbling his jaw. “Want you,” she told him.
“You’ll get me,” he promised, breaking their kiss to lift her shirt over her head, nimble fingers unhooking her bra, tossing that aside, too. Steve sat up to kiss her breasts, laving her nipples with slow, long kisses before sucking one hard into his mouth. Darcy gasped into Bucky’s mouth, her hands threading in Steve’s hair to hold him tightly against her as Bucky’s hands moved lower, one slipping inside her yoga pants, underneath her panties in search of her. “Hmm,” he said, one finger stroking her damp folds. “Already wet for us, doll?”

She whimpered, shifting her hips to give him more room, the feel of his finger sliding into her as Steve worshipped her breasts too much. She came with a sharp cry, the rush of pleasure catching her off guard. “More,” she muttered, pushing Steve back to the bed, her hands attacking his belt. The next couple of minutes were a frenzy of hands as the three of them rushed to get unclothed. The second Steve was naked, Darcy was over him, her hands grasping his cock to stroke, her eyes darkening at his choked groan. She lowered her head, bringing him inside her mouth, hollowing out her cheeks to pull him deep.

“Fuck, sweetheart,” he gasped, head falling back as his hands tangled in her hair. Bucky wasn’t content to be idle, moving behind Darcy once more, his hands, grasping her hips to pull her up so she was practically on her hands and knees over Steve, her mouth working him over as he groaned her name, crooning nonsense as she licked and sucked, her head bobbing up and down.

“You keep making Steve feel good, OK baby doll?” Bucky whispered as he pressed kisses against her back, one hand moving down and around her to finger her wet folds. “I’m going to get you ready for me and then I’m going to fuck you while you suck Steve.” She moaned around Steve’s cock, the vibration making the blond hiss. His fingers tightened in her hair as words poured out of him. Bucky smirked, knowing how close to the edge Steve was. “You gonna last, punk? Gonna give our girl a chance to get off before you do?”

“Jerk.” Steve forced himself to relax. “You gonna talk all day or are you going to fuck our girl?”

Darcy made a noise of agreement, back arching as Bucky’s hands made one more sweep down her smooth skin, resting on her ass before her grabbed her hips and filled her in one smooth motion. He pulled her hips up to him, nearly making her lose her grip on Steve in the process, his fingers in her hair keeping her in place. Bucky leaned over to mouth the back of her neck and Darcy was about to lose her hold on Steve when Bucky’s steady thrusts pushing her further on to Steve’s cock. He was big, too big for her to fully engulf, but she wanted to take as much as she could because the sounds he made every time she sucked him deep … Her hand gripped what she couldn’t fit, moving in time with her mouth.


She felt him swell, felt him try to lift her off him, but she held on, sucking deeper, Bucky’s steady thrusts keeping her in position as Steve exploded between her lips. She swallowed every bit of him, reveling in his taste, tongue darting out to catch what she missed as Steve went boneless beneath them.

“Feel good, Stevie?” Bucky laughed. He looked dazed as he watched Bucky pick up the pace, fucking her harder, deeper. With her mouth free, Darcy was shouting at him to keep going, her demands getting sharper as she reached her peak. “Baby,” Bucky groaned as she turned to look at him, her pupils blown wide with lust. He leaned forward and their shared a deep, sloppy kiss, the taste of Steve on her lips making something inside him break as he drove her up higher and higher, breaking away as she cried his name, his own release coming seconds later.

She collapsed on the bed between Steve’s legs, her head resting on his stomach. Bucky pulled out of her, tossed the condom in the trash by the bed, and laid beside her. “So beautiful,” he whispered,
planting kisses long her shoulder. “You’re so beautiful.”

She murmured something neither one understood, but it was a happy sound. They laid there, a tangle of limbs, sweaty and sated. But especially sweaty.

"Seriously, guys, a ceiling fan." Darcy grumbled. "Look into it."

Chapter End Notes

Help! I feel like the thread of this story is coming undone. I need to stop writing long stories and keep it short! I blame my English degree as my journalism degree is shaking its head in sorrow. I know what I want to happen, but I don't want to hurry things too quickly, nor have them plod along, so the question is how to PLOT without people thinking "That came out of nowhere."

Dilemma.

Stopp -- stop in German (it totally looks like a typo, but it isn't)
Sitz -- sit
Guter Hund -- good dog
Her hair was damp when she walked into the communal kitchen wearing a flannel shirt she borrowed from Bucky and her yoga pants. She said they were clean enough for Chinese takeout, but the truth was she refused to borrow pants from either man. She was a confident woman who loved her curves, but even the most secure female had her doubts. (And have you seen Steve's waist?)

“Darcy.”

She smiled at Bruce sitting at the breakfast bar, a periodical in his hands and a glass of something dark and probably healthy at his elbow, her train of thought immediately slowing in the man’s presence. Bruce had that effect on her. “What’s up, Doc?”

He shook his head slightly and went back to his reading, but she saw his small grin before the glossy publication to cover most of his face. Their relationship was an odd one. Well, technically Darcy could say all of her relationships with the Avengers bordered on the odd side, but Bruce was the one that made her work for it. She and Jane spent their first month in Stark’s labs hearing tons about Dr. Banner, but never seeing him. Had it not been for the television coverage of Bruce’s alter ego’s massive destruction, Darcy would have thought he was Tony’s imaginary friend.

She knew from gentle admonitions from Pepper, warnings from Clint and gossip from Tony that Bruce preferred to work alone, convinced that isolation was the key to maintaining control over The Other Guy. JARVIS’s meticulous records gave Darcy an understanding of Bruce’s eating (not quite a vegan, but close enough), drinking (water, tea and the occasional glass of red wine) and working habits, while Jane’s awed recount of his published work made her realize she’d never connect with him on an intellect level. That was just fine with Darcy – she had enough Science! geniuses in her life already – but she couldn’t let Bruce be. It wasn’t in her nature.

Darcy gave herself major props for making it almost five weeks before deciding enough was enough, walking into Bruce’s lab one sunny afternoon with a takeout cup of his favorite tea, a bag of all-natural trail mix from the hippy grocery store in her neighborhood, an Avengers coloring book and a new box of Crayola crayons (the kind that came with the built-in sharpener, thank you very much).

“Did you know coloring is considered active meditation?”

Bruce looked up from his microscope, blinking owlishly at the petite brunette wearing tight jeans and a black T-shirt that said “What If Stacey’s Mom Was Jessie’s Girl and Her Number Was 867-5309?” Boosting herself up on the lab table opposite his, she swung her booted feet idly as she flipped through the coloring book.

“Apparently repetitive motions such as coloring can help strengthen your focus and reduce stress,” she continued, not noticing or not reacting to his staring. “I just think it’s fun. Most fun things aren’t good for you, so it’s always awesome when one is, am I right?”

Bruce took off his wire-rimmed glasses and rubbed his eyes. “Who are you?”

“Who are any of us, really?”
He had no response to that, which was probably a good thing because she started laughing.

“I’m just joking with you, Doc. Darcy, Jane Foster’s lab assistant. Tony snatched her up London last month and we’re a package deal, so here I am.”

He accepted the cup of tea she handed him, automatically taking a sip before he realized what he’d done. “If you’re Dr. Foster’s assistant, why are you here?”

“Bored. She doesn’t need me right now and Tony is off doing Tony things, so I thought why not stop by to finally meet his best science bro? Seriously, the dude talks about you all the time. If he wasn’t engaged to Pepper, I’d think there was something more there and hey, maybe there is. That’s cool, too. Now that I’ve said it, I’ll probably picture it. I’d say sorry for embarrassing you, but I’m really not because you’re adorable and he’s cute. Dude, don’t tell him I said that! The last thing Tony needs is someone stroking his ego. Hey JARVIS, don’t let Tony see this, ‘kay?”

“Noted, Miss Lewis.”

Darcy gave Bruce a fond smile. “I love JARVIS. He might be my favorite person in the entire Tower.”

“I’m fond of you, too, Miss Lewis.”

“Thanks, buddy.”

Bruce was extremely confused. “I’m sorry, Miss –“

“No, miss. Just Darcy.”

“Darcy.” He repeated. “Why are you in my lab again?”

“To hang out. I know you’ve got things to do, so I brought some stuff to keep me busy. I know it’s hard to believe, but I can keep quiet. You won’t even know I’m here. Oh, and I brought you a snack. All natural nut goodness with some dried fruit.” Bruce found himself holding a bag of trail mix.

“You don’t have any other chairs in here – part of your whole I work alone shtick, right? – so I’m just gonna chill on this table unless you’d rather I cop a squat on the floor.”

“What?” He was desperately lost. He remembered Tony mentioning a lab assistant once or twice; something about her being his long-lost daughter, but Pepper assured him it wasn’t true. “No, that’s not necessary.”

“Coolio.” She took an iPod out of her back pocket. Seconds later, she was sitting cross-legged on the table, her boots kicked off on the floor, earbuds in with the volume turned low so he couldn’t hear what she was listening to. She stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth as she colored.

Bruce watched her for a few minutes before opening the bag to eat a handful of trail mix. He swallowed it down with the rest of his tea and got back to work, the occasional turning of a page the only sound for the next hour. When he pushed away from his table to stretch, he saw Darcy watching him with an amused expression.

He stiffened immediately. “What?”

“You all work so differently. Jane’s a mumbler, always talking to herself. I’ve learned of she’s quiet, it isn’t going well, but bright side, I can usually use the silence to get her to step away for some food and fresh air. Tony’s loud. Loud and messy. It’s like watching a toddler. But you?” She smiled again. “You are just as calm and quiet as you appear. I was not having a good day when I
walked in here and now I’m worry-free. Thanks, Doc!”

“Um … you’re welcome?”

She ripped a page out of the coloring book and slid it across his table. “See you next time!”

He looked down. It was a carefully-colored group picture of the Avengers. In the corner was a note written in purple: “We’re not afraid of you. Don’t be afraid of us. Darcy.” She drew a smiley face after her name. Bruce stared at the paper for several minutes before he tucked it inside the top drawer of his desk. The next time Darcy visited, she had a Sudoku puzzle book in her hands. He helped her finish two puzzles as they shared a carrot pumpkin muffin. She brought Uno the third time she stopped by. He lost an entire afternoon to the classic card game.

Bruce still tried to distance himself, especially after a mission required him to Hulk out. Darcy wouldn’t let him, continuing her no rhyme or reason visits as if nothing happened. “Stop the huffing, Doc,” she leaned over to ruffle his hair, interrupting his prepared speech about why she was better off spending her downtime with the others. “I like you too much to leave you with Tony Stark as your sole companion and we both know I’m your favorite, so deal the cards already.” She flipped to the screen on her tablet in which they kept their running scorecard. “I’m six games behind. Time to catch up.”

Bruce didn’t bother looking at the tablet as he shuffled. “You’re sixteen games behind, Darcy.”

“Eh. Details.”

Darcy placed a pile of forks on the counter. Bruce, Pepper and Tony were the only ones who actually used chopsticks. “How’s life among the geniuses?”

Bruce turned the page of the periodical. “Quiet, which is more disturbing than it should be.”

Darcy nodded knowingly. When Tony was quiet for too long, that usually meant he was up to no good; yet another trait he shared with a toddler.

“And you? How was line dancing?”

She grinned, the preoccupied look Bruce noticed when she walked entered the kitchen vanishing as she started talking about their night out, tossing in little hints that the invitation to join them was always there – no pressure. He appreciated her efforts to make him feel like he was part of the team. Her methods were more subtle and less flashy than Tony’s, but just as valued. It had been a long time since anyone had treated him like the man he was before the accident.

The call came just as Steve was handing the money to the Chinese delivery person, the young man’s eyes widening as he realized what it meant. “Dude, more robots? My favorite burger joint just reopened.”

Bucky snorted, hefting the bags out of Steve’s arms so he could answer SHIELD’s call. “I think you’re safe,” he told the kid. “Sounds like whatever’s happening isn’t here.”

“Good to know,” he said, pocketing the cash after a quick count, noting the generous tip. “Think I’ll stop by on my way back, just in case.”

“Can’t blame you,” Bucky said to the kid’s back. He met Steve at the elevator. “Where’re you off to?”
“They haven’t said,” he replied, punching the number for the communal floor.

“How long?”

Steve shrugged.

“What aren’t you telling me?” Steve looked conflicted. Shit. “Does this have to do with …” He trailed off. He didn’t want to say it. He didn’t want to think it. “I’m going.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Do you want me to?”

“SHIELD would like a second set of eyes.”

“Not what I asked, punk. Do you want me to go?”

Steve ran a hand through his hair. Yeah, he wanted Bucky with him. He trusted him, knew he’d keep him and the team safe as they picked their way through whatever horrors waited for them. He needed Bucky there to keep him sane when the enormity of the situation, the absolute shit of the situation, seemed too much. “Yeah,” he said with a deep sigh.

“Fine. You tell Darcy.”

“I already know,” she announced when they walked in the kitchen. “Nat told me to tell you to grab your stuff. I’ll pack up your dinner; who knows what kind of crap they’ll force you to eat wherever it is your going. It’s probably worse than Tony’s tofu.”

“Shut it, Lewis. My body is a temple.”

She snorted, picking through the piles of white cardboard containers, setting those for the people staying at the Tower on the counter. Steve walked over, kissed her on her neck just below her ear, whispering something that made her smile. “I’ll hold you to that,” she told him, pushing the bag of food in his arms. “Don’t spill in the quinejet. Fury’s still pissed about Coulson breaking his plane after six days.”

“How’d you know about that?” Clint asked from where he’d been talking quietly to Thor, the larger man stooped over to catch the archer’s words. Clint was dressed in SHIELD black, his bow strapped to his back.

“Huh?”

Clint’s gray-green eyes narrowed. “Darcy.”

“No time,” she grinned, pulling Bucky down for a quick smack on the lips. “Go help Nat save the world!”

She kept the smile on her face until she heard the helicopter leave, her shoulders slumping from the effort to pretend everything was fine. Reality was a bitch. She would love to pretend that the past forty-eight hours were her life; that she would always spend her nights having fun with her friends before falling asleep wrapped up in her soulmates, but it wasn’t. She wanted a taste, the tiny little part of her that still believed in fairy tales and happy endings, and she got it, but she had to face the facts. Steve and Bucky were superheroes. They would never stop fighting to make the world a better place. If she couldn’t handle watching them go, knowing there was always a chance
they wouldn’t come back, then she had no claim on them despite the words she wore on her body. Darcy idly poked at her Mongolian chicken, wondering how long she had to stay in the living room with the others before she could make her escape. She’d be brave tomorrow. She’d be an adult tomorrow. Tonight, all she wanted was to escape to her room and indulge in a good cry.

“And our favorite Avenger continues to take the social media world by storm. We’ll have the latest from the God of Thunder’s Instagram account after these messages.”

Tony grunted at Nancy O’Dell’s cheery tone. He claimed to hate *Entertainment Tonight*. Everyone knew he was full of it. “What’d you selfie today, big guy? Helping an old lady cross the street? Rescuing a kitten from a tree?”

Darcy’s head whipped toward Thor. He didn’t post a photo of him with Leo, did he? She sent Jane a text. The scientist subletly shook her head.

“Hey Tony, let’s change to *Wheel of Fortune,*” Darcy reached for the television remote.

“In a minute,” Tony was quicker and held the remote out of reach. “Publicity is your thing now, kid. You have to pay attention.”

Sighing, she flopped back on the chair, prepared to spend the next hour listening to Tony whine about Thor’s popularity. Never mind that the photo she posted of him wiping motor oil off of his face with the hem of his tank top garnered four hundred liked in less than fifteen minutes – people loved seeing their heroes semi-nude. Tony said he was fine with it as long as it was “tasteful” and essential to the plot.

“As you may recall, Thor did more for New York City’s homeless pet population with one photo than years of fundraising,” Nancy said with a broad smile directed to the camera. “This image of Thor with a Great Dane named Simon resulted in nearly three dozen pet adoptions from the Almost Home Animal Shelter in Lower Manhattan in one day.”

Darcy relaxed. They were showing old images from Thor’s account. Their secret was safe. “You might have launched a second wave of pet adoptions, big guy.”

Thor grinned broadly at the thought.

“This is just another example of how The Avengers are making the world a better place, right Kevin?”

Kevin Frazier grinned. “Exactly, Nancy. Of course, some lucky New Yorkers got to see the Avengers’ good deeds in person. Thor, joined by teammates Hawkeye, the Winter Soldier and Captain America, was spotted in a PetSmart on Broadway today.”

Bruce chuckled at the picture of Steve trying to stop the plastic bag from leaking all over the floor. Photos and videos from various social media accounts showed other moments from their visit – Nancy gleefully informed viewers that the image of the kittens climbing up Captain America’s jacket broke set a retweet record and actually shut down Twitter for nearly twenty minutes. Tony rolled his eyes.

“Of course, this is the photo that has the most people talking,” Nancy said as an oversized image of Darcy with her arms around Bucky’s waist filled the screen. She was caught mid-laugh, Bucky looking down at her with an amused expression on his face. “As we all know, James Barnes, otherwise known as the Winter Soldier, is the soulmate of Captain America himself, Steve Rogers. It had never been publicized if the two super soldiers have a second soulmate, nor has there been
photographic evidence to suggest it. However, if you zoom in on this photo—"Darcy froze as the camera did just that. "—you’ll see that the young lady in question does have a soulmark on her arm. We sent this image to a graphologist who confirmed that it matches Steve Rogers’ handwriting."

“Shit,” Darcy hissed. Tony already had his tablet out as Jane moved to sit by Darcy, wrapping an arm around her prone figure.

“What does this mean for the beloved couple?” Kevin asked the camera. “Theirs has been called one of the world’s greatest love stories. Will it have an even happier ending with the addition of another soulmate or will one of our heroes have his heart broken?”

“Both the Avengers and Stark Industries refused to comment, citing Rogers’ and Barnes’ personal lives,” Nancy added. “As for the identity of the woman in the photo, our sources tell us her name is Darcy Lewis. She is a graduate of Culver University and an employee at Stark Industries.”

“That’s convenient,” Kevin remarked.

“When the universe speaks, Kevin, you must listen,” Nancy trilled. “We will continue to stay on top of this story, sharing the latest developments as they come in.”

“Shit, shit, shit.” Darcy buried her head in her hands as the show cut to commercial. She didn’t even think about the possible ramifications of being with Bucky and Steve at the pet store. One impulsive hug, the only physical contact she had with either of them during the shopping expedition, and some jackass took a photo of it!

“Calm down, kid,” Tony looked up from his tablet long enough to give her an encouraging smile. “I’ve been caught in worse situations with better pictures. Or maybe it’s better situations with worse pictures?” He shrugged. “Either way, you’ll get through this.”

“But my mark. They know it’s Steve’s.”

“They think they know it’s Steve’s,” Bruce corrected.

“Exactly,” Tony said with a finger point at Bruce. “They didn’t even name their graphologist. It’ll be easy to poke holes in this story, make people doubt it. Pepper could do it in her sleep.”

“OK,” Darcy took a deep breath and leaned into Jane. Tony didn’t seem worried. If he wasn’t worried, she wouldn’t worry. She closed her eyes, only kind of listening when the show resumed. The latest Twitter war between Katy Perry and Taylor Swift was the focus of the segment. Feeling better, Darcy stood and started gathering the nearly empty containers of Chinese food, carting them out to the kitchen.

“That does it for tonight’s Entertainment Tonight. Thank you for joining me, Nancy O’Dell, and my co-host, Kevin Frazier.”

“And in the spirt of Thor Odinson’s adoption of Leo, a Leonberger who spent nearly a year at Almost Home before finding his permanent home at Avengers Tower, we’d like to encourage all of our viewers to help their local animal shelters,” Kevin said. “If you aren’t in the position to adopt a pet, consider making a donation or volunteering your time.”

“That’s what Thor would do!” Nancy laughed as a photo of Thor with Leo under the “I’m Going Home Today” sign appeared on the TV screen just as the Avengers’ alarm echoed throughout the tower.
Tony dropped his tablet. “What the fuck?!”

Chapter End Notes

So I have two different versions of the next chapter in-progress. I'm going to let them stew for a few days (I'll be out of town anyway) and see which one reads best next week. I wish there was a way you all could give your opinion without me giving anything away ... Should we all flip a coin?

Darcy's shirt is on my Pinterest board. I want it!

Happy Friday, everyone, and thank you for reading!
It was dark when Darcy opened her eyes. Correction: the room was dark. She had no idea if it was actually dark outside or she assumed it was because she was in a room with no windows. She pushed herself to a sitting position, hissing at the pain the pressure put on her shoulder. Carefully, she scooted back until she hit the wall, then slid along it until she was pressed in the corner. It’s safe in the corner. Well, safer. She swallowed the bubble of panic, of fear. That wouldn’t help. What did Natasha say?

“Recognize that you are under attack and think. What do you do next?”

The attack part was over. It was a bit of a blur. One second, she was panicking over a television tabloid show outing her to the public, the next she was following Bruce, Thor and Tony to the roof of the Tower, where Bruce climbed into the waiting helicopter while the other men prepared to take flight.

“You brought a dog into my Tower?” Tone yelled over the noise.

Thor pretended not to hear him, kissing Jane goodbye before taking to the sky.

“This isn’t over, Lewis!” Tony shouted before he, too, was gone.

Darcy turned to Jane. “Would you believe me if I told you that actually went better than I thought it would?”

Jane linked her arm through Darcy’s. “I know what you mean.”

They had wandered back to Thor and Jane’s apartment to liberate Leo, following his excited exploration of the Tower’s floors. They solved the bathroom issue by taking him to one of the outdoor balconies – Darcy was totally going to ask Tony to create a pooper-scooper robot after he got over being pissed -- letting him snooze outside while they started cleaning up the remains of their Chinese takeout. They were debating that night’s Netflix lineup when something shook the building and JARVIS’ voice told them to run.

“Run where?” Darcy grabbed Jane’s hand as the tower shook a second time. “What the hell is going on?”

“The Tower is under attack. My system has been compromised. Go to the panic room.”

Darcy followed Jane up several flights of stairs – In case of emergency, use stairs – hoping her friend knew where she was going because the only panic room she had knowledge of was the
movie. “Jane!” she wrenched her hand out of her friend’s.

Jane turned around. “Darcy! We’ve got to move!”

“Leo!” she cried, running back down the stairs.

“Darcy!”

“We can’t leave him!” she shouted.

“Darcy!”

She hoped Leo was safe. She couldn’t remember if she got to him in time. She hoped Jane was safe, that she was able to hide away from whatever attacked the Tower. She remembered a loud crash and a flash of pain. She had a headache. It was a dull thud behind her eyes, not quite on par with a hangover, so she probably didn’t have a concussion. She could move her fingers and her toes. She slowly twisted from side to side, hearing her bones pop at the movement, but more from stiffness than pain. Her shoulder hurt. She lifted her hand to it and nudged experimentally, almost crying out when she felt something wet, sticky. Blood. Oh God, was it hers? Was she still bleeding? She blinked furiously. She would not cry. Crying wouldn’t get her out of wherever she was. She would not give anyone the satisfaction of seeing her break down. She pressed her hand against the flannel covering her skin. Pressure. Keep pressure on it. Whatever happened, it wasn’t life-threatening. What was it Bruce said that time Tony stumbled into his lab, cradling his wrist?

“I think I broke something, Doc.”

Bruce didn’t bother looking up from his laptop. “I’m not that kind of doctor, Tony.”

“It hurts when I do this,” he said, shaking his wrist from side-to-side.

“Then don’t do that.”

Tony slumped against lab table with a pathetic sigh.

“Why don’t you do to medical?” Darcy asked. “Wasn’t the whole point of employing a small army of trained doctors and nurses was instant care for you and the others?”

Tony pouted. He didn’t like going to medical. That floor made him feel worse.

"He’s not going to go away,” Darcy mock whispered.

Bruce finally looked up, his eyes narrowing at the unnatural angle of Tony’s wrist. It was definitely broken, but if he told him that, he’d never have a minute’s peace. Tony already treated him like his personal shrink. He didn’t need to be his physician, too. “It’s not near your heart. You’re fine.”

“Worst doctor ever,” Tony grumbled as he stomped out of the lab.

Darcy increased the pressure on her wound near her right shoulder. She’d be fine. She would absolutely, completely, totally be fine.

He couldn’t hear. Bucky knew people were talking; they hadn’t shut up since Tony told them Darcy was missing, but he couldn’t hear them. There was this buzzing, this constant hum inside his head that got louder the longer he ignored it. She was gone, snatched from the very place that was supposed to keep her safe. How the fuck did that happen? He wanted to scream. It was taking
Everything to stay in his seat, to try and remain calm while the Winter Soldier was fighting to surface, to hurt, to maim, to fucking kill whoever took Darcy away from him. He didn’t jump when Steve’s hand came down on his, solid warmth that he wanted to grasp, to hold on to until the murderous urge left him. That wasn’t him. He was not that anymore.

“We’ll get her back, Buck.” Steve’s voice was hard, rough. It left no room for question. She was theirs. Someone took her. They would find her. Bucky turned his hand over to grip Steve’s. He didn’t trust himself to speak. Earlier, when Jane had tried to apologize, Steve had to drag him from the room. He knew it wasn’t the scientist’s fault. He knew that, but it wasn’t fair that Thor got to hold her, to comfort her, while Darcy … Where the fuck was she?

Darcy had a habit of crying when she absolutely did not want to. She’d feel the tears gathering behind her eyes and she’d dig her fingernails into the palm of her hand, telling herself to stop, but it never worked. It didn’t freshman year when Laurie Hill had grabbed Darcy’s bra from her PE locker and brandished it throughout the gym during basketball practice and it didn’t now, when she was alone in some room God knows where for who knows how long. She was trying very hard not to think about who took her and why.

Her eyes had adjusted to the darkness. That helped a little. She could make out a door on the other side of the room. Keeping one hand on her shoulder, she clumsily got to her feet and shuffled on bare feet to the door. It was made of steel. That freaked her out more than she already was. Steel meant industrial and industrial meant money and money equaled professionals. There wasn’t a door knob. She felt around, her fingers digging in the groove of a lock, but that was it. She pressed her ear against the door and strained to hear something, anything.

She wanted to scream. The urge to pound her fists against the door, to yell until someone came, was strong, but as much as the dark and silence was getting to her, the fear of what was on the other side of that door scared her even more. What did they want with her? Were they going to hurt her? The fear was real, bordering on hysterical as she stumbled back to her corner, sitting cross-legged with her feet off of the cold cement in an effort to retain some body heat.

She wanted to go home.

Steve didn’t flinch as Bucky’s fingers clenched his, the sharp bite of pain keeping him grounded as the others talked amongst themselves, over themselves, as they tried to piece together what happened. Eight hours. Darcy had been missing for eight hours. It was a hell of a head start for whoever took her. Why did they take her? What did they want with her? What would they do to her if they got it? What would they do to her if they didn’t get it?

Tony, for once, was silent. He hadn’t spoken since he got JARVIS’ system up and running again, head bent over his tablet as he pulled feed, data – everything he could get that wasn’t corrupted. Natasha was leaning over his shoulder, her face stony as she watched Tony work. Clint was pacing the seldom-used conference room, his hand flexing around the damn dog toy Darcy picked at the pet store less than a day ago. Natasha had grabbed it out of his hands to remove the stupid squeaker before someone strangled him. Thor was with Jane. The woman was hysterical when they found her, flying out of the panic room on their floor yelling for Darcy and Leo. The dog bounded over, ears flopping and tongue lolling, as happy as can be.

“Where’s Darcy?” Jane’s head whipped frantically from Tony to Bruce, ignoring Thor as he tried to hug her.

“What do you mean? She’s not with you?” Tony pushed past them to look in the room.
"She went after the dog."

They searched the Tower, floor-by-floor, as Tony worked to bring JARVIS back online. It was the AI who confirmed Darcy’s absence from the Tower.

“What happened?” Tony demanded.

“I’m recovering security feeds now. Shall I contact Captain America and the others?”

They didn’t waste a second when JARVIS overrode SHIELD’s communication system on the quinjet to inform them of Darcy’s disappearance. Natasha turned around without Steve’s command, Clint telling the agents over the coms they could go fuck themselves as they raced home.

“Here we go,” Tony said as several holograms appeared in the middle of the table. Bruce moved to the door to call for Thor, but the man walked in without notice, his face blank as he crossed his arms over his massive frame, watching without expression as the camera showed Jane and Darcy running for the stairs. JARVIS switched to the feed inside the stairwell, Clint shaking his head as Darcy pulled away from Jane to run back down the stairs.

“How the fuck is that possible?” Bucky growled.

“I want to know, too,” Tony’s voice was rough as he entered a command in his system.

Bruce closed his eyes at the image of three men approaching Darcy. Now was not the time to get angry. He needed to stay calm. He needed to think of the team, to think of his friend. They couldn’t help her if The Hulk went on a rampage.

Natasha was silent as she watched Darcy’s attempts to fight off her attackers. She used the heel of her hand to strike the first assailant in the face before she turned to run out of the living room, throwing whatever she could behind her to stop the others’ progress. “Stay on your feet, малютка,” she murmured.

A fourth man exited the stairwell, giving the others the opportunity to tackle Darcy to the floor. She didn’t go quietly, kicking, biting. Natasha taught her to fight dirty, to use whatever she could to get away, but she wasn’t prepared for three against one. Darcy’s back was to the man with the knife. Clint was emotionless as he listened to Darcy scream.

Steve’s eyes were cold. He pushed aside all emotion as he watched the woman he cared about, the woman he had in his bed less than 24 hours ago, go limp. He couldn’t tell how deep the knife wound was, how far it went on her arm. They saw the blood when they returned to the tower. A quick test by Bruce confirmed it was Darcy’s, but there was no trail. The footage showed two men leaving the way they came. The other two split up. He didn’t need the footage to show him they searched for others, that their attempts to break into the labs on the lower levels were unsuccessful.

“Outdoor feed,” Bucky growled.

Tony switched without comment. Darcy was pushed into the back of an unmarked SUV. Tony accessed the city’s surveillance cameras to track their progress to a midtown garage. Thor moved
to go when JARVIS announced the address, but the garage opened again and eight black SUVs drove away.

“They’ll make another switch,” Bucky said as Tony tried to track their progress. “We won’t find the car. If we do, they’ll be long gone.”

“What do we do now?” Thor asked.

Darcy ignored the growling of her stomach. She woke up slouched against the wall, her feet numb with cold, her hand still pressed against her shoulder. She removed it slowly, the dried blood pulling on her skin. Whatever happened to her, she was no longer bleeding. That was a good thing. She pushed to a standing position and assessed her body again. The headache was gone. She was sore, but that could be chalked up to sleeping in a strange position. Her shoulder and upper arm were tender, but manageable. She tried to raise that arm, but the sharp stab of pain stopped her.

There was a sound outside the door. Darcy pressed her lips together. She would not scream. She would not cry. She braced herself against the corner as the door swung open, the bright light from the hall making her blink in confusion. It threw her off enough that she didn’t fight when large hands grabbed her, pulling her from the room. She was several feet down a non-descript hall before she realized what was happen. She struggled. She tried to plant her feet. She didn’t know who these people were, what they wanted, but she’d be damned if she’d go quietly. An open hand slapped her face. Tears stun her eyes, but she didn’t stop, not until the grip on her arm shifted from her left to her right, the pressure on her wound making her cry out.

“He likes screamers.”

“Bucky, you need to lay down.”

“You’re not.”

“I’m not tired.”

“Neither am I.”

Steve sighed, rubbing the heels of his hands against his eyes. He felt gritty. He wanted to take a shower, but was afraid he’d miss something if he did. Twenty four hours. His internal clock noted each additional hour of her absence. There had been no contact with her kidnappers, no demands made. She was simply gone.

“Look at me.”

Steve kept his eyes closed. His fault. She tried to tell them it wouldn’t work, tried to keep them away, and he pushed. He wouldn’t let her alone and now she was alone.

“Steve.”

He opened his eyes. Bucky’s face was grim, his own dark blue eyes red with fatigue, his forehead creased with worry. “We’ll get her back,” he promised.

“I know.”

Strong hands clamped on his shoulders. “Don’t say that because you think it’s what you want me to hear. We will get her back. I need you to believe that as much as you believed you’d get me back.
You found me, Steve. Both times I was lost, you found me. Now I need you to do that for Darcy. She needs you to believe that you’ll get her. Do you believe it?”

He was tired. He was unbelievably tired. He didn’t want to fight anymore. When he “died,” it was near the end of a war. When he “woke up,” the world was still fighting.

“Stevie.”

He closed his eyes and pictured Darcy. Darcy laughing. Darcy cooking. Darcy making snarky comments with Tony, playing video games with Clint, or dancing with Jane and Natasha. Darcy laughing as Leo knocked her to the ground. Darcy trying to outdrink Thor or watching Bruce work. He remembered what she looked like dancing with Bucky, what she looked like dancing with him, how her eyes would darken when he kissed her, the sounds she made when he was inside her.

“Not your fault, punk,” Bucky pulled Steve close, his mouth pressed against his ear as he fiercely repeated the words. He wouldn’t stop. He’d keep saying them until Steve believed him.

Chapter End Notes

Again, I'm really, really sorry.

малютка means Little One (according to Google)
This is a short-ish chapter. I have a crazy week ahead and probably won't be able to update until the end of the week, so rather than keep you all in (more) suspense, I'm posting it now as a thank you for your support of this story.

She was dragged into a brightly-lit laboratory, smaller than the ones at the Tower, but filled with the shiny and expensive things scientists liked to own. There were three men in black stationed around the workspace, not counting the one who brought her there, but it was obvious that the man in charge stood behind the stainless steel table. He could be Bruce 2.0 with his white lab coat, wire-rimmed glasses and quizzical look on his face, though this version had less hair and was obviously evil if the gun next to his clipboard was any indication. Did people still use clipboards?

"You are not Jane Foster," fake Bruce said.

Darcy forced herself not to give in to the fear that had been her constant companion since she first opened her eyes. It wouldn't help. They took her. They had her. What she had to do now was stay alive until ... She just had to fucking stay alive. She focused on the man still watching her. She would have crossed her arms if not for Man in Black No. 1 being handsy and such, so she went with her backup plan: sarcasm. "No shit, Sherlock."

The scientist sighed heavily, picked up the gun and shot the man next to her. She jumped as his body fell back to the floor with a loud thump, a bullet hole in the center of his forehead. "Who are you?" he asked, the gun now pointed at her.

He shot the Man in Black! Yes, he was a bad guy and probably deserved it, but one second he was there, the next he was dead. Holy shit!

The gunshot echoed throughout the room as the man at the computer fell to the floor.

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The gun cocked. "Name."

"Darcy Lewis," she replied automatically, her mind still trying to come to terms with what she just saw. Her head whipped around. No one else in the room moved. Did they not see the dead guy at her feet?

The doctor nodded to the man standing at attention in the corner. He moved to the laptop mounted on a small workspace and started typing. "Darcy Lewis; 23-years-old, born in Garden City, Kansas, on September 18, 1990. Parents deceased; no siblings. Entered the Indiana foster care system shortly after her fifteenth birthday. Attended Culver University on a scholarship, graduated in May 2014 with a bachelor’s degree in political science.” The scientist sniffed. He sounded like Tony. Darcy bit her tongue to keep herself from making a comment. “An employee of Stark Industries since 2013 as Jane Foster’s lab assistant.”

The gunshot echoed throughout the room as the man at the computer fell to the floor.

"Stop it!" Darcy shouted.
The scientist looked at Darcy curiously. “Why? They were hired to take Dr. Foster. They failed.”

“So don’t pay them! You can’t just kill people!”

The doctor showed no emotion as he studied her. He set the gun down again, which made her feel a little better, or as better as she could after seeing two people die. “They abducted you,” the scientist finally said. “I would think you’d be happy to see them punished.”

“Sure, but you know, legally or something. A bullet through the head seems a little excessive, don’t you think?”

The man shrugged. “I’m up against a deadline, Miss Lewis. Haven’t you ever reacted poorly to stress?”

“Yeah, but I dyed my hair purple or got something pierced.” She bit her lip as a visual popped in her memory. “OK, and I slept with a frat boy that one time; mistakes, yeah, but they weren’t permanent!”

He may have smiled. It was hard to tell because his head was down as he made a note on his clipboard. She took a step back when his head snapped up. “You’re hurt.”

Her hand automatically went to her arm. “Yeah –“

“Come here.”

She shook her head. No. No way.

“Miss Lewis, I said come here.”

“I’d rather not.”

He sighed again, stood and picked up the gun. Darcy held herself stiff as he walked to the long counter on the side of the room underneath steel cupboards. He opened one, setting the gun inside and locking it before he turned to her. “Now will you come here?”

She was still thinking about it when the man tilted his head slightly. Darcy felt someone at her back take her non-injured arm and propel her forward until she was in front of the scientist. He leaned down to examine her arm. “Knife wound?”

She shrugged. “I don’t remember that much.”

“Hmm. It’s a common reaction to a traumatic event. The brain suppresses pain and violence in self-preservation. It’s a fascinating study, the human mind.” he continued as he opened a drawer to reveal a first aid kit, taking out bandages, scissors, and a tube of antibiotic cream from another drawer.

Darcy was shoved onto a chair. The man took a seat on a rolling stool in front of her, scissors in hand. “Normally, I would ask you to remove your shirt, but I assume you are opposed to that.”

She snorted. “Just a bit.”

“I will need to cut off the sleeve,” he said, holding up the scissors.

She held out her arm. The shirt was trashed anyway. She hoped it wasn’t one of Bucky’s favorites.

“You’re tense,” the man remarked as he carefully cut the fabric.
Was he for real? “I’ve had a rough day,” she answered dryly.

“Indeed,” he said as he set the scissors down. He snapped his fingers, the man behind Darcy handing him a damp towel. He carefully, gently, cleaned her arm. It had stopped bleeding, which was a good thing. The man clicked his tongue after the dried blood was gone. “It’s deep, but unfortunately too much time had passed for stitches. Had I seen you sooner —”

“Dude; not my fault. I’ve been locked in a room for who knows how long.”

He didn’t respond, but carefully covered the wound with antibiotic cream before wrapping it with a white bandage. “Does it hurt? Would you like something for the pain?”

Darcy’s mouth fell open. “Are you serious?”

“Why not? None of this is your fault. It would be rude to continue to punish you for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.” He snapped his fingers again. Darcy heard the door open behind her. Seconds later, the man pressed a bottle of water in her hands before twisting open the bottle of ibuprofen. She watched as he removed the sealed wrapping and cotton ball, shaking out two and handing them to her. “Can you open the water?” She looked down. It, too, was sealed closed. “We have not tampered with anything, Miss Lewis.”

She twisted the lid and took a sip. Jesus, she was thirsty. She drank some more, stopping only when the man cleared his throat and held out the pills. She took them, swallowed and finished the water. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He pushed back from the counter, hands clasped behind his back as he returned to his table. “I do apologize for our mistake, Miss Lewis. I can assure you that it wasn’t deliberate.”

It was on her tongue to automatically say “That’s OK,” but it wasn’t. None of this was OK!

“I don’t suppose you know anything about Dr. Foster’s work?” His tone was casual, but Darcy detected the faint threat underneath. She considered lying. If she said yes, would it buy her time? Would it be enough for her to be rescued? She felt the man behind her shift position. A second later, a gun was at her temple.

“Don’t lie to me, Miss Lewis,” the man said quietly.

Shit! “No, I don’t know what Jane’s working on,” she admitted.

He sighed heavily. “That’s a disappointment.”

The man behind her cocked his gun. “You’re going to shoot me?” she cried.

He honestly looked surprised at her question. “I have no use for you.”

“But – you bandaged my arm! You gave me painkillers! Why the hell would you do that if you were going to shoot me?”

For a second, he looked unsure. “Habit, I suppose,” he said with a casual shrug of his shoulders. “I don’t like seeing people in pain. Consider it a weakness.” He gathered up his clipboard and walked to the door. “Again, I apologize for our error, Miss Lewis.”

“Sir.”

The man stopped. “Yes?”
“She has two soulmates.”

The man turned. “And why does that matter?”

The man on the laptop, the man who fucking stepped over his dead colleague to access whatever was on the screen, looked up. “Her soulmates are Steve Rogers and James Barnes.”

The scientist walked to the laptop. “Are you sure? If this is some last-minute attempt to save yourself –“

“It’s right here in her file,” he said, turning the laptop toward the doctor. Darcy held her breath as his eyes skimmed what was on the screen. Who would have a file on her?

“Are you SHIELD?” she burst out. “Is this like an evil division of SHIELD?”

The man’s lips quirked slightly. “That’s an interesting question, Miss Lewis.” He approached her. “May I see your soulmarks?”

“Why?”

“I asked to be polite. I won’t ask again.”

Darcy swallowed. “Make the guy behind me put away the gun first.”

The man tilted his head. Darcy felt the man behind her step back. She assumed by the rustling sound that he slid his gun into his holster or wherever bad guys stored their weapons. “Soulmarks.”

She lifted her right foot. The man kneeled, his touch gentle as he rotated her ankle slightly to read Bucky’s words. “This is Sergeant Barnes' handwriting,” he said as he returned to his feet. “Captain Rogers’?”

“It's on my upper left arm.”

“Show me.”

Darcy crossed her arms. No way was she taking her shirt off in front of these people. “No.”

He reached behind her to pick up the scissors he used minutes earlier. In a blink, her left sleeve was gone and his eyes were focused on Steve’s words. “Who else knows about this?” No one responded. The man’s head whipped around. “Who?” he demanded.

The man at the computer typed furiously. “Uh, it’s classified. Sir.”

“So how did you get it?”

“Um … there was a story. Entertainment Tonight had a photograph of her with the Winter Soldier that showed Captain America’s soulmark.”

The scientist removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. It was a very Bruce-like reaction. He usually did it after Tony did something Tony-ish. “You’re telling me a television tabloid learned about this before we did?”

“Yes?” the man answered hesitantly.

The man turned to the guard behind Darcy. She wasn’t surprised when the gun went off and the man at the computer slammed to the ground. He fell forward, though, taking the laptop with him.
“You can’t hire good help these days.”

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**Cap Locked in Fight for Love!**

**Frozen Times for Beloved Couple?**

The headlines screamed lies, accusations. They painted Darcy as a home wrecker, Bucky as a cheater and Steve as heartbroken. Steve pushed the pile of newspapers aside. Three days. Darcy had been gone for three days and they were no closer to finding her now as they were when she first disappeared. Natasha reached out to her contacts. Clint called in favors he said Steve was better off not knowing about. Tony even buried the hatchet and contacted Agent Phil Coulson and his team, the only people connected to SHIELD who might actually do something.

“Perhaps you should release a statement.”

Steve’s head snapped up, biting off his sharp retort when his eyes focused on Pepper. “Why?”

She took a seat on the stool next to his. She’d spent her morning supervising the installation of new windows on the communal floor. The glass had been treated with a concoction Tony and Bruce created that Tony claimed was so strong, it would have kept the Titanic afloat. Clint and Bucky had spent an hour in the shooting range proving Tony's claim as true. Slipping out of her black Manolo Blahniks, she reached for one of the tabloids. “Because of this,” she gestured to the newspapers. “There’s a time for silence, to let things die down on their own. This is not that time.”

“Why?” Steve repeated.

“Because there’s a layer of truth to it,” she placed her hand on his arm when Steve pushed away from the breakfast bar. “Hear me out,” she pleaded. “She is your soulmate. The public knows that. They don’t know that she is James’, too.”

“Exactly,” he said through clenched teeth. “The plan was to keep it quiet so the information wouldn’t be used against her! We were supposed to protect her, to shield her from all of this. We failed.”

Pepper shook her head. “You didn’t fail, Steve. The secret would have come out eventually. Maybe not now or even a year from now, but the fact of the matter is you are a public figure, as is James, which means your relationship is, unfortunately, public fodder.” She tightened her hold to keep him still. “I know what you’re going through.”

“You couldn’t possibly –“

“Afghanistan,” she said quietly.

Steve stopped. He sometimes forgot that Tony had been kidnapped, had been held in captivity for months before building his first Iron Man suit to escape. Pepper, his soulmate, was helpless as she waited for his return, his words along her wrist the only indication that he was still alive.

“I’m sorry,” he said stiffly. “I did not mean to imply –“

She waved a hand before he could finish. Her intent was to help. He was hurting. People sometimes acted out when they were hurting. She preferred taking action.

“Releasing a statement that Darcy Lewis the soulmate of Steve Rogers and James Buchanan, AKA Captain America and the Winter Soldier, will not put her at risk any more than she already is,”
Pepper told him. “If her abduction was an accident, it’s likely they know her status by now given the media coverage. If they knew before, that’s why she was taken.”

“And making this public knowledge –“

“It sends a message, a message that you control,” Pepper said. “It shows the world that she’s cared for. I can’t guarantee it will stop the media from slandering her name. I imagine Darcy will finish them off when she returns.”

“And what about the people who have her?”

“It forces them to make a move.”

Steve shook his head. Part of him saw validity in Pepper’s suggestion. They had not made any progress in uncovering who took Darcy and why, nor had any of them been contacted with demands for Darcy’s safe return. Her words on his shoulder blade, on Bucky’s shoulder blade, were still visible, which meant she was alive, but that didn’t mean she was safe. “I need to talk to Bucky,” he said.

Bucky walked into the kitchen. “I heard.” He picked up one of the newspapers and sneered.

“What do you think?”

Bucky thought about Darcy, the way she poked and prodded people until she got them to do what she wanted them to do. She could be subtle, she could be sneaky, but most of the time she was a steamroller hell-bent on getting her way. “Let’s give ‘em hell.”

Darcy was multiplying by eleven. It was boring and repetitive, but it kept her from going crazy. She managed to get up to eleven times one hundred and forty-three when the door to her “room” opened and the scientist – he’d yet to tell her his name – entered with a sandwich, chips and a juice, all items sealed in their original packaging. She still didn’t know how long she’d been missing, but judging by the somewhat regular delivery of food in her much nicer, but still a locked room, she would guess close to a week.

After the scientist had killed the third man, he instructed Man in Black No. 4 to take her away. Darcy assumed they would return to the room she was kept before, but instead the man led her up two flights of stairs to a room that had a mattress on the floor, a sink in the corner and a small shade blocking a bare toilet. There was no pillow, but there was a blanket. Darcy tried to keep the shock off of her face as she was pushed inside, the door slamming behind her with the can’t-miss-it turn of a lock.

That was the last time she saw Man in Black No. 4.

“How are you this afternoon, Miss Lewis?”

She stopped herself from voicing the response to wanted to give. She knew and he knew that she was there against her will, but anytime she expressed her anger towards the situation, his gray eyes turned cold. The first time she yelled at his innocuous question, he had backhanded her across the face so hard, she had fallen to the floor. He left before she pushed herself to her feet, taking the food he had brought with him. She had no way of knowing how much time had passed before he returned, but she had been careful to treat him with the same amount of respect he was showing her.

“We do what we need to do to survive,” Natasha told her during a training session.
She sat up on the mattress. “A bit bored, to be honest.”

“I wish I could say the same,” the man said as he handed Darcy her food. She set it aside, giving him her full attention as he wandered around her miniscule space.

“Busy day?” she prodded.

“Mmm,” he nodded. “We have visitors.”

That sounded ominous, but all Darcy did in response was raise an eyebrow.

“It seems that Captain America and the Winter Soldier took it upon themselves to have a press conference this afternoon in which they confirmed they each had a second soulmark belonging to Darcy Lewis.” The scientist turned. She forced herself not to cower under his gaze. “They then announced that Miss Lewis was abducted from Avengers Tower on June 2 and vowed to do everything in their power to bring her home safe. I’m not one for theatrics, but they did make an imposing picture standing in front of the rest of their team.” Sighing, he walked to the door, knocking once to alert the guard outside to open the door. “Unfortunately, this accelerates our timeline.”

“Wait!” Darcy got up from the mattress. “What does that mean? Who’s timeline?”

“Hydra’s.”

Chapter End Notes

Have a great week, everyone!
I caved. All of your comments and "What happens now?" and "OMG, you can't stop now!" had me staying up late and getting up early to finish this chapter. It didn't help that conversations were playing in my head when I should have been focused on other stuff, like work, but oh well.

Darcy hated her breasts when she first got them. A great rack might be the cheapest way to party in college, but it made her different in middle school and anyone who hasn’t blocked out the hell that is middle school will tell you different is the last thing you want to be. All of the other girls wore cute bras in pastel colors and patterns while she was stuck with a triple hook basic white over-the-shoulder-boulder-holder. Even worse, they were underwire bras. Darcy’s grandmother was convinced extra support then meant less sagging later, so she purchased a most functional bras she could for her only grandchild.

Yoga pants were not conducive in captivity. Bare feet weren’t a great help, either. An underwire bra, however, was a fucking godsend.

After a thorough investigation of her (Room? Cell? Prison?) temporary living arrangement, Darcy came to the conclusion that she was not under surveillance. Then, because she could hear Natasha’s voice in her head urging her to be sure (her urging voice bore a striking resemblance to her threatening tone), she checked a second and third time because Natasha would be mad if she got herself killed over a technicality.

She never wanted to be on Nat’s bad side, even in death.

Sending a mental shout out to whatever prompted her to grab an underwire bra from her bureau the day she was kidnapped; Darcy ducked behind the privacy screen around the toilet and shrugged off her bra. She used her teeth (thank you SI dental plan!) to make a hole in the cotton and managed to remove the wire with minimal cursing. Well, her normal amount of cursing, anyway. She slipped the bra back on, the flexible metal now in her hand.

“Anything can be a weapon, babe.”

With Clint’s voice egging her on, Darcy used the underwire to slice a hole in the bottom of the mattress, a hole she was careful to keep hidden whenever the scientist paid a visit. She had no idea how bedsprings were going to help when she started (it was quite possible she pictured herself bouncing out of there like Wile E. Coyote; Thor had a soft spot for his cartoons), but having a goal, a focus, kept her from losing it.

Now, though, her body was working automatically while her mind raced. Hydra. Science guy actually said the word Hydra, as in present-tense Hydra and not the Nazi-like organization that Steve fought decades ago. It still existed. It was apparently here. Darcy didn’t forget the amused look the scientist had when she asked if he was with SHIELD. Was SHIELD Hydra? Was Hydra SHIELD? What they hell did they want with her? No, not her; Jane. What was Jane working on
that they wanted? What was so special about Steve and James that they decided not to kill her? Shit, James. Was he safe? Did they want him back?

Darcy didn’t plan to wait around to find out. She never handled surprises well, always sneaking around the house to find her birthday presents weeks before the actual date. She saw no reason to break the streak now.

She was ready when the door opened, heart in her throat as she clutched the springs wrapped around her knuckles, biting her lip to keep from flinching as the pointed metal dug into her skin. Brass knuckles they were not, but she prayed to God, to Thor, to every deity she could think of that they’d work in a pinch.

“I need you to come with me,” the scientist said.

Darcy was grateful he stuck to his usual MO of entering her room alone. “Why?”

“Because I told you to,” he said, sounding very much like a parent speaking to a child. She shook her head. It scared her to death to do it, but she needed him to move closer for her plan to work. “Miss Lewis.”

“No. Not going to happen until you tell me why.”

He sighed heavily. After several days, she was quite adept at distinguishing between them. This was his “Why do you make me do these things?” sigh. She braced herself as he approached the mattress; feet planted on the floor, ready to strike.

Happy would have been proud. She hit the dude’s face with an uppercut that had his head snapping back. She channeled Natasha and kicked next, her foot just grazing his groin area, but with enough force to bring him to his knees. She hesitated for a second (because there was a small part of her that didn’t think her plan would actually work) and he took advantage, sweeping his arm to bring her to the floor. That’s when teenage Darcy came out to play. She clawed. She bit. She felt him reach in his pocket for something and she fought to get to whatever it was first. She saw the syringe out of the corner of her eye just before he jabbed her in the neck.

Self-defense lessons weren’t as exciting as they sounded. Natasha was quick to teach Darcy and Jane how to break out of a hold and incapacitate an attacker long enough to get away, but most of her focus was on conditioning and strength training. Whenever Darcy complained (which was often), Natasha said she was building the base.

“You can know all the tricks in the world, but they won’t help if your body can’t respond,” she said before adjusting the speed on the treadmill.

She still wasn’t sure if she understood, but she did know the second she felt the needle break her skin, her reaction was automatic. Darcy flipped the scientist off of her back, propelling herself to her feet to grab the syringe from him. He was pushing himself to a standing position when she thrust the needle into his neck. She had no fucking clue was she injected him with, but her guess was something that would have knocked her out given the wooziness in her head.

“Cut off one head …” the scientist started before crumpling at her feet.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve read the books,” she muttered. Giving her head a vicious shake – how much of that stuff got into her bloodstream? – she patted the man’s pockets, searching for, hoping to find, a cell phone. When her hand curled over the gun, she drew it out of his lab coat with shaking fingers.
“Sir is everything –“

She shot him. She didn’t even think about it. The man burst into the room, saw her kneeling over the scientist and reached for his gun at his hip – and she shot him. He fell back, his head hitting the ground with a loud thump. She was going to be sick. She was going to throw up first and then pass out. She shot a person. Did she kill him? Oh God. Oh fuck. She crawled toward the body. “Don’t be dead. Be knocked out. Be unconscious long enough for me to get the fuck out of here, but don’t be dead, OK?”

She felt for his pulse on his wrist. It was there. Elation gave way to fear. She wasn’t in the clear. She had to move! Carefully, quickly, she checked the man’s pockets. Keys! Keys were good. Keys were her friend. A plastic badge of some kind. OK, that probably worked as a key card; she could use that. Darcy slid the card underneath her bra strap and checked his other pockets. A walkie talkie-type thing. Would that keep them from calling for help? She took it. Cell phone, cell phone … No cell phone. Fuck! Who were these people?

A wave of exhaustion passed over her. No! No, she couldn’t stop now. She needed to escape. Once she escaped, she could sleep as long as she wanted. Gotta keep moving. Be like Dory -- I think I can, I think I can. Wait, no, that was the train. Come on, Darcy!

She moved to the man’s feet, undoing the laces of his black boots and pulling them on. They were big, but they were better than no shoes at all. Shuffling to the scientist, she unbuttoned his lab coat. She wasted precious minutes wrestling with his body to get it off his unconscious body, but she was sure a woman in a sleeveless flannel would stand out more a woman in a lab coat. She hoped so anyway. She forced herself to get to her feet, swaying slightly. God she felt heavy. Evil villains had the best shit. She stumbled to the door, her mouth dropping open when it opened.

The hallway was long, narrow, but thankfully empty. She seemed to be in the middle of it. She didn’t see any security cameras, but she wasn’t naïve enough to think they weren’t there. Hurry! Gotta hurry now! She pulled the door to her room closed, taking perverse delight in flipping the lock that would keep the scientist inside. Tucking her hands in the lab coat, one still wrapped around the gun, she headed to the right. Stairs. She needed to find stairs.

Clint sat in the rafters of the shooting range, his bow on the ground. He’d been shooting for hours, eye on the target and his mind clear of everything else, until physical exhaustion forced him to take a break. Six days had passed since JARVIS broke through SHIELD’s communication system to tell them Darcy was missing. Six days; almost seven. He tried to tell himself she was fine, that if he could handle three weeks in an Uzbekistan prison, Darcy could handle wherever she was with no problems. Not every abduction led to pain, to torture, to the kind of shit he never wanted to touch her, but he knew better. His years with SHIELD, with the military … he knew too much. He could lie to himself as much as he wanted, he could lie to his friends, his teammates, tell Steve and Barnes what they want to hear, but in silence he was faced with the truth.

He pulled the buzzing cell phone out of the back pocket of his black cargo pants without looking at the screen. “Barton.”

“I shot someone.”

“DARCY?” He leapt from the rafters, not even feeling the sharp stab of pain in his legs from landing on solid concrete. He ran for the stairs. “Where are you?”

“I don’t know!” she whispered hysterically. “I don’t know. Clint, I shot someone! I shot someone and I stole a phone. I couldn’t find a phone. No one had one, so I went into this room and I took a
purse and now I have a phone and I’m hiding under a desk and I want to come home. Please, come and get me so I can go home!”

He burst through into the communal floor, snapping his fingers to get everyone’s attention. “JARVIS, start a trace on this call now!”

“Yes, Agent Barton.”

“Clint, what are you – “

He cut Natasha off with an impatient wave of his hand. “Darcy, I’m putting you on speaker.”

“Darcy!?” Jane pushed herself away from Thor and dove to her knees in front of the phone Clint propped on coffee table.

“JARVIS is tracing the call, Darce; he’s going to let us know where you are. Someone get Steve and Barnes!”

“Clint?” Darcy’s voice sounded so small, so scared through the speaker.

“I’m here, babe. Jane’s here, Thor, Nat. Pepper went to get Steve and Barnes. JARVIS, alert Bruce and Tony.”

“Already done, agent,” the AI answered at the same time Darcy begged everyone not to stop talking.

“Darcy, are you OK?” Jane reached out for the phone; fingers stretched as if she could pull physically pull Darcy through it. “Are you hurt?”

A sniffle came over the speaker. “No?” she sounded unsure. “I’m tired. He tried, science guy, he tried to give me something … a needle … I pulled it out and got him. I shot someone! Jane, he came in and he had a gun and I shot him!”

Steve and Bucky caught the end of Darcy’s sentence when they rushed into the room, their hearts freezing at the horrified tone of her voice. “Darcy – “

“Steve!” she cried softly, her voice lowering as she hissed into the phone. “They know! They know about the soulmarks!”

“It’s OK,” he assured her, wishing he could do more. “Sweetheart, everyone knows – “


“Who?” Bucky asked.

“Hydra!”

Steve was sure his shocked expression was duplicated by everyone in the room. “Hydra? Darcy, we – “

“I know! That’s what I thought, but he said it. He said you guys telling the world about the soulmarks bumped up the timeline, Hydra’s timeline! And SHIELD! I think … I think Hydra is part of SHIELD!”

Clint felt his blood run cold. “Darcy – “
“I’m not crazy, Clinton Francis! I know what I heard!”

“Whoa! No need to start with the middle names, kid.” Tony said smoothly as he entered the room, ever-present tablet in hand. To Darcy, he sounded like he always did. Everyone else saw the bags under his eyes, the pallor of his skin. “He believes you. We all do. Right now, though, we’re going to focus on getting you home, OK?”

“I shot someone, Tony.”

“She keeps saying that,” Jane whispered to Thor as he helped her to her feet. He wrapped an arm around her.

“She has had a great shock,” he told her.

“Good news, kid; you’re still in New York. JARVIS is narrowing in on your location. You’ll be back in time to take the dumb dog on his evening walk.”

“Leo?” she gasped. “He’s OK? You didn’t get rid of him?”

“Only you would get kidnapped in order to keep a damn dog, Lewis.”

The hysterical sob that came through the speaker broke Pepper’s heart.

“Darcy, are you hurt?” Bucky asked.

“I’m sleepy. My head feels like it’s stuffed with cotton.” Her voice was thick with exhaustion. “I ruined your shirt. Cut it to stop the bleeding.”

“Bleeding? Darcy, what’s bleeding? What happened?”

“S’okay. Stopped now,” her words started to slur. “Is JARVIS done? Can I go to sleep?”

“Adrenaline’s wearing off,” Natasha said. “We need to move.”

“Heard that,” Darcy murmured. “I punched the scientist, Nat. Missed when I kicked him, but – oh, I still have the springs.”

Bruce looked around the room, more confused than usual. “What is she talking about?”

“Ah-ha!” Tony cried. “Got the address. You stay on the line kid, OK? Whatever you do, don’t hang up. We’re coming for you. We’ve got to keep the trace so we can find you in the building.”

“Don’t bring SHIELD!” Darcy was frantic. “You can’t trust SHIELD.”

“Right,” he said, following the others to the helipad.

“Where are we going?” Clint yelled, stopping when Tony shouted the address. He looked at Natasha. Her expression was murderous.

“What?” Tony yelled.

“That’s SHIELD.”

Darcy could hear them talking. They were arguing. They always argued. She usually didn’t mind. It was entertaining. Sometimes she made popcorn and watched, but now was not the time. She
leaned her head against the cool metal of the desk. She was cold, but she was also hot. She knew she couldn’t sleep, not yet, but she was so tired. She brought her knees up to her chest. The office she was hiding in seemed like a good place to hide. It didn't look like it was being used. Desk, chair; that was it. No one would find her here. She was tucked underneath the desk just in case, the phone from the stolen purse clutched in one hand, the other wrapped around the gun.

“Darcy? Darcy!”

“What?” Why wouldn’t Clint leave her alone? Get with the program, Barton; less talking, more getting her ass out of there.

“Babe, you’re in a SHIELD building.”

She was too tired to say I told you so, but she thought it. Hard.

“That changes things,” Clint struggled to keep calm, to keep the rage of betrayal at bay. "They know me and Nat, so we’re going to use that. We’re going to walk in like nothing’s different and get you out. We’ll be there in two minutes. You stay there, OK?”

“You gonna use our secret knock?”

He snorted. “Not the time.”

“What I lack in common sense, I make up for in sarcasm.”

“We know. That’s why we love you.”

“This is real touching, guys,” Tony’s voice broke through the line (Darcy had no idea how he did that, but she was glad he did), “but we have a rescue to do.”

“Fuck that,” Darcy forced herself to sit up. She got this far. She’d see it through. “I rescued myself. You’re just giving me a ride.”

“That’s my girl,” she heard Natasha say.

“Darcy, we’re approaching the building,” Clint announced. “I’m putting the phone in my pocket. Keep the line open.”

“Roger that.” She wasn’t sure, but she thought she heard Clint tell Nat she sounded high. She hoped she remembered that because she was going to make him feel bad about it later.

Steve was scrunched in the driver’s side of the black VW Beetle Convertible, his eyes on Clint and Natasha as they entered the non-descript building located in the city's financial district.

"Feeling cramped?" Bucky's amused voice came over the comm from his location on a roof one building away. He was the team's eye in the sky, a rifle trained on the mirrored window where Darcy was located. He could see the outline of her through his heat-seeking scope. She was curled in a ball. He ached to go to her, to hold her. His finger flexed on the trigger.

Steve shifted to loosen a knot in his leg, jumping when his knee hit the horn.

"Very stealthy, Cap," Tony laughed. He was in Pepper's Lexus two blocks away with Thor and Bruce. All of Tony's cars were designed to attract attention. Pepper’s SUV and the VW, the car Tony gave Natasha, was the only inconspicuous automobile they had immediate access to.

"You couldn't have gotten her something bigger?" Steve groaned as his other leg tightened.
"That's what she wanted. I learned a long time ago not to question Romanoff."

"Can you guys shut up?" Clint hissed. "Some of us are actually in the middle of something."

Steve sat up. He was well aware of the severity of their situation. Hydra. SHIELD. Hydra and SHIELD. He couldn't think about that; not now. He'd deal with it after Darcy was home. She was his first priority, his only priority. Nothing else mattered but her. "Are you in the vents?"

"Approaching target now."

There was a nearly silent thump. "Darcy?" Clint's voice barely a whisper over the team's comms.

There was a rustling sound. "Clint?"

"Hey, babe."

Steve listened to Darcy's muffled shriek followed by a soft grunt from Clint.

"She threw herself at him," Bucky said.

"Jealous, Barnes?"

"Fuck off, Stark."

---

Clint practically had to peel Darcy away from him, her arms locked around his waist as if she was afraid he wasn't real. "Hey," he whispered, tuning out the voices of his teammates so he could look at her, see her. Her face was pale, her eyes dazed as she fought to keep them open. The side of her face was a multitude of blue and black hues. Clint's gaze dropped to her neck, the redness of where the needle broke her skin a stark contrast to her pale complexion. A bandage was wrapped around her arm, covering the knife wound he knew was there. He gently removed the springs she had wrapped around her hand, cuts and bruises dotting the skin. "How do you feel?"

She tried to smile. "I shot someone."

"I know," he said as tears filled her eyes. He cupped her unmarred cheek. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head. She knew he'd done worse, had to live with worse. She'd deal with it. She wouldn't add to his burden. "Let's go, 'kay? Can I have a piggy back?"

He placed the black duffle bag that was strapped to his back on the desk. "Piggy back rides are for Drunk Darcy. You're not drunk."

She let out a frustrated huff. "I feel drunk."

"I'm guessing you've got some propofol coursing through you," he said, pulling out a set of clothes. "Bruce will check you over when you get home."

"No."

"Yes," several voices sounded in Clint's ear.

"I wanna take a shower," Darcy whined as Clint helped her out of her yoga pants and into a pair of charcoal dress pants. "James offered to wash my back the last time I took a shower, but I said no because I was too tired from having sex 'cause when a guy offers to wash your back, he's not thinking about hygiene or he shouldn't be because, hello, naked bodies, so I said no, but now that
sounds pretty good. The shower. And the shower sex.” She started undoing the buttons of the flannel. “Do you think the offer's still good?”

Clint rolled his eyes as Barnes growled in his ear not to look, though he turned his head. It was always smart to humor the sniper. “Judging by what I just heard, yeah.”

Darcy's eyes lit up. "Is he here? Is Steve?"

"Everyone's here, babe," he said, opening one eye cautiously to see she’d slipped on the dark blue silk tank top. He helped her into the lightweight black cardigan sweater and passed over a pair of black heels.

"Tell them I said hi," she demanded as she struggled to put on the shoes. Clint nudged her until she was leaning against the desk and did it himself.

"They can hear you, Darce. Everyone can hear you."

"Tell her this is the best rescue mission ever," Tony interjected.

Clint ignored him, pulling one more item out of the duffle.

"Blond? Really?" Darcy eyed the wig. "That's such a cliché."

"You can't look like you, babe," he said as he helped pin up her dark hair. She'd twisted it in a French braid in an attempt to make it look less like she's been locked in a room for several days. Adjusting the long blond hair so it covered the right side of her face, Clint handed Darcy a purse.

"Here's what's going to happen. We're on the eighth floor, Darcy. We're going to leave this office, take the elevator to the lobby and walk out of here. Steve is in Natasha's car --" Darcy snorted at the image "-- across the street. You're going to get in the passenger side and he'll drive you home."

"What about you?"

"I've got to wait for Nat. We'll be minutes behind you, I promise."

She bit her lip. "I'm scared."

"I know." Clint finished putting Darcy's old clothes and the gun in the bag. He gently pried her fingers away from cell phone, disconnecting the call and removing the SIM card, placing it in his pocket to destroy later. "I'll be right behind you. No one will touch you, I promise. They walked to the door, Darcy a little unsteady on your feet. "You're walking like Drunk Darcy," Clint said to lighten the mood.

"Does this mean piggy back when we're home?"

Clint pulled her in for a quick hug and a kiss on her forehead. "You'll never walk again."

Clint left first, telling Darcy to count to twenty before she followed. They would meet by the elevator. "Your name is Carla Jones and you work in accounting," he handed her a pair of sunglasses and the cell phone. "You don't know me. Don't look at me. Mess with the phone. If anyone says anything to you, give 'em an absent smile. Be polite, but not friendly. We don't want them to notice you. I'll follow you off of the elevator and outside. Barnes is watching. He'll cover you until you're in the car. If anything happens, don't stop. You get to the car."

"But what if --"
"No." He was firm. This wasn't Clint, her cookie-stealing, trouble-stirring, drinking and dancing best friend. This was Agent Barton of SHIELD. "You get your ass to the car. Understand?"

She nodded.

"Whole thing will take two minutes," he promised. "You can last that long, right?"

She nodded again. It was getting harder to speak. Talking took too much energy. Focus! "Think Steve will up for a coffee run on the way home?"

He grinned. For a second, he was her Clint again. "I can guarantee he'll do anything you want, babe." His hand went to the door. "Alright; let's go."

She didn't remember opening the door, walking down the hall with her eyes on the phone as if she were reading a text. She stood away from Clint at the elevator, but didn't say a word. The car had two men inside. Darcy moved to the back, her head down as she pretended to type something as Clint greeted both by name. She felt his arm brush against her, a miniscule touch that said "It's going to be fine."

The elevator opened. The men stepped aside to let her pass first. She did, turning towards the exit. Tired. She was so tired. Everything that had happened – the fight, the shooting, trying to find a phone, a place to hide – was on her now. She stumbled. Clint caught her elbow, asked if she was OK and she heard herself make an offhand response about new shoes.

"Be careful, miss."

"I will," she promised, walking deliberately to the bright lights of outdoors. The urge to run was strong. She swore she felt eyes on her, cameras on her. Did they know? Were they looking for her? Clint moved a couple steps ahead, reaching the door before her and holding it open. "You see Steve?" he murmured under his breath as she brushed past him.

Darcy slid on the sunglasses and scanned the street for Natasha's car. Steve was parked near the corner. He had the tinted windows up, but she could feel his gaze. "Yeah."

"Keep walking. You're doing great."

She had to wait at the corner for the walk signal. She wanted to scream. She was so close! A few more steps and she’d be in the car. She was going to go home, take a shower and go to sleep. Just a couple more steps …

Darcy reached for the passenger door, smiling when Steve leaned across the seat to push it open from the inside. "It's gotta be killing you, not being able to open the door for a lady," she joked as she slid into the seat.

His face lit up as he took her hand, pressing a soft kiss on her knuckles. "I've got her." He turned the key to start the car. "Let's go home, Darcy."

Chapter End Notes

Now this REALLY is less of a cliffhanger, yes? We're all good now? :)
Steve pulled into Natasha’s parking space in the Tower’s garage, twisting the key to turn off the ignition, letting out the breath he didn’t realize he was holding on a long exhale as the engine went silent. He turned towards Darcy; she’d fallen asleep seconds after he had pulled into traffic, unaware of the eye he kept on the rearview mirror as he drove side streets and backways in a convoluted pattern designed to throw off a tail, though both Tony and Bucky assured him there was none. Bucky was still in position, this time watching Clint and Natasha as they did whatever it was that they didn’t bother explaining to the others.

He reached out to run a hand down the blond wig Darcy still wore. “We’re here,” he announced in his comms.

“Good deal,” Tony replied. “We’re about twenty minutes out.”

Steve stiffened. “You were five minutes behind us last check. Problems?”

“Nope,” Tony replied. “Just had to make a quick stop.”

Steve closed his eyes, praying for patience. He’d been on the edge for days, struggling to maintain his grip on control, trying not to imagine the worst with every minute Darcy remained lost to them. Having to stay in the car, stay behind, as Clint and Natasha walked into the building where people he’d worked with, people he’d trusted, had his soulmate was one of the hardest things he’d ever done. He was angry. No, he was pissed. He did not have the energy to deal with Tony. “That was not the plan.” His tone was tinged with frustration. He was expected to follow the plan, no matter how much he wanted to screw protocol and go after Darcy himself. It didn’t matter that it was a good plan, a solid plan. Hell, it didn’t even matter that it worked, that she was home safe. This was Darcy. Darcy. Why the hell did he always have to be the one to set the example?

“Unclench, Cap,” Tony’s response was nonchalant. “Get Lewis inside and cleaned up. Bruce will head up to her place when we get back.”

Steve pushed himself out of the car, carefully closing the door so not to disturb Darcy. “I shouldn’t take her to medical?”

There was a pause before Bruce spoke. “We don’t know who to trust, Steve.”

Steve sighed. He was right. The medical personnel were on Stark Industries’ payroll, but if Jane’s lab could be bugged by SHIELD, who’s to say other parts of the Tower weren’t, too? “Copy that.”

“My Jane is waiting for you.” Steve had to strain to hear Thor speak. After Clint had complained more than once that Thor’s thunderous voice was downright deafening over comms, he made a conscious effort to speak in a quieter tone during missions. No one had figured out how to tell him that now he was too quiet. (“It’s like kicking a puppy,” Clint complained.)

“Fine,” Steve said. “We’ll see you in eighteen minutes.”

“Better make it thirty,” Tony replied.

“Tony!” several voices shouted at once.
“Hey! I’m in the middle of putting together a ‘We’re happy you’re back from your kidnapping’ care package, alright? I told you we should have some on hand for times like this but someone said that was crass. Bet you’re feeling pretty stupid now, huh Bruce?”

Steve had to grin at the long sigh that echoed in his ears. The entire situation was ridiculous and yet it still made sense. “Fine. We’ll see you when you get here. Bucky, how are things with you?”

“Quiet.”

“Clint? Nat? Any troubles?”

“Negative,” Clint said. “Two more minutes until we’re clear.”

Steve opened the door. “Let me know when you’re on your way back. Tony --”

“Fuck! Who bought all the Skittles?”

Steve shook his head. “Never mind. See you all soon.”

He kept the comm in his ear, but tuned everyone out as he opened the passenger door. Reaching over Darcy, he undid her seatbelt before dropping to his haunches, resting a hand on her knee. He wanted to pick her up, let her sleep as he carried her inside, but living with Bucky had taught him that waking someone from a deep sleep (re: nightmare) didn’t always end well. “Darcy,” he whispered, his hand flexing gently on her knee. “We’re home, sweetheart.”

She shifted slightly, eyes opening slowly, the dark blue going from sleepy and confused to semi-alert and hopeful. “Steve?” Her voice was hoarse.

He swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. “Hi.”

She sat up, one hand going out to cup his face. “This is real?”

He took her hand and kissed it. “This is real. You’re home.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder. It was awkward, balancing on the garage floor with half of Darcy wrapped around him while the rest of her was in the car, but he didn’t care. He’d stay there as long as she needed. “You were amazing,” he murmured, one hand cupping her head, the other around her waist to pull her closer.

“I was scared,” she mumbled against his skin.

He pulled back slightly. “I was, too. That doesn’t take away from what you did, what you had to do,” he stressed; remember the horror in her voice when she told Jane what she did. “Darcy --” She shook her head vigorously. He understood. She didn’t want to talk about it; not now. He wouldn’t force her. “The others will be here soon. Want to grab a shower or something before they do?” It was the right thing to say. Her face lit up and she moved to get out of the car. He helped, sweeping her up into his arms when she faltered slightly. “Is this OK?”

She looped her arms around his neck and laid her head on his chest. “More than.”

She was quiet as they walked to the elevator; even her “Thanks, J” was softer than usual when the AI welcomed her home. Stepping off the elevator on the floor she shared with Jane and Thor, Steve was barely halfway to Darcy’s apartment when her door flew open and Jane came running out.
“DARCY!”

Darcy’s head jerked up, almost clipping Steve on the chin. “JANE!”

Steve stumbled back when the petite scientist threw herself at Darcy, paying no mind to the fact that she was being held by another person as she struggled to get her arms around her friend. “Um …” he looked around helplessly, wishing Thor was there. He was used to Darcy and Jane’s physical affection with one another, often watching them with a content smile.

Jane stepped back, not bothering to wipe away the tears streaming down her face. “Sorry,” she half laughed, half sobbed. “It’s just …” She dove for Darcy again, this time almost pulling her out of Steve’s arms and into her own, stopping only at the other woman’s sharp hiss. “Darcy?”

“’s alright,” she breathed through her teeth. “My arm.”

“Crap!” Jane jumped back. “I forgot. I’m sorry, Darcy!”

“Jane –“

“Come on,” she grabbed Steve by his wrist and pulled him, and Darcy, into Darcy’s apartment. “Bruce said it was OK for you to take a shower, but he wants you to keep the dressing on until he’s here to look at it, so I figured out a way we can make that possible.” She kept a stream of conversation going as she led Steve through Darcy’s apartment and into the bathroom. “You can leave her here,” she announced.

Steve hesitated. He didn’t want to leave Darcy alone.

“Steve.” He looked down. Darcy smiled softly at him. “I’ll be fine. Jane has experience helping me in the shower.” Steve raised an eyebrow at Jane’s snort of amusement. “Get that look of your face, Rogers. It’s not what you’re thinking.”

He gave her her best innocent look. “How do you know what I’m thinking?”

“You have a penis.”

He felt his face get warm. He was almost grateful when Jane pointed her finger to the door and told him to get out, softening the command by asking him to grab Darcy a change of clothes. Darcy, who had latched on to the toothbrush Jane held out like it was a life preserver in an ocean waved a hand at him, her mouth filled with toothpaste.

Jane wasted no time helping Darcy out of her clothes, being careful not to brush against her right arm.

“So.” Darcy shrugged out of her ruined bra. Part of her wanted to save it as a testament to her awesomeness – she may have composed a thank you letter to Victoria’s Secret in her head in hopes that sharing her story would result in store credit; it’s not like she had anything else to do while she was locked up – but really she was glad to see it go. “How long was I gone?”

“Almost seven days.”

She took a deep breath. Almost a week. It seemed longer. She tugged the wig off her head, not seeing how Jane’s eyes went wide at the bruise that dominated the right side of her face. Jane
wasn’t a violent person, but in that moment, she wanted to hurt someone. No, she wanted to kill someone. Darcy was her friend. No, she was more than a friend. She was her person. No one touched her person.

“That bad, huh?” Darcy turned to the mirror, sucking in a breath at her reflection. “Damn.”

“We’ll get some ice on it. Maybe Bruce has something –“

“Not my face, Jane! Look at my hair!” She brought a hand up to her oily scalp. “Ugh! How the hell did no one stop me looking like this?”

Jane shook her head, moving to the bathtub to start the shower. As warm steam filled the room, she took out a box of plastic wrap and gestured for Darcy to hold out her arm. She did, stifling a yawn as Jane waterproofed her bandage. “Yeah?” Darcy shouted at the knock on the door.

“I have your clothes,” Steve’s voice came through the door loud and clear. “Should I …”

“Just leave them there!” Jane yelled. “I’ll grab them in a bit.”

“OK. Darcy, is there anything else you want?”

“A pony!”

There was a pause. “Huh?”

Jane rolled her eyes. Darcy had to be feeling better if she was being smartass. “Never mind, Steve; we’ll be out in a minute!” She helped Darcy step in the shower and closed the glass door. “You’re terrible,” she shouted as she picked up the clothes on the floor.

“What? He asked if I wanted anything else! If I was ever going to get a pony, now would be the time.”

Jane opened the bathroom door, tossed Darcy’s getaway clothes in the hamper by her closet and picked up what Steve left by the door.

“You’ve already got a dog,” Jane closed the bathroom door and hopped up on the counter. “I wouldn’t push it.”

Darcy squeezed a generous glob of body wash on her pink loofah. “How’s Leo? Can I see him? Have Steve get him!”

“He’s a cheerful and furry menace but I think Tony secretly loves him. Let Bruce see your arm first.”

“Fine,” she grumbled, shampooing her hair a second time for good measure before grabbing her bottle of conditioner. The warm water was helping clear the cobwebs crowding her mind.

“One more minute,” Jane called.

“You’re timing me?”

“You have some kind of anesthesia in your bloodstream. I shouldn't have pushed you to shower before Bruce could check you out but –“

“But I smelled like someone who spent a week locked up in a room,” Darcy finished, catching the tail end of Jane’s sniffl e as she turned off the water. “Don’t cry,” she cautioned, wrapping the towel
Jane tossed over the shower stall around her body before stepping out onto the lime green bathmat outside of the bathtub. “If you start crying, I’ll start crying, and it’s really important for me not to look like I was crying when I see everyone, especially after babbling to Clint about sexy shower times with James.”

Jane rubbed a hand roughly over her face and gestured for Darcy to take a seat on the closed toilet so she could comb her hair. “Do I want to ask?”

Darcy met her eyes in the mirror. “Remember when you got your wisdom teeth pulled? And you were a big baby about it and insisted they knock you out for it?”

“Hmm.”

“And remember how you went on and on about how you have the perfect veins for IVs?”

“I do!” Jane cried, holding out her hand so Darcy could see – again – how well her veins stood out under her smooth skin. “My friend Lynne is a nurse and she told me –“

“I know, Jane. Everyone who was at the dentist office that morning knows. Everyone who was at the drug store when we went to get your pain pills knows. You wouldn’t stop talking about it!”

Jane shrugged. It wasn’t her finest moment – thanks for taking video, Darce – but in her defense, she was drugged. “What’s your point?”

“Substitute James for IV …”

Jane burst out laughing.

Steve’s face went blank when she walked out of the bathroom. Darcy automatically glanced down at her outfit – cotton pajama pants and a black tank top. “What? You picked it out.” His hand brushed gently against her cheek. Oh yeah. She had the wig on earlier. Clint fixed it so the hair would hide the bruise.

“I’ll kill them for this alone,” Steve said fiercely. Neither one paid attention to Jane as she tiptoed out of the bedroom.

She wrapped a hand around his wrist. “I’m fine.”

“They hurt you.”

She didn’t bother denying it. The evidence was right there in front of him; her face, her arm. She knew they watched video of the attack, knew they had to turn off their emotions and view it over and over in search of a clue, a hint, as to had her. “I hurt them back.” She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Steve’s waist, laying her head against his chest. She didn’t move, but she could feel the tension in the way he held himself. She pressed closer, squeezed tighter, turning her face into the soft cotton of his plaid shirt as his arms came up around her.

“I’m sorry,” he kissed the top of her head.

“It’s not your fault.”

She was wrong. He knew she was wrong, but he couldn’t say it, didn’t want to say it. He didn’t want things to change. Not now, not when she was in his arms, whole and safe.

“Steve?”
“Yes?”

“Can you do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

“Hold me?”

He kissed her head again. “Already am, sweetheart.”

She smiled. “Sitting down, maybe?”

He pulled back slightly. “Still feeling off?”

She shrugged, the plastic still wrapped around her arm crinkled with the movement. “More hungry than anything, but Jane said I shouldn’t eat until Bruce does his doctor thing, so …”

Steve bent forward and picked Darcy up bridal style. He carried her to the living room, settling on the couch with Darcy in his lap, her head heavy on his shoulder as they listened to Jane putter around the kitchen. Jane rarely cooked, her head usually too full of Science! to worry about such trivial matters like food, but when she did, she was amazing.

“I’m serious Jane,” Darcy called, her fingers fiddling with the top buttons of Steve’s shirt. “As soon as Bruce gives the OK, I want an omelet as big as Thor’s –“

“Darcy!”

“– hammer,” Darcy finished with a smirk. “Dude, what did you think I was going to say?”

Darcy was nearly asleep again by the time Bruce knocked on the door, medical bag in hand. He apologized for his tardiness, muttering something about Tony and stuffed animals – Darcy figured she was still out of it – as Steve shifted so she was sitting on the couch alone. Bruce nudged her coffee table forward, balancing on the end as he carefully snipped away and plastic and dressing covering her arm. Steve stood behind Bruce, arms crossed over his chest, his face impassive as he watched.

“This isn’t bad,” Bruce announced as he examined the wound. “Healing nicely; no signs of infection.”

“Scientist guy took care of it,” Darcy replied, looking away from the red scar that dominated her right arm. “He said it was too late for stitches, but he cleaned it and then …” She trailed off, remembering the gun at her temple, the cold steel against her as the man apologized for their mistake.

“I have no use for you.”

“Darcy?” Steve was kneeling in front of her, a hand on her knee.

She couldn’t breathe. She tried to suck in air, but couldn’t. Fuck!

“Sir.”

“Yes?”

“She has two soulmates.”
“And why does that matter?”

“Her soulmates are Steve Rogers and James Barnes.”

There was pressure on her knee; an insistent voice. “Baby, come back. We’re here. You’re safe.”

She heard Steve, but he sounded so far away. Steve. James. Soulmates. What did they want with them?

“Darcy!”

She forced her eyes open at Jane’s shout.

“You are not Jane Foster.”

They wanted Jane.

“Jane!” she tried to jump up, but Steve’s hand on her knee, Bruce’s on her arm kept her still. “They wanted Jane! They had a schedule for something and they needed her. I wasn’t her. The guy, the science guy, he said he was sorry and fixed my arm, and he was going to shoot me! They had a gun, they put it to my head and they –” she sucked in her breath.

“You said he fixed your arm?” Bruce was calm.

“Yeah. He cleaned it, bandaged it. He gave me pain pills and fucking apologized for their mistake. He was total Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, polite one minute and shooting people the next. He killed three people in front of me! Thought nothing of it. He was going to kill me, too; stopped only when someone told him about the soulmarks.” She looked at Steve. He was wearing that face again, that closed-off, no one could touch him mask. “He knew James’ handwriting, Steve. He knew yours. Seeing my marks …” She placed her hand over his, still on her knee. “Steve, they saved me. If I didn’t have them –”

“If you didn’t have them, you wouldn’t have been taken,” he said stiffly.

“They didn’t take me because of my soulmarks!”

He shook his head. He opened his mouth to say something, but the words were lost as Clint, Natasha and Bucky entered Darcy’s crowded apartment, the dark-haired sniper pushing past Thor and Tony. Squeezing Steve’s shoulder, Bucky sat down next to Darcy, pulling her in a one-armed hug, burrowing his face in the crook of her neck as he whispered her name over and over.

“Uh …” Bruce looked around the room. Thor had his arms around Jane protectively, as if daring someone to take her from him. Tony was leaning against the breakfast counter, watching the whole scene with an amused expression on his face. Natasha stayed by the doorway, body poised for battle, while Clint surveyed the scene, taking note of Pepper’s absence (she was handling the PR fallout of Steve and Bucky’s press conference) before focusing on an obviously relieved Barnes and conflicted Steve.

“Break it up, kids,” Clint called, trying to ease the tension he didn’t quite understand. “Bruce needs to get a blood sample and Darcy needs to eat.”

Steve nodded once, getting to his feet and moving across the room, his eyes never leaving the two people on the couch. Bucky, after a few more seconds, pulled away, though he stayed on the couch, Darcy’s free hand cradled in both of his. Resigned, Bruce finished examining Darcy’s arm before rewrapping it with a quiet apology for the scar.
“I have something that might make it lighter, but …”

“It’s fine,” Darcy said automatically.

He promised that the mark in her neck, where the needle had pierced her skin, would go away in a day or two. He placed a bandage on it, apologizing when she complained that it was boring – “I told you to go for the Muppets,” Tony muttered – before taking out a syringe for a blood sample. Darcy turned away from the needle as Bruce did his thing.

“Almost finished,” he murmured. “You’re doing great.”

“My veins aren’t awesome like Jane’s but I get by.”

“Darcy!” Jane shouted.

Clint started laughing. “I forgot about that!”

“You told Clint?” Jane cried.

“I tell him everything,” Darcy replied, “especially when alcohol is involved.”

“Sometimes she shares video,” the archer snickered.

Bruce really needed to get out of there. The Other Guy was happy Darcy was home, but seeing her injuries, listening to her talk about having a gun to her head, made him angry. Now was not the time. Later, when they knew exactly who and what they were dealing with, he could get his revenge. For now, though, Bruce needed to be in control. “I’m going to go down to my lab,” he said, wrapping a label around the second tube of Darcy’s blood. “As of now, I agree with Clint’s field assessment that its propofol, but I want to make sure. You’re a little dehydrated, so drink plenty of fluids and no caffeine.” He ignored her squeak of protest and kept talking. “Keep the wound clean and dry; I’ll check it every morning. Does it hurt? Do you need something for the pain?”

Darcy shook her head, her focus still on Bruce’s ‘no caffeine’ mandate.

“OK, then I’ll leave you to your food.” He turned to Tony. “We’re still meeting at your place?”

“Yeah,” Tony nodded. “Everyone to the penthouse in an hour.”

“Why there?” Darcy asked, not that she was complaining, but they didn’t do group gatherings in each other’s living spaces.

“I thought you might want to avoid the communal floor.”

Darcy looked down at the ground to avoid the onslaught of sympathetic looks she was getting from everyone. “I know you’re trying to be sensitive and stuff, but really, I just want everything to get back to normal.” She focused on Tony. He’d understand. He was gone much longer than her. He knew what it was like to have everyone watching you. “OK?”

He nodded. “Yeah, OK. Change of location, still an hour.” He bent over to pick something up off of the floor. Maneuvering his way around Darcy’s crowded apartment, he deposited an oversized gift bag at her feet, tousling her hair as he did so. “Glad you’re back, kid.”

Chapter End Notes
The Jane keeps repeating herself while recovering from anesthesia story is totally based on what happened to me when I got my wisdom teeth pulled. Apparently I told everyone how awesome my veins were for IVs and that I'd be awesome at drugs, if that was my thing. :}
James Buchanan Barnes doesn’t hover. He ignored Darcy’s claim otherwise as he redid the bandage around her arm. He was well aware that Banner had looked it over, but he had more field-tested medical knowledge and Darcy was his soulmate. “Second opinion, doll,” he told her, his fingers slowly removing the small bandage on her neck.

“I think that only works when the patient requests the second opinion,” she said in a somewhat pacifying tone of voice.

“Humor me.”

“Oh, believe me; I am.”

Yet another way she was like Steve, insisting she was fine instead of shutting up and letting him see for himself. Was he seriously going to spend the rest of his life butting heads against two stubborn people, one of whom ran into trouble without ever thinking about himself the other who tended to attract it like a magnet? He looked into Darcy’s eyes, the bright blue shining with barely-suppressed hilarity.

Yes. Yes, he was.

Taking a bandage from the box Thor tossed to him – he made a mental note to ask Darcy what a Minion was later – he affixed it to small laceration on her neck, pressing a light kiss over it. “You were amazing,” he murmured against her skin, wishing everyone had followed Stark when he swept out of Darcy’s apartment seconds after he dropped the oversized gift bag in front of her, one hand raised in an absent wave when Darcy yelled “Thank you” at his back. He knew the shit hit the fan today, that the side they all thought was good was actually infested with evil. They needed to figure out a plan and time wasn’t on their side, but he wanted a minute, just a minute, with his girl.

“Food’s ready, Darce!”

Moment’s over.

Bucky’s arm automatically went around Darcy’s waist, helping her to her feet. He brushed a kiss on her cheek and forced himself to step back when all he wanted to do was walk forward. He was aware that Steve had not moved from his spot on the other side of the room. The man’s face gave nothing away, but Bucky knew Steve better than he knew himself. Steve was punishing himself, likely blaming himself for what happened to Darcy. He managed to keep the chastisement contained while they searched for her, but now that she was back, he was going to be all martyr-like and shit. Bucky loved Steve; he did. He had practically since the day he recused him in the alley. He was the best man Bucky knew, hands down, but sometimes his willingness to sacrifice everything for the greater good was complete bullshit. Even heroes deserved to be happy. Jesus, if a recovering amnesiac assassin realized that, why couldn’t he?

Bucky walked over to Steve, nudging him not-so-lightly on his side. “Snap out of it.”

Steve avoided looking at him. “Out of what?”
“I don’t have time for the innocent act, punk. The two of you were fine when you got here. Now you’re keeping your distance and she’s pretending you don’t exist.”

Steve mumbled something that sounded like “Maybe it’s better that way.”

“Want to repeat that?” Bucky asked.

Steve uncrossed his arms. “I should go see what Tony is up to.”

Bucky grabbed his arm as Steve pushed past him, but he shrugged him off. Bucky let him go, giving Steve a few seconds head start before he followed, though he stopped to say good bye to Darcy first. He stole a bite of her ham and cheese omelet, smirking at Thor when his attempt resulted on her slapping his hand. “She likes me more,” he told the pouting man before he left the apartment. He had to fix whatever it was Steve screwed up before it became something bigger. Their relationship was already fragile. He didn’t need Steve being Steve to mess them up even more.

“I know watching me work is amazing, but you need to back off, Cap.”

Of course Steve avoided the privacy of their apartment for the communal living room. Normally, Bucky took was entertained by Tony’s frustration, but he didn’t want an audience for this particular conversation. Shaking his head at the sight of Steve peering over Tony’s shoulder as the man’s fingers flew over a tablet, Bucky snapped his fingers to get his attention. “Hey. I need to talk to you.”

“I’m busy,” Steve replied.

“Busy being a pain,” Tony retorted.

“I’m trying to help.”

“I don’t need your help. This is technology, AARP; not your strong point. Now, if I need someone to punch a wall, you’ll be the first person I call.”

“We need to ensure that we have all the information before we –“

Tony’s hands hovered over the tablet seconds before whatever he was watching on the tablet filled the room as a giant hologram, making Steve jump back. Several screens appeared in the room, one a running list of names, another showing videos of missions and fights. Bucky couldn’t begin to decipher what the others displayed. Steve looked just as lost. “You were saying?” the billionaire asked dryly.

Clint walked in before he could answer, tossing a flash drive to Tony. “That’s the last of what Nat was able to grab,” he didn’t even bothering to pretend to understand what the man was doing. Instead, he turned his focus on the super soldiers. “For two people who got their soulmate back, you’re awfully subdued.”

“Not now, Barton,” Bucky warned.

“No, I think now,” he crossed his arms over his chest. “Darcy is upstairs, wondering what they hell is going on and she’s not the only one. I’m all for avoiding public displays of affection. After living with Thor, it’ll be nice to walk into a room without asking JARVIS if it’s OK first, but whatever
has you two worked up doesn’t strike me as wanting to keep the physical side of your relationship private. What gives?”

“It doesn’t concern you –“

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Clint interrupted Steve. “While normally I’m not the person people go to for relationship advice and, frankly, I prefer it that way, that little speech I gave you a couple of months ago wasn’t for my own amusement. I warned you that hurting Darcy was permission for me to hurt you, so you better tell me right now why I shouldn’t.” Clint was several inches shorter than Steve, but that didn’t make him any less imposing as he glared at the bigger man.

“She called you!” Steve blurted out.

Clint gave him an odd look. “Huh?”

“We’re her soulmates! We wear her words, she wears ours, but she called you for help! What does that say about us? About her? How are we supposed to mean something to each other when she always turns to you?”

Bucky’s urge to smack some sense into Steve somewhat diminished with this new revelation. Clint looked flabbergasted. “That’s what got your panties in a twist?”

Steve ran a hand through his hair. “Part of it, yeah,” he huffed.

Clint shook his head. “Dude. Darcy is part of the cell phone generation.”

Bucky decided to intervene. He may not be thrilled with Steve, but he still had his back. “So?”

“So, they don’t memorize phone numbers! It wasn’t like it was when I was a kid or you guys – wait; did they even have telephones in the forties?”

“We had fucking telephones,” Bucky growled.

“Very few people had them in their homes,” Steve answered, somewhat calmer. “We didn’t, but there was –“

“Save the history lesson, Cap; the point I’m trying to make is Darcy grew up with cell phones. People plug their names and numbers in the contacts and that’s it; no need to memorize someone’s telephone number. People rarely do these days. I bet you couldn’t –“

Both Bucky and Steve spouted off Darcy’s number without prompting.

“That’s impressive,” Clint admitted. “But you aren’t Darcy, which is why I made her memorize my number – and Nat’s, too – just in case.”

“Why you two?” Steve asked, not defensively; more out of curiosity. “Why not Jane or Tony?”

Clint snorted. “Please. Jane has to have someone remind her to eat and to go to bed! Do you honestly think she’s going to answer her phone? It’s a rare day she even remembers she has a phone and Tony’s almost as bad.” The three men looked at the man sitting less than ten feet from them, completely oblivious to the conversation. “Exhibit A,” Clint said with a wave of his hand. “Nat and I always have our phones on us. We answer them. It’s as simple as that.”

Steve nodded though he didn’t look completely satisfied. Bucky would bet money that he was going to make Darcy memorize their phone numbers next.
“OK, now that we have that figured out, tell me what else has you bent out of shape.”

Bucky shook his head. “I’ve got it covered, Barton.”

Clint’s eyes darted between the two men. “Yeah,” he said after a minute. “For your sake, I hope so.” He joined Tony, who was now muttering to himself as he worked on multiple screens, shouting orders to JARVIS every so often. Ignoring them, he took Steve by the elbow and pulled him into the nearby dining room, pulling the pocket doors closed to give the illusion of privacy.

“Nice cover with the phone call,” he said, pushing Steve towards a chair, not surprised when the blond continued to stand. He positioned himself in front of the doors, arms crossed. They were going to have this out, one way or the other. “Now tell me what’s really bothering you.”

“Bucky –”

“Steve, I’m not the fucking idiot here; you are. I saw the look you gave Darcy when she got in the car; it was like you saw salvation. I expected you to be all over her when I walked into her place, but instead you were standing in the corner, completely closed off. I know it wasn’t her doing because she was happy to see me.”

He saw the fight go out of the other man. It wasn’t anything physical – his shouldered didn’t slump, his postures didn’t break – but Bucky knew. “Fury was right, Buck. She’s the weak link.”

Bucky’s fist collided with Steve’s jaw without thought, the blonde’s head snapping back with the force of the hit. “Are you fucking kidding me?! Did you not hear what she did to get out of there?!”

Steve blocked the second punch, his face red with effort as his hand gripped Bucky’s clenched fist. “She’s not weak, Buck! I didn’t mean it like that!”

Bucky pulled himself out of Steve’s grasp, pissed as hell. “Then what the fuck did you mean?!”

Steve sighed. He was terrible at this; always was. It made sense in his head but when he tried to say it out loud, he messed everything up. “She makes me weak,” he admitted. “When she was gone, it felt like part of me, part of us, was missing. It scared me to death that we were here, we were together, and she was alone. We didn’t know where she was! We didn’t know if she was hurt or if someone was hurting her … “ He rubbed the back of his neck. They failed her! Was he the only one who saw that? “We were supposed to keep her safe, Bucky! She moved here, uprooted her life, because we promised she would be safer here than her old apartment. Instead, this is where they grabbed her. Fifteen feet from here, they grabbed her, stuck a knife in her arm and –“

Bucky pulled Steve in a rough embrace, both men finally letting the fears they refused to voice to one another before rise to the surface. “I know, Stevie. I was right there with you.” He pressed his forehead against Steve’s. “But she’s home now. We got her back.”

Steve pulled away. “This time! Who’s to say it won’t happen again? Hydra knows who she is, Buck! Jesus, the world knows what she is to us! We fucking painted a target on her back, a target we already proved we can’t shield her from and –“

“They were after Jane!” Darcy cried as she slid the doors open with enough force that they practically slammed closed again. “I told you that, Steve; why the hell won’t you listen? They wanted Jane and grabbed me by mistake!”

“This time, but what about –“

“Next time?” she asked. “You think I haven’t thought about that? Steve, my life has been a fucking
question mark since Thor fell out of the sky! I’ve been on SHIELD’s, and apparently Hydra’s, ever since! I was attacked by The Destroyer and Dark Elves because of him! I spent more than a year working with a man who likes to blow things up—“

“I don’t like to do it; it just happens!” Tony yelled from the living room.

“That he hears,” Bucky muttered to himself.

“—and another who can turn into a giant rage monster at any time before you even moved in! My best friend constantly falls off buildings—“

“I jump!” Clint yelled.

“—and my other best friend is working on something freaky enough to make an evil scientist want to pick her brain, probably literally, so there’s no way it’s safe to try at home!” She stomped forward, ticking off examples on her fingers. “And let’s not forget the scary assassin I hang out with who once pulled a knife on someone for eating her ice cream and putting the empty container back in the freezer.” She paused in her ranting to relive the memory. “Seriously, ask Thor about that scar near his elbow sometime. It’s a funny story.”

No word came from the living room, but Darcy imagined a smug smile on Natasha’s face.

“If you think having you in my life has made it more dangerous, then you have not been paying attention these past few months,” Darcy continued. “My life already was dangerous! It will continue to be dangerous because I don’t plan on changing it any time soon. So if you want to do the cliché superhero thing where you step away because it will be better for me, go ahead, but I’m telling you right now I’m not going anywhere! This is my home just as much as it is yours and this group of dysfunctional individuals are my family just as much as yours!”

“You don’t know what’s coming, Darcy.” Steve needed to explain it to her, needed her to understand. “This thing with SHIELD and Hydra – none of us know what’s coming.”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Dude, up until a few hours ago, none of us even knew about the Hydra and SHIELD connection. The way I see it, if the guys who took me hadn’t gone all Parent Trap and grabbed the wrong brunette, we’d have no idea that SHIELD and Hydra are practically one and the same! I never considered myself a glass half full kind of girl before, but in this case, I think it works. I’m not saying we should send them a fruit basket or anything, but you’ve got to admit, it was helpful.”

“Darcy—”

“And I kicked ass out there! How dare you overlook how fucking amazing I was today! I’m not fucking Princess Peach waiting for Mario and company to come rescue her!” She marched forward and pushed the bigger man with all of her strength. He stumbled back, mostly out of surprise. “So you got scared. Fine! I was real fucking scared, too, but everyone kept their heads and now we’re all here. That’s what’s important! If you would just stop playing the martyr for one goddamn second, you’d see that! And by the way, do you really and truly believe that walking away from me is going to protect me?”

“Darcy—”

She was aware that Bucky had hopped on top of the dining room table and was watching the two of them in amusement. She didn’t care. She was on a roll! “That so does not make any sense! It’s not like the bad guys are going to all get together and decide to leave me alone because I no longer
matter to you. Don't forget, I'll still have James. You think that's not going to be dangerous? Not to mention that the poor guy will have to divide his time between the two of us. I'm a competitive person, Cap, so I'm willing to bet I'll get more of his time than you, plus you had him for years before me; don't think I won't be playing that card to get my way whenever I want –"

"Darcy –"

"Damn it!" She pushed him again, though this time he didn't budge. "Stop interrupting me when I'm pointing out all the reasons why your stupid train of thought sucks!"

That did it. Steve swooped in, hoisting Darcy effortlessly in his arms, his lips crashing down on her. He spun and pressed her against the wall, her legs coming up to wrap around his torso, her hands tangled in his hair as he traced the seam of her lips with his tongue before sliding into her mouth.

"You're an idiot," Darcy scoffed when she broke the kiss.

"So I've been told," Steve said wryly.

"No, I said you were a fucking idiot," Bucky corrected, moving so he was pressed against their sides, ducking his head to kiss Darcy first, then Steve. "He has a hard head, doll; you're going to have to knock some sense in it every so often."

"But not you," she snorted. "James Barnes is a fucking angel."

Bucky smirked and kissed the tip of her nose. "I'm no angel, Darce, but I am yours."

Steve cupped her head, nudging so she was looking at him once more. His expression was wary, though his blue eyes were hopeful. "We both are – if you'll have us."

She pretended to think it over, tapping a finger against her plump lower lip. "I don't know … What's in it for me?"

"Two men to carry you around when Barton isn't available?" Steve suggested.

"Eh." Darcy shrugged.

"Foot rubs?" he continued.

"Hmm .."

"Mind-blowing sex?" Bucky asked. "Multiple orgasms?"

Darcy laughed and pulled him in for another kiss. "That's more like it."

Chapter End Notes

I struggled with this chapter. I didn't want to drag out Steve being an idiot because there are other things happening and I want the three of them to be together for what's next, but I still wanted to give him a chance to explain why he was being an idiot.

I wrote several versions of the fight. This one, where Darcy just went on and on and
on, was the best of the bunch.

For those of you curious about what was in Darcy's "We're happy you're back from your kidnapping" care package, some items will be revealed in the next chapter.
Steve kissed her again, not with the urgency he displayed moments ago or the feverish want she’d come to expect from him. This kiss was slow, unhurried, downright worshipful as he cradled her head in his hands, his fingers running through her hair as his lips settled over hers in soft, teasing touches, his tongue moving against hers in light strokes that made her want more. He shifted slightly, allowing Bucky to slide between her and the wall, his hands going to her hips as his lips moved to her neck. This was new. This was different. It was romance and seduction and something more – something Darcy wasn’t ready to face. This, what they were doing, what they said – “Yours” – was everything she hoped for when she was younger, before she understood that loving someone meant leaving yourself vulnerable. Her hands were on Steve’s shoulders, gripping, kneading. She needed to push away, to get away, but instead she pulled him closer. “Steve.”

He didn’t answer. His lips trailed down her face, along her jaw, moving to the opposite side of where Bucky’s lips were turning her insides to mush, their mouths working in tandem to nibble and lick and caress and oh God. “I’m not like you guys,” she cautioned though she arched her neck to give both men better access. “Any marks you leave on me don’t go away after a few hours.”

Her tone must have sounded less playful than she was going for because Steve pulled away, reluctantly, his face flushed, his breathing harsh, and his eyes dark with lust. Bucky followed his lead, nuzzling the side of her neck, his warm breath making her shiver. “When this is over,” Steve breathed, “when we’re done for the night, I want you to come with us, to our room, our bed. We don’t have to do anything,” he said quickly. “I want to make love to you, God, Darcy, I want you so much, but I need … I need …” He took a deep breath, one hand gently pushing away the strands of hair sticking to her damp forehead. “Please?”

“The three of us,” Bucky murmured against her skin.

She wrapped one arm around Bucky’s neck, the other keeping a white-knuckle grip on Steve’s shirt.

“Hey! You all remember we’re dealing with a possible end-of-the-world situation, right?” Tony called from the living room.

Steve closed his eyes. Bucky groaned. Darcy giggled. Who would’ve thought Tony Stark would be the voice of reason? She opened her mouth to say as much, but then she heard the distinctive sound of toenails on the Tower’s hardwood floor.

“Leo!”

An excited Woof! met Darcy’s cry. She wiggled out of Steve’s hold, aware of the agonized expression that crossed his face in the process, but she was too anxious to see the dog to do much more than ruffle his hair before she ran out of the dining room. Leo! The last time she saw him, he was on the balcony, his paws pressed against the glass as he growled at the men in black surrounding her. God she worried about that dog while she was gone. “Leo!”

She was knocked to her butt as 130 pounds of excited canine planted himself on top of her, pink tongue licking her face, taking her laughter as permission to continue. She wrapped her arms
around his thick neck as she crooned words of praise and love. “Who’s a good boy? Oh, I missed you! I’m so glad you’re OK!” His nails were digging onto his skin, his perch on top of her chest making breathing a legitimate concern, but she didn’t care. He was OK. He was safe. She was safe. She was home with her dog and her friends, her family and her lovers and fuck, she was going to cry. Dammit, she hated crying! She buried her face in Leo’s fur, surreptitiously wiping the tears away as she tried to calm herself. She was fine. She was fine. She made it out. She kicked ass! Everything was going to be OK.

“Tossed over for the mutt,” she heard Bucky grumble behind her.

“It happens,” Steve said resignedly.

“Leo!” Bucky said sharply. Immediately, the canine sat on his haunches, though his body continued to trembled with barely suppressed excitement. Bucky scratched the dog behind his ears, murmuring something in German as Steve helped Darcy to her feet. If her face showed traces of tears, no one said anything as Steve led her to one of the couches. Bucky snapped his fingers, Leo trotted behind them, plopping his head on Bucky’s knee after he got settled next to Darcy, his dark eyes gazing adoringly at him.

“How do you do that?” Darcy muttered, shifting until she was comfortably pressed against Bucky, her injured arm cushioned by the pony Pillow Pet Tony included in her ‘We’re happy you’re back from your kidnapping’ care package. (She named it Herbert Hoofer. Jane was the only one to appreciate her brilliance, Tony having muttered something about soft sciences before turning back to his screens.)

“He has a way of adopting strays,” Steve said as he say on Darcy’s other side, lifting her legs so they rested over his, his large hands immediately going to her stockinged to gently rub the heels, the soft purr she gave in response reason enough to not stop.

“How I got you,” Bucky smirked.

Steve rolled his eyes in response.

“Right,” Tony announced, pushing to his feet. “Time to talk about SHIELD and Hydra. Or shall I say HIELD?” He glanced around the room. Clint was perched on top of the breakfast bar, his face set in stern lines as he studied the screens on display. Bruce was sitting in the armchair, a cup of tea cradled in his hands, eyes closed; Darcy hoped it was from exhaustion – an appearance by The Hulk was the last thing they needed. Jane was sitting in one of the loveseats. Thor, surprisingly, was not with her. Instead, the large blond was standing by the windows, his eyes darting between outside and the group as a whole. He smiled slightly when he caught her watching him, but it was nowhere near the wide smile she was used to seeing.

Tony tried again. “SHYDRA?” He looked around the room expectantly. “Really, people? Nothing to add?” He shrugged and turned back to his screens. “Right, so from what we’ve been able to pull from Hy-Eld’s – forget I said that; that one sucks – files, the whole neo-Nazi group has been part of SHIELD from the beginning. Good people started it – go team! – but they unknowingly brought some evil people with ‘em and they apparently recruit bad people like crazy, hence the current shit storm we finds ourselves in at this time.”

Darcy didn’t see how Tony could come to that conclusion from whatever information streaming in the screens at the front of the room, but she agreed with his summation.

“What’s their end game?” Steve asked.
Tony swiped to a different screen showing wars, fights and protests. “Chaos,” he surmised.

Darcy watched Bucky and Steve share a look, the pair saying nothing but having an entire conversation with a tilt of Steve’s head. “That’s too simple,” Steve said. “The Hydra we remember was obsessed with power, control.” He got to his feet and walked to the screens. “This is too anarchic, too messy for Hydra.”

“Yeah?” Tony sounded curious.

“Yeah,” he murmured. “It’s almost like …” He looked over at Thor. “Sorry, but it’s almost like what Loki hoped to do.”

Thor uncrossed his arms and walked forward. “Are you saying my brother is behind this?”

“No,” Steve’s response was resolute, leaving no room for debate. “I was drawing parallels; nothing more,” he stressed, his gaze steady on Thor’s until the blond nodded once, his defensive stance relaxing. “Hydra wanted to rule the word. They wanted …” He looked at the screens again, saying something under his breath.

“Come again?” Tony asked. “Something you’d like to share with the rest of the class?”

Steve turned to face the room. “Hydra wants power. Control. What better way to get it than to disguise yourself as a secret government agency dedicated to the public’s safety?” He pointed at the images. “This is not what they want, but it’s a means to reach their goal.”

“And that is what?” Clint asked.

“Fear,” Steve told him. “When people are afraid, they’ll go to any lengths to protect themselves and those they love. If Hydra, if SHIELD, makes the public believe that the world is too chaotic, that only they can protect them from the evils that are out there –”

“Then they win,” Tony surmised.

Steve nodded. “They cause the mess, make it look like they’re the only ones who can clean it up and suddenly, everything is in their control. The world submits without knowing it. By the time we realize it, if we realize it, it’s too late.”

“Well fuck,” Tony said, sitting on the arm of Bruce’s chair. “OK, let’s back up a bit. How did we not know Hydra was still around?” He looked at Bucky. “They took you, right? Didn’t you know that’s who you were working for –”

“He wasn’t working for them, Tony!” Darcy jumped in. “Don’t make it sound like he had a choice!”

“I’m not saying he had a choice. I’m saying you’d think someone who was under evil’s command for nearly seven decades would remember that it was the same evil group he once fought against, the evil group he and his boyfriend once fought against and that perhaps, maybe, it might be worth mentioning to said boyfriend after escaping from the evil group’s clutches.”

Steve stepped forward at the same time Darcy jumped to her feet, but Bucky was faster than both of them, gently pushing Darcy back on the couch before laying an arm on Steve. The two men locked eyes, before Steve reluctantly pulled back. “That’s fair,” Bucky admitted, metal plates whirring as he flexed his fingers. “I knew Hydra took me, the first time and the second, but it’s still a blur. What I remember …” He squeezed his eyes shut. “What I think I remember, I don’t know if it’s them or KGB or someone else. I assumed KGB because of the Russian, but I don’t know.”
He ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. Darcy itched to go to him, to wrap her arms around him and tell him he didn’t need to do this, he didn’t need to explain. He’d been through enough. It wasn’t his fault they didn’t know about Hydra. He didn’t need to feel guilty about that, too.

“They weren’t exactly forthcoming with information,” Bucky continued, his voice robotic, eyes focused on nothing as he forced himself to flip through images in his mind, to try and remember something, anything, that would help. “When they spoke to me, it was to explain the mission. That was it. I didn’t focus on anything else.”

“Ever?” Bruce asked. “You never once –“

Bucky’s looked down at his arm, the gesture saying everything. “I learned not to. I was conditioned not to.”

“But what about –“

“That’s enough!” Steve stepped in front of Bucky. “He’s not the enemy here.”

“That we know of,” Tony muttered.

“Excuse me?” Darcy stood up. “Are you implying that James is still working for Hydra?”

Tony shrugged. “Given what we’ve learned today, I wouldn’t put it past them.”

“You can’t be serious!” Jane shouted, everyone jumping as she, too, got to her feet. “He’s Steve’s soulmate! He’s Darcy’s soulmate!”

“It’s a great story, Foster, but –“

“But nothing!” Steve interrupted. “I know Bucky! I know him! When we saw each other, I knew who he was just like he knew me. He stopped fighting because of that bond. He didn’t know his name, he didn’t know mine, but he knew me.”

“He’s not working for Hydra, Tony,” Clint said quietly.

Tony turned towards the spy. “And you know this because …”

“Because I know what it’s like not to be in control of yourself.” Clint’s tone was flat, his face gave away nothing. Darcy wanted to hug him. He didn’t talk about Loki. Ever. “Barnes isn’t like that. He’d hurt himself before he’d do anything to hurt Steve or Darcy. That includes hurting any of us.”

Tony glanced around the room. He was met with stony looks from everyone but Bruce who looked guilty. “Fine,” he huffed. “Sorry I accused the amnesia assassin.”

Bucky snorted, retaking his spot on the sofa and pulling Darcy onto his lap, the dog sneaking up to the couch to settle on the other side of him. “The sad thing is that isn’t the craziest thing to come out of your mouth today.”

Tony’s lips quirked in an almost smile. “So where does that leave us, Cap? We know Hydra’s alive and well. We know they infiltrated SHIELD. We know they must have some of their people pretty high up. Do we know –“ He broke off, looking around the room quickly. “Where’s Romanoff?”

Darcy glanced around. Natasha wasn’t there. She tried to remember if she was there earlier. She remembers the redhead telling her she’d see her later when she left Darcy’s apartment. Had she
seen her since then?

“She’s fine, Stark; don’t worry,” Clint told him.

“Don’t worry,” Tony repeated. “First you defend Barnes, now you’re defending our other resident assassin?”

“Don’t,” Clint warned him.

“Why not? She’s SHIELD. She was KGB. She’s the one that pulled the information we have, right? You were helping Lewis get out of the building. What was she up to? What is she up to now?”

Everyone was quiet as they digested Tony’s words.

“He has a point, Clint,” Steve said quietly.

The archer stared at Steve. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Steve refused to back down. “She’s not the most forthcoming person on the team.”

“She’s also saved your life countless times!”

“You met her because she was supposed to kill you,” Tony pointed out.

“And yet somehow she refrains from killing you every day!”

“ENOUGH!” Thor roared. “We cannot fight amongst ourselves! To do that is to give victory to the enemy before the battle begins.”

“So what, big guy? You’re saying you trust Romanoff?” Tony crossed his arms over his chest defensively.

“Yes.” Thor didn’t hesitate. “I trust everyone in this room with my life, the life of my Jane and of my shield sister.”

Again with the urge to hug someone. Darcy accepted it as fact. She wanted to hug everyone. She knew Tony felt betrayed. She understood how easy it was to lash out when what you believed in was gone. She didn’t blame him for that, but they were a team. Fuck it, they were family!

“What did you say, Darcy?” Bruce asked.

Shit. She said that last part out loud. “I said we’re a family.”

Tony grunted. “That’s a bit too after school special, don’t you think?”

Darcy pushed herself to her feet. “Says the man who renovated his tower so we’d all have a place to live,” she shot back. “Look, we’re fucked up. We all know that. But we look after each other. We all have different reasons for being here and none of us are related, but we are family, whether we like it or not. And right now, we have to trust each other. It sounds insane because not one of us is 100 percent trustworthy, except maybe Jane and Pepper, but only because she’s never here long enough to be corrupted, but I can’t think of a single reason why I wouldn’t trust a single person in this room.” She bit her lip. “I know Steve and Bucky trust each other, and Clint and Nat have each other’s back, and you and Bruce are science bros, Tony, but now isn’t the time to pair off. You said it yourself: this is a shit storm. The only way we’re going to make it through is together. So you all need to decide right now if you can do that or else we’re broken.”
Tony’s face was suspicious. “If we say yes, you’re not going to have us do any stupid trust exercises or something? ‘Cause there’s some humanitarians in this world that wouldn’t catch me in a trust fall.”

“The Hulk caught you when you fell from space. I think that’ll work.”

Tony nods. “Good enough.”

Darcy sat down, secretly patting herself on the back. That was a hell of a speech. She hoped JARVIS recorded it. She caught Jane’s eye. The scientist winked.

“I’m not hugging anyone,” Tony warned.

“Noted,” Clint said.

“And appreciated,” Bruce added.

Steve studied his teammates. “Everyone good?” he asked. “No more accusations?”

“All for one and one for all, Cap,” Tony said with a sigh. “For the record, I don’t like not knowing where Romanoff is, but I no longer think she’s working for Hydra.”

“I’m sure she appreciates that,” Steve told him. “But Tony does have a point. Who, outside of this group, can we trust at SHIELD? Fury?”

“No,” Tony’s response was immediate. “No, no, no, no.”

“Do you think you’re being a bit overdramatic?” Bruce asked.

“No! Fury is a lying liar who lies! We can’t trust him.”

“I trust him,” Clint said.

“Amazingly, that does not make me want to change my mind.”

The elevator dinged. Eight heads turned as Natasha stepped out with Maria Hill, the two women supporting a bruised and bloodied Nicholas Fury between them.

“He was attacked leaving SHIELD headquarters,” Maria’s voice was brisk as she gave a rundown of his injuries to Bruce while Steve and Thor rushed to help support the director. “We were able to stop the bleeding from the gunshot, but the bullet is lodged deep.”

“Tell me what you need, Bruce,” Clint said. “Barnes and I will get it.”

Maria didn’t ask questions as Fury was carried to one of the guest residencies instead of Medical. Darcy and Jane held hands as they watched the flurry of bodies.

“Do you trust him now?” Darcy asked Tony.

“I want to say no, but near-death experiences are kind of hard to argue against.”

Chapter End Notes
So a scary moment happened when I went to save this chapter and my laptop froze! Screaming might have occurred. Luckily, autosave did its job. Yay for technology!
“Who ate all of the chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream?”

Jane looked up from her laptop. “Huh?”

“It’s not just the ice cream!” Darcy stomped into Jane’s lab, tablet in hand. “We’re out of cereal, flour and Dr. Pepper! We’re even out of maple syrup! I’m gone for one week and this place falls apart! How the hell is a girl supposed to stress eat when we’re out of potato chips? Do you expect me to drink one of Tony’s protein shakes?”

Jane lowered the lid on her laptop. “No,” she said flatly.

Darcy slumped against the lab table. “Exactly. Those things smell like feet.”

“I meant no, you are not going to make jokes about being abducted.”

Darcy bit her lip. “Too soon?”

Jane glared at her. “It will never be OK to joke about it.”

Darcy shuffled her feet. Humor, especially inappropriate humor, was her self-defense mechanism. Jane understood that, but apparently even she had a breaking point. “Sorry.”

Jane gave Darcy a pointed look before she pulled her laptop forward.

“That doesn’t solve our lack of munchies.” Darcy leaned on the table and tried her best why-won’t-you-play-with-me look. “I’m hungry and I can’t even bake because we’re out of flour.”

“I have cookie dough at my place,” Jane said, eyebrows furrowing as she noted a change in the numbers running across her screen.

“Really?” Darcy straightened up with a grin. Cookie dough was a perfect stress-eating food. “The kind in a tube?”

“Mmm. I’m pretty sure we have vanilla ice cream, too.”

“Excellent! I’ll make our own chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream. Do you think Bruce will let me use his centrifuge?”

Jane pulled a highlighter from behind her ear (her hair often held more supplies than Office Depot when she was doing Science!). “No. Plus there’s the fact that a centrifuge is used to separate fluids, not mix them together.”

“Eh. Details.” She walked to the door. “I’m going to break into the others’ apartments, see what I can scrounge up for frozen treats of some kind of another. You want one?”

“As long as you don’t add anything you find at Tony’s.”

“Ew. Be back soon!”
Darcy made her way to the only elevator with direct access to the Tower’s residential floors, absently playing with the silver band around her right wrist. Tony put it on minutes after they watched Fury be whisked away.

“Um.” Darcy lifted her arm and studied the thin band. “Cool friendship bracelet.”

Tony pulled out another to attach to Jane’s wrist. The two women glanced at each other before clicking their bracelets and yelling “Activate!” Tony shook his head with a heavy sigh. “First of all, the Wonder Twins had rings, not bracelets. Second, this is a tracking device, not the latest fashion accessory.”

“Hells to the no.” Darcy felt around for the clasp. “I’m not spending the rest of my life knowing I have you as a shadow.”

“Sir won’t be tracking you, Miss Lewis; I will,” JARVIS spoke.

“Oh.” Darcy studied the bracelet once more. It was kind of pretty.

“‘Oh?’ JARVIS turns into a Police song and you’re suddenly OK with it?”

Darcy groaned. She was going to have “Every Breath You Take” in her head for days now.

“The tracking device is currently off, Miss Lewis. I will only turn it on when necessary.”

“For the record, Tony wanting to know if I’m sleeping in an apartment other than my own is not necessary, J.”

“Noted, Miss Lewis.”

Jane jiggled her wrist. “Is it safe? What if I spill something on it?”

“What do you mean ‘if?’” Darcy snorted.

“The bracelets are completely waterproof, Dr. Foster. If you’d like, I can send you a report with more information.”

“No!” Tony shouted with an emphatic shake of his head. “These things are perfect! I know Foster. She’ll want to build her own. These are a work of art. You will not try to Foster them up in any way.”

“Things don’t have to be expensive to be functional,” Jane sniffed.

Tony rolled his eyes. Darcy wrapped her arms around the snarky billionaire. Jane, seeing how uncomfortable Tony was, decided to make it a group hug. “Thank you,” Darcy murmured. “For the bracelet and the other stuff.”

Humming as she made her way to Steve and Bucky’s apartment, Darcy wondered if there was a way Tony could make her a bracelet that was also a Taser. That would be freakin awesome! Oh! Maybe he could make an iPod a Taser or, more realistically, a StarkPlayer since he was anti-Apple and such.

“JARVIS?”
“Yes, Miss Lewis?”

“Do you think the guys will mind if I raid their kitchen for food?”

“Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes have granted you full access to their living quarters.”

“Really? Huh.” That was a privilege. She didn’t even have access to Natasha’s place, not that she’d go in there without the redhead even if she did. Natasha booby-trapped her kitchen cupboards. Darcy wasn’t kidding about Thor’s scar. “I don’t know their code.” She heard the distinctive click of the lock turning. Apparently that didn’t matter.

Darcy pushed open the door, feeling somewhat guilty about invading their space without their knowledge. Unlike Clint and Thor, she understood and respected personal boundaries, which is why she was going to go straight to the kitchen and look around for ice cream treat supplies. She was not going to poke around the tall bookshelf in the living room corner, nor was she going to flip through the sketchpad sitting in the middle of the kitchen table. One of the guy’s hooded sweatshirts was flung over a chair. She was not going to pick it up. She was definitely not going to sniff it to see if she could scent out whom it belongs to -- oh wait, that was the hoodie Steve leant her forever ago and she never gave back. She must have left it at their place. Given that it was more hers than his at this point, she snagged the navy blue hoodie from the chair, shrugging it on as she opened the refrigerator. Jackpot – they had fresh strawberries. She took the container, snagged a couple of bananas from the bowl of fruit on the counter and made it to the hallway without giving into to the urge to snoop. That’s maturity. She’d give herself a high five if her arms weren’t full.

Clint and Natasha’s floor was next. She walked into Clint’s place (she knew she had access to his apartment; he didn’t have access to hers, but that never stopped him before), sniffed at the pile of dishes in his sink – he didn’t even cook; why did he always have a sink full of dishes? – and opened his cupboards. They were nearly as empty as the communal kitchen, though he did have Doritos. Or he did. She took them. She took his container of Magic Shell, too. She left a note on his table, filling him in on her thievery. He’s a spy. You don’t just take things from spies. He’d know something was missing. Better to spill the beans now than deal with paranoia later.

Darcy stopped by her place next to grab a container of whipped cream and her messenger bag, filling it with the pilfered goodies before walking across the hall to Thor and Jane’s apartment for the cookie dough and ice cream.

“I have returned!” she announced, pushing her way into Jane’s lab once more, two glass banana split dishes, two spoons, a plastic purple mixing bowl, and a wooden spoon in her arms, her bag slung over her shoulder. “Put the computer away because it’s time for Darcy Science!”

Jane did as instructed – the programs needed to finish running the new data before she could do anything with it anyway – and eyed Darcy’s bounty. “No nuts?”

“Nuts do not belong in junk food,” Darcy said automatically. She plopped the container of vanilla ice cream into the purple mixing bowl. She pushed it across the table to Jane. “Nuke this.”

“Why?”

“To soften it up for the cookie dough; duh.” Jane was brilliant at understanding the way the world worked, but could be downright stupid when it came to really import things. “Don’t melt it!”

“I’m not an idiot!” Jane yelled from the break area where she quickly changed the microwave’s time from one minute to twenty seconds.
Jane brought the bowl back to Darcy. She spooned out the ice cream and added crumbled cookie dough, stirring the concoction while chewing on a chunk of dough. “I’m not Ben or Jerry, but it’ll do,” she said after a minute. Grabbing the banana split dishes, she ignored Jane’s groan about ruining ice cream with fruit – “I have not seen you eat for the past week, Jane; I’m willing to bet you haven’t had a fruit or vegetable that wasn’t on a pizza that entire time. Do you want to get scurvy?” – and plopped three generous scoops of her homemade chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream on the halved bananas before drizzling Magic Shell on top. The whipped cream was next, followed by slices strawberries.

The two women toasted each other with their spoons.

“How do you think Fury’s doing?” Darcy asked around a mouthful of food.

Jane shrugged. Biology wasn’t her science. It wasn’t even Bruce’s science, but somehow the physicist had become the Avengers’ physician by default.

“The longer they’re working on him, the better his chances, right? If he was dead, they wouldn’t still be up there, right?”

Jane shrugged again. “I wish I knew, Darce.” They continued to eat their ice cream with less enthusiasm. “Oh, hey; good job with the family speech. Everyone needed to hear it.”

“Things are so fucked up right now.”

Jane prodded a frozen strawberry. “When aren’t they?”

Darcy licked her spoon. “True.” She was pretty proud of that speech. “And you thought binge-watching Friday Night Lights was a waste of time.”

“I was wrong.” Jane reluctantly took a bite of the banana. “You do know that the lack of fruit and vegetables won’t cause scurvy right away, yes?”

“Eat your ice cream, Janey.”

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Steve stood near the door of the room Maria and Natasha transformed into a makeshift hospital room. His hands were clasped behind his back, eyes sharp as he watched Bruce work. Bucky and Clint had managed to sneak down to medical and collect what Bruce needed without detection, passing them to Natasha before she pushed them out of the room.

Clint took up his watch at the end of the hall while Thor stayed by the elevator. Bucky was just beyond the closed door across the hall. Steve could feel his eyes on him, even through layers of plaster and wood. He refused to leave, ignoring Maria’s command and Natasha’s muttered Russian. He needed to know what was going on. He needed to see it. He’d had enough of Fury’s lies, enough of SHIELD’s deceit. He was going to be present for anything that could possibly touch him and his team. He was no longer a soldier who followed orders blindly, but the leader of earth’s mightiest warriors. If anyone had a problem with that, he didn’t particularly care.

Natasha approached him now, mimicking his stance.

“How is he?”

“Stable.”
Steve cocked his head. “That’s good, right?”

Natasha was one of the few people Steve knew who could say everything with only a look. Right now, her expression told him not to get his hopes up. “He lost a lot of blood. Bruce says the next 24 hours are critical.”

“Why was he attacked?”

“Because he started asking the wrong questions,” Maria said, joining their group. “The director has slowly been pushed out of a few projects; nothing too alarming, it’s happened before, more after he went against the World Security Council during the Chitauri attack. He called me yesterday, asked me to meet him. If I hadn’t gotten there when I did …” she trailed off. “I assume none of this comes as a surprise to you, Captain.”

“SHIELD is Hydra,” he said flatly. Maria looked up sharply. “It has been since the beginning.”

Maria’s eyes moved to Natasha. She nodded once. “Well, hell,” Maria said, her shoulders losing some of their stiffness as she rubbed her eyes.

“Agent Barton and I were able to collect some data; Stark did a quick analysis,” Natasha said. “I assume he’s digging deeper at this moment. Pepper is on her way to Malibu to comb through SI’s employment records for Hydra connections.”

“Basically, we don’t trust anyone but each other,” Steve spoke with finality.

Maria eyed him. “Where do Fury and I fall?”

“I don’t know yet,” Steve admitted. The brunette maintained eye contact before nodding her head once.

“Fair enough.”

It was closer to early morning than the middle of the night when Steve told everyone to get some sleep. Clint and Natasha protested, the pair wanting to go over, yet again, a plan to attack SHIELD from the inside. Steve understood that of everyone, they felt the most betrayed. SHIELD was more than their employer; it was their mission, their identity. It was how Natasha worked to right her wrongs and Clint proved her was more than a two-bit circus act. To learn that everything they’ve done, every life they’ve taken, every wound they’ve received, aided the enemy … But it was no reason to go off half-cocked.

“We have an advantage,” Steve stressed. “We have to be careful not to waste it. If we go in now, guns blazing with no real plan, we’ve lost the element of surprise. Anything they don’t want us to know, we’ve lost the opportunity to learn it.”

“But why Jane?” Clint asked. “What is she working on that Hydra wants?”


Tony snorted. They were back in the communal living room, Maria (and JARVIS) keeping Fury under observation. “While I agree with you that Foster’s equipment is dangerous, I seriously doubt Hydra wants anything to do with it.” Thor’s eyes slid over to Bruce who sighed deeply. He removed his glasses before pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger.
“What was that?” Tony asked, his head whipping between the two men. “That was a look. They just shared a look!” He glanced around at the others. “Did you see that?” He turned back to Bruce. “Why are you sharing looks with him? We’re science bros!”

“Tony –“

“Don’t placate me, Bruce! What do you know that I don’t?”

Bruce stood up and walked to the front of the room. “We all know Dr. Foster’s focus has been the Einstein-Rosen Bridge, mainly for the purpose of bringing Thor to earth. However, her work also lends itself to the connection of realms beyond Asgard.”

“Why would Hydra care about that?” Steve asked.

"Weapons," Bruce said.

Tony chuckled and leaned back in his seat. "I don’t think flails and swords fit Hydra’s image." He turned towards Thor with a smirk. "No offense, big guy."

Thor did not look upset. He looked like a patient parent explaining something to an overtired toddler. “The weapons within these lands are far superior to that on Midgard.”

Tony looked insulted. “Excuse me?”

“I mean no disrespect, my friend, but the technology on Asgard is millennium ahead of yours,” Thor continued.

“Hold up!” Tony jumped to his feet, jolting Leo, who had been sleeping with his head pillowed on Tony’s lap. Leo leapt to the floor and walked over to Bruce, leaning his bulky frame against the rumpled doctor. Bruce absently reached down to pet him, the content growl in the dog's chest making The Other Guy grumble happily in return. “You get confused by technology! Do you know how many toasters we’ve had to replace since you moved in here?”

Thor looked like he wanted to give Tony a hug. “That is true, but it is not because I do not understand how these things work. It is only because so much time has passed since I came in contact with them. It is difficult to remember how to operate something you had not encountered in hundreds of years.”

Tony’s mouth dropped open. He looked at Bruce. Bruce nodded. He looked at Clint and Natasha. They were still wearing their we-want-to-blow-SHIELD-sky-high faces and were of no help. Bucky looked bored. He turned to Steve who shrugged. “I have no reason to think Thor is lying,” Steve said.

“Why would I lie?” Thor asked. “How does that benefit me?”

“But … but …” Tony reclaimed his seat, looking very much like a child who just learned the truth about Santa Clause, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy. Clint leaned over to thump him on the shoulder. “Right there with you, man.”

Chapter End Notes

Full disclosure -- I don't plan to write a "This is how we defeat SHY-dra" story
because that isn't my strong suit and, let's face it, Agents of SHIELD is still working on that going into Season 3. There's no way I could get it wrapped up sooner. (I do think we're getting close to the end of this story. Yay? Boo? Combination of both?)

A few people have asked how Steve and Bucky reunited if this story isn't Winter Soldier compliant. I have a backstory for that, which should reveal itself soon.

I'm running a half marathon in the morning. I'll probably distract myself by thinking of the next chapter while pounding the road. Fingers crossed for a flat course!

Thanks for reading!
Bucky watched her sleep. He was aware of how creepy that was, but he didn’t care. He didn’t trust himself to sleep beside her. Not now. The urge to hold her, to touch her, to taste her, to take her over and over, to prove to himself that she was there with him, with them, was overwhelming. She needed to sleep. Hell, they all needed sleep, but he was too churned up, his mind too full of everything that had happened, everything they learned, to rest. Steve gave up after twenty minutes, pulling on sweats and a T-shirt, muttering something about working out before slipping out of their apartment. Bucky knew he was at the gym, taking his frustrations out on the punching bags. He wondered how many would be split at the seams by the time he had enough.

Darcy shifted in the large bed, still wrapped in Steve’s sweatshirt. Bucky tensed, waiting for her to settle. Darcy was a heavy sleeper. The few times he shared a bed with her, he’d gotten used to her habit of falling asleep immediately and remaining in the same position until it was time to awaken. He envied that. He couldn’t remember the last time he slept through the night, the last time Steve rolling over didn’t startle him awake.

She moved again, her fingers clenching as she reached for something? Someone? Was she dreaming? Was she having a nightmare? He leaned forward in his seat. Should he go to her? Take her hand, stroke her hair? Shit. What did he do? It was different with him, with Steve. They knew each other. Steve understood that Bucky preferred to sleep with space between them, even if he wasn’t so great at masking the hurt on his face. He wished he could be the Bucky Steve remembered, the man who used to wrap around the small blond, holding him close for warmth, for comfort. Now, he didn’t trust himself. Part of him knew he’d never hurt Steve, but what if he didn’t pull himself from the memories in time? What if the Soldier hurt Steve before Bucky stopped him? He wouldn’t risk that. As much as he wanted to sleep, truly sleep, wrapped in his soulmate, both of his soulmates, it wasn’t worth the risk. Damn it! He was supposed to protect his soulmates! Why the hell did the world give him two when he so obviously failed at taking care of one?

Darcy’s gasp pulled him out of his brooding. She sat up quickly, her eyes wide as her head whipped around the room frantically.

“JARVIS, low lights.” Bucky got up from the chair to perch on the edge of the bed. She closed her eyes as the room illuminated in a soft glow, squeezing tight before opening them, the horrors of whatever she saw while she was sleeping clouding the usual bright blue hue. “Hey, doll,” he whispered, slowly moving closer so he could move his arm around her, sighing in relief when she sank into his touch. “You’re safe, Darcy. You’re in the Tower. We’re all here. No one is going to hurt you.”

His hand rubbed soothing circles on her back as he repeated the words in a soft murmur, not stopping until he felt her body relax against his. He knew what it was like to wake up and not know
where you were, to be disoriented, frightened, and so scared that what you’d see when you finally opened your eyes was the one place you never wanted to be again. He didn’t want Darcy to live like that, to have a fear so great that it made you forget what it was like not to be afraid.

“You’re in our room, baby,” he whispered, his hand slowing as she leaned into him further, burrowing into his side, absorbing his heat, her hand gripping the soft cotton of his shirt. “We wanted to wake you up, to ask where you wanted to go, but you were asleep …”

The circles under her eyes were faint, but they were there, gray smudges against pale skin as she snored lightly. She was curled into a tight ball on the edge of the orange plaid couch tucked in the corner of Jane’s lab. Her hands were pillowed underneath her cheeks, an innocent gesture that made Bucky want to laugh. Darcy was anything but innocent.

Leo bounded ahead of them, jumping onto the couch before Thor could stop him, curling up on the opposite side of the sofa with a delightful sigh.

Darcy didn’t budge an inch.

Steve’s eyes took in the scene, from the stack of coloring books and box of 120-count Crayola Crayons (more goodies from Darcy’s care package) on the floor of the lab with the remains of enough food to feed the entire team. He tilted his head at Bucky in a silent question. They didn’t want to assume anything, to force Darcy to do something she didn’t want. “How long has she been out?” Steve asked Jane.

She pushed away from her laptop and rubbed her eyes tiredly, groaning lightly when Thor moved behind her to knead the knots in her shoulders. “An hour maybe?”

Not long enough. If they woke her now, there was no guarantee that she’d go back to sleep. Also, and this was the real reason he didn’t want to nudge her into wakefulness, what if she chose to return to her apartment and her bed alone? He didn’t want her out of his sight. Not now. (Not ever, if he was truly being honest with himself.) “Better to beg forgiveness than ask permission,” he decided, leaning over to lift Darcy into his arms.

“I don’t mind,” she said now, her arms going around his waist. “I kind of don’t want to be alone.”

They were silent, each one taking comfort from the other. Bucky felt his muscles tense after a few minutes, the familiar prickle of sensation that arose whenever a person was in an uncomfortable position for too long. His years as a sniper, an assassin, taught him to ignore it. He was conditioned to be still and remain still as long as necessary to complete a mission. Right now, his mission was Darcy’s comfort. She didn’t have the same training, though, moving against him in effort to find a better position. He wasn’t a stupid man, shifting until he was lying on his back, Darcy tucked at his side, her head on his chest.

“Where’s Steve?” she asked, the fingers of one hand tracing small shapes over his heart. He mirrored her movements with his own fingers against her shoulder.

“Gym.”

“He couldn’t sleep?”

“Doubt anyone is.”

She raised her head. “And you?”

“And me what?”
“Things got pretty intense,” she said quietly, her fingers moving up to rub against his temple in the gesture designed to soothe. “How are you?”

He forced himself to keep his eyes steady on her, though the urge to close his eyes and arch into her touch was strong. “I’m fine.”

The look she gave him made it obvious she didn’t believe him. “You’re full of shit, James Barnes. You’re telling me you’re ‘fine’ after having your loyalty questioned? You’re ‘fine’ after trying to force yourself to remember things you can’t?”

He shrugged. “It wasn’t the first time I was asked questions I can’t answer. It won’t be the last.” His hand moved up to cup her head, bringing her face down so he could kiss her. “Besides, I’ve got a beautiful woman in my bed,” he murmured against her lips. “I’m way better than fine.”

She pulled away with a snort. “The more time I spend with you, the more I realize how you were able to charm your way into so many beds back in the day.”

He raised an eyebrow in question. “Does that bother you?”

She shook her head. “Nope. I’m a woman of the 2000s, dude. I’ve had my fun, too.”

He pushed down the quick flare of jealousy at her statement. “I may not remember everything, but I do know I’ve never been with a woman as beautiful as you,” he told her with absolute sincerity. She blushed at his words. He didn’t understand how one a woman could respond enthusiastically to whatever filthy things he or Steve said or did in the heat of passion, but turn inward whenever things took a turn for the romantic.

Bucky no longer felt jealous of the nameless, faceless men in Darcy’s past. If anything, he wanted to hit them. Hard.

“But you remembered Steve,” she said softly.

Bucky forced himself to stop thinking about punching ex-lovers and focus on Darcy. “Yeah, I remembered Steve.”

She raised her head again, her expression curious. “Did you always?”

He closed his eyes, his mind sorting through the pieces of his scattered memories. Some were sharp, others not so much. Some he knew he could bring to focus if he really tried, but it was like there was a door blocking him, one he didn’t want to push open. There were some things he instinctively knew he shouldn’t remember. They were better left in the dark. But Steve … Steve was always the light.

It was dark. He’d been on the ship for hours, waiting for his target. He was immune to the dampness of his clothes, the scent of saltwater so strong, it burned his lungs. None of that was important. Only the mission was important. He was there to kill the woman with red hair. They told him she was a traitor, a woman who worked for one side when she belonged to the other.

He saw him, a blur of dark gray against the dark sky. A hand went to the knife sheathed at his side as the masked man pulled himself over the side of the cargo ship effortlessly, his actions quick as he took out guard after guard in movements so swift, so sure, it was almost a dance. Sometimes he used his fists, other times a shield he wielded with conviction. Bucky felt a stir of something in his mind – he didn’t know what it was, he had long since been trained not to feel anything – as he watched the man, moving from his spot so he could track his movements, shadowing him as the man shadowed the others. Had he fought this man before? No. If he had, one of them would be
dead. If he was supposed to kill, he killed. If he didn’t, he would be killed.

For a second, a minute, he forgot why he was there; he was caught up in the beauty that was this person, this stranger. A man with the gun was behind him before the man noticed. Bucky nearly broke his cover to intervene when the man dropped, killed by the bullet of a man now landing on the ship, his dark parachute drifting behind him. Bucky heard the blond say “Thanks” and he stumbled at the familiarity of his voice.

*He knew him. He knew him.*

He saw his target, the woman with the red hair. She walked next to the man. She said something to him that annoyed him. The look of frustration on his face was oddly familiar, almost comforting. Bucky wondered why. He watched the redhead disappear, knew he should follow her, but he didn’t. He followed the man. He wanted to know why he remembered him; why there was this innate desire to make sure he left the ship safely.

“I broke protocol when I saw Steve again,” Bucky told Darcy. “I didn’t know it was him at the time. I didn’t know anything about him. I didn’t know who he was or what he did – I didn’t even know his name, but I knew him. I knew he was important to me, not the Soldier, but me.”

Darcy rolled to her side, tugging on Bucky until he rolled on to his side. Facing each other, she continued to stroke his face. “How did you find him?”

The explosion was sudden. Bucky hit the ground, stifling the urge to shout for the man. He held his breath, waited for him to appear, feeling a great relief when he stormed on to the galley; his face screwed up in annoyance, in anger, the redhead following seconds later. Bucky knew then that the Soldier would not kill the woman. No, he needed her. He needed her to get to him.

“I had a mission,” he chose his words carefully. Steve knew the truth. Natasha and Barton did, too; the two spies later using the information Bucky had to eliminate those who ordered the hit on Natasha. “It was loosely connected to Steve. I knew ignoring it would help me find him, so I did. He became my mission. It was the first time I made a decision in decades, probably. The second I did, there was a sense of rightness about it.” He shrugged his shoulders, unsure of how to put it in to words, how in that moment everything shifted, filling him with something he didn’t recognize as hope.

“When did you realize who he was?”

He chuckled. “Really, doll? The media is obsessed with Captain America. It wasn’t that hard.”

But in other ways, it was. It hurt; the sudden sense of knowing when before there was none. He stood in The Smithsonian, a broken man in clothes he stole from a store, ball cap pulled low over his eyes, watching the video that showed him and the man laughing together. Steve Rogers and James ‘Bucky’ Barnes, the recorded voice had announced. The man was Steve Rogers. That meant he was James Barnes. Bucky.


*His soulmate.*

That knowledge hit him like a sledgehammer. He stumbled back, almost fell. *He had a soulmate.* The man, Steve, was his. He remembered. He remembered rescuing him from fights, caring for him in the dead of winter. He remembered Steve rescuing him, walking beside the Steve that was somehow bigger, stronger, but still the same. *Still his.*
They kept him from Steve. How long, he didn’t know. His hands curled into fists, the need to find his handlers, to kill every single one from keeping him from his love stronger than anything he’d felt before. He would find them. He would find them and he would kill them. He would make them pay, make them suffer, make them scream and –

“Bucky!”

He was falling. Oh God, he remembered falling. They were on a train, he and Steve. He was holding on, reaching for Steve’s hand when he fell. No! He didn’t want to leave him! He just got him back. Please, God, no!

“James? James!”

He was unaware he was crying until she was over him, her hands heavy on his shoulders as she gently shook him.

“James, come back! I’m sorry I asked; please come back!”

Her voice broke into his memories, replacing Steve’s scared face with her own.

“Thank God,” she murmured, leaning forward to press frantic kisses on his forehead, his cheeks, and his lips. “I thought I broke you!”

He kissed her back, a hard press of his lips against hers – once, twice, and then longer. His arms came up to hold her close when she would have moved away, almost desperate in his need to keep her close. He rolled until she was under him, wiggling his hips until he was nestled between her thighs, groaning as she brought her legs up to wrap around his waist. The pain faded away as he lost himself in the feel of her, the taste. He would never forget this, forget her. She was branded on him, just like Steve, just like their words burned into his skin. “My Darcy,” he murmured, ignoring how the hands she had tangled in his hair faltered. She was his, just like he was hers. He always had been and always would be. “Missed you,” he said now, pulling away to look at her, one hand gently tracing the contours of her face, the curve of her lips. “It was like I was lost without you.”

“You had Steve.”

He shook his head decisively. “We’re better when we’re with you,” he told her.

Her answering smile was delightfully naughty. It pushed aside the heaviness that had settled around the room, threatening to choke them both. There was a wicked gleam in her eyes as she pulled him close. “Is that so?” she murmured, her lips were a breath away from his. “Want to find Steve and prove it?”

Chapter End Notes

I can always tell I'm close to wrapping up a story when the chapters take longer to write. It's a combination of thinking about the next story I want to write and not wanting to let go of the one in progress. I've learned I can't write more than one at a time, as that's what makes it easy for me to ignore a WIP.

Thanks to everyone who wished me well on the half marathon. It was described as a fast, flat course. Yeah, and Darcy doesn't have boobs. I stopped counting hills after six
-- we hit the first one before the first mile marker! -- but I knocked two minutes and eleven seconds off my overall time, so yay!

Hugs and well wishes to all of you!
Steve hung the last punching bag from the chain, three others in various states of abuse piled in the corner of the gym. JARVIS only said “Yes, Captain” when he requested that more be ordered later that day, but he swore he caught a tone of disapproval in the AI’s voice.

Fine. Maybe hitting bags until his knuckles bled and his muscles ached wasn’t the healthiest way of dealing with things. Maybe leaving Bucky and Darcy alone wasn’t the bravest thing he’s ever done. And maybe wanting to say screw his own orders and attack Hydra with everything he had wasn’t smart, but you know what? He was tired of playing by the rules, of doing what was expected of him. He spent most of his life being affable only to get kicked down time and time again.

Goddamn fate.

He should have known. Things were good. Too good. He wouldn’t go so far as to call them perfect, but the afternoon he walked into his and Bucky’s apartment to find Bucky sound asleep on the couch, sprawled on his back with one arm over his head, the other wrapped around Darcy was as close to perfect as Steve could imagine. He didn’t know how long he stood there, staring, his heart so full it was near to bursting as he committed the image to memory. They were beautiful, his soulmates, with their creamy skin, dark hair and blue eyes. Bucky’s eyes were a deeper blue than Darcy’s, sometimes clouded with glimpses of moments he wasn’t sure were real, scared to dig deeper in case they were, though it was happening less. He’d smiled more since meeting Darcy, too; real smiles and not the grins he used to give Steve that were meant to reassure them both, though they rarely did.

“Take a picture; it’ll last longer,” Bucky grumbled without opening his eyes, Darcy still dead to the world.

“Might break the camera, jerk.”

_Bucky pulled Darcy closer before lifting his hand in a ‘Come here’ gesture. His eyes were still closed, but there was a definite smirk on his face when Steve leaned down to kiss him. “Missed you,” Bucky murmured._

_Steve looked at the half empty bowl of popcorn, two empty soda cans, Darcy’s ever-present cell phone and the muted flat screen television still showing Buffy Summers kicking vampire ass. “Looks like it,” he pointed the remote at the screen to stop the DVD. “I can’t believe Darcy actually let you nap during Buffy.”_

_Bucky finally opened his eyes. “I’m persuasive,” he said with a lazy grin._

_It was a moment in time, but it was one of many Steve hoped the three of them would have together. He had gone to the bedroom to kick off his shoes and grab his sketchbook, content to sit and draw Bucky and Darcy as they dozed the afternoon away, the horrors that made it impossible for Bucky to sleep as such at night apparently banished in the light of day._

_Then they took Darcy. Hydra took Darcy just like they took Bucky and he wanted to fucking kill them!_
Steve watched the punching bag fly off of its hook, sand spilling on the concrete floor as the bag flew several feet before it crashed into the wall.

“Feel better?”

He whipped his head around, unsurprised to see Bucky. He was waiting near the boxing ring, Darcy perched on his back, her arms lopped loosely around his neck. “I thought Clint was your official piggyback giver,” he said, grabbing a towel from his gym bag and wiping his face.

“Eh,” Darcy shrugged, wiggling until Bucky loosened his hold, bending slightly so Darcy could jump down. She padded over in fuzzy socks, still wearing his hoodie. “Someone says I don’t have to walk, I’m not gonna walk.”

“I didn’t offer, doll,” Bucky leaned against the ring’s ropes, his arms crossed over his chest. “You pouted until I gave in.”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Details.” She took the towel from Steve’s hands to finish rubbing him down, though her touch was much softer. “We missed you.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Neither could we – ’cause we missed you.”

Steve snorted and took the towel back, stuffing it in his gym bag, pulling the zipped closed with the rough jerk. Didn’t she get it? He couldn’t be sweet Steve right now. He was frustrated, angry – hell, he was fucking pissed! They took her! The group who fucked him over so many times was still around, still fucking with the people he cared about. All that he’d done, all that he’d sacrificed – it was for nothing!

“Steve.”

He flinched at her hand on his arm. He didn’t mean to; he just did. He waited for her to step back, to walk away, but instead she moved forward until she was pressed against him, her arms going around his waist to hold tight. “Darcy …”

“I know,” she murmured, her cheek pressed against his damp T-shirt. “I’m mad, too.”

He looked at Bucky helplessly. He didn’t know what she wanted, what she expected him to give. The other man simply shrugged. “Darcy …”

She leaned back and smiled at him. “Did anyone tell you it’s OK not to always have a plan?” She slid her hands slowly up his back, her nails against the fabric of his shirt making him arch instinctively into her touch. “Sometimes you just need to go with it.”

Christ, he wanted nothing more than to stop thinking and take what Darcy was offering, to lose himself in her, in Bucky, for a few hours, to bury the pain and the betrayal, to remember that they were here, with him, but he wasn’t in the right place for that. “Darcy …” He caught he hands as they drifted lower. “Baby, I can’t … sweetheart, I can’t give you what you need right now.”

She smirked. “I haven’t even told you what I need.”

“I can’t be gentle.”

She chuckled at that. “I didn’t know that was an option.”
He flushed thinking of the few times they had together, when lust overrode common sense; all the more reason to show her it could be different. He could be different. Just not now. Maybe he’d go for a run first, take a few (hundred) laps to dull his rage. “Darcy,” he tried again.

She pushed herself away from him. “Dammit, Rogers!” she huffed. “I know things were different in the 1940s, but I find it hard to believe that even then, a guy would say no when a hot chick threw herself at him.”

“It’s not that,” he protested. “I just … Darcy, I’m mad! I am beyond mad and if we were to do anything right now … Sweetheart, I don’t trust myself.”

She grinned seconds before she leapt into his arms. Instinct forced him to catch her, to hitch her higher in his arms to keep her safe. “Good thing I didn’t ask then,” she said before pressed her mouth against his that was all heat, a clash of teeth and tongues as she wrapped herself around him, her hands moving all over his body, snapping what little control he had. He lunged toward the nearest wall and shoved her against it. “You tell me if I hurt you,” he demanded.

Her eyes were wide with lust, her chest heaving as she struggled to catch her breath. She licked her lips, already swollen from his kisses. “You won’t hurt me.”

God, her mouth. He kissed her again, groaning as his tongue tangled with hers, her teeth nipping his bottom lip. “Damn it, Darcy!” He forced himself to pull back, to focus on her. “Promise me!”

“She will,” Bucky’s voice was low in his ear, the hands he rested on his shoulders strong and sure. “We both will, won’t we, doll?”

Darcy nodded her head emphatically. That was all the permission Steve needed. He turned his head to capture Bucky in a kiss, sighing as he felt the man’s hands grasp his head to pull him closer, matching him strength for strength. “Love you,” he said as Bucky pulled away, his voice low enough so that only the other man heard him.

“Don’t I know it?” he whispered just before he kissed his way down Steve’s neck. “Now,” he said a bit louder, “how about you show our girl?”

“Yes, please,” Darcy panted as she tried to pull Steve closer, her nails digging into his shoulder. “Show me.”

Her pajama pants and panties were gone within seconds, Bucky pulling them away while Steve wrestled his hoodie and Darcy’s tank top from her body. Steve vaguely heard Bucky demand JARVIS for privacy as he reached down and wrapped an arm around each of her thighs. He ignored the confused look on her face as he lifted her up, higher and higher, her back sliding against the wall until her thighs were over his broad shoulders and her pussy was aligned with his mouth. He dove in, his tongue going straight to her clit. He licked her with precision, with focus, her every gasp spurring him on. He heard Bucky’s groan, the other man’s hands kneading Steve’s flesh as Darcy’s slapped against the cement wall, unable to find purchase, unable to do anything but take his exquisite torture. Steve gripped her tightly. He didn’t want Darcy to move, to shift her hips to evade or guide. No, he needed her to take it, to accept everything he was, everything he had. He used her gasps as a guide, her moans as a clue. When he hit one spot that made her shiver, he made sure to revisit it over and over; his name on her lips the sweetest prayer he’d ever heard.

“Fuck, doll,” Bucky breathed. “He’s got you so wet already. Are you going to come for him, Darcy?” One of Bucky’s hands was in his sweatpants, gripping him, stroking him in the same rhythm that Steve’s tongue fucked Darcy. “She’s close, Stevie. You going to be able to hold on, to give our girl something before you take yours?”
He’d give her everything. Everything! He pushed himself into Bucky’s hands, wanting more, but knowing he couldn’t until he took care of Darcy. Hell, that’s all he wanted was to take care of Darcy, to make sure she was always happy, always satisfied. She yelled his name, shouted Bucky’s. He felt her legs tremble against his head, licked her excitement as it poured from her body. She gasped as he nipped her clit and sucked it into his mouth. She held herself stiff and then let go with a scream that echoed throughout the gym. “Again,” Steve demanded, not wanting to slow down. If anything, her orgasm made him want more.

“Fuck, Steve …” she gasped. “I can’t.”

“You can,” he licked her with slow, sure strokes. He was gentle, knowing she was sensitive, flattening his tongue against her.

“It’s too much.”

“You’re too much,” Bucky said. “Darcy, you have no idea what you do to us, how you make us feel. Let Stevie try and show you, huh? Can you do that for him? For me?”

Steve pulled back and looked up at Darcy. “Baby?” She looked down. Her face was damp, flushed. Tendrils of dark hair clung to her cheeks. Her eyes were wide, her pupils huge as she swallowed deeply. “You OK? You want me to stop?” She opened her mouth. He held his breath. He’d stop if she asked, if she told him, but he didn’t want to. He hadn’t had enough. He wanted more. He needed to make her feel more.

“Don’t stop,” she gasped, her head falling back to rest against the wall. “Dammit, Steve, don’t stop!”

That was all the permission he needed. Steve lapped at her again, his unrelenting attentions to her clit making Darcy cry out. He refocused his attention on her and not the fact that Bucky’s hand still on his dick, his lips on the back of his neck, were driving him insane. He’d take care of Bucky next, show him that he was always his and he would always be his, but first …

“Fuck!” Darcy shouted. “Oh, Jesus, oh fuck!” Her body stiffened, jerked.

“That’s it, baby girl,” Bucky crooned. “You are so beautiful, so fucking gorgeous. I love seeing you come, seeing your body tense up before you let go. Steve’s got you there, doesn’t he? Do you want to come, Darcy? Do you?”

“Yes,” she cried just before she let go, practically wailing her release as the buildup Steve so carefully crafted snapped. He barely had a chance to enjoy it before he gave into Bucky’s torture, groaning his own release with his face still pressed against Darcy, two days’ growth of whiskers on his cheeks abrating her thighs. He sighed, smirking when that had Darcy whimpering, his breath against her folds too much. Carefully, gently, he helped her regain her footing, feeling something settle in him when she fell boneless against him.

“You OK?” he whispered, pushing aside the hair that had slipped out of her ponytail holder so he could look at her. Her eyes were glazed, an exhausted smile on her face.

“What? This dopey expression doesn’t scream well and truly fucked?”

Bucky wrapped his arms around her waist and nuzzled her neck. “We haven’t even gotten to that part,” he reminded her.

Darcy groaned. “You’re killing me.”
Steve was grateful for JARVIS’ privacy protocols and his discretion, as there was no way he wanted anyone to know that he supported a naked Darcy to the elevator, a naked Darcy that apparently got her second (or was it third?) wind somewhere around the 20th floor, and had Steve repeating her name over and over when the car finally arrived to their floor. In a scene that was reminiscent of their first time, Steve carried Darcy to their apartment while Bucky dealt with the door, only this time when he went to lay her on the bed, her hand on his chest stopped him. “What is it?”

“I want both of you.”

Bucky shrugged off his T-shirt. “We want you, too, doll.”

“No, I mean all of us. Together.”

Steve paused. “You mean at the same time?”

Darcy blushed. “No … I mean, yes, eventually, I want that, but tonight … I’ve seen the two of you kiss, but that’s all you do in front of me. James’ hand job? That was the first time the two of you have touched each other like that with me in the room.” She had a wicked smile on her face. “Seeing you let go like that, for James, was one of the sexiest things I’ve witnessed and I say this as someone who had just been thoroughly eaten out by Captain America.”

Bucky snagged Darcy’s arm and pulled her to him. “Yeah? How do we look to you?”

She sighed into his mouth as she kissed him. “So fucking hot.”

Bucky glanced over at Steve. “You hear that, punk?”

Steve walked forward, wrapping his arms around both of his soulmates. Maybe, on some level, they had kept the physical aspect of their relationship between the two of them because they wanted to show Darcy that she belonged, that her presence did not come between them. Apparently, she was not OK with that. “Tell us what you want,” he said, planting a kiss on the top of her head. “Tell us what you want and we’ll do it.”

Darcy pulled herself out of their circle and walked to the bed. She crawled to the middle before turning over to lay on her back, her head propped by several pillows. “What I want is for you to be inside me,” she said, her eyes on Steve before they shifted to the man at his side, “while Bucky fucks you.” There was a secrecy to the smile she gave Bucky. Steve wanted to know what it was, but then her gaze was back on him. “I heard a rumor that the two of you are better together. You up for proving it true?”

Steve pulled his shirt over his head. “Yes, ma’am.”

Chapter End Notes

We've got about four, maybe five, chapters left. Lots to wrap up and I wanted to make sure our trio had at least one more sexy fun time before then, but it was really hard to write this ... pun not intended. :)
She would not tell Bucky he was right.

Darcy closed her eyes as the tremors of her last orgasm coursed through her body leaving little flutters in her stomach and shakiness in her legs that, if she had to walk, could conceivably have her swooning. Seeing as Steve was using her abdomen as a pillow, there was no way she’d be able to test that theory, which was totally fine with her. Yeah, he was heavy and sweaty and sticky, but he was also more relaxed than she ever remembered seeing him. She ran a hand lazily through his blond hair, giggling when he let his out on a contented sigh. “Tickles,” she said when he shifted slightly to give her a questioning look.

“Sorry,” he told her, though she doubted he meant it since he went right back to resting on her stomach.

“You doing OK, doll?” Bucky rolled to his side, pushing Darcy’s hair back from her face so he could look her in the eyes, his gaze just as intense as it had been moments before, when he refused to break eye contact as he pounded into Steve, his thrusts making the man between them push into Darcy deeper with every stroke.

“OK isn’t the term I’d use.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

Steve lifted his head again, concern replacing the lazy look he wore seconds before. “We didn’t hurt you, did we?”

“I don’t think that’s what she meant,” Bucky smirked at the other man. “I think our girl had a great time, but doesn’t want to admit it.”

Steve rolled his eyes and settled on Darcy once more, one arm going around her waist to tug her closer. Bucky opened his mouth, but apparently thought better of it and settled for sliding one arm beneath Darcy’s neck as he snuggled against her chest, his other hand drifting down to tangle with Darcy’s hand still curled in Steve’s hair. She loved the feel of their weight against her. They were too hot to cuddle long-term, but she could handle it for a few minutes – at least until she was sure her body was recovered enough to function.

She had no idea that when she told Steve she wanted to have him between her and Bucky what it would mean to watch the two men together. She had tried to picture it, of course, but daydreams and fantasies had nothing on reality. They were a study in contrast, Steve’s golden looks compared to Bucky’s darker features, and yet they moved in a rhythm that spoke of years of familiarity, but with a sense of reverence, as if they knew their time together was precious, that the fact that they were still together was a miracle. Had she not been desperate to be part of that, she might have cried. If anyone deserved to be happy, they did.

“Thank you,” Steve murmured, the heat of his breath against her skin sending another shiver up her spine.

She was glad his eyes were closed and that he couldn’t see what she knew was a dopey smile at his words. “I think that’s my line. You put on a good show, soldier.”
He raised his head. “I wasn’t referring to that,” he protested.

“I’m insulted.” Bucky grumbled.

“Me, too,” Darcy added.

Steve sighed and pushed himself up until he was kneeling on the bed. “I meant thank you for helping me get out of my head, at least for a little bit,” he said. “Sometimes I get too caught up in what’s happening to the team or what could happen to the team –“

“No. Really?” Bucky interrupted.

“ – that I forget to take care of myself.”

Darcy pushed Bucky off of her so she, too, could get to her knees. Leaning forward, she kissed Steve. “We’ll make sure that doesn’t happen, right James?”

“It’s a dirty job, but someone’s gotta do it,” the brunette rolled off the bed to snag the sweatpants he was wearing earlier off the floor. “Speaking of dirty jobs, I’m gonna take a shower. In the interest of saving time and resources, you are both welcome to join me.” He leaned over to kiss Darcy on the shoulder before doing the same to Steve. “Who knows? We might even catch Stevie off guard and have our wicked way with him again.”

Darcy groaned. On one hand, she desperately needed a shower and Bucky still owed her shower sex. On the other hand, she was exhausted and could conceivably fall back asleep – a scenario that was looking less likely as Steve, too, got off the bed and had pulled on a pair of track pants before he stopped suddenly, blue eyes narrowed in concentration as he focused on something only he could see.

“Steve?”

“Resources,” he mumbled, pushing himself off the bed to stalk to the bathroom. Darcy shot a look at Bucky who shrugged in return as they listened to the water run in the sink. A minute later, Steve walked back out and made his way to the dresser, pulling a fresh T-shirt from the drawer. He was nearly out the door before Bucky’s shout of “Steve!” stopped him. “What?”

“Care to explain what’s going on in that head of yours?”

“Multiple resources, Buck! An attack on all levels. We use everything we have, don’t give Hydra time to think.”

Bucky slowly nodded his head. “And by the time they figure it out –“

“We’re in,” Steve finished. “Those that are with Hydra are identified. Those loyal to SHIELD know who they are.”

“We clean house.”

“If there’s anything left to clean,” Steve finished.

“That could work,” Bucky mused.

Steve nodded once decisively. “I need to talk to Clint and Nat, see if there’s anyone they trust to help. Maybe we call in –“

“Hey!” Darcy called, waving one hand, her other arm carefully holding the sheet she pulled from
the bed to wrap around her body. “Not that I’m not enjoying the two man show of ‘Let’s Make a Plan,’ but do either one of you want to clue in the person who doesn’t speak Super Soldier?”

Steve looked at Bucky. He was obviously impatient, anxious to share whatever he had with Clint and Natasha as quickly as possible. Bucky nodded, waiting until he heard the slam of the apartment door before he focused on Darcy. “You might have just saved the world, doll.”

Darcy sat on the bed. “Yay me.”

“Yay me.”

Darcy rolled her eyes at Jane. It was a wasted gesture, seeing as she was focused on dicing onions and not her best friend, but the situation called for it. “When you say it like that, it sounds ridiculous.”

Jane set a carton of eggs on the counter. “I said it exactly how you said it.”

“No,” Darcy pushed the pile of onions to the corner of the chopping board and started on the green pepper. “I said it with more inflection.”

Jane leaned against the counter and crossed her arms. “Yes, that’s why it’s ridiculous: semantics.”

“Fine,” Darcy huffed as she set the knife down. “Mock what very well could be my heroic moment; see if I care.” She gave Jane a pointed look and dug through the bag of groceries for the sharp cheddar cheese, grateful that the grocery store JARVIs ordered from was more than willing to make a delivery before eight in the morning. Judging by what little she caught from the others when she and Jane delivered the first round of coffee and two boxes of donuts to their makeshift war room, otherwise known as Fury’s makeshift hospital room, the team was going to need a substantial breakfast.

Jane finished breaking her carton off eggs into a glass bowl, whipping them lightly with a fork before adding the shredded cheese and sliced vegetables. “I apologize for mocking your heroics. Please explain to me what role sex plays in taking down Hydra.”

Darcy didn’t blame Jane. It was ridiculous that Steve’s plan came to him moments after their sexual encounter, but it made sense when Bucky explained it to her.

“We overwhelmed him, you and I,” Bucky said. “He wasn’t Steve for a moment. There was too much happening at once and he lost his focus.”

“We’re awesome.”

“Agreed,” Bucky helped Darcy to her feet and maneuvered her to the bathroom. “But think of it from a tactical standpoint. If we were to attack SHIELD at once – I’m talking attack as in not just headquarters, but every branch we know of – “

“Then Hydra will be too overwhelmed to fall back on whatever contingencies they have in place,” Darcy finished.

“Exactly.”

“So the idea is the Hydra goons fight back because that’s what they do, alerting the others to who
“is Hydra and who is SHIELD,” Darcy summarized as she poured pancake batter on the electric skillet, making four circles the size of a toddler’s head.

“Huh,” Jane flipped the vegetable omelet. Darcy watched as the other woman placed the finished omelet on a plate and slid it into the oven to keep warm, her movement automatic as she pictured the scenario as Darcy laid it out. It didn’t surprise Darcy one bit when Jane grabbed a paper towel and the pen Bruce left by his unfinished crossword puzzle and started jotting equations. Instead, she poured more pancake batter and waited for Jane to do whatever it was Jane did that made her look up with an incredulous look on her face. “You totally saved the world with sex.”

“I told you!”

“Food!” Clint shouted as he walked into the communal kitchen minutes later, whatever the group decided having lifted his mood temporarily as he grabbed Darcy in a quick side hug before making his way to the coffeepot, topping off Darcy’s oversized white mug that declared “I don’t give a sip” (another care package gift) before filling up his own. He snagged a pancake from the platter by the stove, stuffing it in his mouth before Darcy could stop him.

“He gets that way when he’s hungry,” Jane nodded knowingly.

— as was Barnes,” Clint finished.

“Super-fast metabolism,” Darcy reminded him, adding milk to the pancake mix.

“Or his personality.”

Darcy pushed the bowl in Clint’s arms. “Here. Make those arms of yours useful and stir this while I finish the bacon.”

Clint groaned in protest, but did as she asked. The three of them worked in compatible silence, similar to the few times Clint joined them for breakfast in New Mexico. Jane didn’t want to like the SHIELD agent who was part of the team that took her equipment, but alcohol and dancing has a way of thawing even the deepest freeze.
“I smell food,” Tony announced as he walked into the kitchen, tossing his table on the counter. “Barton; pancake me!”

Clint flipped a pancake in Tony’s direction, giving the engineer a thumb up when he caught it with one hand. Tony folded the pancake in half and dunked it in the bowl of warm maple syrup.

“Don’t you dare double dip that,” Darcy warned him as the elevator chimed softly.

“Really, Mr. Stark. Must you stoop to new levels of infancy in Ms. Potts’ absence?”

As one, Darcy, Jane, Tony and Clint turned to watch as Phil Coulson stepped into the room, trailed by five people Darcy had never seen before. One was an Asian woman dressed all in black who carried herself in a manner that was eerily similar to Natasha’s. The man and woman behind her were obviously scientists, their heads nearly touching as they whispered excitedly to each other, the girl practically bouncing on her feet when her eyes settled on Jane. A petite brunette stood next to a man wearing dark jeans and a black leather jacket at the back of the group.

“Agent,” Tony said coolly. “Didn’t we already have a conversation about overriding my privacy protocols?”

“You knew he was coming,” Clint said, handing the spatula to Darcy so he could shake Coulson’s hand. There was a formality between the two that wasn’t there before, but faking a person’s death had that impact on people.

“I never said I liked it.”

There was an awkward silence as everyone waited for someone to say something. It didn’t help that Bruce chose that moment to enter the kitchen, faltering slightly when he realized nine people were watching him. He took a step back, bumping into Bucky who walked around him to stand next to Darcy. “Um …” Bruce looked around uncertainly. “Breakfast?”

“Yeah.” Grateful for something to do, Darcy moved to grab another stack of plates from the cupboard, but Bucky beat her to it. “It’s a serve yourself-type deal this morning. Grab a plate, some silverware and load up on whatever. The coffee pot is over there, cups in the cupboard beside it, and milk and orange juice is in the refrigerator.” She took Jane’s omelets out of the oven and sliced them in several pieces. “We have pancakes, bacon, veggie omelets, donuts … I can whip up some plain scrambled eggs if you want them. There are also a few boxes of frozen waffles in the freezer, if that’s your thing. We didn’t make toast, but we could do that, right Jane?” She turned to Jane who was watching Coulson with narrowed eyes.

“You didn’t have trouble yourself, Miss Lewis,” Coulson said in his usual calm manner which used to drive Darcy crazy, but she now found calming. With all the weird ass shit the man has faced with his time at SHIELD, this moment had to make the top ten, yet he was still as cool as a cucumber.

“No trouble at all, Son of Coul,” she smirked when she caught a glimmer of a twitch at his lips.

“SON OF COUL!” Thor boomed as he entered the room, making the two scientists and the brunette jump at his entrance. “You have arrived! I was pleased to learn that you made a full recovery from your attack. On behalf of my Asgard and of my family, please accept my sincerest apologies for my brother’s actions. If there’s anything I can --”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Coulson interrupted before Thor could kneel on one knee. Darcy snorted, remembering how uncomfortable Clint was when Thor made a similar speech to
him. Judging by the glare the archer sent her, he remembered, too. “I was glad to hear of your return to Midgard.”

“Oh, yes,” Thor smiled at the room at large. “I am finding this place to be more like home to me every day. Of course, this is where my Jane lives, so as long as I’m with her, I am home” he surmised, not noticing the blush that stained Jane’s cheeks.

“Want me to make a similar declaration?” Bucky whispered in Darcy’s ear.

“Try it and I’ll taze you,” she hissed, straightening when the Asian woman’s eyes settled on her, flickering briefly to Bucky’s metal arm, which was wrapped around Darcy’s waist. She felt Bucky tense behind her and placed her hand over his, squeezing gently.

“You’re here,” Natasha stated as she walked into the room with Steve. She moved to stand next to Clint while Steve joined Bucky and Darcy.

“We were in route when you called,” Coulson replied.

“Thank you for coming,” she said without emotion.

“Thank you for calling,” he replied similarly.

Darcy shuffled closer to Jane. “Remember the time Eric ran around Stonehenge without his clothes on and it made the news?” she whispered.

“Yes?”

“This is more awkward.”

Jane nodded her head in agreement.

“We are looking at an operation that relies heavily on trust,” Steve said as he eyed Coulson and his team. “Natasha and Clint say we can trust you.”

Coulson raised an eyebrow. “And what does Director Fury say?”

“Jury’s still out on if we trust him,” Tony replied.

Coulson nodded once before he turned to his team to make introductions. Darcy was only half listening, still giggling at the names of the two scientists -- Fitz and Simmons; it was perfect – when the brunette Coulson introduced as Skye raised her hand in an awkward wave. “Wait,” Darcy stepped forward to get a better look. “Skye?”

The brunette turned to face her head on, her own eyes widening in recognition. “Darcy?”

Chapter End Notes

Just a heads up that there won't be a big Darcy and Skye reveal in the next chapter, but more of a meet-cute situation. I know it reads like a cliffhanger, but it isn't. I'm just sneaky like that.

Yes, Agent Ward is still with the team at this time. I don't plan on making him remain
a good guy, but then again I don't plan on focusing on the 'Let's take down Hydra' plan, either. But I felt he had to still be with Coulson and the team when I brought them on board because that's how things were in the story timeline that I choose to acknowledge when it suits me. :)

This chapter wasn't part of my original outline, but the conversations were playing in my head, so consider it a bonus chapter/fun filler.

“So. On a scale of one to meeting Thor’s parents, how uncomfortable was that meal?”

Jane ran the white platter under warm water to rinse away the last of the suds, handing the clean dish to Darcy. Both women hated washing dishes by hand, but they hated sitting in a room of spies and assassins, soldiers and agents, colleagues and former colleagues with much to discuss but little to say to each other even more, so when Jane announced she and Darcy would handle clean up while everyone did what they had to do, Darcy faked enthusiasm for the plan, then proceeded to spend the next thirty minutes dissecting every member of Coulson’s new team while Jane bustled around the kitchen.

“I had more to say to Odin,” Jane admitted.

“Yikes.” Darcy stood on her tiptoes to slide the platter into the cupboard. “I don’t know about you, but I miss the days when our biggest problem was getting you out of the lab and into a shower before you became part of one of Bruce’s mold experiments. Or movie night. Remember how long we debated movies for our first family movie night?” Darcy hopped onto the counter with a dramatic sigh. “Things were so simple then.”

“Yes, well, learning that a terrorist group you thought was eliminated in the 1940s is not only still active, but has an open gate to a secret government agency that has access to everything tends to override day-to-day concerns.”

“Stupid Hydra,” Darcy grumbled.

Jane snorted and ran a clean sponge over the countertops. Darcy refused to move, so Jane wiped around her. “How long do you think they’ll be doing whatever it is they’re doing?”

Darcy shrugged. “I’ve never been invited to a let’s-kick-some-ass-plan-making session, unless egging the Phi Sig house sophomore year counts, but even then, it was more of a search-the-grocery-ads-for-the-cheapest-eggs type of thing than an actual plan. Eggs are freakin’ expensive, you know; especially extra-large, which is what we were going for, maximum impact and all.”

Jane tossed the sponge in the sink and wiped her hands dry on the tails of her oversized flannel. “And you wonder why it took you five years to get your bachelor’s degree.”

“Dude,” Darcy kicked her foot at Jane’s butt. “Not cool.”

“Excuse us?” The woman named Simmons tiptoed – actually tiptoed – into the kitchen, Fitz on her heels. “We were told by Mr. Stark to see Dr. Foster in regards to lab space.”

Darcy was skeptical. “Tony is giving you access to his labs?”
Simmons shook her head. “Not his personal work space, no; nor yours, Dr. Foster,” she clarified quickly. “He mentioned something about extra space for Agent Agent’s lab monkeys?” She turned to Fitz for verification. He nodded his head.

“JARVIS?” Darcy asked.

“Drs. Simmons and Fitz are correct, Miss Lewis.”

“Alright,” Jane nodded. “I promised Thor we’d take Leo for a walk, so give me a second to grab his leash. I’ll be right back.”

“Right,” Darcy pushed herself off the counter. “Meanwhile, I’m going to –“

“Stay here with Drs. Fitz and Simmons until I get back.” Jane was firm.

“Fine,” Darcy sighed. She eyed the scientists with blatant curiosity. Jane would call her rude. Tony would call her subtle. “So, you are Agent Agent’s new team. How’s that going?”

Simmons face lit up. “Oh my gosh, we are having the most incredible time, aren’t we Fitz?” she gushed.

“Incredible,” the Scottish scientist answered dryly. "We almost died our first week on the job."

“An old friend of Coulson’s tried to kill us,” Simmons explained. “She wasn’t like that when he knew her, of course, but apparently time will change a person. Director Fury was not pleased with the state of the plane.”

“I don’t think Fury knows the definition of the word ‘pleased,’” Darcy replied.

“There was a ghost —” Fitz continued.

“He was more of a poltergeist,” Simmons whispered to Darcy confidentially. “He had some unfinished business.”

“And don’t forget the freaky Asgardian stick that made Ward and May revisit their worst memories.”

Simmons clucked her tongue in sympathy. “That was a tough day.”

“Wow.” Darcy had no idea what to say. “Sounds like you two are living the dream.”

Simmons nodded enthusiastically. Fitz hesitated, but eventually mirrored his colleague’s (Friend? Partner? Love interest?) lead. “And you,” the English woman continued. “How are you doing after your … after the … when you were …” She turned to Fitz who shook his head in the universal sign for ‘Don’t look at me to help you.’

“When I was abducted?” Darcy supplied.

“Yes!” Simmons cried. “I mean, not yes, like it was a good thing that happened to you, but yes, that’s what I was referring to." She bit her lip uncertainly. "Oh, unless I’m not supposed to refer to it? Agent Coulson briefed us on our way here, but he didn’t have many details, only was Agent Romanoff shared with him.”

“We don’t mean to intrude,” Fitz continued. “It’s just that your, um, event, is the catalyst for everything happening now, so to not mention it –“
“When it’s the elephant in the room,” Simmons clarified.

“Is difficult,” Fitz finished. “But we completely understand if it’s something you don’t want to talk about and apologize for putting you on the spot like that.”

Darcy smiled. It was strange to think that she'd been back for less than two days. To honest, she hadn't quite processed everything she went through -- she didn't even know what happened to spooky scientist guy and the guard she shot. There were moments when the absurdity of the situation threatened to overwhelm her -- seriously, when did this become her life? -- but she beat it back. She knew she was due for a nice, old-fashioned breakdown, but now was not the time.

“We saw the press conference,” Simmons told her, apparently uncomfortable with uncomfortable silences. “The one in which Captain America and the Winter Soldier revealed that you are their soulmate; their second.”

“Agent Coulson was shocked,” Fitz grinned. “He thought he knew everything about Captain America.”

“There’s a bit of hero worship there,” Simmons confessed in a whisper.

“So I’ve heard,” Darcy smirked. Now these were scientists she could get behind. She wondered if they always spoke around each other and over each other like this. It was almost like Tony and Bruce during a multi-hour science bender, but with accents and less explosions. But she barely knew them. Maybe there would be explosions. She’d check with JARVIS later.

“Everyone must be so happy you’re back,” Simmons smiled. “You must be so happy to be home.”

“I have no complaints,” Darcy told her, trying not to grin at Fitz’s snort of laughter. Seriously, she was going to watch video of these two working together like its reality TV. Their chemistry was the best will-they-or-won’t-they since The Office.

The sound of excited barking interrupted whatever Simmons was going to say next.

“Brace yourselves,” Darcy warned.

“What – ack!”

Leo bounded into the kitchen with his usual enthusiasm amplified by twenty because someone obviously said the W word. “Didn’t we have this discussion about spelling W-A-L-K?” Darcy complained to Jane as she pushed Leo away from Simmons. Unfortunately, that left Fitz wide open for a slobbery greeting.

“He saw the leash!” Jane huffed as she pulled on Leo’s collar.

“And all this time I thought you were a lab assistant.”

Darcy pushed her glasses on top of her head as Skye settled in the couch across from the ottoman, a laptop balanced in her arms. “And I thought you were a fangirl; not a SHIELD agent.”

Skye grinned. “Is there a rule against being both?”

Darcy smiled back. She liked Skye. She liked her the day they met outside of the Tower, the young girl breaking away from the herd of Avengers groupies to help Darcy balance her tray of coffee, messenger bag and storage container of treats (Brown Butter Bourbon Chocolate Chip Cookies; she
was rewarding Tony for going one week without antagonizing Jane). Darcy complimented Skye’s boots, Skye told her about the kickass thrift shop near Broadway where she bought them and the coffee went cold as they bonded over their shared love of Disney cartoons, conspiracy theories and bargain shopping. “You couldn’t tell me?” she asked, referring to their occasional texting marathons.

“Rule No. 1 of training to be a secret agent is no talking about fight club,” Skye replied, her eyes on her screen as her fingers flew over the keyboard. “Plus, there was a bit of time when I was banned from all technology. Not fun. I don’t recommend it. Besides, it wasn’t like AC recruited me. He arrested me.”

Darcy thought of Natasha. “It wouldn’t be the first time an arrest led to an agent.”

Skye looked up briefly. “Did you know you were on his shortlist? After New Mexico, he made a note to bring you in once you graduated, but then aliens attacked New York and all that.”

“Really?” Darcy tried to picture herself in Agent Black. Yeah, she’d be hot, but if SHIELD training was anything like training with Natasha …

“He probably still would,” Skye continued. “If SHIELD still exists after …” She trailed off with a little shrug and turned back to her computer.

Darcy didn’t say anything. One reason the two of them had bonded so fast was their shared lack of family. She had no problem imagining that Skye considered Coulson’s team her family, just like Darcy thought of the Avengers as hers. “You never know,” she told Skye. “Stranger things have happened.”

“I’m sitting in one of Tony Stark’s living rooms,” Skye replied, the sadness lifting as she looked around the room with wide eyes. “Believe me. I get it.”

Darcy turned back to her tablet and the Avengers’ Instagram account – as expected, nothing was posted in her absence, so she was making up for lost time by uploading a few pictures from her personal collection. Steve and Tony had asked her to do so to give the illusion to the outside world that the team was operating as normal, hence Thor and Jane’s stroll through the neighborhood with Leo.

“Pep suggested a press conference to announce your return, but we’re going to go with something more subtle.” Tony swiped a piece of bacon from Coulson’s plate. The senior agent said nothing; having learned long ago that Tony would only be Tony if people reacted. Ignore him and he eventually went away.

“You can do subtle?”

“I can do lots of things, kiddo.”

She was still waiting to find out what this subtle plan was. For now, she posted a photo of the platter filled with pancakes with the Thor and food hashtag, all the while watching Skye do whatever it was she was doing on her laptop. The agent-in-training asked JARVIS to relay a few things to Tony, which he must have responded to because she’d squeal and her fingers would type even faster. “OK,” Skye sighed. “This decryption program is on automatic pilot for the next hour or so.” She stood up and stretched, her hands reaching for the sky before she bent over to touch her toes. “That means I’m off to get my ass kicked by Ward in the gym. Want to show me where it is and stick around for medical treatment after?”
Darcy tossed her tablet on the couch. “Sounds like a plan.”

Bucky was watching Steve strategize, the blond man standing with Coulson and Stark in front of several holographic screens. The three men debated various scenarios while Fury weighed in from his bed. He had a brief image of Steve in a similar pose, though instead of jeans and a gray T-shirt, he was wearing his Captain America uniform, and smelled of dirt and gunpowder. He closed his eyes briefly, wanting to see if he could bring more of the memory – he was sure it was a memory – to the forefront of his mind, to find comfort in it. There were too many new people in the Tower, people he didn’t know; only one he’d ever heard of and that was in passing. He didn’t like the unknown. It made for too many variables. He knew they needed numbers if their plan was going to have any sort of impact, but anytime you increased the number of people, so did the possibility of mistakes.

At least they were keeping the actual planning secretive. Bucky didn’t feel anything for Fury when he entered the Tower bruised and bleeding, nor did he feel anything when he sees the man sitting in bed now, the white of the bandages a stark contrast against the darkness of his skin. He did, however, agree with him when he insisted on compartmentalizing the mission. They would divide into teams and each team would have one assignment. That would be their concern. They would not know the details of the other teams – how they would attack, when, where or who would be with them. It was safer that way.

Bucky barely reacted at the vibration in his back pocket. He fished out his cell phone, his eyebrows drawing together when he saw Barton’s message on his screen.

*Come to the gym.*

Bucky didn’t have time for games. *Why?*

*Ward called Darcy a housekeeper.*

*What?*

*She’s gonna kick his ass.*

---

He pushed open the doors to the gym just in time to see Darcy flip Agent Ward over her shoulder. The man landed with a loud grunt, tapping out after Darcy wedged her bare foot on his neck.

“See what I was saying?” Darcy called over her shoulder to the brunette – Skye, Bucky reminded himself - struggling not to smile as she nodded her head. Clint had no reason not to hide his amusement and whistled as Darcy offered a hand to the agent still lying on the mat. Bucky’s eyes narrowed as the man didn’t acknowledge the courtesy, instead flipping to his feet and gesturing for Skye to come forward. He saw Darcy roll her eyes and imagined she had a litany of comebacks going through her mind, but instead she nodded to Natasha who stood at the edge of the mat with her arms crossed, the slight tilt of her head saying more than Clint’s cheer.

“She’s in scary agent mode,” Darcy informed him as she walked over with her shirt and shoes in her arms. Holding on to Bucky’s arm for balance, she slipped on her gray Chuck Taylors. “Has been since Coulson showed up with his new band.”

“She was the one who suggested Coulson.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean she’s happy about it,” she said, shrugging into the green plaid shirt she swiped from Steve’s closet that morning. Bucky would take issue with the fact that Darcy
seemed to take more of Steve clothes than his, but she was wearing his green T-shirt with her black leggings underneath.

“Have I told you how sexy you are when you wear our clothes?”

She looked up, blue eyes twinkling with suppressed laughter. “Everyone in this place is walking on eggshells because of whatever Steve’s hatching up and you’re flirting?”

His hand went out to adjust the collar of Steve’s shirt, his fingers lightly brushing against her neck. She shivered at the contact. He felt himself harden at her response. Christ, would he ever not want her? “I’m not dead, doll. Want me to stop?”

She shook her head.

“Want to tell me why you’re beating up Agent Tight Ass?”

“Cause he’s Agent Tight Ass.”

Bucky smirked as Darcy took his hand and led him out of the gym. “That’s my girl.”

Chapter End Notes

I binge-watched Season One of Agents of SHIELD in a week. I still haven't finished Season Two. Is Season Three good so far?
So, according to my story’s outline, this was supposed to be finished at chapter 33. That obviously didn’t happen. I wanted to flesh some things out a bit more, as I would hate for the ending to feel too rushed, you know? Hopefully no one thinks the story is dragging! New goal is for the story to be over by chapter 40, if not sooner.

Bucky let Darcy lead him out of the gym, but when she headed for the elevator, he took a detour to the stairs, guiding her down as she babbled about Skye’s common sense taking a serious beating due to her crush on Agent Tight Ass. Bucky didn’t consider a girl with no last name who came under SHIELD’s radar because of her hacking skills a model of good judgement but unlike Steve, he knew better than to say so.

“I mean, OK, the guy isn’t a total troll, but come on! He’s wound tighter than a two dollar watch – and I thought Agent iPod Thief was the king of impassiveness. Compared to Agents May and Tight Ass, he’s the damn Energizer Bunny!”

Bucky had no idea what she was talking about, but he was glad she was distracted because he knew the second she realized he was leading her to the shooting range, he’d have a fight on his hands.

Darcy didn’t like guns. He got that. Most people, decent people, didn’t. If he had his way, she’d never have to touch one, but they were going to be invading SHIELD. If he was going to be forced to leave her behind, he was going to be damn sure that she could take care of herself. With that thought in mind, he tightened his hold on her hand and descended another floor. He knew from Natasha’s report that the bullet Darcy shot at the guard wasn’t life-threatening (Natasha took care of that after she eliminated the scientist; they couldn’t risk leaving witnesses). Darcy got lucky, managing a shot that rendered him unconscious long enough for her to make her escape. Bucky knew better than to rely on luck a second time.

“Dude.” Darcy stopped walking as soon as she realized where Bucky was heading. She planted her feet, one hand gripping the metal stair rail as if she was afraid Bucky was going to hoist her over his shoulder. The idea had merit, but another time. “No.”

“Dary –“

“No,” she repeated with a stubborn shake of her head. “I don’t want to learn how to use a gun.”

“Darcy,” he let go of her hand and took a deep breath. Why the hell was he always the bad guy when it came to her? When was it Steve’s turn to be the bad guy? “You were taken from the Tower.”

“Already knew that, have the battle scar to prove it,” she quipped.

Bucky closed his eyes. He needed to be calm and patient. He could make her see reason if he remained calm and patient. “I need to know that you are able to protect yourself if it’s attacked
again.”

“I seriously doubt that’ll happen, given the upgrades to JARVIS’ security measures and the super scientifically-treated glass with some official name I can’t even pronounce,” she countered. “Didn’t you spend hours trying to blast through it?”

He shook his head. “That’s not the point.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I kind of think it is.”

Jesus Christ, she was just as stubborn as Steve.

“Darcy.”

“James.”

“Um … excuse me?”

Bucky looked down the middle of the stairwell, guiding Darcy behind him in the process, and saw one of Coulson’s agents – one of the science ones; Fitz? Simmons? – cautiously looking up at him. “What are you doing here?” he snapped.

“James,” Darcy ducked under his arm so she could see who he was talking to. “Hey, Fitz!” The man waved. It was a stiff wave, as if he didn’t trust himself to fully relax, but Bucky saw the general affection aimed towards the woman at his side. “Did you get lost? That happens a lot around here.”

The man nodded. “I told Jemma I’d get us something to drink. I should have used the elevator, but I was curious to explore more of Mr. Stark’s design and since Mr. JARVIS –”

“It’s just JARVIS, Dr. Fitz,” the AI corrected with a tone of affection Bucky thought was reserved for Darcy. Apparently the AI had favorites. He wasn’t one of them.

“—said he would be sure to lock any areas in which I wasn’t welcome, I didn’t think it would be an issue, but then I got lost,” Fitz finished with a sheepish grin. “I left my phone in the lab, so when I heard the two of you coming down, I figured everything would be fine, but then it was obvious you were in the middle of a discussion I wasn’t supposed to overhear, so I kept quiet.”

“Why are you talking now?” James ignored the elbow Darcy jabbed in his stomach.

“Because I might have a solution?” Fitz replied uncertainly.

Darcy totally did not play favorites when it came to her scientists. Yes, Jane was her best friend (best female friend, she’d clarify if Clint was within hearing distance) and Bruce was too adorable for words, but Tony’s lab had fun things to play with, all of which put everyone on equal footing – until she walked into the workspace Fitz and Simmons temporarily claimed as their own.

“Ohmigod; it’s like Q lives here!” She rushed forward to study the array of tech the two scientists placed under a light table. Her fingers itched to touch, but she knew from countless James Bond marathons (Sean Connery was sooo hot back in the day) that grabby hands and super-secret spy tools did not get along. Still, was that ballpoint pen a tranquilizer? Or maybe it was a laser that could cut through metal? Did SHIELD seriously have something like that? “Excuse me?” she
waved to Simmons who walked over with a friendly smile. “What is that?”

Simmons looked down. “My pen!” She plucked it up and stuck it in the pocket of her lab coat. “Thank you; I was looking for that.”

Darcy’s not going to lie. She was disappointed. She made sure it didn’t show when Fitz joined her at the table. “Is this you?” Darcy gestured to the array of items. Fitz tried to play humble, but it was bouncing on his heels, eager to share his and Simmons’ creations. He launched into a frenzied speech that made very little sense to her, but managed to capture Bucky’s attention as he stepped closer to examine the pistol Fitz held in his hands. Simmons stood back, an indulgent look on her face, as she watched Fitz explain the abilities of the Night-Night Gun.

“I’m sorry; what do you call it?” Darcy interrupted.


“That’s a horrible name,” Bucky muttered.

“I told you,” Simmons said.

Fitz rolled his eyes. Apparently this was an ongoing argument, as he merely shrugged and picked up a different pistol. “This is what you and the others will take when you attack SHIELD,” he explained. “It’s called an I.C.E.R. –“

“Better name,” Bucky remarked.

“—and it has three times the stopping power of the Night-Night Gun.”

“So,” Darcy clasped her hands behind her back to keep herself from touching the non-lethal looking tech and to stop Bucky from dropping a pistol in her hands, “a shot from this will knock a person out? No killing?”

Fitz nodded.

“For how long?” Bucky tossed the gun from one hand to the other, testing its weight.

“Depending on the size of the target – height and weight – whether or not its human, alien, enhanced –“

“How long, doc?” Bucky interrupted.

“Long enough for the person to be restrained and/or innocents to get away,” Simmons informed him.

Bucky nodded, apparently satisfied. “I need one now to see how Darcy handles it, and then any you can spare to stay at the Tower.”

“Absolutely,” Simmons smiled as Fitz nodded eagerly.

Bucky turned towards Darcy. “Alright, doll?” She glared at him. It was not fair to turn on the 1940s charm now. “Please,” he tucked the pistol at the small of his back and stepped forward, one hand going out the tuck a strand of hair behind her ear before cupping her cheek. “This isn’t like before,” he spoke quietly, though both Fitz and Simmons had wandered away, talking over each other. “I know you can take care of yourself, Darcy. I’ve seen you do it. This is for me. I need to go with Steve, to help him take down Hydra for what they did to you.”
“And what they did to you,” she told him forcefully, her blue eyes flashing in anger.

“Yeah,” he breathed, though he didn’t give a shit about that, not when he knew that underneath her makeup, Darcy still sported a bruise on her cheek. “And what they did to me. But I need to know you’ll be safe while we’re gone, that if anyone was stupid enough to try and attack the Tower again, you’ll be able to get away.” He framed her face with both hands and leaned forward to press a kiss on her forehead. Instead of stepping away, he stayed like that, breathing in the scent of her, well aware of the two scientists watching them across the lab and not caring. After a minute, he felt Darcy relax against him.

“I guess you’ll have your hands full, trying to keep Steve from doing something stupid,” she conceded with a sigh.

He quirked his lips in a grin that made him look years younger. “Story of my life.”

They spent an hour in the shooting range. Bucky found a gun in the armory with a design similar to Fitz’s Night-Night Gun (Darcy didn’t care what anyone said; she loved the name) with the same weight. He loaded it with rubber bullets, and then had Darcy take aim at the targets, adjusting and correcting her form as needed.

It was almost kind of cool.

She wasn’t going to run out and join the NRA anytime soon, and it helped that all she had to do with the Night-Night Gun was hit the target to knock them out (which was helpful, considering that her aim was not improving, no matter how many times Bucky stood behind Darcy, his hands guiding her as she tried to shoot the bullet in the center of the target; his close proximity probably didn’t help, but she wasn’t going to tell him that), but shooting a gun was not nearly as terrifying as she thought it would be. Of course, she was aiming at paper targets; not a person. Not a guard who rushed into the room. Not a man who pulled a gun on her. Not someone who was bleeding when she checked for his pulse.

“Darcy?”

She was shaking. When did she start shaking? She was cold. Did JARVIS turn up the air conditioning? She barely registered Bucky taking the gun from her hands before he drew her into his arms, a stream of words she couldn’t make out falling from his lips as he held her close, his hands rubbing comforting circles on her back as they swayed back and forth.

“You’re OK, Darcy; I’ve got you.”

He said it over and over again, until the shaking stopped and the tears started. She cried. She cried like she wanted to when she shot the gun. She cried like she wanted to when Clint dropped from the ceiling. She cried like she wanted to when she climbed into Natasha’s car and saw Steve look at her with so much feeling that it nearly hurt. She cried like she wanted to when Steve later took a step back, to physically distance himself from her, from them, from whatever it was they were doing.

“It’s OK, Darcy,” Bucky whispered. “You’re safe, doll. Nothing’s going to hurt you.”

He was wrong. He was going to hurt her. Steve was going to hurt her. She tried to fight it, tried to ignore it, but she couldn’t. She cared about them. God, she might even love them! She knew she was getting in deep, knew that every moment she spent with them would make walking away that
much harder, but she couldn’t stop. She didn’t want to stop. She had her chance two days ago. She
could have let Steve be the martyr, let him end what they only just started. It would have hurt; she
knew that, but sooner rather than later would have been less painful, right? But she didn’t. She
didn’t want him to walk away. She didn’t want to be without him, without Bucky. She was an idiot.
Didn’t she remember what it was like to be abandoned, to wake up one day and realize you were
completely alone? That everyone you loved was gone? Was she really willing to risk going through
that again?

“What happened?”

Darcy jumped at the worried tone of Steve’s voice. Without thinking, she pushed out and
grabbed his hand, tugging until he was next to them, his large arms reaching around to embrace her
while she sniffled against Bucky’s shoulder.

“Shock,” Bucky told Steve. He pressed his lips against Darcy’s forehead. “Let it out, doll. We’re
here. We’re not going anywhere.”

She took him at his word, letting everything go as the two men pressed closer, their combined body
heat pushing away the chill that had settled in her bones. She felt Steve’s lips on the top of her
head, the strength of his body at her back as he mirrored Bucky’s swaying. She had no idea how
long they stayed that way, the three of them wrapped around each other, the two men supporting
most of her weight. When her tears slowed to shaky sobs, Bucky shifted, turning her so she could
burrow against Steve’s chest and he settled at her back, nuzzling her neck as Steve whispered
words of reassurance.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky murmured a few minutes later.

“For what?” Darcy hiccupped, her whole body jerking in movement.

“I shouldn’t have made you come here.” She shivered as Bucky pressed his lips against her neck. It
was an innocent gesture, comforting in its familiarity.

“It wasn’t just him.” Steve slid a finger under Darcy’s chin, lifting gently until she was looking at
him. “I wanted you to have something besides your Taser and panic bracelet, too.”

She shook her head. She wasn’t angry. She wasn’t stupid. While she knew the chances of someone
attacking the Tower again were slim, it wasn’t unheard of. She and Jane would not be going with
the others when they left. Seeking protection in a safe house wasn’t an option because they all
belonged to SHIELD. Even Malibu was out, thanks to Tony blabbing his address on national
television. Jane wouldn’t want to put her mother in danger and Darcy didn’t have family they could
turn to. “I’m OK.” She took a deep breath. “I get it. I don’t like it and the next time we all have a
free minute, I suggest we spend it creating a super-secret hideaway that, hopefully, we never have
to use.”

“I had other plans for our free time, but I guess we can do your thing instead,” Bucky mumbled
against Darcy’s back, making her snort and Steve shake his head in amused exasperation.

“Always the sweet talker, Buck.”

“Worked on you, punk,” he shot back.

Darcy snickered. She loved when they acted like an old married couple. In many ways, they were.
They were two halves of the same whole and for some stupid reason, something bigger than the
words adorned on each other’s skin; they thought she belonged with them. She pressed her
forehead against Steve’s chest and took a deep breath. She felt … better. Well, mostly she felt gross and in desperate need of a shower – she was not a pretty crier – but that tiny bubble of panic, the one that had been following her like a shadow the past two days, was almost gone. She felt … she wouldn’t say peaceful, but she certainly felt more in control, more like herself.

“What do you want to do now, Darce?” Steve asked as he rubbed his hands up and down her sides. She knew he did it to comfort, to soothe, and yet she felt the familiar stirring of desire at her core whenever he touched her. Was this really the same man who hours earlier had her pressed against the wall, his mouth on the most secret part of her as he tore her apart with his lips and teeth and tongue? The same man who later shuddered over her, her name a whispered plea on his lips?

“I want a shower,” she said. A long, cool shower.

“Good answer,” Bucky replied, his own hands flexing gently on her hips. “I’m in.”

She laughed and pushed herself of both men’s holds. Part of her wanted to say yes, to lose herself in the physical part of their relationship, but she couldn’t now, not when she was feeling so open and vulnerable. “I know we keep putting it off, but sexy shower time is going to have to wait a bit longer.”

Bucky pouted. Darcy wondered if anyone else knew that the Winter Soldier knew how to pout? And that it was freaking adorable?

Steve nudged Bucky with his arm. “And after? You want to go and grab a late lunch or something?”

Darcy was surprised. “You mean leave the Tower?”

He nodded. “I could use a break. Get some fresh air.”

She wasn’t buying it. While no one had said that the Tower was on lockdown, everyone had spent the last forty-eight hours in close quarters, Jane and Thor’s family time walk with Leo the lone exception … and now it all made sense. “This is part of the plan, isn’t it?” Darcy didn’t need Steve’s confirmation. She knew she was right. SHIELD was Hydra, Hydra was SHIELD. They knew there were bad guys afoot, but they didn’t know how many. She was taken by Hydra and escaped and unless Scary Scientist Guy blurted out that he actually said the word Hydra in her presence (Which she doubted because while the man was most like a psychopath, he didn’t strike her as stupid – of course, that was if he was still alive. She had her doubts about that, but was comfortable living in the land of the ignorant.), the bad guys hanging out amongst the good guys had no reason to think that the Avengers were going to go all, well, avenger on their asses. What better way to play up the “We have no idea that SHIELD has been infiltrated by evil?” card then to have everyone going about their business like all was well?

“You know that Stark Industries released a statement saying that you were back, but Miss Potts says a public appearance, all three of us, would go a long way in appeasing the public about our relationship,” Steve explained.

Darcy wondered when he was going to bring up the tabloid headlines that cast her as a harlot set on breaking Captain America’s heart. Jane practically ripped Darcy’s tablet out of her hands when she realized that’s what she was reading in the lab last night, the smaller woman muttering something about shoddy journalism and seeking retribution. Darcy hoped, for the media’s sake, that she meant legal actions. Pissed off Jane was scary. Her brains could cause some serious damage, not to mention rip a hole in the damn universe.
“So you’re expecting we’ll be photographed?” Darcy asked though it was more of a statement.

Steve nodded, though he didn’t look happy about it. His face, his demeanor, was resigned. She wondered if this was what he looked like during the USO tour. She also wondered if being the paparazzi’s new target was karma’s way of getting back at her for the hours she wasted reading and watching celebrity gossip when she could have been doing something more productive like volunteering with a charity or her laundry.

“It has the added bonus of potentially confusing and pissing off Hydra,” Bucky told her, though he too looked less than thrilled about the situation. All of them were seriously going to have to up their poker faces if this was going to work.

“Sounds good,” she said with faked enthusiasm. “I’m in.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Big Brother

Chapter Notes

Quickly adding this before the system goes down again! I will come back to fix typos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Darcy was sixteen, Evan Higgins asked her to prom. She was so surprised, she blurted out “Yes!” without thinking. Two days later, she approached him in the crowded cafeteria to tell him she changed her mind. She pretended it was because a school dance was beneath her, but the truth was she didn’t have the money for a prom dress and there was no way her foster family would foot the bill.

Evan ended up taking Melissa Dwyer and Darcy got a job at McDonalds so the next time a boy asked her to a dance, she’d have the money to say yes and mean it – only no one ever did. Logistically, Darcy knew she missed out on the teenage rite of passage because she attended six high schools in four years. She was never in one long enough to form connections that could potentially lead to a date to a school dance. The fact was, for all her bravado, Darcy didn’t have much of a dating history.


While technically this late lunch with Steve and Bucky wasn’t a date, Darcy decided, given her track record, to treat it as such. And if that meant kicking the guys out of her apartment after both insisted on doing a walkthrough for safety’s sake and cranking up Taylor Swift (if you were going to be a cliché, you may as well go the whole nine yards) loud enough to sing along in the shower, so be it. Maybe it was nostalgia. Maybe she was still emotional after her breakdown in the armory. Maybe part of her remembers the flutter in her stomach when Evan asked her to prom, the same flutter she felt when Bucky gave her flowers and Steve asked her to go on a date with them. It wasn’t that she regretted choosing to go to the bar with their friends – they still ended up in bed together - but it would have been nice to experience Steve Rogers and James Buchanan on a date.

She was finishing her makeup when she heard knocking on her door. She turned the music off, all warm and fuzzy feelings brought on by TSwift’s lyrics forgotten as she made her way to her door. How was she supposed to make an impression in her bare feet?

“There’s early and there’s too early. Guess which one you hit?” Darcy grumbled as she opened the door.

Thor was apologetic. “I am sorry for catching you at an inopportune time.”

Darcy opened the door wider so he could walk through, her eyebrows furrowed in concern as he did so without his usual hug. “No problem, big guy; just thought you were someone else.”

He looked at her, his face devoid of its usual good humor. “You are going out,” he stated, taking in her black-and-white striped T-shirt dress and sleeveless olive green military jacket.

“Yeah, lunch with Steve and Bucky. They’re gonna be here in fifteen minutes and I’m not quite ready, so if this can wait …”
He shook his head. “It cannot.”

She forgot about her shoes. “What’s going on?” Darcy took Thor by the hand and led him to the couch, drawing him down so they were sitting close together, bodies turned towards each other. “Is it Jane? Did something happen on Leo’s walk?”

Thor held up a hand. “My Jane is fine, as is Leo. A little girl gave him an ice cream cone. It was vanilla. Jane assured me it won’t hurt him.”

“Did you take a picture?”

Thor handed over his phone and Darcy swiped through the images, grinning at the delighted look on the dog’s face as he licked his treat, his oversized paws carefully holding the cone as he sprawled on the busy New York sidewalk. “It’s not quite late enough in the season to be the dog days of summer, but we should hold on to this and …” She looked up, her words trailing as she saw Thor watching her with a guilty expression. She reached forward to place the phone on her coffee table. “You look like hell. I didn’t know that was possible.”

Thor swallowed deeply, then sat tall, shoulders back, head up as he looked her in the eye. “I’m here to apologize.”

“Apologize for what?”

“For not being able to save you.”

“Save me from what?”

“When we discovered you were taken …” Thor pushed to his feet and stalked across the room, his jaw clenched as he recalled his anger at her disappearance. “After we watched the security feed and saw what happened to you, I went to Heimdell. I asked him to locate you, to tell me where I would find you, but he could not.”

Darcy was confused. Her understanding of Norse mythology might not be as vast as her knowledge of all things Harry Potter (she read the fanfiction and was not ashamed), but even she knew Heimdell was all-seeing.

“My father would not allow it,” Thor continued, his massive hands clenched in tight fists as he looked down. He walked back to the couch and resumed his place next to Darcy. She immediately put one of her hands over his and squeezed, leaning against his arm as he laced his fingers with hers. “He is upset that I choose to split my life between Midgard and Asgard. He does not like that I have declared my love for Jane, nor does he understand my refusal to abandon my fellow warriors. Part of me can understand; it has not been done before. I cannot fault my father for having concerns, but the fact that he was willing to let an innocent suffer because -- “

“Thor,” Darcy squeezed his hand once more. “I’m fine. I’m home.”

“I could have had you home sooner,” his voice was filled with regret. “You should not have suffered so. I made a promise to you, my Shield Sister, that I would let no harm come to you. I do not make such statements lightly, and yet it was a promise I was not able to keep.”

Darcy pulled her hand out of his grasp and punched him in the shoulder, ignoring the stab of pain that shot up her arm as she jumped to her feet. “You know, I’m getting really sick and tired of people apologizing for failing to keep me safe!” she fumed. She’d had her fill of the martyr act. "I wasn’t aware that everyone made a vow to keep Darcy protected at all times, that the safety of one person trumped, oh I don’t know, the whole world!”
“You are important to us.”

“Fine. Great. You’re important to me, too, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to take it personally if you get injured fighting aliens of sparring with Steve!” She waved her hand, cutting him off, when he opened his mouth. “I hate to break it to you, buddy, but I got in a shit ton of trouble before you fell out of the sky and managed to survive without superheroes looking over my shoulder.”

“Teenage mischief is not the same as abduction.”

“I will admit the level has ramped up considerably, but like I told Steve, I signed up for this! I could have walked away after you flew back to Asgard the first time, could have told Jane six credits weren’t worth whatever she was cooking up in that massive brain of hers, but I didn’t.” She sat on the coffee table and faced Thor. “You call me your Shield Sister. You love to tell people how I thwarted you with my Taser. You brag about it all the time! Is it just talk? Do you not think I’m strong?”

Thor shook his head. “You are one of the strongest women I know. You remind me very much of Lady Sif.”

Damn if that wasn’t the greatest compliment ever. “And what would Sif do if you tried to have this conversation with her?” Darcy asked, nodding gravely at Thor’s wince. “Exactly.” She leaned forward to kiss his weathered cheek, taking a second to rub her cheek against his beard. “I know you’re only saying this because you care and I agree that your dad has a major stick up his ass —“ she laughed at Thor’s deep chuckle “—but I need you to keep treating me the way you always did.”

“Warrior Darcy.”

“Exactly.”

Thor nodded once. “I will still worry; it is a bother’s right.” When Darcy opened her mouth to protest, he smiled. “But I will also place more trust in your inner strength and courage.”

She stood and gestured for him to do the same, walking forward until she was pressed against him, her arms going tight around his waist, grinning when she felt his arms wrap around her. Thor really did give the best hugs. “Good because if you don’t, I’m going to dedicate the rest of my life to causing as much trouble as possible just to annoy you. I might even go to Tony for pointers.”

Thor’s chest rumbled with laughter. “Fitting punishment indeed, little one.”

“Damn right,” she smirked, getting in one more squeeze before releasing him. “Feel better?”

“I do.” His usual smile was back. “I adore you, Darcy Lewis.”

“Feeling’s mutual,” she told him. “But you don’t get off that easy. Now you’re stuck helping me choose which shoes to wear. Be right back!”

Thor wandered to Darcy’s oversized windows, one hand going into the deep pockets of his jeans, feeling lighter of heart. He turned when he heard Darcy reenter the room, a black Chuck Taylor on one foot and a low-heeled sandal on the other, with a pair of black closed-toe heels in her hands.

“So we’ve got the sandals, but that means I’ll need to paint my toenails and I’m cutting it close as it is.” She kicked the shoe off. “You know what, forget the sandals.” She tugged on one of the heels, her body weight shifting as she posed. Before Thor could voice his opinion, she pulled off the heel. “Let’s face it; they’re gonna tower over me no matter what I wear on my feet and if we’re going to
walk, I’d rather be comfortable, not to mention the chances of tripping and humiliating myself are less likely in flats, so decision made!” She returned to her bedroom, coming out a minute later with the matching shoe on her foot and a plastic storage container in her hands. Thor watched in amusement as she dumped its contents on the coffee table, her fingers sorting through her collection of silver hoops earrings. After a minute, he moved to sit beside her.

“I try not to live my life with regrets,” he said quietly, his hand returning to his pocket to withdraw the small bottle tucked inside. “I am grateful my Jane had the opportunity to meet my mother before her passing, but I do wish she’d had the chance to meet you. She would have loved you.”

Darcy grinned. She’d heard many stories about Frigga. Talk about a female role model. “Really?”

He nodded, running a fingers over the bottle. “You have heard that my mother had the gift of sorcery?” After Darcy’s hum of consent, he continued, his voice thick with emotion. “Her powers were different than my brother’s. Loki … he was mischievous. He liked to cause trouble. My mother liked to help people.” He handed the bottle to Darcy. “She was known for her ability to bring comfort to those who needed it, to help them find the answers they sought, even if they didn’t know the question.”

Darcy studied the bottle. It was dark blue with a silver and crystal stopper at the top. She couldn’t see anything inside, but she could feel it. Weird. “I don’t understand.”

“What you hold in your hands is the last of my mother’s magic,” Thor explained. “When you are ready for the knowledge that it will give you, drink it before dreams overtake your mind. It is there you will find your answer.”

Darcy shook her head. “No,” she tried to give the bottle back to Thor. "I can’t accept this. Thor, this is your mother’s. You should keep it.”

“I do not have questions,” he said, placing the bottle in her hand, gently wrapping her fingers around it. “You do.”

“I don’t,” she argued.

His smile was gentle. “Very well.”

“I don’t!” Darcy was adamant.

“That is fine. It is still my wish that you take this. I know my mother would want you to have it.”

Darcy found it hard to believe that a woman she never met, a goddess of all things, would have such a request. “And how do you know that?” she challenged, unaware that Thor had stood up and was at her door.

“Your name is on the bottle.”

Darcy looked down as the words Darcy Lewis appeared on the side of the bottle in silvery script. “What the – Thor!”

He was gone.
Get ready for some feels in the next chapter or so -- and a little bit of humor I couldn't resist! Frigga's magic is going to be awesome!
Dine and Dash

Chapter Notes

So I'm doing NaNoWriMo, which means less time to work on this story. Unfortunately (or perhaps not) my original characters weren't talking to me today, so I was able to finish this chapter. Yay!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve watched as Darcy methodically stacked the plastic containers of coffee cream, one on top of the other, one hand ghosting by her creation to keep Bucky’s hands away as she added another to the growing tower. He caught Bucky’s eye, the other manshrugging ever so slightly in response.

She was distracted when she answered their knock on her door. They told her she looked beautiful (which she did; Darcy rarely wore dresses and the sight of her legs was a welcome distraction after two days in Fury’s company) and sheabsently returned the compliment before rushing around her apartment in search of her purse, only to realize the pockets of her jacket were deep enough for her phone, wallet and tube of lipstick – and she already had them on her. She stood still for a second and Steve could see the moment where whatever was on her mind before they arrived was pushed aside and she smiled, a real smile, as she took them in. She grabbed Bucky by the arm, grasped his hand, and sort of pushed and pulled them out of her apartment, all the while babbling about how they needed to go somewhere they didn’t particularly like because if the paparazzi spotted them at a place they loved, it would be swarmed and they could never go there again.

“You watch too much reality TV,” Bucky told Darcy, though the look on his face was indulgent. She replied by sticking out her tongue, which he took as an invitation to kiss her until the elevator arrived at the lobby. Steve hoped that was the picture that was taken when they walked out of Avengers Tower, Darcy’s arm still looped through Bucky’s while the hand that was clutching Steve’s tightened slightly as complete strangers shouted their names. He hated the cameras, hated that they were going to use the paparazzi as much as they were using them, Steve hoped their photos showed the flush on Darcy’s cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes. They wouldn’t know that it was Bucky who put that look on her face, but he did and that was enough.

There were questions and pleas to look this direction. They kept quiet, Steve and Bucky deciding that the statement they made while Darcy was gone would be the only time they’d comment on their personal lives; a decision Darcy agreed with after she approved the statement Pepper released through SI.

“I hate this,” Darcy grumbled softly so no one but the two men on either side of her would hear. She tugged on Steve’s hand. “Is this what it felt like for you on the tour?”

A dancing monkey. A person who did what he was told, who went where he was told and who smiled when he was told. Christ, he was still doing it. First for the USO, now SHIELD.

“Steve.”

He bent down and kissed her, ignoring the excited cries as the moment was captured on film. This wasn’t part of the plan. He didn’t care. Darcy was his soulmate, had been since he awoke from the
ice, the last piece of a convoluted puzzle that finally made him realize he was where he was supposed to be. She sighed into his kiss, her body going lax as he gathered her closer, the feeling of loss he’d been grappling with since she first uttered Hydra’s name fading as he focused on Darcy. She was here. Bucky was here. That’s all that mattered.

“Are we done playing for the cameras or are you looking to top Stark’s public displays of affection?” Bucky smirked.

Steve slowly backed away, his eyes never leaving Darcy as hers opened. “Yeah, we’re done,” he said just as a car pulled to the curb. Bucky led Darcy inside, Steve following after, slamming the door over the rise of voices begging for more.

“Hot plates coming through!” Francine balanced a large tray on one arm, shooing aside Bucky’s efforts to help with a hard slap on his hand. “We’ve got two double burgers, extra cheese, extra tomatoes, no ketchup, just mustard and pickles for Steve,” she passed the loaded plate to the blond, handing him the large basket of fries next. “Then we have one burger, extra cheese, no tomatoes or pickles, lettuce, red onion, mayonnaise and ketchup, plus two chili dogs and an order of onion rings for James; sure hope you have a mint on you, mister, if you plan on kissing either of these pretty people later,” she commented as she placed his food in front of him. Her casual acknowledgement of who they were and their relationship making each person breathe a little easier. It was Steve’s idea to go to the diner, the others agreeing after Happy assured them that he could get them there without being followed. He felt the last of Darcy’s tension leave her shoulders the second they walked into the familiar place, Francine’s shouted greeting of “Grab a seat and I’ll be there in a sec!” a calming balm. “Finally, for my favorite –”

“I thought I was your favorite,” Steve interrupted.

“Hush. You have enough fans as it is,” Francine admonished with a wink as she placed Darcy’s lunch – the meatloaf special with mashed potatoes and steamed carrots and a hard roll – on the table. “You all good on drinks? You need another milkshake, baby girl?”

Darcy finished sucking the rest of her ice cream through the straw with a delightfully loud slurp. “Not if I’m going to have some of that apple pie you were pimping earlier.”

Francine chuckled, her white curls shaking as she tucked the tray under her arm. “I’m not as old as you think I am, girlie. You’ve got two men like this in your bed, you need all the energy food can give ya and then some.” Steve ducked his head in embarrassment while Bucky barked out a choked laugh. Darcy buried her face in her hands, her own shoulders shaking in amusement. Francine simply rolled her eyes and moved to the next table, muttering something about youth wasted on the young.

“I will have that second milkshake!” Darcy shouted to her retreating back.

“Was already planning on bringing you one!” Francine called over her shoulder.

“I love her,” Darcy announced as she swiped one of Steve’s fries, dipping it the large glop of ketchup Bucky dumped over his onion rings. “I want her to live with us. She could totally give Tony a run for his money, don’t you think?”

“Don’t scare me like that, sweetheart,” Steve begged, happy to see that whatever was bothering Darcy was pushed aside with the arrival of their lunch. He hoped it wasn’t Agent Ward. He watched the video, the pride in seeing his girl bring the agent to the ground almost satisfying enough to make him forget the way he dismissed her as a housekeeper when she was showing Skye one of the moves Natasha had taught her.
“What are you doing?”

Darcy looked over her shoulder. “Helping Skye. What are you doing?”

Ward crossed her arms over his chest. “This isn’t playtime, Miss Lewis. Skye had more important things to do than entertain you.”

Darcy stood up, her back straight as she glared at the dark-haired man. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” he told her. “The Avengers might indulge you when they should be training, but we don’t have the luxury of magical hammers or iron suits, so why don’t you be a good housekeeper and go back to the kitchen so we can get back to work?”

JARVIS’ security feed showed Clint pushing away from the wall with a murderous expression, but Natasha’s hand on his wrist and a subtle shake of her head stopped him. Darcy didn’t look mad. She was amused. She took the elastic off her wrist and gathered her dark hair into a messy bun.

“New plan, Skye,” she called as she walked to the center of the mat. “Agent Ward volunteered for a live demonstration. Watch my hands to see what I’m talking about.”

“Miss Lewis –“

“What? Are you afraid to get beat up by a housekeeper?” she challenged.

Natasha’s expression didn’t change, but those who knew her well saw the dangerous gleam in her eye. Clint was texting something on his phone. Steve would later learn it was a message to Bucky.

“You’re distracted,” Darcy swiped another fry from Steve’s basket. “Usually, you’re finished eating by now and stealing food off my plate, not that I’m complaining,” she finished with a slurp of her second chocolate milkshake.

“I saw the video from the gym.”

Her face lit up. “Yeah? Is it as cool on screen as it was in real life? I was totally channeling Nat; could you tell? Did you tell JARVIS to send me a copy?”

“I think Stark is making copies for everyone for Christmas,” Bucky said dryly.

“I so hope you aren’t being sarcastic,” Darcy replied. “That was definitely one of my Top 10 Badass Moments; not quite tasing Thor territory, but a close second.”

“You know he was wrong, right?”

Darcy looked over. “Who?”

“Ward. When he called you our housekeeper. He was wrong.”

She rolled her eyes. “Duh. I think my official title is Director of Social Media, but I’m not one hundred percent sure. Pepper gave me like a gazillion things to read when I made the leap from lab assistant, but I might have gotten distracted when I saw my salary because suddenly I was on Go Jane’s website with several items in my cart. Don’t tell her that, though.”

“I don’t think it will come up,” Bucky smirked.

“Never underestimate Pepper,” Darcy warned before stuffing a bite of meatloaf in her mouth.
Steve felt the conversation slipping away from him. He put his hand over Darcy’s, ignoring Bucky’s sharp look. “You know you’re more than what he implied, right? Darcy, you’re the reason we became a family. Before … We fought together because we had to, but we weren’t a team, let alone a family. We lived in the same building, but unless we were fighting or training, we did our own thing. I know I told myself I was fine with that and I think the others did, too, but you changed that. We’re better now because of you.”

“You certainly eat better,” Darcy joked.

“Please don’t,” Steve pleaded, squeezing her hand. “I need you to know how important you are to everyone.”

She stopped smiling. She shifted in the booth, her eyes darting from Bucky to Steve. “Steve, you don’t have to—”

“I know I don’t have to,” he interrupted. “I want to. I need to. Sweetheart, you … you’re home, Darcy. You aren’t a housekeeper; you’re home. You’ve dragged two lost boys from Brooklyn into the 21st Century. You’re best friends with the world’s greatest marksman and a brilliant scientist. You remind Bruce he’s human and managed to get through to Tony. You paint your nails with a Russian assassin and taught the God of Thunder how to line dance.” She was staring at him. He couldn’t tell what she was thinking. Was she happy? Sad? Was he saying too much? Not enough? “Darcy, SHIELD has access to every professional with a ton of letters behind their names all hired to make sense of the Avengers. They couldn’t get through to us. They didn’t understand us. You do. You know who we are and what we need, usually before we’ve figured it out. You are generous and loving, stubborn and combative. You’re ours, Darcy, and we’re—all of us—we’re yours.”

Tears filled Darcy’s eyes. Steve leaned forward to press his lips against her forehead, partly to give her a moment, but also to keep himself from saying what he really wanted to say. He loved her. He didn’t know when it happened, but he knew it was true. He loved her and if she’d let him, he’d spend the rest of his life proving it to her.

“You can ignore him if you want, doll,” Bucky’s voice was gruff. Steve turned his head slightly and caught Bucky’s narrowed gaze. They had talked about this, argued about it. Bucky said it was too soon, that saying they loved her now, before they left, would scare her off. “Punk was never great at talking to dames.”

“He’s gotten better,” Darcy said softly. She pulled away and cupped the side of Steve’s face in her hand. “He might give you a run for your money.”

Bucky snorted as Steve turned to kiss the palm of Darcy’s hand.

“Hey now, this is a family place!” Francine teased as she approached the table with a tray of desserts. She quickly swapped their lunch plates for dessert, waiting with a raised eyebrow until Darcy took two more bites of steamed carrots before sliding over a piece of apple pie with cinnamon ice cream on top.

Darcy hummed appreciatively, her fork digging into the warm and melty concoction, the seriousness of the moment gone as all three focused on their desserts.

>All the eyes on me in the center of the ring Just like a circus. When I crack that whip, everybody goin’ trip Just like a circus. Don’t stand there watching me, follow me, Show me what you can do. Everybody let go, we can make a dance floor Just like a circus.
“The hell?” Bucky asked.


“Where are you going?”

“Outside.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s rude to talk on the phone at a restaurant. Don’t you remember lecturing Tony about that?”

He vaguely did, but Tony thrived on rudeness. “That was before.” Before she was kidnapped. Before Hydra. Before he realized how important she was to him.

She shook her head. “That’s a weak argument, Cap.”

“Darcy --”

“No. I’m going to take this call outside – shut up, Clint; yes I am.” She rolled her eyes. “I’ll be right where you can see me. If anything happens, break through the window and tell me ‘I told you so’ later, OK?” She brought the phone up to her ear. “Stop lecturing,” she snapped into it as she exited the restaurant.

“Smooth, Steve,” Bucky remarked, his eyes never leaving the brunette standing outside the window by their booth, her back to them (they never should have told her they can read lips) as she talked on her phone. “I thought we agreed not to say anything.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Steve argued.

“Basically did,” Bucky shot back. “Marriage proposals have said less than that little speech.”

Steve didn’t spare Bucky a look. “She needed to hear it.”

“You mean you needed to say it.”

Steve sighed. Yeah, he needed to say it. He didn’t expect to feel this way about her. She’d never know how much he despised the idea of her when he first woke up, how much he hated her words on his skin. The guilt he felt because of that was killing him.

“She wouldn’t blame you,” Bucky said quietly. Steve didn’t reply, focused on watching Darcy as her head bobbed up and down. Seconds later, she slid the phone into one of the pockets of her jacket and walked back into the diner.

“Is everything alright?” Steve asked.

Darcy nodded, pushing her plate away even though she only took a few bites.

“He told you they were leaving?” Bucky guessed.

“Yeah.”

Steve took her hand. “They’ll be OK. Clint and Nat, the stories they tell – I wouldn’t believe half
of ‘em if their reports didn’t back them up.”

Darcy linked her fingers with Steve’s. “When are you going?”

Bucky’s gaze slid over to Steve. “Tonight,” he answered.

Darcy took a shaky breath before nodding her head once. “OK, then.” She slid out of the booth, dragging Steve with her. “Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?” Bucky asked, taking out his wallet and throwing a handful of bills on the table.

“We’re going back to your place.”

“Why?” Steve asked.

“Because you’re gonna leave soon, which doesn’t give me a lot of time to do what I need to do to convince you to come back in one piece,” she replied, practically dragging him out the door, Bucky on their heels. She brought her fingers of the hand not grasping Steve’s and gave a sharp whistle, a cab pulling up to the curb almost immediately.

“Sweetheart –“ Steve started.

“You may not be as clumsy around women as you used to be, Cap, but there’re still a few things you need to learn,” Darcy told him. “No. 1 is don’t try to talk a girl out of rocking your world.”

Bucky snorted as he opened the cab door. “You didn’t say that exactly.”

“I was going for subtlety,” she grumbled as she climbed in the back of the cab after Bucky, Steve sliding in last.

“Subtle doesn’t work for that one,” Bucky grinned.

“Yeah? How about this then?” She leaned toward Steve, one hand going around his neck to pull his head down until her lips were near his ear. “Will you please take me home so I can take you in my mouth and hear you moan my name as I suck you dry?”

Steve’s jeans were suddenly too tight. He fought the urge to push Darcy across the back seat and fuck the smug look off her face.

“I take your silence as a yes,” she whispered with the quick nip to the lobe of his ear before she settled in her seat. Steve barely heard Bucky’s laughter over the roar in his head.

Chapter End Notes

I love writing Francine! I couldn't mention her Mets cap again, though, as I'm a Cubs fan. Sigh.

Big thanks to Liebekatze for the "You're home" line!
Whispered Confessions

Chapter Notes

Writing NSFW scenes at a coffee shop is awkward!

Don't read this chapter at work.

Or at a coffee shop.

This chapter switches POV a lot. I couldn't keep one voice in my head. They all wanted a turn.

(I reached 20,000 words for NaNoWriMo. I wrote this chapter as my reward!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Come on!” Darcy groaned, her head falling back against the mountain of pillows, Steve’s hands on her hips keeping her pinned to the bed as he mouthed at her upper thighs, his lips so close, yet so far from where she wanted.

He was torturing her. They were torturing here. The cab ride from the diner to the Tower was blissfully short. (The fifty dollars Steve handed the driver probably had something to do with it.) The number of photographers waiting outside Avengers Tower was considerably smaller, most likely Pepper’s influence. (She might be in Malibu, but her power and influence knows no bounds.) And the elevator ride to Steve and Bucky’s apartment was uninterrupted, thanks to JARVIS. Darcy was grateful to everyone helping her get laid. Well, everyone but the two super soldiers who must have had one of their non-verbal conversations prior to entering the bedroom because rather than the hot, sweaty sex she was anticipating, they were sweet, practically reverent as they removed her clothes, then their own. It continued as they stretched on the bed, one on either side of her, their movements slow, languid, as she fidgeted.

“What’s the hurry?” Bucky murmured as he ran his hands through her hair, the movement igniting an erogenous zone she didn’t know she had, the slowness of his motions a direct contrast to the urgency that had surrounded them, almost to the point of suffocation, the last few days.

Darcy tried to relax, to ignore the clench of need that wrapped itself around her heart as she tried to joke with Clint on the phone, the grasp tightening when Bucky confirmed he and Steve would soon leave, too. It was too much. They were making her feel too much. She shifted, one hand moving down to clutch Steve’s head, to try and push him where she wanted. “Why?” she whined as Steve moved slightly to the left, teasing, prolonging.

“Why haven’t we worshipped you before? Why haven’t we taken the time to show you how a woman like you should be treated? Why haven’t we explored every way to make you sigh and moan?” Steve moved up the bed, turning to his side to run a hand slowly up and down Darcy’s body, his blue eyes intense as he watched her. “We’ve wanted to, you know; the first time, the last time. Every time we’ve been with you, the plan was to take it slow, draw it out, and show you how precious you are to us.”
“And Steve Rogers always has a plan,” Darcy grumbled as Bucky kissed his way down her body. The smile he gave in response said everything.

Her thighs were trembling from Steve’s ministration. He followed the path the other man left, his own lips and tongue tracing the places Steve had kissed, tasted and sucked. She’d have their marks on her; the imprint of their fingers, spots marking where mouths and teeth came out to play. The thought stirred his blood. He wanted that. He wanted more than his words on her ankle, Steve’s on her arm. He wanted evidence of them on every inch of her. Christ, he wanted their fucking ring on her finger, a permanent declaration of his commitment to her, to Steve, to this incredible gift that the universe deemed him fit to receive.

“James,” she sighed as his mouth hovered over her. He could smell how much she wanted them, could see how wet they’d made her. He look up, his eyes darkening as he watched Steve worship her breasts, her hands tangled in his blond hair as he sucked a nipple into his mouth, his tongue doing something that made her cry out. His large hand covered her other breast, nimble fingers twisting and plucking. Bucky pressed his throbbing erection into the mattress and groaned, the warmth of his breath so close to Darcy’s core that she gasped, one hand leaving Steve to clutch at him. “Please,” she begged, eyes squeezed shut as she arched her back. “God, James, please!”

He wanted to make her wait, to see her fall apart for Steve before he swallowed the evidence, but her hand was twisted in his hair, her hips canting in constant motion, his name and Steve’s falling from her lips as she begged from them to stop, to keep going, to slow down, to go faster. Harder. Soft. Please, please, please. He lowered his head, his tongue flicking her clit her seconds before Steve pushed her over the edge. He slid two fingers inside her, her walls fluttering and tightening around him. He added a third, curving up until she stiffened. He grinned at her gasp, his finger tapping her G-spot in a constant motion as his tongue sucked and flicked her clit.

“Shit!” she yelled, sitting up so fast, she almost dislodged him.

“We’ve got you, sweetheart,” he heard Steve soothe, murmuring words he couldn’t understand as he fingered Darcy through her orgasm. He wanted her to have another one, redoubling his efforts when she tried to push him away.

“He wants more,” Steve told her, so in tune with Bucky’s needs and desires. “You can do that for him, can’t you? He wants to make you feel good, baby. Doesn’t he feel good?”

“Yes,” she groaned.

Steve felt like he was flying. He had one hand tangled in Darcy’s hair, cushioning her head as he brought her lips to his, his tongue sliding inside to tangle with hers, his mouth swallowing the sounds she made. His other hand was on Bucky’s head, keeping the man in place as he worked their girl over again and again. He knew what Bucky was like when he wanted something. Focused. Relentless. He had a knack for knowing how far to push Steve until he felt like he would break, but he knew Bucky would be there to catch him, just like they’d be there for Darcy. They’d always be there for Darcy.

He felt her tense. He pulled away, reluctantly, so Bucky could hear Darcy’s cry as she came, the
words that poured from her making no sense. He pressed soft kisses to her face, along her jaw, moving lower to mouth at her neck before nuzzling his face in her hair. He was an idiot for thinking he didn’t want her in his life, for believing he couldn’t love her as much as he loved Bucky. He meant it when he said she was home. She was their link to this new life, their anchor. “I love you,” he whispered into her neck, his voice so low he knew she wouldn’t hear him.

James heard Steve. He rested his head on Darcy’s stomach, enjoying the aftershocks that made her shiver. He knew Steve would break first; say the words he knew he’d been holding back for weeks, just like he knew the stubbornness Steve displayed when he talked about their second soulmate was his way of trying to protect Bucky from the unknown.

He remembered how surprised he was when he caught a glimpse of the words on his shoulder blade. It was days after he approached Steve on the street, no longer content to watch his soulmate from afar.

“Bucky?” Steve’s eyes were wide. “Jesus, Buck, it’s really you?”

“I think so,” he replied, the urge to wrap his arms around the man in front of him battled with the itch to wrap his hands around his neck. This was Steve. His soulmate. This was Captain America. His mission. Protect Steve. Kill Captain America. It was a jumble in his head. He couldn’t stop the words, the memories, snatches of a life once lived, once forgotten, combined with images of living he wanted to forget. “I need help,” he whispered. He’d wanted to wait. Wanted to be whole before he approached his soulmate. Steve deserved better. He always deserved better, but he wasn’t getting better. He was away from them. He knew that. He knew that made him feel something. Happiness? Joy? He didn’t know, but he did know that he wasn’t whole. He desperately wanted to be whole.

“What are you thinking?” Darcy asked.

Bucky looked up. Two pairs of blue eyes watched him. “I was remembering the first time I saw your words.”

The smile that graced her lips was slow, sweet, a complete contrast to the litany of words that fell from them minutes before.

“We were at the cabin, Stark’s cabin. Steve whisked me away because the memories were coming fast, piling up on one another. I didn’t know what was real and what wasn’t; what actually happened or what had been planted there. One minute, I’d be holding Steve, the next I was trying to kill him.” Bucky moved up to the head of the bed, pulling Darcy in his arms, watching Steve roll out of bed and walk around to get in on his other side. He tensed slightly. They waited. Sometimes he could cuddle, but never in the middle. He needed an escape, a way to break hold. When he didn’t move, Steve scooted closer, a large arm wrapping around him to rest on Darcy’s hip.

“This OK?” he murmured in Bucky’s ear.

Bucky closed his eyes, let himself feel. Darcy tucked her head under his chin. Steve rested his on top of Bucky’s head. It felt safe. It felt right. “It’s OK,” he replied.

“You tell us if that changes,” Darcy told him.

He tightened his arms around her. “Won’t change,” he told her. “This is how it’s supposed to be. I
didn’t know that when I saw your words. Thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. Thought it was a mistake. Thought it was something they did. Thought maybe you were a mission, someone I hurt or was supposed to hurt.”

*He curled into a ball on the bathroom floor, not feeling the cold tile on his knees as he rocked back and forth.*

“Bucky! Bucky, are you OK?” Steve pounded on the door. “Answer me, Buck!”

*He moaned, low and deep. A soulmate. Another. Steve never said anything. Did he hurt them? Was he supposed to hurt them? What if he hurt Steve?*

*The door crashed open. He was on his feet, crouched in a defensive position as Steve walked in, hands up. “I won’t hurt you,” he spoke softly, soothingly. “Bucky, I won’t hurt you.”*

“Words,” Bucky whispered, his voice hoarse from years of being muzzled. Steve didn’t care if he talked. Steve wanted him to talk, but he never made him. He never made Bucky do anything he didn’t want to do.

“Words,” Steve repeated. “I have your words, Bucky. You have mine. We’re soulmates.”

*Bucky shook his head. “More,” he said. He took a deep breath and turned around. His body fought against the movement. You never turn your back to someone! But this was Steve. Steve. Steve was everything. He flinched as Steve’s fingers traced the words on his shoulder. He shivered at the touch. It was strange and familiar. “Did I …” he swallowed, not wanting to ask the question, dreading the answer. “Do you think …” He closed his eyes. He couldn’t ask. He was better not knowing.*

“Bucky. Bucky, look at me. Please.”

*He turned, slowly. Steve’s shirt was gone. He was beautiful. His skin was tan, smooth. He reached a hand out. He traced the muscles on Steve’s chest, his hand resting over the other man’s heart. He had a flash of memory, of exploring Steve like this before. The awe of feeling muscles where there was once just skin over bone. A healthy Steve. He was always beautiful to Bucky, but now he was healthy. He wouldn’t have to worry about Steve getting sick, of leaving him.*

“Is this alright?” Bucky whispered, scarred fingers and cool metal exploring warm skin.

“It’s always alright, Bucky,” Steve’s voice was equally hoarse. “You can touch me as much as you want, but you need to see.”

“See what?”

*Steve turned. Bucky’s eyes went wide at the words on his skin.*

“These are … these are new?” Bucky whispered hoarsely, fingers ghosting over the words on Steve’s shoulder blade, aware of how the blond man shivered at his touch. “I don’t remember …”

“They’re new, Bucky. I woke up with them.”

“And I …”

“You have new words, too. Here,” he said, placing his hand on Bucky’s shoulder blade. “Same handwriting.”
“Do you know … have you met them?”

“No. Not yet.”

“I was desperate to meet you, doll. I needed to know you were OK. That no one had hurt you. That I hadn’t hurt you.”

She raised her head, her gaze steady as she locked eyes with him. “You’d never hurt me, James.” Her hands grasped his head when he automatically shook it. “Stop,” she commanded. “You aren’t that man. You never were. You are James Buchanan Barnes. That’s who you are.”

“I did things,” he whispered.

“We all do things,” Darcy shot back. “You at least have the excuse of being brainwashed. I was just stupid.”

He felt Steve’s chuckle before he heard it, his body trembling with the effort to keep it inside. Darcy buried her head in Bucky’s chest, her shoulders shaking as she laughed. Bucky rolled his eyes at the absurdity of the situation, then rolled until Darcy was under him, her eyes growing wide as she saw the want in his. It was time to get back on track.

“I want you.” Her voice was husky. She ran her hands over Bucky’s shoulder, her touch light on his scars. Steve wanted to feel her hands on him. He moved closer, kissing Bucky, then Darcy.

“How do you want him?” he whispered against her lips. She turned her head to kiss him deeper, harder.

“Like last night,” she replied, lips turning up at the twin groans that met her demand. “Except this time, James is in the middle.”

It was a shuffle of bodies, a shifting slowed down by strokes on bare skin, lips and tongues tangling together. He groaned. Bucky moaned. Darcy demanded they stop fucking around and fuck her. She was on her back, her body cradling Bucky when he slid inside her. Steve kneeled on the bed beside them, his hand curved around his cock, stroking as he watched. He wanted to be part of it. He had to be part of it, but he wanted to watch, too; to watch the people he loved more than anything take and give pleasure to each other, the same two people who take and give pleasure to him. He isn’t Captain America when he’s with them. He’s not a symbol to them, but a man. They don’t need him to lead or demand that he follow. They simply let him be. Would he ever be able to convey to them how much that meant to him? How much they meant to him?

“Hey.” He jerked at the feel of Darcy’s hand around his. He moved so she could grasp his cock, her hand moving in time to the thrusts of Bucky’s hips. “You gonna play?”

He kissed her. Hard. His tongue fucked her mouth like his cock was going to fuck Bucky. “Gonna make you feel good,” he promised on a groan.

“Talk’s cheap, soldier,” she teased, squeezing him lightly. “Prove it.”

They were so beautiful. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from the sight of them, Bucky’s eyes
closed as he held himself still inside her, Steve’s on her as he slid into the other man, their twin groans making her involuntarily twitch in anticipation.

“You’re gonna hold still, Buck,” Steve demanded in that commanding tone that made her insides turn to mush. “You’re gonna let me fuck you into our girl, understand?” The dark haired man nodded, his face flushed with effort. Steve tucked his hands under Darcy’s thighs. She couldn’t wrap her legs around both men, so he rested them over Bucky’s arms. “This OK, sweetheart?”

“Stop talking!”

He listened. His first thrust made Bucky groan, his strength pushing his cock deeper into Darcy. “God!” she gasped.

“OK?” Steve grunted.

She nodded, not able to find the words to describe what she was feeling. Her hands were wrapped around Bucky’s biceps, her fingernails digging into flesh and metal. He opened his eyes. Intent wasn’t a strong enough word for what she saw reflected in them, but Steve moved before she could ask. Cries of pleasure echoed throughout the room as he increased the rhythm, his hips moving faster. He was going to kill her, kill them. She was going to die from the most incredible sex of her life – and she was OK with that.

“Manners, Buck; ladies first,” Steve teased when the middle man tensed. “You can’t come until Darcy does.”

Bucky growled, but moved a hand in between the press of their bodies, deft fingers finding her clit and rubbing. She jumped, gasped, his touch the final push she needed to snap the coil of desire. She yelled his name, Steve’s. She forced her eyes to stay open so she could watch Bucky fall apart, Steve following a minute later. They collapsed to the bed, Bucky’s metal; arm keeping their combined weight off of her as Steve held him close. They mashed their faces together in a kiss that was nearly violent, but so fucking hot. Steve rolled to the side and Bucky lowered his body against Darcy, his face buried in her neck as he whispered words in languages she didn’t understand.

“Ye tebya liubliu. Ljubim te. Ich liebe dich. Es tevi miilu.” He said ‘I love you’ in every language he knew, every language but those he knew she’d understand. He couldn’t stop if he tried. He felt Steve’s hand on his back, an understanding that the words had to be said. He turned his head to look at the other man. He leaned forward and kissed him.

“I know,” Steve whispered.

They ate. Darcy thought of the pie she didn’t finish with a sad sigh. Cheerios were OK, but they weren’t pie. She pushed the yellow box aside and rooted around the mess of bedcovers for the box of miniature chocolate chip cookies she saw a few minutes ago. “Sex with super soldiers,” she spoke around her first mouthful of crunchy sweets. “Think I might be on to something that could revolutionize the diet world.”

Steve handed her the rest of his water with a shake of his head. Bucky stretched out on the bed, arms folded behind his head. He smiled lazily at Darcy.
“No,” Darcy told him.

“No’ what?”

“I know that look, James Barnes.”

He raised an eyebrow. “What look?”

“The I-want-to-have-sex-again look.”

“You’re wrong,” he smirked. “This is my I-want-to-take-a-shower look.”

She cocked her head. He was lying. She knew he was lying. He knew she knew he was lying. She knew he knew she knew he was lying. But they were sweaty. And sticky. And hell, she fucking wanted shower sex with James and Steve. “Fine,” she said with a resigned sigh. She tossed the covers aside and walked naked to the bathroom. She looked over her shoulder. “Coming?”

They were barely dressed when JARVIS’ voice reminded them that there was a world outside Bucky and Steve’s bedroom.

“Your presence is requested in the communal kitchen,” the AI announced.

“Everything OK?” Steve asked, his eyes automatically going to his shield. Bucky had a gun in his hand. Darcy wondered how many weapons he had hidden in the room. Was it more than Clint? Natasha? Clint and Nat combined?

“This isn’t an emergency, Captain, but it is a situation,” JARVIS answered.

“Define situation,” Bucky demanded.

“It appears Dr. Banner has met his soulmate.”

Chapter End Notes

Any guesses on Bruce’s soulmate?
The Big Reveal

Darcy was out the door seconds after JARVIS dropped his bombshell, her hair still damp as she rushed down the hall, the pads of her bare feet slapping against the floor. Bucky and Steve caught up with her at the stairs. Steve grabbed her hand before she could run down them.

“Darcy –“

“Hurry!” she tugged impatiently.

He planted his feet. “JARVIS said it wasn’t an emergency.”

“I know that! Aren’t you curious who it is?” She was practically quivering with excitement. For a brief moment, she understood what it was like to be Leo and hear Thor boom the word “walk.” Oh, she hoped it was Simmons. Or Fitz, for that matter. They would have so much fun doing Science! together. “All this time I thought Betty was his soulmate and she’s not! Do you know what this means? He can be happy! Doesn’t Bruce deserve to be happy?” Her head whipped between both men. “Well? Doesn’t he?”

Bucky shrugged his shoulders. “Yeah. Sure.”

“Exactly!” She turned to run, but Steve pulled her back.

“That’s still no reason to go flying down the stairs,” he cautioned, ignoring Bucky’s snort of derision.

“For the love of – fine! Turn around.” Darcy demanded. “Do it,” she repeated when Steve looked confused. He did. She pushed down on his shoulders to get him to crouch and climbed on to his back. Much better. “Happy now?” She took his grunt as he adjusted his hold as an assent. “Go!”

With Bucky chuckling behind them, Steve carried Darcy down the stairs to the communal floor. Darcy was sure they’d walk into the middle of chaos, but instead they were greeted by eerie silence – from the people in the crowded room anyway. The kettle was whistling furiously on the stove burner, but Bruce didn’t react, his hands cupping nothing (a shattered coffee cup was at his feet) as he stared at Skye. She was watching him with a similar shocked expression from her perch at the breakfast bar. Tony leaned against the counter, phone in hand and a gleeful smile on his face. Thor mirrored Tony’s joy, his arm around Jane as they watched from the living room, Jane glancing every so often at the laptop perched precariously on the arm of the sofa.

Fitz and Simmons were paused midway to the kitchen, two sets of eyes darting around the room as if gauging the best way to respond. Agents May, Hill and Coulson wore their usual looks of indifference. Even Fury, who was leaning against the wall in a way that Darcy guessed was designed to look as if he wasn’t leaning against the wall, was quiet and he was never quiet.

Agent Tight Ass looked pissed. That pleased Darcy enormously.
“So …” Darcy’s head was pressed against Steve’s as she peered around him to take in the scene, Bucky’s hand on her back to keep her from tumbling out of his hold.

Coulson looked over, his expression going from impassive to, well, still impassive (it was Coulson, after all) as he took in the sight of his childhood hero carrying the young woman who threatened to tase him over her missing iPod. “Are you injured, Miss Lewis?”

“Nope!” She replied, swinging her legs cheerfully. She paused and peered at her toes. “Although I could use a pedicure relatively soon. Hint, hint Tony.”

Several heads swung towards Tony. “What?” he snapped. “I have steady hands. I do it for Pep all the time.” He smirked. “Course, that usually leads to sexy times, but Lewis bakes me cookies.” He shrugged. “I consider it even.”

“You’re comparing sex with me to cookies?”

Tony held up his phone. “Everyone say hi to Pepper!”

Darcy waved. “Miss you!”

Pepper blew Darcy a kiss. Tony turned the phone around and pouted. “Where’s my kiss?”

Darcy could picture Pepper rolling her eyes. “You just compared sex with me to cookies – and you chose the cookies.”

“We have two dozen chocolate salted caramel cookies in the freezer. I’m not allowed to touch them until you’re here.”

“Fair enough,” Pepper conceded.

Coulson looked like he wished he wasn’t there. “That still doesn’t explain this.” He gestured to Darcy still perched on Steve’s back.

“Dude, you get kidnapped by Shydra – I think that’s the nickname we should use, Tony, if it’s still on the table – and then we’ll talk about post-tragedy benefits.”

“I was stabbed in the chest with an alien sword,” the agent said.

Darcy shrugged. “It’s not my fault your negotiation skills suck.”

May closed her eyes. “Can we please get back to the subject at hand? And take the kettle off the stove?” she asked.

“Yes!” Darcy wiggled until Bucky plucked her from Steve’s back and set her on the floor. “Who is it?”

“You haven’t figured it out yet?” Tony asked, switching the stove burner off with the flick of his wrist.

Darcy crossed her arms and studied the players once more. Fitz and Simmons were holding hands. It was adorable. It also crossed them off the list. Fury shifted slightly. Maria surreptitiously moved to his side so he could perch a hand on her shoulder. Their faces gave away nothing. Thor hovered over Jane, who gave up trying to pretend she was paying attention and was quietly typing away on her computer. May was a rock, Agent Tight Ass still looked disgusted and Skye … “Skye?!?”

The brunette broke her stare to glance at Darcy. Her face had lost all color. She opened her mouth,
but no words came out. She swallowed and tried again. “He said …” She gestured helplessly at Bruce. “He’s mine.” Her face went soft as the enormity of the simple statement sunk in. Darcy automatically took Steve’s hand, lacing her fingers through his. At the same time, Bucky slid his arm around her waist. “He’s mine,” Skye repeated with a smile.

Her words seemed to snap Bruce out of his trance. He took a step back, bumping into Tony who steadied him with a hand on his elbow. “Well done!” the billionaire crowed. “Guess we know now why it took so long for your words to show up, huh?” He gestured to Skye. “Jailbait here wasn’t alive for most of your life!”

Bruce closed his eyes. “Tony.”

“What? She’s hot!”

“Tony!” Pepper snapped over the phone. She raised her voice so she could be heard over the phone (because as much as Tony liked to bitch about Apple, the StarkPhone still needed tweaking). “I apologize for him, Skye. I’m sure you’re quite lovely and look forward to meeting you in person.”

Skye looked nervous again. “Um … me, too?” She replied, tearing her eyes from Bruce to shoot Darcy a desperate look.

“You’re making her nervous, Pepper!” Darcy shouted. “I’ll call you later when things aren’t so awkward.”

“Good luck with that,” Bucky muttered, grunting when Darcy elbowed him in the stomach.

Tony said good bye to Pepper and tossed the phone on the counter. Crossing his arms over his chest, he eyed Bruce, then Skye, then Bruce again. The physicist looked like he wanted to flee the room and never return. (Darcy could sympathize. At least her not-so-picturesque soulmate meet and greet happened among friends. She doubted May and Maria were capable of smiling.)

“Um … Skye, is it?” Bruce asked, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck.

Skye nodded encouragingly.

“I …” he took a deep breath. “I understand if our situation isn’t what you imagined,” he spoke in a rush. “I never expected to meet my soulmate. It’s one of the reasons why I isolated myself from the world. I didn’t want her to feel obligated.” He tried to smile reassuringly. “I want you to know that I don’t expect anything from you.”

Darcy watched as Skye’s expression changed from hopeful to disappointed. “You don’t want me as your soulmate?” she asked. Behind her, Simmons looked like she was going to cry. Fitz put his arm around her shoulder.

Bruce looked shocked. “What? Why would you think that?”

“You just said you don’t expect anything from me. You don't want me.”

“No! I didn’t!”

“You kinda did,” Tony told him.

Bruce glared at his friend. “I didn’t mean it as rejection.”

Tony smirked. “Might want to explain that to her.”
Bruce looked flustered. For a second, barely a second, there was a green tint to his skin. Skye leaned forward. “Don’t be upset,” she told him. “I get it. You’re this brilliant scientist guy who saves the world on a regular basis and I’m a hacker/SHIELD trainee who was arrested for sticking her nose where it doesn’t belong.”

“No!” Bruce shouted, making Steve and Bucky tense slightly. “I mean, not no, I don’t want you – not that I don’t want you, I do want you …” He groaned and ran his hands through his hair. “I don’t want you to feel obligated,” he finished with a resigned sigh. “I know being my soulmate comes with baggage.”

“Hulk-sized baggage,” Tony added.

“Tony!” Darcy shouted.

“What?!”

“Maybe we should leave. Give Skye and Bruce their privacy,” Steve suggested.

Coulson nodded. Tony shook his head. Ward snorted in disbelief. “I can’t believe any you actually support this situation.”

“Who?” Tony asked.


“It’s not a situation, Agent Ward,” Thor spoke deliberately. “The universe has spoken.”

“Screw the fucking universe!” Ward shouted. “We’re talking about The Hulk and Skye.”

“No, we’re talking about Dr. Bruce Banner and Skye,” Darcy said slowly, as if talking to an angry toddler. It was the voice she used with Jane after a Science! bender.

“They’re one and the same,” Ward argued. “He’s dangerous.”

Darcy laughed. “Most of the people in this room are dangerous, including you Agent Tight —” Bucky coughed. “—Agent Ward.”

“We can control ourselves,” Ward sniffed.

“So can Bruce,” Darcy pulled away from Steve and Bucky to give the scientist a hug. “I am so excited for you,” she whispered in his ear. “Skye’s great. She’s going to make you so happy and you are going to make her happy.” Bruce didn’t return Darcy’s hug, but he did lean his head against hers for a second. “Ohmigod!” Darcy ran around the counter and hugged Skye. “Does this mean you’ll move into the Tower?” She looked at Tony. “She can live here, right? We so need another female in this place!”

“Of course she can live here.” Tony spoke as if it was a done deal though, knowing him, it probably was.

Skye was back to looking shocked. “You want me to live here?”

Darcy nodded. “No offense, Coulson, but planes aren’t the best for an accidental Hulk out. And while I’m sure the bus has a great lab for doctors Fitz and Simmons, we kind of need someone with medical experience here because, well, Tony. And Jane.”

“Hey!” Tony and Jane.
“I can hear, you know!” Jane added from her spot on the couch.

“You’re actually paying attention?” Darcy asked. “Color me shocked.”

“Enough!” Ward shouted. “This place is insane! You people are in the middle of planning a covert operation and you have Captain America giving fucking piggybacks to a groupie –“

Darcy’s hands automatically went for her taser. Fuck! No pockets. Dresses sucked.

“– Fitz is giving SHIELD-issued tech to the Winter Soldier –“

“Technically, I gave it to Darcy,” Fitz interrupted.

“—and everyone is apparently OK with the fucking Hulk being paired with one of ours?”

“We’re all on the same side,” Coulson said calmly.

Darcy stared at Ward, his tirade sparking a memory in her mind. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that, Agent.”

“What do you mean?” Skye asked Darcy.

Darcy cocked her head. Ward was glaring at her, his dark eyes filled with something bigger than anger at the frustration. She tried to picture his face covered in black, with only his eyes showing. “Agent Ward, where were you on June 2?”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

He crossed his arms over his chest.

“We were grounded,” Fitz spoke up.

“We’d just wrapped up the –“ Simmons stopped at May’s glare. “Um, something I’m not allowed to say. We were given 48 hours off duty.”

“Ward left as soon as we landed,” Skye pushed herself out of her chair and stood between Ward and Darcy.

“Where did you go?” Steve asked.

Ward didn’t answer.

“Agent Ward, where did you go during that time?” Fury asked.

Ward sniffed. “Are you fucking serious? You’re questioning me?”

“You were here,” Darcy said, the remembered voice that was a murmur in her head getting louder. “You were one of the people who came for Jane, who took me instead.”

“Miss Lewis, you can’t accuse –“

“I’m not accusing,” Darcy interrupted Maria. “I’m stating a fact. Something felt familiar when we fought earlier. I figured it was the technique Natasha taught me, that is was a SHIELD thing, but that wasn’t it! He felt familiar because we fought before, only he was wearing a mask and had a
fucking knife!”

Steve’s hand on Bucky kept him from attacking. “What the –“

“Let her finished,” he said quietly. “She needs this.”

Ward wasn’t paying attention to the super soldiers. His focus was on Darcy. His expression made it obvious he thought she was crazy. She could work with that. She was an expert at pushing people’s buttons.

“Has anyone else noticed how familiar Agent Ward seems to be with the Tower?” She looked around the room. “It’s like he’s been here before. Or perhaps he memorized the layout.”

“And where would I get that?” Ward asked.

“SHIELD,” Darcy replied. “Fury had people planted to keep an eye on the team, on the work Jane was doing in her lab; work that used to be under his control until Tony swooped in. I’m sure they passed on a lot of information, including the Tower’s schematics and Jane’s research, before Tony figured it out. Ironically, that was thanks to Fury. Had he not been such an ass after Steve and Bucky and I said each other’s words, he might still have a spy or two around here. Short-sighted,” she remarked with a sad shake of her head. “You can relate, yes? You grabbed the wrong person. I’m not saying mixing me up with a teeny-tiny scientist who could blow over on a windy day is a dumbass mistake but … You know what? Yeah, I am. Do bad guys really recruit from the bottom of the barrel? Is that why they're so willing to sign up and get their asses handed to them?”

“You’re crazy,” Ward told her.

She shrugged. “Probably, but at least I’m not Hydra.”

“I’m not Hydra!” Ward exploded.

“Prove it,” Darcy invited. “Tell Fury where you were on June 2. Ooh, let me guess! You’re going to produce the time-stamped receipts I’m sure you have tucked away for this very reason? Maybe dig up the surveillance video from a restaurant or hotel. Go ahead! Show us everything that proves you are where you claimed to be except for actual people who saw you.” She snorted at the ridiculousness of the situation. “My God, Ward! Anyone watching Law and Order could do better! You’re a fucking Shydra agent and you couldn’t go beyond Covering Your Tail 101?”

He snapped. She was almost bummed he did so quickly. She really wanted to toss in a line or two from A Few Good Men.

“Fucking bitch!” Ward hissed as he grabbed Darcy’s arm. “They should have shot you when the realized you weren’t Foster!”

“They should have shot you when they realized you grabbed the wrong girl!” Darcy shouted just as Bucky punched Ward in the jaw. The agent fell back with a thud, Bucky's metal fist knocking him out. Steve wedged his booted foot under the man’s chin for good measure. “Dammit, James! I wanted to do it!”

Bucky turned around, tugging Darcy to him until she was flushed against his chest. “Sorry, doll,” he murmured as he wrapped his arms around her. “It's kind of ingrained to hit people who threaten you.”

“Yeah, well,” Darcy shrugged as she slumped against him. “I left my taser in my jacket, so I guess it’s OK.”
“Ward’s Hydra?” Fitz asked.

“How is that possible?” Simmons continued.

“Believe me, we’ll find out,” May spoke through gritted teeth.

“Can I kick him?” Jane asked, having left the couch to glare at the unconscious man on the floor. “I really want to kick him.”

“We normally frown on that, Dr. Foster,” Coulson said, wincing when Steve shifted so Jane could kick Ward in the side.

“Feel better?” Darcy asked.

“A little," she shrugged. "How are you?"

“Kind of freaked,” Darcy admitted. “We knew Hydra scum was part of SHIELD, but I didn’t think anyone here was part of it and – Clint! Steve! Clint and Nat left already!” Her hair whipped Jane in the face as she tried to look at a million people at once. “Did Ward know where they were going? He could have given Hydra a heads up! They could be walking into a trap!”

Steve allowed May to take over watching Ward. He rested his hands on Darcy’s shoulders. “They’re fine,” he promised. “Ward didn’t have access to anyone’s missions besides his own.”

“The Captain insisted on it,” Maria added.

Darcy wasn’t convinced. “He still could have passed something on!”

Fury looked pissed. OK, he always looked pissed, but this level of angry was above and beyond his normal level of rage. “We move things up,” he stated through gritted teeth. “The whole fucking timetable.” He turned to Maria. “Contact Romanoff and Barton. Let them know.” Maria turned and walked away. Fury looked down at Ward. “We need to keep him unconscious. Miss Lewis? Feel like giving that SHIELD tech a practice run?”

Darcy’s mouth fell open. “Are you serious?”

“No, he isn’t,” Coulson said at the same time Fury replied, “It’s the least I could do.”

“Awesome!”

Bruce cleared his throat. “I can’t stay behind,” he announced. “I know that was the plan, that I would stay at the Tower with Jane and Darcy, but with your permission,” he said with a nod to Skye, “I’d like to join your team instead.”

Skye beamed. “You want to come with me?”

Bruce flushed slightly. “I want to make sure you’re OK.”

“Awww,” Darcy, Jane and Simmons cooed as Tony thumped Bruce on the back.

“I don’t like this,” Bucky said as he added another gun to his duffle bag. Darcy stopped counting after twelve.
“That’s just ‘cause you haven’t met Rhodey,” she told him. “He’s cool.”

“He’s Stark’s best friend.”

“Yeah, but he’s like the anti-Stark. Tony is the devil on your shoulder and Rhodey’s … well, I don’t think he’s an angel, exactly, but he’s the voice of reason disputing everything coming out of miniature devil Tony’s mouth.” Bucky looked confused. She didn’t blame him. She was usually better at this. Oh well. It wasn’t every day a girl got to confront the man who fucking stabbed her. “Still no idea how long you’ll be gone?”

Bucky shook his head. The plan was for each team to hit a S.H.I.E.L.D. HQ at the same time. From there, the teams would splinter with half focused on weeding S.H.I.E.L.D from Hydra. The intel Natasha was able to download had the potential to lead to non-S.H.I.E.L.D. Hydra bases, but they needed S.H.I.E.L.D.’s tech to unlock it. That was Tony’s mission. After he accessed that information, the teams not interrogating S.H.I.E.L.D. employees would attack the identified bases.

“We’ll check in when we can, doll.”

“I know.” Darcy picked at a loose thread on the comforter spread over the guy's bed.

“Hey,” Bucky slid his hand under her chin, gently lifting until their eyes were locked on each other. “I’ve followed Steve on crazier missions. We’re gonna do this and we’re gonna come back to you. Promise.”

She wanted to believe him. She nodded because she knew he needed to see it, needed to think she believed it.

“Darcy, I fell off a train, was fucking brainwashed for decades and still found my way back to Steve. There’s no way Hydra will keep me from you.” He leaned down and pressed his lips against hers in a rough, bruising kiss, breaking off before she could react.

“Time to go,” Steve spoke from the doorway, already in uniform. His shield was strapped to his back. Darcy stood on shaky knees and walked to Steve, letting him pull her close. “We’ll be back,” he rested his chin on top of her head. “I know we can’t make you believe that, but it’s the truth.”

“Be careful,” she whispered into his chest, the image of the star on his uniform blurring as she blinked back tears.

“Been telling the punk that most of our lives,” Bucky tossed his duffle over his shoulder.

“Make sure he listens this time,” she demanded.

Darcy followed them to the elevator. They were taking one of Tony’s cars, Coulson’s team having left (with Ward) in their bus while Maria and Fury boarded a S.I. helicopter to DC. Tony and Thor were flying to their rendezvous point.

The trio was silent as the elevator made the descent to the garage. Darcy wanted to say something. The words she knew both men wanted to hear were there, in her mind, but she couldn’t make herself say them. To say what she was almost one hundred percent sure she was feeling was risky. She was brave, but she wasn’t that brave. She honestly didn’t know if she could ever be that brave again, so she remained silent, her arms wrapped around her middle protectively as she watched Steve and Bucky store their gear. When they approached her for one last hug, she returned the gesture with everything she had.

“We love you, Darcy,” Steve ignored Bucky’s frustrated curse. He framed her face in his large
hands, his blue eyes searching hers. “You don’t have to say it back, sweetheart. You don’t ever have to say it back, but you do have to know it.”

They were gone less than a minute before her tears started falling.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know why, but the idea of Bruce and Skye together makes me happy. She's desperate to have a family and he thinks he's unlovable, so of course the world pairs him up with someone who will love the crap out of him. I'm not going to write this, but I picture her continuing her SHIELD training with Coulson, but living with Bruce in the Tower when she's off-duty. They will be beyond adorable during these breaks, spending every single second together and making everyone simultaneously coo and gag at the sweetness of it all.

I'm not in love with the good-bye scene. I was still in the comedy place of the kitchen scene and the shift to heartfelt wasn't happening. I didn't want to drag it out to another chapter because I have an outline and if I've ever going to finish this thing, I must stick to the outline!

Thanks everyone for reading!
Sweet Dreams

Darcy turned the electric mixer on medium speed, trusting the egg whites to do their thing while she checked on the simple syrup slowly heating on the stovetop. Flour was smeared on her cheeks, cookie dough crusted underneath her fingernails and numerous stains on the gray T-shirt she stole from Bucky’s dresser, Steve’s hoodie long since abandoned on one of the high stools in front of the breakfast bar.

“I thought Science! happened in the labs.”

Darcy spared a quick look to grin (grimace) at Rhodey before focusing on the batter once again. It was her seventh hour in the kitchen. She gave up sleeping more than an hour at a time three days ago. After she passed an entire day channel surfing every news site in the country thanks to Tony’s amazing satellite options, Rhodey (and Pepper) decided it would be best to limit her screen time, too.

“How am I supposed to know that they’re OK if I’m not watching?”

“No one is watching, Darcy; this is a covert operation.” Even on a tablet screen, Pepper’s calm demeanor was evident. Normally, cool and collected Pepper was a positive influence on Darcy’s hyperactive personality. That was before nearly everyone she cared about disappeared to go who-knows-where to do who-knows-what with no word whatsoever. “JARVIS is monitoring all news sites. The minute he gets something, he’ll let us know.”

“But he’s still connected to Tony, right? He’s in the suit!”

Pepper’s resolve crumbled, just for a second, but Darcy saw it. That scared her more than the team’s silence. "If he is, he’s not telling. This is for their safety as much as ours."

“I hate this,” Darcy sniffed. She would not cry. She cried enough after Steve and Bucky left. She had to be strong for Jane. For Pepper. And because Natasha would kick her ass if she wasn’t.

“I do, too,” Pepper said.

With Jane burying her worries in Science! and Rhodey monitoring what little secured communications he had access to (when he wasn’t obsessively checking the Tower’s security), Darcy turned to baking. She was determined to have everyone’s favorite snacks available when they got home.

They would come home. She refused to think otherwise.
Three more hours passed before Darcy plopped on the kitchen floor in exhaustion. She’d stored two dozen double chocolate cupcakes with dark chocolate frosting in Clint’s freezer and more than three dozen creampuffs in Tony and Pepper’s. (Her plan was to assemble the croquembouche as soon as she heard Tony was on his way back to the Tower.) She baked three different types of brownies with walnuts, pecans and cashews for Bruce (and Rhodey, who apparently had a sweet tooth and loved licking the spoon), and stocked Steve and Bucky’s freezer with numerous variations of the classic chocolate chip cookie -- they were fans of the classic comfort food. She swiped a few cookies from each batch to make Thor’s beloved cookie ice cream sandwiches. Natasha’s macaroons took the most time and effort, but Darcy was pleased with the plastic storage container of raspberry, caramel, chocolate, lemon and lavender French cookies. Still leery of entering Natasha’s suite without the redhead by her side, Darcy had labeled the container with Natasha’s name and a death threat to all who touched it before sticking it in the communal freezer.

“You don’t look so good.”

Darcy peered through the oily strands of her hair and stuck her tongue out at Jane. “Take a good look, Janey; this is you after too much Science!”

Jane joined Darcy on the floor, the two of them shifting until Darcy was sitting with her back against the pantry door, legs stretched in front of her, with Jane’s head resting on her thigh. Darcy’s fingers automatically went to Jane’s hair, tugging it free from the French braid she’d put it in last night during their chick flick movie marathon. The lineup included Mean Girls, Bring It On, Pitch Perfect and Darcy’s personal favorite: Waitress. (She told Jane she loved it because of the pies, but they both knew it was really because of Nathan Fillion.)

Rhodey barely made it through Mean Girls before he called it a night.

“You need to sleep,” Darcy said as she smoothed Jane’s hair. She knew the practice would knock the scientist out faster than an Ambien.

“I will if you will,” Jane murmured, already several miles into her road trip to dream world. Darcy closed her eyes and kept running her fingers through Jane’s hair until Rhodey appeared. “Perfect timing.”

He lifted the unconscious Jane in his arms with little effort. “What about you?” he asked, his dark eyes filled with concern. “You’ll make yourself sick if you don’t sleep soon.”

“That sounds rehearsed.”

He grinned. “I’ve said it to Tony enough over the years – but don’t change the subject.”

“I know,” Darcy sighed and pushed herself to her feet. “I’ll try. I just want to clean up first.”

“No,” Rhodey said forcefully, though he kept his voice low so not to disturb Jane, who was drooling on his shoulder. “We’re all going to your floor and you are going to bed. I’ll clean the kitchen.”

Darcy doubted she’d sleep once she was in bed, but she hated cleaning up after a baking bender, so she nodded and followed Rhodey to the elevator, hesitating outside Jane and Thor’s apartment door. Since everyone had left, she had Jane had slept together. Or tried to, anyway. Neither woman had been particularly successful, spending most nights camped on the couches on the communal floor with various movies playing in the background. With Jane already dead to the world, Darcy didn’t want to risk her own restlessness on waking her exhausted friend. Instead, she helped Rhodey tuck Jane into bed before walking across the hall to her apartment, Leo at her heels.
“I can take him,” Rhodey offered. Darcy shook her head. Having Leo by her side helped. “All right then,” Rhodey said, pulling Darcy in for a brief hug. “I know it’s hard, kiddo, but try to get some sleep, OK?”

She nodded, too tired to talk. Lifting her hand in a careless wave, she shuffled into her apartment. Leo’s large body pushed past hers to reach her bedroom first. He was already snuggled on her unmade bed when she reached the doorway. She glanced at herself in the full-length mirror attached to the bathroom door and immediately wished she hadn’t. “Save me a spot, Leo; I’m gonna take a shower first,” she told him as she made her way to the bathroom.

She didn’t linger in the water, staying only long enough to run a bar of soap over her skin and wash her hair. With one towel wrapped around her and a second twisted around her head turban-style, she wandered to her dresser, pulling out a pair of simple cotton underwear and shimmying into them before opening her pajama drawer. She’d spent the last few days in leggings, Bucky’s T-shirt and Steve’s hoodie; perhaps actual pajamas would be conducive to sleep. She dug through the drawer, looking for her ultra-comfortable green sushi pajama bottoms, the matching pink tank top with the words “This is how I roll” on it already in hand. She tugged it on and pushed aside several pairs of sleep shorts before she spotted them at the bottom of the drawer, the drawstrings caught on something. She tugged, stumbling back a few steps when she managed to pull it free, dislodging a dark blue glass bottle with a silver and crystal stopper in the process.

Darcy picked it up, fingers trembling as she traced her name etched on the side of the bottle. She’d forgotten about Thor’s visit and his insistence that the last of his mother’s magic go to her. Steve and Bucky had shown up seconds after Thor disappeared and she’d stashed the bottle in her pajama drawer, not wanting either man to see it and ask questions she didn’t know the answers to.

“When you are ready for the knowledge that it will give you, drink it before your dreams overtake you. It is there you will find your answer.”

Darcy studied the bottle. She still couldn’t see anything inside, but she felt something. Before, it felt like a tingle, similar to the pins and needles feeling she got in her foot when it fell asleep. This time, she was overwhelmed by a feeling of peace. She cradled the bottle in one hand as she pulled on her pajama bottoms. “What do you think, Leo?” She crawled into the bed and pulled the covers up to her chin. "Thor said the answers appear in dreams. Should I give it a shot?” She glanced at the dog. He stared back at her, unblinking. "If anything, maybe it will knock me out for a few hours right?” Leo cocked his head to the side. “I’m gonna take that as a yes.” She twisted the stopper and sniffed the contents cautiously. “I feel like Alice,” she remarked as she toasted the dog. “Bottoms up!”

When Darcy asked Jane to describe Asgard, the scientist looked completely stumped before she blurted out "Gold."

"Gold?" Darcy wrinkled her nose.

Jane paused, as if reconsidering her answer, and then nodded. "Gold."

Darcy shrugged as Jane turned back to her equipment, her focus so obviously not on other realm exterior design. "OK."

When she opened her eyes to a room that was completely white except for the women standing before her in a crystal blue gown, her gold hair braided in an intricate top-knot that had Darcy’s fingers itching to explore, she was bummed. White wasn’t gold. Even her dreams had a budget.
"Darcy Lewis," the woman smiled. "At last we meet."

Darcy glanced down at her pajamas. She was woefully underdressed for whatever this was. "Yeah," she looked around, hoping for a clue. "Who are you?" The woman smiled and Darcy sucked in her breath. "Shit! Your Thor's mother -- Queen Frigga." She fumbled in an awkward curtsey. You were supposed to courtesy for royalty, right? "Fuck! I'm so sorry! I didn't know!" She bit her lip. "And I said 'shit' in front of you. And 'fuck!' Dammit!" Her shoulder slumped in defeat. This was why Jane was surrounded by gold and she got white. No manners. No class. "Sorry," she repeated mulishly.

Frigga's gentle smile never left her face. "I raised two sons, Miss Lewis. I have heard such language before."

"Thor's a warrior," she grumbled, still kicking herself for being, well, her.

"Yes, but to hear his stories, you are as well," her laughter sounded like the jingling of bells. She reached out and brushed Darcy's hair away from her face, stopping only when the young woman raised her head. "He was a changed man after his time on Midgard. Quieter. Humble. In many ways, he was a better man because of it and in others ..." She trailed off, no doubt remembering her other son who caused so much destruction to the world Thor vowed to protect. "Yet when he spoke of Lady Darcy and her pocket lightning, he was nothing but smiles. Thor was proud to boast of the small warrior who bested him. You are admired in Asgard, Miss Lewis. Many of our children want to be just like you."

Darcy grinned at the thought. "Thor tends to go overboard."

Frigga nodded knowingly. "Yes, but not when it comes to those he cares about. He cares for you deeply, Miss Lewis. Jane Foster is his love, but you are his sister." She reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind Darcy's ear. "I imagine if I had been blessed with a daughter, she would have been very much like you."

Darcy had to ask. "Is that a good thing?"

Frigga beamed. She looked like her son. "I would have been honored to call you my own."

Darcy smiled, her first real smile since arriving at wherever they were. "Thor talks about you, too," she said. "Not often, because he misses you so much, but when he does ... He loved you, I mean loves you. He loves you," she repeated.

"As I love him. Tell me, Miss Lewis --"

"Darcy."

"Darcy," Frigga repeated, her expression shifting slightly from genteel to concerned. "Is my son happy?"

Darcy worried her lip between her teeth as she considered the question. Her immediate answer was yes, he was happy, but that wasn't the whole truth. In many ways, Thor and Steve were a lot alike; both carried the weight of the world on their shoulders, though Thor actually was responsible for the care and protective of several worlds. Most of Darcy's interactions with Thor were carefree and playful, but she'd also been there to comfort him in times of sadness, just like he was there for her when she needed a kind word or a strong hug. "He is content," she decided. "His decision to stay with Jane weighs heavily on him because his father doesn't approve. He tries his best to balance his responsibilities to Asgard and the nine realms with his loyalty to The Avengers and his love for
Jane. Personally, I think he does an amazing job at keeping everything in check. That fact that he worries it isn't enough is a testament to his loyalty."

"Is content enough?"

"Some people go their whole lives hoping to reach content," Darcy replied. "There are moments when I would say yes, absolutely, Thor is happy, but if you want me to be honest ..." Darcy trailed off, waiting for Frigga's nod to continue. "Then I'd say no. He isn't unhappy, but until he and Odin reach an understanding, I don't think he will be." She shrugged her shoulders helplessly. "I'm sorry."

Frigga shook her head. "There is no need to apologize. It is not your doing."

"But it hurts you that he isn't happy."

"It does. It is every parent's wish is for their child to be happy. I failed one son in that regard. I had hoped not to repeat my mistakes with Thor."

"I should have lied."

Frigga's lips turned upward. "You are a clever girl, Darcy, but you are not a liar. I asked you a question knowing you would tell me the truth. You say my son is content. I must be content with that, and hope that someday he and his father will reach an understanding."

"Do you think they will?" Darcy asked. "Is that something you know or have a feeling about?"

Frigga shook her head. "The powers that be will not share such information with me."

"That sucks," Darcy told her. "What good is magic if you're not allowed to use it?"

Frigga raised her arms, her hands turned so her palms faced what would be the sky if they were outside. "For this," she said. "It is every parent's wish for their child to be happy," she repeated before she disappeared.

"Wha--hey, where'd you go?" She whipped her head from side to side. Frigga was gone. She was alone. "What's happening?!!?"

"Darcy?"

Darcy turned around, her eyes widening in shock. "Mom?"

Chapter End Notes

Another cliffhanger, but a happy one, yes?
Talk To Me

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the delay in posting. A new fic took over my life because this chapter gave me so much trouble. It's still not what I had imagined, but I leave for vacation next week and want this story to be finished by then because I'll be out of the country and away from all technology. Yay!

Trigger warning: Veiled references to suicide.

---

She was wearing the same clothes Darcy last saw her in; not the muted gray dress from her funeral, but well-worn jeans with a hole in one knee and the frayed cuffs, and a pale blue denim button-down shirt with broken in cowboy boots. She’d hugged Darcy goodbye before the sun was up, kneeling down to nuzzle against Darcy’s cheek before she rushed out of the house to some animal emergency at the veterinary clinic. Darcy had squirmed out of her mother’s grip, grumbling about how she was too big for hugs and kisses. That memory haunted her for years. It haunted her now, as she stared at her mother, not quite believing what was happening, but knowing it was real at the same time.

“Darcy.” Maureen Lewis’ lips were curved in a smile, but her eyes were sad as they took in the grown woman in front of her. “My baby girl.”

Her words were like a match under Darcy’s feet. She ran to her mom, practically knocking her over as she threw her arms around her, burying her face in her neck, sobbing at both the familiarity and difference between this and their last hug. She was bigger, sure, but she still felt like her mom. She still smelled like her mom. This was her mom! “I’m sorry,” she choked out the words, years and years of guilt pouring out of her as she apologized for the last time they saw each other, every temper tantrum she’d ever thrown, and that time she swore at Dr. Harris after a particularly painful tetanus shot when she was seven. She kept repeating the words, hoping they’d erase years of loss, abandonment, fear and anger.

“Shh,” Maureen soothed, her hands rubbing soothing circles on her daughter’s back. When a sofa appeared by the women, Maureen helped her daughter sit, neither one questioning the furniture’s sudden emergence.

“I was a brat,” Darcy continued.

Maureen chuckled. “You were not a brat. You were spirited, baby. You still are.” She pulled back, still keeping one arm around her daughter’s waist as she wiped away Darcy’s tears with the sleeve of her shirt. “And you have nothing to apologize for. I’m sorry for leaving you,” she said, swallowing her own tears, desperate to say everything she had to say, needed to say, before she had to leave again. “I left you, baby girl. I’m so sorry. I never wanted to leave you. The last thing I wanted to do was leave you.” She cupped her daughter’s face in her hands. “You’re so grown up,” she whispered in an amazed voice. “My smart, funny, brave girl. I couldn’t be prouder.”

Darcy shook her head. She didn’t deserve such praise. “I got drunk at sixteen.”
Maureen smiled. “I know.”

“I slept with Dylan Bart when I was seventeen.”

“I know that, too.”

“I shoplifted ramen noodles and peanut butter my freshman year at Culver. I learned how to make fake IDs my sophomore year. I dropped out of school for a year so I could travel overseas on a science grant’s dime and then—“


Darcy sat back. “You know?” she clarified.

Maureen nodded.

“How do you … what … did you spy on me?” Darcy’s mind swam with memories she didn’t want to remember, bad decisions and stupid mistakes she didn’t want anyone to know about.

Maureen laughed. “Oh sweetie, I wish I could explain. I wish it was that simple.”

Darcy sat back, crossing her arms over her chest. “Try,” she demanded.

Maureen shook her head at Darcy’s familiar stubborn pout. She looked the same way she did at six when she refused to eat broccoli. “It doesn’t work that way, baby. I … let’s say I get to check up on you. There are times I get a feeling, right here,” she said, tapping the middle of her chest. “I think it’s when you need me. Or maybe you think you need me, I don’t know, but it happens and when it does, sometimes I get to see you. Other times I get to guide you. Does that make sense?” Darcy shook her head. “OK. Um … New Mexico. The giant metal robot killing machine. You ran to the pet store to rescue the puppies. You had one in your arms when you reached an intersection. You were going to go right. I made you turn left.”

Darcy thought back to that day. God, she was scared. She had no idea what was happening. She didn’t know where Clint was. He wasn’t answering his phone. Thor had told her to run, to find somewhere safe. Nowhere seemed safe. “I couldn’t find Jane. Going that way made it harder for me to find her.”

“If you’d gone right, you would’ve been crushed by a building,” Maureen told her. “I don’t know how I knew that, but I did. I was able to stop you.”

Darcy shook her head. Just when she thought her life couldn’t get weirder, she learned her deceased mother was kind of like her guardian angel. “I broke my leg when I was 13.”

Maureen nodded. “When you fell off the horse. Grandma Lewis told you not to ride him, that he wasn’t ready. You didn’t listen.”

Maureen shook her head. “Like I said, it’s doesn’t work that way, baby. I get moments. When they happen, I do what I can to keep you safe. Maybe it’s … I don’t know. Maybe it’s fate’s way of making up for leaving you.”

Darcy could feel the tears welling in her eyes once more. She forced them back. She didn’t want to cry again. She did, but she wouldn’t. She had her mom. For the first time in almost fifteen years, she had her mom. She didn’t know how long Frigga’s magic would last, but she wasn’t going to
waste it crying over what couldn’t be changed. “I hated you,” she confessed, wishing she could keep the words buried deep inside it, but needing to say them at the same time. “For a long time, I hated you.”

Maureen nodded sadly. “I hated me, too, baby. No parent wants to leave their child. I was so mad, so angry at the world for doing that to you. To me. To your father.”

Darcy shook her head vigorously. Her father. She’d hated him, too – even more than her mother. She knew, even when she was at her lowest, that her mother’s death was an accident; a terrible, horrible accident. Her father’s wasn’t. “He left me! You died and he couldn’t deal with it! I needed my dad and he wasn’t there!” She threw herself into her mother’s arms, her chest heaving with broken sobs as she let her anger towards her father pour out – the fear she felt when the bill collectors called; the sadness she felt listening to her dad cry for Maureen in the middle of the night; the dread of watching him open another beer, trying to ignore the pile of empty cans and bottles in the garbage can.

“It’s OK to be mad.” Maureen brushed away the tears that fell from her eyes, eyes the same shade of blue as her daughter’s, as she let Darcy rage. “You have every right.”

“He couldn’t handle it when you died!” she shouted. “Your dying killed him, too! You left me, Mom!” She pulled herself out of her mother’s grasp. “Why’d you have to take him, too?”

“Don’t blame your mother,” a quiet voice said over Darcy’s shoulder.

Darcy turned around. Richard Lewis stood less than five feet away from her. His face with lined with worry, his black-rimmed glasses perched on the end of his nose. His dark hair was streaked with gray, shoulders hunched somewhat defensively as he tucked his hands into the pickets of his navy blue dress slacks. He wore a brown cardigan over a plaid shirt with battered brown loafers. He didn’t smile. He wanted to, but he wasn’t sure he deserved to. He didn’t think he deserved any of this, but here he was and there was Darcy; his sweet, lovely, funny Darcy. His baby. His baby was now all grown up and he missed it because he was weak. He was selfish where she was giving, weak when she was strong, scared when she was brave. “Hi, pumpkin.”

“Stop being so damn stubborn!”

Steve ignored Tony. He was used to ignoring Tony. Tony loved to hear himself talk. He flipped through the files on his Starkpad, looking for something, anything, they’d missed. Bucky sat next to him on the quinjet, a silent sentry. The team was together for the first time in almost a week. The plan had worked. It had worked so well, Steve couldn’t stop questioning their good luck. Tony told him to shut up and fucking appreciate that something worked in their favor. They’d attacked the main branches of SHIELD in a series of coordinated assaults that caught Hydra off guard. Natasha dumped hundreds of top secret files on the Internet, a move that both publicized the terrorist group’s secrets, but also sent them scrambling. With Coulson’s team focused on rebuilding the organization, the Avengers turned their attention to going after as many Hydra bases as they could before the trail went cold.

Steve didn’t want to admit that it happened faster than he thought it would.

“What’d you expect?” Bucky asked now. “They’ve lasted decades living in secrecy.”

Steve shook his head as he studied the information Natasha didn’t make public; information only
they had access to, Steve not willing to trust anyone that wasn’t part of his direct team, especially after Darcy revealed Agent Ward’s true status.

Darcy. He missed her. His heart ached from missing her. He knew Bucky felt the same. If he could, he’d go home right now. He wanted to be home. He wanted his life to be nothing more than debating pizza toppings and movie selections. He wanted to listen to Darcy complain about being too warm for snuggling (though she never pushed him away) and Bucky forgetting to make coffee again. He wanted to get upset when she left the lid off the toothpaste – “It takes two seconds, Darce!” “So stop bitching to me about it and do it yourself!” – and surprise her with a strawberries and cream scone in the middle of the day. He wanted normalcy. He craved normalcy. He couldn’t have that as long as Hydra was still a threat. “We can do more damage,” he insisted.

Bucky looked around the quinjet. Steve was toying with something on his Starkpad; probably checking in with Bruce who was going to stay on with Coulson’s team a bit longer. Natasha was pacing by the cockpit, Clint having taken over the controls nearly an hour ago after insisting she rest. Thor was the only one sleeping, his loud snores more of a comfort than an annoyance. “Seems to me we’re lucky we’re not damaged,” Bucky remarked. “Maybe we shouldn’t push it.”

Steve’s head snapped up. “You wanna give up?”

Bucky didn’t take offense at the accusation. Steve was on edge. They all were. He understood that. He also understood that Steve was beginning to feel helpless and when that happened, he got even more stubborn, God help him. “Didn’t say that, punk,” he said quietly. “But think for a second, OK? What’s a better plan? Flying around until we think we’ve got a lead, or going home where we can regroup and use the millions of resources we have at our disposal to get a definite hit? Hydra knows we’re after them. They know we won’t stop. We did some damage while they scrambled. Maybe now we let them relax, make some mistakes.” He took a deep breath, the urge to fight, to blow up the damn earth until every last Hydra agent was nothing more than dust so strong, it almost choked him. They’d make it happen. Maybe not today, but eventually. They had to. Cutting off their heads weren’t enough. He was going to make damn sure nothing was left. “We’ll get ‘em, Stevie,” he promised. “We’ll bury them in the fucking ground ‘til there are no more.”

Steve leaned back in his seat. What Bucky said made sense. Their plan had worked because Hydra wasn’t expecting it. They were caught off guard and the team used it to their advantage. Not they were on the defense. It made things harder. Everyone was tired. They’d never admit it, but they were. Maybe it was time to use strategy and brains over brute force. “I don’t want to leave her again,” he admitted, his voice low so only Bucky heard him.

Bucky took Steve’s hand in his. “I know. It kills me, too.”

Steve squeezed Bucky’s hand, finding comfort in the simple touch. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair that she was alone when they were together. What would happen in the future? Would one of them stay with her, stay behind while the other fought? Could they do that? Could he let Bucky go without him?

“Stop,” Bucky said now.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You don’t have to,” Bucky brought the hand that wasn’t holding Steve’s up to soothe the lines between Steve’s brows, the cool metal soothing his flushed face. “You get this look when you’re thinking too hard about shit that hasn’t happened.”

Steve chuckled. He leaned forward until his forehead was pressed against Bucky. “Can’t hide
Bucky’s hand slid around to cradle Steve’s neck. “Nope,” he said, popping the ‘P’ much like Darcy did. “I know you better than you know yourself.”

“Think so, huh?”

“Know so,” Bucky said smugly. “Just like I know you’re thinking about our girl and what’s gonna happen the next time we go because there’s no way I’m letting you go off without me.”

Steve sighed. “She has abandonment issues.”

Bucky nodded against him. “I know.”

“She won’t talk to us about it.”

“She will. Eventually.”

Steve pulled back. “What makes you so sure?”

His grin was cocky. Confident. It was a look that never failed to make Steve want. “I’ve got experience with stubborn soulmates.”

Darcy had wondered many times if there was something she could have done to stop her father from destroying himself. She remembered standing next to her grandmother at his funeral, watching as the coffin was lowered to the ground next to her mother’s tombstone, so angry at both parents, but riddled with guilt at the same time. He was gone and she’d done nothing to stop him, had tried nothing to stop him. She ignored everything that was wrong in favor of pretending everything was OK. She was a terrible daughter; she had to be, wanting her father’s attention when it was obvious how much he was hurting. Why else would he leave? Why else would he choose death over staying with her? Darcy pushed herself to her feet. Finally. Finally she would get to ask him why he couldn’t stay. She rolled her shoulders back, prepared to accuse, to shout, but when she opened her mouth, all that came out was one whispered word: “Daddy.”

She was in his arms without thought, hugging him as tight as she’d hugged her mother moments before. His shoulders were shaking from the tears he cried as he stroked her hair, her name a constant murmur, interspersed with “I’m sorry” and “I’m so sorry.” He eventually pulled away, desperate to say the words he wanted to ever since he realized what he’d done, but Darcy shook her head. She tugged his hand instead, pulling him to the sofa what Maureen sat, watching them both with a soft smile. Darcy sat next to her, pulling on her dad’s hand until he joined them. “Darcy, pumpkin, I’m so sorry,” he spoke in a rush, so worried she’d try and stop him. He didn’t know how long he’d be with them. He knew the guilt she carried, the fear she had of being abandoned. He knew it was his fault.

“Daddy, it’s OK.”

Now he shook his head. It wasn’t. It never would be, but now he could finally do something and maybe help his little girl find happiness. “Darcy, I love you. I loved you from the moment your mother told me you were on your way. I loved you even when I made it seem like I didn’t, when I was too wrapped up in my grief to realize you needed your father.” He took Maureen’s hand in his. He smiled at his wife, his love. He never understood how he got so lucky when she came into his life. “I was weak, Darcy. I wish I could tell you there was more to my actions, but there wasn’t. I
was a weak man who didn’t realize until it was too late that I had a daughter who needed me.” He took a deep breath. “My death had nothing to do with you,” he confessed, knowing in his final act that he wasn’t thinking of his daughter or even his deceased wife, but his own need to stop the pain. “It was all me.”

Darcy let out the breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. She was tired, emotionally and physically drained. She wouldn’t say she was better, that years of remorse and fury and anxiety were suddenly gone, yet there was something in the back of her mind that wasn’t there before. It felt like … it felt like hope. But she was still her parents’ daughter, which meant she was still suspicious. “Why are you here? I keep trying to tell you I’m sorry and you both keep telling me it’s not my fault. Is that what this is? Are you here to absolve me of my guilt?”

Maureen brushed her hand down Darcy’s hair in a familiar gesture. Instinctively, Darcy turned to sit sideways on the couch so her mother could braid her hair. She kept her father’s hands in hers, not wanting to miss one moment of being connected to her parents.

“Why do you think we’re here?” Richard asked, his question prompting Darcy to make a face. He always did that, asking her what she thought instead of answering her question. When she got in trouble as a little girl, he’d always ask her what she thought her punishment should be for whatever infraction she’d committed. Darcy still had a sneaking suspicious that her self-imposed punishments were harsher than anything her soft-hearted father would’ve come up with.

“Because of my soulmates?” Maureen hummed encouragingly. Richard squeezed Darcy’s hands. “You’re here to tell me to stop being afraid, aren’t you? You’re here to tell me that I need to tell Steve and James that I love them, and we’ll all live happily ever after, aren’t you?”

Richard winced at his daughter’s bitter tone. That, too, was his fault. “Nothing is guaranteed in life, Darcy. Not even happiness.”

“But,” her mother continued as she finished her daughter’s braid, “holding yourself back from seeking happiness in a misguided attempt to keep yourself from getting hurt doesn’t work, either.”

“So what does?” Darcy snapped. “You two loved each other and life found a way to fuck that up.” Darcy saw her father wince at her word choice, but he wisely said nothing. “My soulmates are superheroes! You know where they are right now? I don’t! Why? Because they’re off fighting evil! I don’t know where they are, if they’re hurt or not, when they’ll come back, or if they’ll come back! But please, Mom and Dad, tell me why I should dive into this with my eyes wide open! Tell me all the good that’s gonna come out of possibly having my heart ripped in two because it was so much fun the last time!”

Richard looked at Maureen. She pulled on Darcy until she was leaning against her, smiling when she felt Richard move to her other side. They used to watch movies like this. “We don’t know what’s going to happen, sweetie,” she admitted. “We wish we could tell you that the rest of your life will be perfect. You deserve to have all the happiness in the world. You’ve suffered more than any one person should, but it doesn’t work like that.”

Darcy turned her face into her mom’s shoulder. “So why should I try anything different? What we have now works.”

“Does it?” Richard asked.

“It does,” Darcy insisted.

“They told you they loved you,” Maureen commented.
“Yeah, but Steve also said I don’t have to say it back. I never have to say it back.”

Richard leaned back. He missed arguing with his stubborn girl. He always thought she should be a lawyer. “Alright,” he conceded. “How would you feel if you told your soulmates you loved them and they didn’t say it back? That you, too, told them they didn’t have to.”

“I’d be fine with it,” Darcy replied automatically.

“So you’re telling me that every time you told them you loved them and they didn’t say it in return wouldn’t eat at you? That it wouldn’t build up into hurt and anger and resentment?”

Darcy shook her head. “You’re not really making a strong case, Dad. If things play out the way you just described, then that means Steve and James will eventually resent me.”

“OK,” Maureen said. “Let’s go with that. They love you. You don’t return their feelings. What happens?”

Darcy ignored the stab of pain at her mother’s scenario. “Easy. Whatever we have together ends. They’ll be fine; they have each other.”

“And you?” Maureen asked.

“I’ll be better than fine,” Darcy replied even as a tiny voice in her head called her a liar. “Better than because I won’t be hurt.”

“You won’t?” Maureen asked.

“Not one bit,” Darcy maintained. “No harm, no foul.”

Richard took his daughter’s hand. “We can’t make your decision for you, pumpkin. You’re an adult now; have been for some time – and I gave up my right to tell you what to do years ago. Maybe we’re not here to tell you to love your soulmates. Maybe we’re here to tell you you’re doing the right thing, that my selfishness was the catalyst for your future as an independent woman capable to handling herself no matter what, soulmarks be damned.”

“Maybe that’s why you got two,” Maureen added. “So that they would have each other while you took the world by storm.”

Darcy bit her lip. She didn’t like this conversation. “You always said I had two soulmates because I had a lot of love to give,” she said quietly.

“You do,” Maureen hugged her daughter. “You have your scientist and the demigod and the archer.”

“You mean Jane, Thor and Clint,” Darcy told her.

“Right,” Richard continued. “And Tony Stark, Pepper Potts, Dr. Bruce Banner and the scary redhead. Natalie?”

“Natasha. She’s not scary once you get to know her.”

“Really?”

Darcy considered her father’s question. “She has her moments.”

“See?” her mother said cheerfully. “The proof is right there. You have a lot of people you care
about and who care about you. You don’t need your soulmates. Like you said, no harm, no foul. When they get back, tell them it’s over and everyone can move on.”

Darcy wasn’t surprised at her mother’s suggestion given that she’d considered doing just that. The entire time she was baking treats for the team, she was working through various scenarios that had her leaving the Tower for a new life without Steve and James. She wasn’t quite ready to take Clint and Nat up on their “We can give you a new life” plan, but something along the lines of living somewhere where she wouldn’t see two super soldiers again. It wasn’t cowardly, but self-preservation. If she stayed with them, she would tell them how she felt. She’d be open, vulnerable. If she ran, it would hurt, but it wouldn’t destroy her, right?

“Are you sure you can’t just tell me what to do?” she asked her parents, feeling very much like a sulky child in need of a nap. She curled into her father, smiling when she felt her mother settle on her other side. She was tired. Reunions with deceased parents were exhausting.

Both Maureen and Richard chuckled softly at her question. “Because that’s worked so well every time we tried before,” her mother said.

Darcy snorted. She’d bet they were talking about the broccoli debate again. Did they know she liked eating it steamed now? Bruce made it all the time. She couldn’t get enough. She opened her mouth to tell them, but let out a huge yawn instead. She buried her face in her father’s cardigan, smiling when her mother kissed the top of her head. She felt her father’s arms go around both her and her mother. She felt safe and loved. “Stay?” she asked sleepily.

“For as long as we can,” her father promised.

Chapter End Notes

So my original plan was that this visit would be the push Darcy needed to admit her love for Steve and James, but she kept being stubborn and insisting that was too easy. Aughh! Just admit how you feel already and be happy!!!

Thank you for reading!
Waking Up

Chapter Notes

A short chapter (sorry!) leading up to the final chapter of this story that really ran away from me. Thanks to everyone for reading and commenting and kudoing. (Is that a word? Can we make it one?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She was in that moment between asleep and awake, where she could feel reality closing in, but was still comfortably wrapped up in dream world. She’d said good-bye to her parents. Not the actual words, so much, but she felt them leave, her mother pressing one last kiss to her cheek with the whispered words “Be brave, baby girl.” It hurt, but at the same time, it didn’t. She got to see her parents. She got to hug them and kiss them and say everything she never had the chance to say before.

She sent a silent prayer of thanks to Frigga for her amazing gift as she snuggled next to Leo, burying her face in his warm fur. The dog grumbled in his sleep. Darcy could sympathize. She, too, wasn’t ready to open her eyes, to face another day of uncertainty. She wanted this to be over. She wanted everyone back in the Tower, where they belonged. She wanted them home.

She sat up in bed. Home. She was home. This incredibly gaudy phallic structure of glass and steel was more than the Avengers headquarters or SI’s East Coast office. It housed her family – not the family she was born into or the one she dreamed of when she was a lonely and angry teenager, but family just the same, complete with two older brothers (Clint and Thor), the older sister she’d forever try to emulate (Natasha) and Jane – someone who was more than a sister, more than a friend. Jane was the end of her loneliness and the beginning of something bigger, something better, something that sometimes drove her crazy, but it was worth it because family always was.

She wondered how Bruce would react if she told him she considered him a father figure. He’d probably blush and stammer before making an excuse to run away from the conversation. He’d avoid her for a few days and then reappear as if nothing happened, though a pat on her shoulder would say everything. Pepper was the cool aunt, the successful member of the family everyone admired. And, because her life was apparently a 1990s sitcom, she was linked to Tony, the crazy uncle who showed up at every gathering to spoil the kids and annoy the adults.

Steve and Bucky were … Darcy pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs. What were Steve and Bucky to her? Her marks on them and theirs on her made them soulmates. Living in close proximity these past few months made them friends. Physical chemistry made them lovers. Her bleeding heart made her care. Her innate stubbornness made that hard to admit.

"I kissed Rhodey once,” Pepper confessed after a sip of her third margarita.

Darcy had been hanging upside down over the armrest in Tony’s leather chair – she was trying to see if her hair could touch the floor – but Pepper’s out-of-the-blue announcement had her falling

“It was years ago. Tony was still stuck on his ‘I don’t need a soulmate’ shtick and set us up, knowing James didn’t have a soulmark. Of course, it ended up backfiring because Tony saw us together and realized pushing me away didn’t make him happy. And yes, it was good. Very good.” She had a secretive smile when she lifted her glass to her lips. "That's when things started to change between Tony and I. It didn't happen overnight, but there was a definite shift that, in time, made us both happy.”

Darcy’s narrowed her eyes. Or she tried to. She’d taken up residence in Margaritaville several hours earlier and vision was no longer her friend. “Wait ... are you trying to after-school-special me?”

Pepper shook her head, winced at the movement and then looked abashed. “Maybe a little? I like you. I like Steve. I’m beginning to like James. Is it wrong to want the three of you to be happy?”

“I see the way they look at you when they think no one is watching. Steve’s expression is downright adorable and James …” She sighed. “He is not as good as hiding his thoughts as he thinks he is. I guarantee if his words weren’t on your ankle, you’d have climbed him like a tree already.”

“Nu-uh!”

“Uh-huh! He’s broody, smug and prone to sarcasm.” Jane pointed at Darcy. "That is so your type. Hell, that’s you!"

Darcy crossed her arms over her chest. She was not broody! “So explain Captain America then.”

“I’ll take this one.” Pepper stood up, looking very much like the badass CEO despite the pajamas, tangled hair and empty glass she had clutched in one hand. “Steve tends to act impulsively, take care of people and doesn’t back down when he thinks something is wrong, even if that puts him up against someone in authority.” She paused. “Especially if that puts him up against someone in authority.”

“Again – you,” Jane smirked.

“Don’t question it, kid.”

“What?”

Tony paused in the act of sliding his welding mask over his head. “Just do what feels right and that will be enough.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He gave her one of his rare I’m-not-joking looks. “Yeah, you do. It doesn’t have to be a life decision, kid. It’s a moment. Live in the moment. If you decide you want another one, you can take that step when you’re ready, but right now, a moment is enough.”
“Yeah, there’s a chance they could get killed on the job. There’s a chance Jane blows you up in the lab tomorrow. We don’t know what’s going to happen, but if they live to be two hundred years old, and have a great, long life together, you’re going to be pissed you didn’t share it with them.”

Darcy wiped away her tears. She hated crying. “They’d do that, too, just to make me mad. Especially James.”

“Bastard.”

Darcy sniffed. “Yeah.”

Clint hugged her. “I can’t tell you what to do, but for what it’s worth, you’re good for them. I think they’d be good for you.”

“My Darcy,” Bucky murmured, ignoring how the hands she had tangled in his hair faltered. She was his, just like he was hers. He always had been and always would be. “Missed you,” he said now, pulling away to look at her, one hand gently tracing the contours of her face, the curve of her lips. “It was like I was lost without you.”

“You had Steve.”

He shook his head decisively. “We’re better when we’re with you,” he told her.

“Sweetheart, you … you’re home, Darcy. You aren’t a housekeeper; you’re home. You’ve dragged two lost boys from Brooklyn into the 21st Century. You’re best friends with the world’s greatest marksman and a brilliant scientist. You remind Bruce he’s human and managed to get through to Tony. You paint your nails with a Russian assassin and taught the God of Thunder how to line dance. Darcy, SHIELD has access to every professional with a ton of letters behind their names all hired to make sense of the Avengers. They couldn’t get through to us. They didn’t understand us. You do. You know who we are and what we need, usually before we’ve figured it out. You are generous and loving, stubborn and combative. You’re ours, Darcy, and we’re – all of us – we’re yours.”

“What you hold in your hands is the last of my mother’s magic. When you are ready for the knowledge that it will give you, drink it before dreams overtake your mind. It is there you will find your answer.”

Darcy shook her head. “No,” she tried to give the bottle back to Thor. “I can’t accept this. Thor, this is your mother’s. You should keep it.”

“I do not have questions,” he said, placing the bottle in her hand, gently wrapping her fingers around it. “You do.”

“I don’t,” she argued.
“Whatever you decide, those boys better be good to you.”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “They’re superheroes, Dad. Being good is kind of their deal.”

“No one is good enough for my little girl.”

She hugged her pillow to her chest, feeling lighter than she had in months. It was so simple. The answer was right there the whole time; she only had to open her eyes. “They are, Daddy,” she whispered, hoping this was a moment her parents could see. "They are."

Chapter End Notes

She finally sees reason! One more chapter to go!
Chapter Notes

Seven hours from now, I'll be on a plane to get out of the country for a week, but I had to get this chapter finished because I did not want it hanging over my head.

I hope this chapter was worth the wait. I don't know about you, but the last chapter of a fic is either really easy to write or really hard. This one fell in the hard category. I knew the last line of this story. I wrote it soon after I started writing this fic, but getting there ... augh!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy's grandmother loved movies. After Darcy's mother died and her father, for a lack of a better word, disappeared, Darcy spent a lot of her free time watching movies with her grandma. They'd pop popcorn, Grandma Lewis would make homemade chocolate sodas, and they'd snuggle under knitted blankets, watching everything from *Gone with the Wind* and *Out of Africa* to *Goonies* and *Airplane!*

Grandma Lewis, like her granddaughter, did not define herself by one genre. She loved all movies, though she had a not-so-secret soft spot for romantic comedies. *When Harry Met Sally* was a particular favorite. She watched it so often, Darcy practically had the entire film memorized before her thirteenth birthday, in particular Harry’s speech to Sally on New Year’s Eve: “I love that you get cold when it's 71 degrees out. I love that it takes you an hour and a half to order a sandwich. I love that you get a little crinkle above your nose when you're looking at me like I'm nuts. I love that after I spend the day with you, I can still smell your perfume on my clothes. And I love that you are the last person I want to talk to before I go to sleep at night. And it's not because I'm lonely, and it's not because it's New Year's Eve. I came here tonight because when you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible.”

“Harry Burns was spot on, Janey.”

Jane looked up from her laptop, her brown eyes blinking owlishly at her friend. “The guy from R&D?”

“What guy from R&D?”

“They guy you’re talking about!”

“I’m not talking about a guy!”

Jane closed her laptop. “Yes, you are! You just said he was spot on!”

Darcy paused in sipping (re: guzzling) her coffee. “Whoa – hold on a sec. You don’t know who Harry Burns is?”

Jane bit her lip, her face taking on that pinched look it gets when she’s trying to remember something. “He’s not the guy from R&D?”
Darcy set her cup on the counter with a thud. “Oh Dear God.” She swiped Jane’s laptop and pulled up the clip of Billy Crystal’s Harry confronting Meg Ryan’s Sally on New Year’s Eve. “OK, so this is movie is about two people who meet after college, don’t like each other, but keeping running into one another because, you know, plot. The whole premise is that a guy and a girl can’t be friends because sex is always an issue, but they somehow because BFFs because they don’t sleep together until one night they do, and it ruins everything until Harry realizes he loves Sally as more than a friend and he runs to a party to tell her, but she doesn’t believe him, so he gives the speech.”

Jane’s mouth fell open. “You didn’t take a breath that entire time,” she said in an awed voice.

“Jane! Focus!” Darcy snapped. Her eyes shifted from the screen to Jane as Harry declared his love to a hurt and (rightly so) suspicious Sally. Seeing Jane’s face go from amused to starry-eyed was all the validation she needed.


“What?” Darcy stumbled back, hand to her chest as if trying to re-start her heart after a great shock. “Is Jane Foster actually suggesting we spend the morning watching movies instead of forcing the universe to give up its secrets?”

Jane turned off her computer. “It was bound to happen sometime.”

She ended up bringing a notebook and a pen to the communal living room, jotting notes in handwriting Darcy was so glad it was no longer her job to decipher. (You can turn off a scientist’s technology, but you can’t turn off her brain.) Rhodey joined them, expressing delight at a film that didn’t involve dance offs or riff offs or Lindsey Lohan.

“It’s killing you, isn’t it?”

Darcy tucked the movie back in its case. “What’s killing me?”

“Not being able to tell Steve and James how you feel.”

Darcy’s head snapped up. “How did you …”

Jane’s expression was smug. “Genius,” she said, tapping her head with her index finger.

“You totally sounded like Tony just then.”

“Rude.”

Darcy snorted. “And you did it again.”

Jane opened her mouth to retort, pausing before flopping back on the couch. “I spend too much time with the man. But hey -- quit deflecting!” She resettled on her knees, practically bouncing as she clapped her hands. “You love Steve and James! Yay!”

Darcy really wanted to make fun of Jane – she was the epitome of every girl cliché in the book at that very moment – but damn it, the feeling was contagious. She dove on to the couch, hugging her friend until they were both squealing. Rhodey, who had been loading dishes in the dishwasher, wisely chose to leave the room, taking Leo with him.

“I can’t breathe!”
“No, not that,” Darcy protested, tugging at Jane’s arm until they were curled together on the couch. Yes, she wanted to tell Steve and Bucky how she felt. She’d been dying to ever since her stupid brain caught up with her stupid heart, but stupid Hydra was making that impossible and it was pissing her off. She was a product of the instant gratification generation, damn it! Same-day delivery was a must. She never waited in line for anything. On-demand streaming was her right as a millennial and yet the freaking universe was forcing her to wait to tell her soulmates how she felt. “It’s like … it’s like …” She took a deep breathe. “It’s like ever since I figured it out, there’s this need in me to shout it from the rooftops! I love them. Darcy Lewis loves Steve Rogers and James Barnes!”

Jane smiled. “To borrow a word from you: duh.”

Darcy blinked. That’s how Jane reacts to the biggest news of her life? “Duh?”

Jane nodded. “Duh,” she repeated, laughing at her friend’s confused expression. “Darcy, you’ve loved them for weeks, maybe even months! You weren’t ready to admit it to yourself, but your actions said everything you weren’t ready to face.”

Darcy sat back. “Like …”

“Like forcing Steve and James out of their rooms to spend time with the team. Like taking them out of the Tower to explore the city. Like filling in the blanks on references they didn’t get without making them feel bad. Like giving them reasons to laugh and be themselves, and not the personas the public expects them to be.” Jane paused in ticking items off her fingers. “You take care of people, Darcy. You’ve been taking care of me for years, but it was different with them – and it should be! They’re your soulmates.”

Darcy took a deep breath. “Yeah,” she said, exhaling loudly. “They’re my soulmates.”

Jane smiled knowingly. “It’s scary, isn’t it? Loving someone that much?”

“I feel drunk and high and that I have throw up all at the same time,” she confessed.

Jane picked up her notebook. “Congratulations. You’re in love.”

Darcy snorted. “Is it serious?”

Jane gave her a knowing look. “Very serious – and so worth it.”

Darcy spent the next three days obsessively cleaning her suite, watching an insane number of romantic comedies, and outlining various scenarios in which she told Steve and Bucky how she felt. She even snuck down to Jane’s lab and swiped one of her whiteboards. Jane always seemed to be inspired after staring at a whiteboard for hours at a time. Darcy thought she’d give it a shot. Instead, she started designing an Avengers-themed Monopoly game.

(She’d talk to Tony about it when he returned.)

She wasn’t a romantic. She may own every Julia Roberts movie ever made, but she wasn’t a girl who needed grand gestures and heartfelt speeches. She was a simple woman with simple needs – and her soulmates got that. Most men would go for roses when giving a woman flowers; James gave her three sunflowers. The restaurant industry catered to couples with candlelit meals; Steve
took her to a diner for the world’s best pancakes. Their walks in the park ended up in arguments about snacks and nights out included line-dancing with their friends. Even the way they told her they loved her was unscripted and uncomplicated. Well, except for the whole going off to defeat a secret Nazi-like terrorist organization thing.

“We love you, Darcy.” Steve ignored Bucky’s frustrated curse. He framed her face in his large hands, his blue eyes searching hers. “You don’t have to say it back, sweetheart. You don’t ever have to say it back, but you do have to know it.”

Steve and Bucky found each other when Bucky came to Steve’s aide during a fight. He met her on an elevator, giving her a hand at a time when she could use three or four extra, while Steve did what Steve does, walking into chaos and making things right again. Unplanned. Unscripted. Darcy tossed her marked on the couch, flopping on to the soft cushions with a sigh. Going with the flow worked for them. She was not going to buck the trend by devising some great scenario in which she told them how she felt. She was just going to be herself.

“Miss Lewis.”

Darcy jumped at the unexpected voice. “JARVIS?”

“My apologies, Miss Lewis. I did not mean to frighten you.”

She jumped up. “Screw that! What’s going on? Why are you talking to me? Oh God, what’s wrong? Who died? Who’s hurt? What are –“

“Miss Lewis, please calm down. I am detecting an increased heart rate and your blood pressure is -“

“I’m freaking out, J! You’ve been radio silent for almost two weeks!”

“Again, I apologize. Sir wanted me to inform you that the team is en route.”

Darcy stopped her frantic pacing. “En route? They’re coming home? All of them?”

“All but Sir and Dr. Banner, Miss Lewis. Sir is going straight to Miss Potts. Dr. Banner remains with Director Coulson’s team for the time being.”

“Director Coulson? Did Agent Agent get a promotion in all this? Wait, don’t answer that. I’ll get the story when everyone gets here. How much time are we talking?”

“ETA is twenty minutes.”

“What?!!” Darcy looked down at herself. She was wearing yoga pants and her red I’m Training for a (Netflix) Marathon T-shirt. “Shit, shit, shit!” She ran around her living room, her whole ‘Go with the flow’ plan sounding incredibly stupid when faced with reality. Hide the whiteboard. No, don’t hide the whiteboard. Take a shower. She glanced at her phone. No time. Jane! “JARVIS, have you alerted Jane and Rhodey?”

“Colonel Rhodes is aware of the team’s arrival and will be waiting for them on the roof. Dr. Foster is on her way up, too?”

Darcy paused in picking up random objects around her apartment and discarding them just as quickly. “They’re both going up there? Should I go, too?”

“I have not been informed to advise you of your actions.”
“But what do you think I should do?” she pressed.

The AI was silent for a minute. “I don’t have an answer for you, Miss Lewis.”

Darcy nodded her head even though she knew JARVIS couldn’t see her. “Right,” she said. “Cool.”

“But I would advise you to put on footwear before you leave your apartment.”

Darcy looked down at her bare feet. Her toes were painted a bright purple with silver polka dots. You try going through Sandra Bullock’s makeover scene in *Miss Congeniality* without feeling the urge to do something pretty. “Gotcha,” she said, running to her closet and swiping her black flip flops. She had them in her hand as she rushed down the hall to the elevator, sliding them on her feet as she waited impatiently for its arrival. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She fidgeted with the hem of her shirt. Maybe she shouldn’t go up. Maybe she should wait for them to come to her. Or maybe she should go to them after they’ve had time to clean up. Eat. Rest. She didn’t want to crowd them.

“Darcy!” Darcy’s head snapped up. The elevator had arrived. Jane and Leo were inside; the dog’s tail wagging uncontrollably, as if he knew Thor was near. “Get your ass in this elevator right now.”

Darcy paused. It was instinct. She was a rebel at heart. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” Jane reached out, grabbed Darcy by the hand and pulled her into the elevator car. “You’re second-guessing yourself. Stop it.”

“I was not,” Darcy lied.

Jane rolled her eyes but said nothing as the elevator continued its ascent. By the time it reached the roof, Darcy’s heart was threatening to beat its way out of her chest. She’d never greeted the team on the roof before. That was something Pepper did. Or Jane.

Rhodey was standing by the door that led to the roof. “Three minutes out,” he announced. “Tony is in Malibu. They’ll fly here the day after tomorrow.”

“Is he OK?” Darcy asked.

Rhodey nodded. “The whole team is relatively unscathed.”

“Even Clint?” Darcy asked.

Rhodey groaned. “Damn it, Darcy! Now I owe Tony twenty bucks!”

“What? I’m not making fun of him! It’s just, statistically, he’s the one that gets injured most often, being a squishy human and all.”

“What about Nat?” Jane asked.

Darcy scoffed. “Please. That woman is more superhero than any of them.”

Rhodey nodded in agreement, but before he could expound on his bet with Tony, there was a rush of air, followed by a whoosh of pressure. The trio watched as the quinjet landed. “Cool raiding prize,” Darcy remarked.

“To the victors go the spoils,” Jane agreed as the hatch opened and Thor bounded out. Darcy watched as Jane pushed open the door to greet her love, Thor picking her up and twirling her around three times while Leo jumped around them, barking enthusiastically. Rhodey shook his
hand, the two speaking for a moment before Thor and Jane walked to the door, their arms wrapped around each other.

“Lady Darcy!” Thor boomed. “You are well?”

Darcy hugged Thor, burying her face against the cool metal of his armor. She wanted to tell him about her dream, about his mother. She wanted him to know Frigga loved him and missed him, and that she hoped he and his father would bridge the distance between each other, but now wasn’t the time. Soon. She would tell him soon. “Missed you, big guy.”

“I missed you, too,” he replied, kissing the top of her head.

“Do I get one of those?” Clint interrupted, pulling Darcy close as soon as Thor loosened his grip. “That’s my girl,” he murmured as she wrapped her arms around him. Darcy felt Natasha’s hand on her shoulder for a moment before she made her way to the elevator, the only comfort the redhead was able to give and accept until she decompressed. Darcy made a mental note to check on her later. “You’ve got a couple of soldiers anxious to say hi,” Clint said as he pulled away. He held Darcy at arm’s length, sniper face on as he studied her. “Aw, hell,” he sighed. “You’re going to do the big reveal, aren’t you?”

Darcy wasn’t surprised that he picked up on it. “You said they’d be good for me.”

“I know what I said. I’m just not ready to let you go.”

Well crap. Darcy pulled Clint in for another hug. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Promise?”

“You’re my best friend. Two super soldiers won’t change that,” she promised.

Steve picked up his duffle bag. He was glad to be home. He still felt incomplete, leaving the field knowing Hydra was still out there, the cells they didn’t hit recuperating, but he knows they did some damage. He’d have to be content with that as they prepped for their next strike.

“You worried about seeing Darcy?” Bucky tossed his bag over his shoulder.

Steve shrugged. He didn’t regret telling Darcy how he felt. How they felt. He needed to say it. She needed to hear it. “Haven’t had much time to think about the implications,” he admitted.

“And now?”

He took another look around the quinjet. It belonged to the Avengers now. They had removed all tracking devices, both S H I E L D’s and Hydra’s. Natasha and Clint knew how to pilot it. Bucky’s training made him slightly more than proficient. It was a good addition to their growing list of resources. Steve had the feeling they’d need everything they could get.

“Stop stalling, punk,” Bucky said, tossing his arm around Steve’s shoulder. “Let’s get this over with.”

Bucky wasn’t nearly as carefree as he pretended to be as he led Steve off the quinjet. He had no idea how Darcy would greet them -- if she’d greet them at all. Steve had dropped a bombshell on
her before they left, pulling the pin from the grenade and tossing it for her to catch.

Damn punk was always shit with dames.

“This a private party or can I cut in?”

Bucky drank in the vision that was the woman stepping out of the door and on to the roof. She was nothing like the women of their past, who would never think of leaving the house without gloves covering their hands. She wasn’t even like the women he saw today, with their stick-thin bodies and sleek hair. Their Darcy was all soft curves and chocolate curls, with a mouth like a sailor and an inner strength greater than any serum. “We always have room for you, doll,” he said before she stepped forward, her arms going out to pull both men close. He felt the tension drain out of him as he copied her movements, one arm going around Steve, the other around Darcy, smiling as he felt Steve do the same. “Missed us?” he couldn’t help but ask.


“What?!” Steve pulled out of their embrace, eyes wide as he stared at Darcy. “Want to repeat that, sweetheart?”

Her smile was uncertain, but her stance was all Darcy as she lifted her head. “I love you,” she repeated, a little louder, a lot stronger. She turned to Bucky. “I love you,” she said softer this time, her hand sliding down his metal arm, her fingers tangling with his. “Finally figured it out. It sucked having to wait until you got back to tell you, but if you’re still interested,” she took Steve’s hand, too, “I’m in.”

She barely finished speaking before she was in Steve’s arms, the blond man kissing her everywhere as he whispered words of love. Bucky watched for a second, feeling a sense of peace wash over him that he hadn’t felt in Lord knows how long before he pressed himself against Darcy’s back. “Course we’re in, doll,” he told her. “Have been from the start.”

“It’s not gonna be easy,” she cautioned even as she moved an arm behind her to wrap around his waist, pulling him closer. “I’m a smorgasbord of issues.”

Bucky snorted. “M not so well-adjusted myself.”

“We'll get through it,” Steve leaned his forehead against Darcy. “The three of us together can get through anything.”

“Together is the key word,” Darcy cautioned. “If we’re going to do this, I mean really do this, it’s got to be 50/50 all the way. Or, you know, one hundred divided by three, so 33 percent for you, 33 percent for James and 34 percent for me.”

“Why do you get more?” Bucky asked.

She snorted, turning so she could face him with Steve pressed against her back. “Please. We both know you two are going to gang up on me. I need every advantage I can get!”

Bucky kissed the tip of her nose. “What if you and Steve gang up on me?”

“Or you and Bucky team up against me?” Steve questioned.

“Oh, that’s totally allowed.” Darcy laughed before Bucky kissed her, slow and sweet, a precursor of what’s to come. He let her go, reluctantly, so Steve could do the same.
“What do you say, soldier?” she asked as she smiled up at Steve. “Are you in?”

Bucky watched as he pulled her close, his eyes closed as if he couldn’t believe this was happening. “All the way sweetheart. I’m yours.” He leaned down to whisper not-so-softly in her ear. “I’m pretty sure Bucky is, too.”

Bucky snorted as the loves of his life looked at him expectantly, sealing the deal with her words written on his skin. “What was your first clue?”

Chapter End Notes

I had so much support for this story -- thank you, thank you, thank you!!!!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!