she blinded me with political science

by thingswithteeth

Summary

Darcy watched the Avengers defend New York from over two thousand miles away. She could look out her window if she wanted to watch the aftermath. She watches the news instead, and realizes one very important thing: the Avengers have a bit of a PR problem.
The offer looked super legit on paper, but they both knew it wasn’t. Being the kind of astrophysicist who raced around the desert in a trailer trying to track down Einstein-Rosen Bridges was the sort of thing that got you a reputation for being a bit of a crackpot, no matter how well received your papers were, and that kind of reputation didn’t generally lead to offers of prestigious temporary consulting jobs in freaking Norway.

There had been another looks-good-on-paper, too-good-to-be-true offer about a month after Thor had left, a government grant that Jane couldn’t remember applying for. More to the point, Darcy couldn’t remember Jane applying for it, and that was the kind of detail she kept track of when Jane’s brain inevitably went off to lala science! land. Jane had talked to Erik and had taken the grant, because at that point her desire to find a way back to Thor had trumped her desire not to be in the government’s pocket, and any scientific venture, even one as MacGyvered and cobbled together as theirs, needed money to keep on trucking.

Darcy hadn’t objected. The money meant that Jane could afford to keep her on as a paid intern after graduation, and if the suits were going to keep her iPod, the least they could do was make up for it with massive amounts of anonymous money.

“So,” Darcy said around a mouthful of poptart, “any idea why the Men in Black want to ship you off to Norway?”

Jane was in the process of poking her own poptart to death with the pointed end of a Bic pen, which was a horrible thing to do to a perfectly edible cinnamon poptart, and Darcy might have rescued it for herself once it became evident that Jane was going to continue to abuse the poor, beleaguered toaster pastry, but she didn’t think cheap ink would much improve the flavor. “I don’t know. They seemed perfectly all right with me continuing my research after Thor left, but—.”

“Maybe they’re planning to have you killed.”

“Darcy.”

“You know too much.”

“Really, I think they could accomplish that without arranging for a job offer from the Tromsø Geophysical Observatory.”

“Maybe they’re planning to have me killed. You’re still useful to them. They want you out of the way so they can,” she sliced a finger across her own throat and made a few weak gagging noises.

“Also probably doable without the plane ticket to Norway.”

That was... possibly creepy-true. Some of those guys helping to rebuild Puente Antiguo were sure as hell not your average builders and relief workers. They were good enough not to wear standard issue black around town, but they moved a little too stiffly and Darcy knew that one of the dudes helping to put in new windows at the convenience store had been there when the suits had come to steal their equipment.

“Maybe it’s a real offer?”
“It’s real enough,” Jane said, and gave her poptart another vicious stab. Seriously, Darcy heard the pen clink against the plate beneath, and that just couldn’t be a healthy way to work out aggression. “I called to check. That doesn’t mean SHIELD didn’t arrange it.” Another stab. “Six journals have refused to publish my most recent findings. Said they wouldn’t make it through peer review. Six.”

“Okay,” Darcy said, and reached out cautiously to retrieve the pen from Jane’s hand. They didn’t have many plates. They couldn’t sacrifice one to Jane’s eerily restrained, doesn’t-involve-a-taser temper. She was only a little worried about ending up with the pen through her hand, but thankfully Jane showed no inclination to get vicious toward a living target. “I’m pretty sure that SHIELD put a chokehold on at least one of those journal editors. Maybe even two or three.”

“They wouldn’t have to,” Jane grumbled. “It’s one thing for people to write about hypothetical bridges through space-time, but apparently a paper about an actual Einstein-Rosen Bridge that connects universes is a little too crazy for them.” She had taken to pulling the poptart apart with her fingers. Darcy wasn’t sure that her pen retrieval could be considered a victory, given that level of determination.

“Damn that scientific process,” Darcy said. “You could still come over to the social sciences. We don’t worry about that sort of thing at all. It’s not too late.” She could practically hear them revoking her shiny new Poli Sci degree, but it got Jane to smile, so it was worth it for the approximately five seconds it took before her boss went back to brooding at her decimated dinner.

“So do it,” Darcy said with a shrug.

Jane paused. “What?”

“Do it. Go to Thron-sa—.”

“Tromsø.”

“—be brilliant, talk smart to the other science-y people, prove that you aren’t foaming at the mouth with the pure and undiluted power of your cray-cray, and get your reputation back.” She perked up a little bit. “Maybe that’s why the feds arranged this. They knew that if they ruined your good name, your studly Norse god boyfriend would totally beat them up when he got back.”

“My research.”

“It’ll still be here when you get back,” Darcy said. “I think the big guy can wait a couple months. Besides, he sort of went out of his way to save your research and your career and everything. I doubt he’d want you to give up a chance to save it because you’re sitting around moping over him.”

“I don’t mope,” Jane said.

Darcy was silent. She had seen what had happened to the ill-fated poptart. She didn’t want to be the next target. She waited until Jane had stood and cleared the table, then crossed the room to dump the plates into the sink, before muttering, “You totally mope.”

* *

Jane left the next morning.

Darcy blasted her music and put on the TV, changed back into her pajamas after driving Jane to the airport, and took the time to revel in what was essentially paid time off. Ice cream for breakfast
was really the only thing that would do when it came to celebrating her newfound freedom, so she raided Jane’s freezer for a half-empty carton of Chunky Monkey (always stocked since Thor’s departure from Earth), poured chocolate sauce and mini marshmallows in until the carton was entirely full, and settled her butt into a chair for a good, long laze.

The TV had been on a local station when she’d turned it on. They were reporting on some huge earthquake somewhere in the Chihuahuan Desert. Weird. Darcy couldn’t remember there being anything bigger than a two-point-something since she had moved here.

Whatever. She flipped through the channels until she found an old Scooby Doo rerun, and attacked her ice cream with vigor.

This? This was the life.

The life turned out to be a little boring. Darcy was actually glad when Jane didn’t make it a week in Trom-so-what before calling, even though she knew that the boss lady was probably just wanting to check in on her machine babies and making sure that Darcy was doing something resembling actual work. Which, not so much, unless working it around the station to her tunes counted, but it wasn’t like there was a whole lot she could do other than collate Jane’s files to within an inch of their life and make sure the place didn’t burn to the ground or something.

“Miss me already?” she asked. “I know it’s hard, but I’m confident that you’ll soldier on in my absence.”

“Turn on the news.”

Darcy almost shot off another quip, but Jane’s voice pulled her up short. “Local or national?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

She flipped on the TV.

They sat there for hours and watched the world crumble. The video coming out of New York wasn’t very good, patchy and filled with static, interrupted now and again by the stiff commentary of a news anchor miles away from the warzone that the city had become. The woman’s hair was as stiff as her voice, and after a while Darcy muted the TV rather than deal with both. The only sound then was the quiet rasp of Jane’s breathing over the phone. Darcy didn’t mention what the call from Norway was probably doing to her cellphone minutes, although she thought it and felt instantly guilty. Neither of them mentioned the familiar flash of a red cloak that one of the cameras picked up about an hour in; this was bigger and more frightening than Jane’s demigod boyfriend being back in town and forgetting to call. Both of them were silent, and Darcy was reminded viscerally of high school, stepping out of her freshman comp class to find teachers and students gathered around whatever TVs the AV Club could provide, each and every one of them silent and stunned. She wondered what the atmosphere was like at Puente Antiguo’s little one building K-12 school, whether they had gathered in the auditorium to watch or sent the students home, or if they were keeping it quiet, nervous teachers not wanting to spread the panic to their students.

They watched until it was over.
“I’m coming home,” Jane said.

“No, don’t,” Darcy replied without really thinking about it, except that New York had inexplicably turned into a freaking sci fi movie and she was starting to maybe see why SHIELD had sent Jane out of the country. She might’ve been indignant about the fact that she apparently didn’t rank high enough on their list of priorities to be deported from the blast radius, but she also kind of knew why. No one was going to be using Mew-Mew to smash heads if she ended up in the crossfire.

After what she had spent the day watching, she didn’t doubt that New Mexico was close enough for crossfire. She was starting to wonder whether Norway was far enough away.

“But—.”

“Seriously, boss lady, what’s the point?” Darcy asked, aiming for a normal tone of voice and mostly managing to hit it. “Nothing you can do here, and when your long cool drink of godly water stops by, I’ll be around to point him in the right direction. He’ll probably like Norway. Everyone is, like, as enormous and blond and hot as him, right? He’ll blend in great.”

“No quite.”

Getting Jane to agree was something that Darcy would have liked to attribute to her truly awesome powers of persuasion, but she thought it probably had something more to do with Norway being where the Science! lived.

Ultimately, it didn’t matter, because by the next day Jane was on a plane home anyway. SHIELD had called her back in, in the form of a somewhat shaken Erik Selvig (and Darcy was torn on that one, vacillating back and forth between “that sneaky bastard,” because apparently Erik had been working directly for SHIELD for months and that was why he had up and left their project, and “oh thank God,” because apparently Erik had been in New York when everything had gone down and was somehow not dead).

Of course, Jane didn’t tell Darcy any of that at first. What she said was, “Pack in the lab. We’re moving it to New York.”

“Nyuh?”

Darcy momentarily considered revising her response to something more intelligent and, well, coherent, but no, that pretty adequately conveyed her opinion on her boss’ most recent bout of reality disconnect. She quite liked ‘nyuh.’ It was like the strange lovechild of ‘uh?’ and ‘nu-uh.’

“I need you to pack up the lab. And my stuff. I’m flying directly to New York.”

“Nyuh?”

Distantly, Darcy considered telling Jane that ‘nyuh’ in no way translated as ‘I didn’t catch that, could you please rephrase while offering the exact same completely terrible information?’

“Why are we moving to New York?”

“SHIELD offered me a position there. There’s this—I don’t want to explain over the phone, and I don’t know what you’re cleared to know anyway, but they want me there and I want you there.” Jane hesitated, and she sounded a little uncertain and very un-Jane-like when she spoke next. “You will come, won’t you? I mean, I know it’s a little sudden.”

“Yes,” Darcy said, without even having to stop to think about it. She had long ago accepted that where Jane went, so went her nation. This sad truth was less because of her fondness for Jane (although she was fond of Jane) and more because of resignation to the fact that, having ended up
knee deep in the insanity that was Norse gods, wormholes, and secret government organizations, there was no climbing back out again. Darcy wasn’t sure the aforementioned gods and organizations would let her go, even had she wanted to leave. She was pretty sure that the wormholes were ambivalent to her continued presence; that was encouraging, at least. “We work for SHIELD now? We like SHIELD now? When did this happen? Why wasn’t I informed? I think I missed the memo.”

Of course, knowing Jane, the memo had been used to doodle equations on at three in the morning and then left at the bottom of a hole somewhere. That was the peril of working for Doctor Jane Foster: there were no memos when things were about to go strange. Also, she never remembered to refill the coffee pot. Darcy had yet to decide which one of those things she resented more.

“Darcy,” Jane said, in her patented Darcy-you-are-being-ridiculous voice, which was a little ridiculous in and of itself, being as Darcy wasn’t the one who forgot to eat because science, “we’ve worked for them since I accepted that grant money, and you know it. We’re just making it official.”

“Oh, fine,” Darcy muttered, and yeah, she had kind of known that, but the thought of working for a bunch of iPod thieves kind of rankled. Besides, she was going to miss those nights when she and Jane would break out a box of wine and spend an hour or two bitching about how SHIELD was a bunch of doo-doo heads, since calling a group of covert government operatives mean names while within earshot was probably a really horrifically bad idea. “What about your research?” Darcy asked, which was basically her version of a Hail Mary pass, because while it was true that Jane could not resist the siren call of research (and in this case, the siren call of Getting Laid Someday Soon), it was also true that once Jane had made up her mind about something, she stuck to it.

“It’s taken care of. Sort of. I’ll explain when you get here.”

Darcy sighed.

“Okay. Yeah. I’m on board. You’ve definitely got some explaining to do, though.”

“Thank you,” Jane breathed. “Be careful with the equipment. Stark says he his stuff is better, but I’m not going to trust it over something I built myself just because his is shinier and has his name plastered all over it.”

“Cool,” Darcy said, before most of what Jane had said really sank in, and goddamnit all to hell, she knew better than to agree with anything Jane said without thinking first. “Wait. Jane. Stark? Like, Tony Stark? You were actually serious about packing up the equipment? Jane!”

Jane... had hung up on her.

That was so not cool.

Darcy looked around the inside of their converted gas station, packed to full with a cubic shit ton of machinery, much of it delicate and all of it completely irreplaceable in Jane’s eyes.

“Fuck my life.”

Chapter End Notes
Big thanks to everyone who writes for my new and delightful ship, because this story came into being as a direct result of reading through a good chunk of the Bruce/Darcy tag on AO3. More big thanks to JaeFire, who sat patiently through my first chapter gibbering of, "what am I doing, what is my life?"

'Norway' and 'science' are now on a list of words I'm never allowed to use again, but that won't keep the second one from appearing a lot more in this fic.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s eleven in the morning, and Tony Stark is on her doorstep.

Darcy considered that for a moment, and then decided to rephrase. *It’s eleven in the morning, and Tony fucking Stark is on her doorstep.*

“Why is Tony Stark here?” she inquired, not sure if she was asking the man himself, the empty air somewhere to the left of his shoulder, or Jane, because this was totally and completely Jane’s doing.

“Jane won’t do science with us until she has her equipment,” he said, and oh dear God, that was Tony Stark of Stark Industries, also known as Iron Man, also known as The Entirety Of Facebook Would Band Together To Call Darcy A Lying Liar.

But whatever. Darcy knew a god. She had *tased* a god. She could be cool. “Okay. But why are *you* here?”

“I’ve been asking myself that the entire plane trip over,” Tony fucking Stark said. “I told Bruce we should have a *no girls allowed* sign on the door to the lab, but he said that would be sexist, and apparently Stark Industries has *policies* about that kind of thing. Or so Pepper tells me.” He shrugged. “I’m here because Foster thought you might need the help.”

Which was sweet of Jane, although it would have been sweeter had Jane remembered to actually inform Darcy. It was also, the very small part of Darcy’s brain that was still coherent noted, complete and utter bull hockey. She narrowed her eyes. “Don’t you have people for that? Heck, doesn’t *SHIELD* have people for that?” she asked, and oh yeah, it was a little hard to tell past the smirk, the sunglasses, and the facial hair, but that was definitely a *the* look of a man caught red-handed. “You’re just here because you want to play with Jane’s toys, aren’t you?”

“No.”

Darcy narrowed her eyes further. She considered reaching for the taser.

“...maybe.”

“I probably shouldn’t let you,” Darcy said. “Jane said something about wanting to prove that her toys are better than your toys.” Well, close enough. “I doubt she’d be willing to let you tinker with them before they even reach New York. I mean, that sort of defeats the purpose.”

“Not even a little?”

He sounded tiny bit plaintive. Darcy couldn’t decide if he was hoping to melt her cold, cold heart, or if Tony Stark really was just that unaccustomed to people saying no to him. “Nope. Jane would eviscerate me.”

“What if Jane never found out?”

Tony Stark was actually wiggling his eyebrows at her. Darcy had lost all ability to be awed by him. The mystery was gone from their relationship. After a moment, she told him so.
“Harsh,” Tony said, pressing a hand to his chest, where Darcy could see the faintest blue glow from beneath his t-shirt. “I like that in a woman.” He slipped off his sunglasses and stepped inside, forcing Darcy to step back or get to know Tony Stark a lot better than was probably good for anyone’s health or well-being. “Okay. You drive a hard bargain, Betty, but I’ve got a moment to get back to and you’re not the only one Foster would eviscerate if I messed with her stuff. I’m yours to command.” The leer was more-or-less expected at that point.

“Betty?”

“Boop or Page, take your pick.” He made a vague gesture toward her chest. “I considered the Jessica Rabbit comparison, but the hair is wrong. Have you considered going red? You’d make a stunning redhead.”

“I don’t have the complexion for it,” Darcy said, leading him back into the lab. “Flattery will get you everywhere, though.”

“Will it get me a drink?”

“I think we still have some boxed wine.”

Tony winced, recovered, and waved an expansive hand at her. “Sure. Why not? When in Rome, and all.”

It took a little under five hours to pack in the lab. Tony deserved his reputation for being a genius with machinery, and most of the equipment had been built to be mobile enough to pack it in and shunt it out to the middle of the desert. It probably would have taken less time than that if Tony hadn’t kept stopping to exclaim things like, “Oh my god, is she holding this together with rubber bands?” and “Duct tape is awesome, and so are bells, but this is just ugly. Really, really, ugly. It offends every one of my senses, including but not limited to my sense of smell.” Darcy thought that he was being awfully judgy for a man who was drinking all of their wine.

By the time they had reached the five hour mark, Darcy was tucked into the passenger seat of a convertible, the top down and the radio blaring, a U-Haul trailer improbably hooked to the back. She had a good little wine buzz going and was starting to feel more than a little optimistic about the move to New York.


On the plane ride back, Tony soothed his offended sensibilities by tinkering with Darcy’s taser and breaking out the most expensive bottle of scotch he had on board. By the time they reached JFK, the taser was no longer street legal and the scotch was gone.


“Oh my god,” Darcy giggled, leaning heavily against Tony’s shoulder. “You built yourself a giant penis. You built yourself a giant penis in the sky. And you put your name on it.”
Tony grinned. “I know, right?”

“You got drunk with Tony Stark, let him play with your taser, spent a couple hours prank calling SHIELD headquarters, and then passed out on his couch.” Jane pressed a hand over her eyes, like looking at Darcy was just too much to deal with right at that moment. “Why, Darcy? Why do you do these things? Do you do them to hurt me?”

“Did you know that Tony does a mean Thunderbolt Ross? It’s eerie.”

“Darcy.”

Darcy sunk down a little lower in her seat, because Jane knew where all of Darcy’s Jewish guilt buttons were located, and half a pot of coffee and a pair of Tony’s sunglasses just had not adequately prepared Darcy to deal with her boss while hungover and operating on about three hours of sleep. Someone really ought to have told her that graduating college also meant giving up her ability to recover from a solid night of binge drinking.

Jane took a deep breath and continued. “And then, apparently, he offered us a suite in Stark Tower, and you saw fit to accept on both of our behalves.”

“Okay, that was a perfectly reasonable thing to do,” Darcy protested, because she couldn’t actually remember any such offer, but if it had actually happened then she was totally okay with living at Tony’s Giant Penis Sky Mansion instead of in whatever government housing SHIELD had planned to put them in. “I don’t want to live with the suits. The walls are probably beige. Beige makes me break out in hives.” She eyed Jane thoughtfully. “I bet the bathrooms here all have Jacuzzis. I’m your assistant. I’m assisting you by facilitating living arrangements for you somewhere not-beige.” She gestured around the living area of what Tony had called his “temporary living quarters until I’ve ironed the Loki-crater out of my floor, pass the gin.” “Look around you, Jane. All this could be yours.”

“It is pretty nice,” Jane murmured, before shaking herself and retreating to more solid ground. “That’s not the point though. Why did you think drinking with Stark was a good idea in the first place? I mean, I’m pretty sure that man could guzzle gasoline straight from the pump and not suffer worse than a bit of a headache the next morning.”

After brief consideration, Darcy let the sunglasses slide forward on her nose a bit so that she could stare at Jane reproachfully. The sunlight hurt like a rampant bitch, but it was totally worth it for effect. “His girlfriend was stuck in some kind of emergency shareholders meeting. Fallout from the whole, uhm, battle of New York thing. He missed a moment because he went to tow your stuff from New Mexico. A big, romantic moment. He was sad. I couldn’t leave him to drink alone like that.”

Which was basically complete and utter bullshit. Maybe Tony had been sad, but it was impossible to tell with the beard and the smirk and everything. Darcy had stayed to drink with him because after the bottle of scotch it had seemed like a grand idea. Other than the hangover, it had been. Tony’s Thunderbolt Ross was pretty damn good, but Darcy did a brilliant Lady Sif. She had those Asgardian speech patterns down, baby.
Jane probably even knew it was bullshit, but that didn’t keep her gaze from softening or the scowl from fading on her face. Jane had been kind of a sucker for the romantic stuff since Thor had left. She and Darcy had once spent an entire weekend marathoning Hallmark movies. “Oh. Okay then. I guess. But don’t do it again, alright? They guys over at SHIELD were really not happy with you two this morning.”

“And we can move in?”

The admiring glance that Jane cast around was probably meant to be surreptitious. It totally, totally wasn’t. “I guess. Tell Stark that this doesn’t mean I work for him, though. We’re with SHIELD.”

When Darcy smiled, it felt a little smug. “Mmm, sure, boss lady. Better Stark than suits, I say, but it’s completely your call.” She snuggled a bit further back onto the couch, her body curved around her coffee cup and her feet tucked beneath a blanket. The blanket had been covering her from the waist up when she’d awoken that morning, and she hadn’t decided yet whether it had been Tony’s drunken attempt to tuck her in, or some drunk logic desire to cover her boobs. She didn’t judge; a lot of people had a hard time not looking at her boobs, especially when they were drunk. Jane had a hard time not looking at her boobs after a few glasses of wine.

Jane sighed.

The walls of their new suite at Stark Tower were painted a bright, shocking pink.

Darcy grinned. “I never would have guessed it of Tony. Then again, he does fly around in a suit roughly the same color as my Russian Red lipstick, so maybe I should’ve.”

“Mr. Stark wished you to know that I relayed your desire to not live with beige wall coverings to him, and that he both heard and was willing to accommodate that desire,” the walls said. Or JARVIS. It was probably JARVIS.

“That’s so creepy,” Darcy muttered, then cleared her throat. “Ah, no offense.”

Her daddy hadn’t raised any fools, and he had always told her to be polite to waitstaff, security guards, and receptionists, not only because it was the right thing to do but because those were the people who could mess you up faster than you could say ‘boo’ if they took a dislike to you. Darcy wasn’t sure where sentient computer programs fell on that list, but she was also pretty sure she didn’t want to find out.

“None taken, I assure you.”

Even the computer programs were sarcastic at Stark Tower. Darcy was going to love it here.

“I won’t be able to sleep here,” Jane said, and she looked a little dazed as she stepped into the suite. “I feel like the walls are yelling at me.”

Trust Jane to be more disturbed by the paintjob than the A.I. that was probably watching their every move. Darcy shook her head and followed Jane inside. “Dibs on whichever room is biggest.”
Darcy spent most of the rest of the week finding her feet at SHIELD Central. One lesson she learned extremely quickly: when working for an organization as big as SHIELD, being Jane’s lackey sort of meant being everyone’s lackey.

She couldn’t quite bring herself to resent it. There wasn’t much she could do for Jane here, where there were barrels full of eager lab assistants, all willing and able to help with Jane’s work, all fully recognizing how brilliant Jane was and kissing her ass accordingly. Mostly Darcy fetched coffee and made sure that Jane saw the outside world and her bed at least once per day. She ended up fetching a lot of other coffees and files and mysterious briefcases for SHIELD agents while she was at it, and if it wasn’t the most fulfilling work she’d ever done and not even remotely what she had imagined doing after finishing her degree, at least it was something to do with her day and draw a paycheck for at the end of the month.

On her third day there, a woman she vaguely remembered as having led the SHIELD mandated orientation she had dozed through stopped her in the hall. “Lewis, right?” She looked distracted, but her blue eyes still managed to be intense as they glanced Darcy over.

“That’s me,” Darcy said, and offered the woman the best smile she could manage while juggling two cup holders filled with Styrofoam coffee cups and secretly wondering if somehow the feds knew that she hadn’t even cracked the cover on the manual they had given her at orientation.

“Your file says that you have an MA in Political Science,” the woman said. “We’re always looking for more analysts, and you’ve already been vetted. Might be a better place for you than where you’re at.” She jerked her chin sharply toward the coffee, the file briefs tucked under Darcy’s arm.

It was a kind offer, in its way, although Darcy rather suspected it originated more from the military-like desire not to waste good soldiers than it did from actual kindness. She was almost tempted, except for the fact that she really didn’t want to let the Borg assimilate her any further, and she was pretty sure that no matter how smart all of Janie’s new little science babies were, none of them would bother to remind the woman to eat and sleep and not do physics all day, every day.

“Thanks, but I’m good.”

“Tell me if you change your mind,” the woman – Agent Heller? Hearst? Helsinki? – said, and then continued on her way down the hall as if they had never spoken.

The first time Darcy met Nick Fury, it was because Jane had caught her pushing a cart from the mailroom around and dragged her into the big man’s office. There was crazy in Jane’s eyes, lots and lots of crazy. Darcy did not think that boded well for anyone.

“Mine,” Jane said, because she got a little monosyllabic when she was sleep deprived and half of her brain was still on whatever ridiculously complex problem she was working on in the lab. She was clutching at Darcy’s arm possessively, a fact that Darcy wasn’t about to point out because she really didn’t want either the man behind the desk or her currently rather terrifying boss to turn their attention to her. “Mine, no one else’s.” She pointed an accusatory finger at Fury. “That was part of
our deal. You said.”

Fury rubbed a finger between his eye and his eye-patch like he was developing a migraine on the spot. Darcy could sympathize. “Fine. I’ll tell my agents to leave her alone. Happy?”

“Ecstatic,” Jane said, before turning and stomping out of the room, born forth by her own righteous anger and completely oblivious to the fact that she was leaving Darcy behind.

Darcy looked at Fury.

Fury looked at Darcy.

“Physicists,” she said with a shrug.

“Jesus Christ, tell me about it,” Fury muttered.

For one bright, shining moment, Darcy found herself in perfect charity with the director of SHIELD.

“Get the fuck out of my office,” Fury said.

Darcy got the fuck out of his office.

* *

It was basically inevitable that Darcy would meet Pepper Potts, being as she lived about two floors down from the woman. It was more surprising that she managed to meet Pepper during that first week living at Stark Tower, since Pepper spent a good deal of her time jet setting around the world and (Darcy presumed) keeping Stark Industries from crashing and burning, and most of her time at home with Tony. On the Friday after Darcy arrived in New York, she found herself waiting for the elevator beside a meticulously put-together redhead that could only be Pepper Potts.

Yeah, she wasn’t even going to pretend that she hadn’t kept the copy of Forbes that had featured Potts on the cover, along with their list of the World’s 100 Most Powerful Women. It was sitting at the bottom of one of the boxes Darcy still hadn’t managed to unpack.

Potts cast her a brief glance, and then a longer one. “It’s Darcy Lewis, right? Doctor Foster’s assistant?”

It was actually really weird to realize that she had come to a point in her life where anyone featured in Forbes knew her name. “Yeah.”

The elevator arrived, and Potts motioned Darcy inside. “I’m Pepper.” Darcy accepted the offered hand, still marveling a little at the fact that after gods and SHIELD and Tony Stark, this was the interaction that seemed the most surreal. Pepper was still eyeing her. “Tony likes you,” she said after a moment.

Darcy was suddenly confronted with the terrifying possibility that she was about to get a don’t you dare touch my man or else talk from Pepper Potts. “I’m pretty sure Tony thinks my name is Betty.”

A smile sketched its way over Pepper’s lips, tired but solid and sincere enough that Darcy relaxed a little. “True, but he also sent me an extremely typo-ridden text in the middle of an emergency
shareholders meeting to let me know that, and I quote, ‘Foster’s taste in lab assistants is surprisingly un-terrible.’”

“We may have gotten incredibly drunk,” Darcy said solemnly. She felt a little bit like she was ratting out Tony, but she also sort of felt like anyone who could wear heels that high without so much as a flinch of pain was not someone to be trifled with.

“You work with Doctor Foster, so you have some experience wrangling PhDs,” Pepper said as the elevator rose. “I don’t have time to find Tony another PA right now. He’s gone through eight of them in the last two months. I’ll pay you whatever your going rate is to make sure he occasionally sleeps in a bed and doesn’t blow up my twelve percent of the tower.” There was a faint, fond twist to her lips as she said the last, a joke that Darcy didn’t get hidden away somewhere in the sentence.

Actually, scratch that. The joke was probably that the CEO of Stark Industries was asking her to babysit the Stark of Stark Industries. Darcy scrambled for a response. “I work for Jane.”

Pepper nodded like she understood that, and maybe she did, since she’d been Tony’s assistant for a long time before she’d run his company. “I get it. Keep working for Jane. Just prod Tony out of his workshop once in a while. When there’s a meeting he really and truly has to attend, remind him a time or five the morning of. That kind of thing. Just until I find a replacement.”

Darcy thought about that. She thought about how Jane got absorbed in her work to the point of neglecting everything else, and she tried to imagine caring about someone like that beyond the point of she’s-my-friend-and-I-love-her-even-thought-her-reality-switch-is-disengaged. She remembered watching New York from states away, and seeing flashes of red and gold that could have been Thor or could have been a man in a metal suit, and tried to revise her calculation to account for the idea of really caring about someone who thought it was an excellent idea to battle aliens and space eels and who the hell knew what else. She guessed she could understand why Pepper might want another hand on deck to make sure Tony didn’t, like, accidentally kill himself.

“Okay,” she said, without really meaning to. She didn’t take the word back though, letting it slip through her lips and away rather than clutching it to her mouth like a secret. She could do a good deed once in a while. Besides, Pepper was going to pay her. “Yeah, sure. I can do that.”

Pepper smiled. “I’ll have someone draw up the paperwork.”

The first time that Darcy met Doctor Bruce Banner, it went a little something like this:

She hadn’t actually ventured onto the floors of Stark Tower devoted to R&D at any point during her first week in New York. Jane was only there about half of the time that she was at home and Darcy didn’t see any real point in exposing herself to that much science and that many science people during her off hours. When Jane was there, she was usually there with Erik and Tony and one to two people who were just as ridiculously smart as they were, and even if Erik was still a wee bit concussed due to (Darcy had been told) alien force field (what), the IQ levels in that lab still had to be approaching toxicity to anyone with a lowly Master’s degree.

JARVIS was usually willing to urge Jane to call it a night around two or three in the morning, and Jane, unlike Tony, was usually willing to obey, so Darcy had managed to avoid venturing into the
strange, uncharted, and frankly daunting territory that made up the top ten floors of Stark Tower beneath Tony’s wrecked penthouse.

She felt totally fine about this. She was at peace with her own cowardice, motivated as it was by the desire not to deal with Jane times, like, four.

However, she had just finished signing the paperwork presented to her by one of Stark Industries’ in-house attorneys, and she was emboldened by new purpose: make sure Tony ate, make Pepper proud.

She looked at the door to the lab contemplatively. Someone had taken a Sharpie to it, so that now, as well as having a neat little chrome plaque that proclaimed this to be Lab #12, it was labeled as *private, keep out, this means you. no gi*, with a sad little line trailing down from the *i* like the note writer had interrupted. Below that was another quickly scribbled set of words, this one reading, *beware of h* and ending in a sharp upward slash. Poor Tony. They wouldn’t even let him finger-paint on his own walls.

She knocked on the door.

The door opened.

Someone staggered out and into her. Darcy stumbled back a step, found herself steadied by a hand that caught on the collar of her sweater and then quickly withdrew, and refused to acknowledge that the sound she had made was more half-indignant half-startled snort than anything more delicate than that. By the time that Darcy had gotten her bearings, the man who had banged into her was a good two feet away and staring at the now-closed door to the lab like it had done him some kind of deep and personal injury.

“Tony isn’t here,” the man said, still without looking at her and in the sort of flat monotone that reminded Darcy of nothing so much as that time she had gone to see her oldest nephew’s school play, and been treated to a good two hours of the kid wading with a great lack of enthusiasm through his lines.

Which brought Darcy to her real point: *how she was obviously being fed a line*. She hadn’t even mentioned Tony. Which meant that Tony knew she was coming, and had obviously decided to distract her with one of his science flunkies. Which meant that Tony thought that she was so easily deterred that he could derail her from her mission by flinging mildly attractive scientists in her path, and she just couldn’t allow that to stand.

“Hmm,” Darcy said, and stepped deliberately forward. “Who said I was looking for Tony?” She used her best low-voiced purr when she said it, the one she had learned watching old Mae West and Rita Hayworth movies with her grandma.

He stopped looking at the door and started looking at her, although he still wasn’t making eye contact. He also wasn’t looking down her shirt, which was a little surprising; instead, he seemed to be focusing somewhere between her left cheek and her shoulder. There was a slight twist to his lips, a not-quite-smile that treaded the line between wry and mocking, and which might have been enough to make Darcy remove the modifier when thinking of him as attractive had she had any level of certainty that he wasn’t mocking her. “Tony did,” he said placidly.

Darcy beamed at him. “Thank you. You’ve been very helpful.” She reached up to pat his cheek, but stopped when he flinched back out of range. Okay. Didn’t like to be touched. Noted. She let her hand drop to the door of the lab instead, shoving it open with one hard push and stepping around him to go inside. With what sounded like a heartfelt sigh of relief, he followed.
“Traitor,” Tony said, pointing an accusatory work glove covered finger at her without so much as glancing up from whatever jumbled piece of metal he had spread out on the table in front of him.

That was enough to pull Darcy up short, because it wanted clarification. “Which one of us?”

“Both of you!” Tony exclaimed. “You,” his finger remained steadily on Darcy, “for going over to the enemy camp.” He looked up at her briefly, “That hurt, Betty. I thought we were bros,” before going back to his work and swinging the finger toward science dude behind her. “And you for telling her where to find me. Seriously, Bruce, I let you play with all my cool stuff, and you just sell me out. You’re like Benedict Arnold, only meaner and greener.”

“Bruce?” Darcy asked, flicking a glance over her shoulder. “Banner? Jane mentioned you.”

Doctor Science was looking a little tense, by which Darcy meant that if his shoulders went up any higher they’d be around his ears, even if the funny little half-smile was still solidly in place. “Really? What did she say?”

The too-casual way he said it told Darcy that there was definitely a wrong answer, but damned if she knew what it was, so she just barreled on. “Something about anti-election collusions? I don’t know. She was fangirling pretty hard at the time, and I have trouble understanding her when she gets like that. Partially the technical jargon, partially the high-pitched squirrel voice, you know?”

She finally got some eye contact from Tony, even if it was a little horrified. “Anti-electron collisions. Jesus. How are you a lab assistant? How are you Foster’s lab assistant?”

Darcy shrugged. “I was the only applicant.” She smiled at him. “And now I’m your assistant too.”

“What did I do to deserve that?”

“Do you want the entire list?” Bruce murmured as he wove around her to approach the table Tony was working at. Darcy cast him a look that couldn’t help but be a little admiring, because she felt she could forgive him for maybe-mocking her if he was going to mock Tony too.

“Traitor.”

“We’ll start with you throwing me at lab assistants like a projectile. That was dangerous.”

“Only if by ‘dangerous’ you mean ‘hilarious.’”

“She could have been hurt,” Bruce said, in tones low enough Darcy was pretty sure she wasn’t supposed to hear. “A lot of people could have been hurt. It’s one thing if you want to put yourself in harm’s way by poking at me, but you really shouldn’t be spreading the risk around. That’s not the good kind of sharing, Tony.”

Darcy cleared her throat pointedly.

They both looked at her.

“Girls, you’re both pretty, and there’s no reason to break up over me,” she said distinctly. “I’m wearing sensible shoes, and well equipped to survive a little scientist flinging. Now, if that’s settled, you,” she pointed at Tony, because turnabout was fair play, “will be downstairs in half an hour to eat a sandwich, or I’m turning on the sprinklers.”

Tony lifted a brow. “I’m pretty sure you don’t have the override codes you’d need to do that, cupcake.”
“I’m pretty sure Pepper does.” Darcy might’ve felt mean for playing dirty, but she was pretty sure Tony could handle it and equally certain that was about all he would respond to. “Care to place any bets on whether or not she’ll give them to me, once I tell her what they’re for? Now, you can either spent the next thirty minutes working, or you can spend it changing the override codes, at which point I’ll just come up here with a bucket and do the job myself. Do we have an understanding?”

“Did Pepper know what she was getting me into when she hired you as my PA?”

“I’m pretty sure.”

Tony narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, and dear God, Darcy could practically see the terrifying hamster wheel that was his brain turning away. Probably the hamster was drunk, but that didn’t keep it from moving about a billion times faster than her little brain hamster ever did. “How about you bring me my sandwich here?”

“Sure thing,” Darcy said, “as long as you agree to sleep in your own snug little bed tonight, and promise to actually eat the sandwich rather than using it to grow mold cultures.” She let her eyes stray to the line of coffee mugs on his worktable. There were seven of them, and they were organized by size and color. Darcy was pretty sure that was Bruce’s work; Tony didn’t seem like the type, and she had shared lab space with Jane, so she thought it more likely that half of those cups belonged to her than that she had lent a hand to anything even remotely resembling organization of them. “I’m coming back for those mugs,” Darcy said contemplatively. “Because that? That is disgusting.”

“But the mold cultures are my friends.”

“I’m worried that you’re going to forget and drink your friends.”

“They have names and everything.”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Do we have a deal?”

Tony smirked. “Sure. I solemnly swear—.”

“To JARVIS.”

Tony winced, but the smirk made a reappearance a moment later. “I solemnly swear to JARVIS that I will eat every last bit of the delicious pastrami on rye sandwich that you’re going to run down to Katz’s and get me, and that at some point tonight I’ll sleep.”

That was the best she was going to get, so Darcy nodded. It hadn’t been bad, for the first engagement in what was going to probably be a long and gory war. “Good enough.” She saluted both him and Bruce, and turned toward the door. “See you in a few, Tony, Doctor Sexy.”

Bruce dropped the screwdriver he had picked up from the edge of Tony’s worktable. Darcy decided to count that as a much less mixed victory than the one she had won over Tony.

As she approached the door, she heard Bruce speak again, in that same low tone that he obviously thought she couldn’t hear from ten feet away. “That’s Jane’s ‘attractive brunette colleague, Betty’?”

“Why?” Tony asked, and he didn’t bother to lower his voice in the slightest, so Darcy could still hear the smirk in it. “Who did you think I was talking about?”

“Some days, I don’t like you very much,” Bruce said.
“That’s cool,” Darcy heard Tony reply, just before the door swung shut, “since most days, you’re one of the only people who includes ‘some days’ and ‘very much’ in that statement, so I just hear, ‘Tony, you’re the best’ every time you say it.”

By the time Darcy got back to the lab, Bruce had left, and she spent one baffling moment trying to decide if she was disappointed. She stole the pickle spear from Tony’s takeout container in retaliation, and didn’t think of it much more after that.

Chapter End Notes

Dear Avengers Fandom,

I think you're pretty, too. To show my adoration, I'm posting a chapter early.

Sincerely,

thingswithteeth

All joking aside, I was absolutely floored by the response to the first chapter. Thanks so much for the very warm welcome to this new fandom o’ mine.
Chapter 3

Darcy didn’t really mean for Bruce Banner to be one of those other scientists. It just sort of happened. He was always in the lab, Darcy was in the lab a lot more between Tony and Jane’s continued presence there at all hours, and she wasn’t about to feed them and just leave him out. It had absolutely nothing to do with that one time he had left the top button of his shirt undone and she had caught a peek of chest hair and had some kind of hot flash. She was just being considerate. That was what she told Jane, at least.

“Tell Tony that I know who’s responsible for my bottle of Bailey’s going missing, and that if he really needs to add four shots of it to his morning coffee, he’s more than rich enough to buy his own damn bottle.” Darcy leaned strategically over the table Bruce was working at as she spoke.

His gaze flicked up from the microscope he had been looking through – and then back, just as quickly. “Mmm-hmm.”

Goddamnit.

New York was rebuilding. Slowly.

Darcy watched the news a lot. It was a habit left over from grad school, and several months of painfully writing a Master’s thesis in which she tried with varying levels of success to talk coherently about gender and nationalism in the modern U.S. news media as compared to propaganda films and newsreels from the Second World War. She had watched from two thousand miles away as the city had fallen to pieces; she could look out her window if she wanted to see it rise again, but some part of her still couldn’t help but be fascinated by how events appeared when filtered through the cameras and shotgun mics:

A human interest story on a local station, which detailed how New Yorkers were opening their homes to those who had been displaced by the destruction of huge chunks of Midtown Manhattan.

A panel of experts debated on CNN the larger implications of learning beyond a shadow of a doubt that humanity was not alone in the universe.
A well-known evangelical preacher earnestly told Liz Cho that the Rapture had begun, while simultaneously insisting that New York had brought destruction upon itself due to its large population of homosexuals and godless liberals.

A straight-faced Stephen Colbert stroked a replica of Captain America’s shield and claimed that if the great American hero couldn’t be found, he had the red-white-and-blue balls to pick up the mantle. The studio audience laughed.

Colbert’s joking was good-natured, but a lot of the rest of what was being said just wasn’t. It all boiled down to the same thing, in the end: Who were the Avengers and, more importantly, where were the Avengers? There were other questions too, questions about accountability and legality, but in the end it mostly boiled down to the fact that it was hard to get a quotable sound bite from people who just weren’t there.

Well, for the most part. Tony, as the only member of the team who hadn’t completely dropped off the face of the earth, ended up bearing the brunt of the press and the public’s interest.

“Mr. Stark.” The reporter was blond and gorgeous, and the tape recorder she shoved at Tony said print media to Darcy rather than television; the crew that had filmed her hadn’t been hers, they had just taken advantage of the opportunity she had presented them with. “Mr. Stark, would you care to comment on the role you played in recent events?”

Tony drew to a stop, which forced his ragged semi-circle of bodyguards to either stop with him or leave him behind, where he would surely be devoured by the ravenous crowd of reporters who spent most days camped out in front of Stark Tower. He smiled, a flashing media darling smile that looked rehearsed to Darcy. “Christine, you should know by now that I’m always willing to talk about myself.”

“What do you say to accusations that the Avengers operated outside the bounds of the law?”

“I’d say that anyone who wasn’t looking forward to greeting their new alien overlords is probably pretty happy right now that we did, if we did.”

“Early estimates of how much it will cost the city to repair the damage done during what’s being called the Battle of New York are ranging anywhere from eighty to a hundred and fifty billion. Some people feel that you and your costumed pals should be held accountable for the part you played in doing that damage.”

“Was that a question?” Tony’s smile had slid sideways into a smirk, but Darcy thought she saw a hint of frustration in the set of his jaw. “No, never mind. Just tell me where to send the check. I mean, we didn’t start the fight. We just ended it.”

“And your fellow Avengers? Do they have any plans to, as you say, help the repairs along?”

Darcy snorted at the only marginally subtle attempt to find out anything about the rest of the Avengers, one of many that she had watched Tony field in the past several days.

“You’d have to ask them.” Tony turned away from the reporters and the cameras both, and his men took that as their cue to start pushing forward again. “I think that’s enough questions for today.”

Some days, when Tony was being particularly egotistical or particularly stubborn, Darcy thought that it would be easy to dislike him. She didn’t, though, and she almost never envied him.
The night after watching Tony’s impromptu interview (although Darcy wondered how impromptu it had really been; it wasn’t like Tony didn’t have ways of leaving the Tower that would allow him to bypass the front door) Darcy worked her way up to asking Jane where Thor was.

Jane paused in the scribbling she was doing on the back of a copy of The Astrophysical Journal, letters and numbers that blurred together before Darcy’s eyes if she tried to look at them too closely. “Home,” she said. “He had some things he needed to take care of. His brother. He has a way back, though, which is why we didn’t need to continue our research in New Mexico. I’m not sure how much I can say, beyond that.”

It didn’t really matter that Jane wasn’t willing to possibly reveal state secrets; by the end of her second week at SHIELD, Darcy had a pretty clear picture of most of what had happened. SHIELD agents weren’t particularly chatty, but their secretaries were when plied with coffee and baked goods from Bouchon. She didn’t think they would have talked to a reporter, had the reporters known where to find SHIELD Central and taken to haunting it the same way they did Stark Tower, but they would talk to Darcy.

“I heard that the guy behind it all was a god,” said Consuela, a wide-eyed brunette with a taste for macaroons who did a good job of looking all innocent and sweet right up until someone tried to get through the door to Agent Sitwell’s office without an appointment or a, as she called it, Fuck All Big Emergency. When she shifted in her chair Darcy could see the lump that her gun made against the fabric of her jacket, because at SHIELD even the secretaries were packing heat. Darcy had started to think that she was the only one in the building who didn’t carry a gun.

“Loki,” Darcy supplied, because she believed in fair exchange of information. “I know his brother. They are gods. Sort of.”

Consuela leaned forward, her big Bambi eyes going a little wider. “You know Thor? Really?”

“Really.” She congratulated herself for not adding I tased Thor, because she really, really wanted to. It had been one of her prouder moments; she couldn’t help but feel the desire to brag.

“Hmm,” Consuela said, and Darcy knew that the other woman was carefully filing away that piece of gossip for a later exchange. She took a delicate bite of one of the half dozen macaroons Darcy had brought her and carefully licked all traces of coconut and sugar from her lips before continuing. “Well, I heard that the Hulk planted Loki so far in Stark’s floor that it left a hole.”

“Confirmed,” Darcy said. “I’m not sure about the Hulk part, but I’ve seen the hole.” She shook her head. “I wonder where they sent that one to keep him away from the media circus? I mean, the rest
of them probably blend in pretty well once they lose the costumes, but you’d think a big green
dude would stand out—everywhere. He’d stand out everywhere.”

Consuela frowned, and then tsked softly. “Darcy, didn’t you read your SHIELD orientation
manual?”

“Oops,” Darcy said. “Look at the time, gotta go.”

*

Darcy meant to look at the manual that night, she really did. Then Tony set the lab on fire, and she
kind of forgot.

*

“I’m just glad Doctor Banner wasn’t here,” Jane said, using journal she had been writing on the
previous night in a mostly futile attempt to wave the smoke into the vents faster. She, along with
Darcy and Tony, had been soaked through by Stark Tower’s truly admirable sprinkler system.

“Hmm?” Darcy said, examining the edge of her white cotton blouse and wondering if the scorch
marks would come out. Probably not.

Jane shrugged. “You know. He’s, ah, not always the best at dealing with stressful situations.”

“Mmm.” Maybe she could turn it into some kind of fashion statement. Post-apocalyptic chic.

*

She ran into Bruce while retrieving a stack of towels from one of the shower rooms scattered
throughout Stark Tower’s R&D labs, which had probably been meant for use in case of some kind
of chemical accident and which probably got most of their use from Stark employees who couldn’t
be bothered to go home and bathe when there was science to be done.

Bruce lifted his eyebrows and shifted a little nervously from side to side as he considered her.
“Tony forgot to eat whatever it was you brought him for dinner tonight, and you retaliated?” he
guessed, stepping aside to let her out of the shower room.

Darcy kind of made a point of stepping into his personal space as she exited, because she was only
human and also because she had always been really massively terrible at hiding it when she had a
bit of a crush on someone. She couldn’t help it. It was the chest hair. Or maybe the glasses. She
had always been sort of a sucker for a man in a pair of spectacles.

He stepped back. His glasses looked alarmed, and also a little reproachful.
Darcy sighed.

“Fire,” she corrected. “Tony. Lab. You might want to give it a few before you go in there.”

“Noted,” Bruce said, right before he slipped into the shower room and closed the door behind him. The light above the door went from green to red, a sign that it was occupied.

Bruce. Shower. Darcy's brain quickly wound itself down a long and incredibly perverted road.

Goddamn it.

The memorial happened three weeks to the day after Darcy arrived in New York. She supposed that SHIELD could be forgiven for being a little tardy in honoring their fallen soldiers, considering everything else they had needed to deal with in the meantime.

Darcy went because Jane was going, and because the first Agent Suit that they had met in New Mexico was apparently listed among the deceased. She wasn’t sure how to feel about that, because to her he had just been some dick who had taken her iPod and Jane’s research, but she also had some pretty vivid memories of Thor talking to the Son of Coul. Phillip Coulson, that was his name, and yeah, it was uncomfortable to think that among the huge number of casualties that had come out of Loki’s invasion of earth, someone she had known even a little was among them. The news reduced the people killed to numbers, statistics. Having met one the dead brought home the meaning of those statistics in a way that made Darcy’s stomach squirm.

SHIELD’S chapel was a funny little thing, tucked away among the winding halls of the central office like a secret. It was all grey upholstery and tinted glass arranged in a variety of geometrical shapes, all so carefully non-denominational that Darcy had checked the room number twice to make sure they weren’t walking into some kind of lecture hall that just happened to be swarming with SHIELD personnel.

Tony and Pepper were sitting near the front. Pepper had the only damp eyes in the entire place; everyone else was so stone-faced and silent that, were it not for Pepper, Darcy really would have thought that she had stumbled upon some kind of mission briefing instead of a memorial. Beside Tony there sat a blond man, uncomfortable in his dark blue suit and handsome enough that Darcy might have spent some time idly checking him out had doing so not been completely inappropriate to the occasion. Jane went to go sit with them, but Darcy didn’t follow. Instead, she sat down in the mostly empty back row, not wanting to take her place with the mourners when she didn’t really have anyone to mourn.

Erik and Bruce came in a few minutes later and the former nodded once to Darcy before she lost them in the sea of neatly groomed agents at the middle of the room, the various support staff showing up as bright flashes of color against that heavy backdrop of black. A few more minutes passed before Nick Fury made his way up to the podium at the front of the room.

It was a simply ceremony. Mostly, Fury just read off the names of SHIELD employees who had been killed during Loki’s invasion, with a pause between each name to allow for a moment of silence. It would have been short as well, if there hadn’t been so many names for him to read.

A man and a woman were seated in the same row as Darcy. Both of them were dressed in black,
and had the woman’s brilliantly red curls not been so distinctive, or had Darcy spent any less time watching the news in the weeks since her arrival, she might not have recognized them. They seemed smaller, somehow, than they had on TV, life-sized and lifelike replicas of New York’s real superheroes. They didn’t look at each other or anyone else during the memorial, but the woman had a hand locked around the man’s wrist, pinning it to his lap like she meant to hold him in place.

The gesture was at odds with her words; as soon as Fury had read off the last of the names and started in on a brief speech thanking the agents lost for their years of dedicated service and their sacrifice, Black Widow turned to Hawkeye and said, in a voice that carefully tread the line between bland and gentle, “Have you seen enough? Can we go?"

He nodded, and the two of them rose.

“There’s a proper wake in the cantina after the service,” Darcy murmured on impulse as they passed. She wasn’t sure what motivated that impulse, curiosity or kindness or simply the knowledge that she hadn’t seen either of them around SHIELD headquarters in the past three weeks and that they might not know. She regretted speaking almost immediately, because doing so was enough to draw the Black Widow’s gaze.

She didn’t think the woman intended to intimidate, not really. It was just that she looked so intense, so focused, like all of the SHIELD agents did but with a little something more, an edge that Darcy hadn’t noticed on anyone else except Fury. Or maybe it was just that there was some really good footage of Black Widow cutting down alien invaders like it was a sport; that was a little intimidating too. “Tony’s coming, I think,” Darcy added, quietly enough to keep from disturbing the people seated in front of them. She scooted her knees to the side so that they could pass.

Black Widow glanced at her companion. Nothing in his expression changed, but maybe there was some kind of signal that Darcy just couldn’t read, because a moment later she received a short nod of response from the Widow. “Maybe.” They slid past Darcy and were gone, out the door so quickly and so silently that no one else seemed to notice.

\*

Darcy didn’t really expect them to show up, so when she looked up from firing a where are you? text at Jane to find two familiar faces seated across the table from her, she did an admirable job of sloshing about half of her drink down the sleeve of her blouse.

One perfect red eyebrow rose, but the Black Widow and Hawkeye were both good enough not to comment.

“Natasha,” the woman said, which was nice, because Darcy’s brain sort of giggled inappropriately every time it was forced to use the Avengers’ codenames. That had been the case even before she had met any of them other than Thor; Captain America had featured prominently in Darcy’s thesis, and some part of her hadn’t been able to help going Captain America, really? and snickering every time she had typed the name. “It’s Ms. Lewis, right? I hear that you’re Tony’s new PA. Having fun with that?”

Something in Natasha’s wry intonation when she asked said that maybe there was a story there, and damned if Darcy didn’t really want to hear it. Her curiosity basically clobbered her anxiety, and she smiled widely. “Oh, you have no idea.”
It was true, actually. Screwing with Tony was massively fun, because he gave and good as he got and didn’t look confused by her pop culture references the way that Jane sometimes did. Some of that truth must have shown, because a faint smile tucked its way up into the corner of Natasha’s mouth.

When Darcy looked at Hawkeye, she sort of regretted allowing Natasha to distract her, because he was sitting across from her and rubbing his thumb lightly over the point of a small, flat knife. Darcy swallowed hard enough that her throat clicked, but maybe this was just what he liked to do while casually drinking a beer, because his gaze was mild when caught her staring. “Clint,” he said, as if she had been looking for a name and not at the knife he was currently holding in his hand.

“Darcy,” she said faintly.

They didn’t speak for a few minutes after that, and if Darcy gulped down the remains of her margarita a little faster than was probably advisable, Natasha and Clint once again refrained from comment.

She completely and utterly blamed nerves and Jane’s continued absence for what she said next.

“I once tased the god of thunder.”

Blank stares greeted that statement. Then Natasha smiled.

“I once put one over on the god of lies.”

Darcy looked at her. “So,” she said, “this is completely inappropriate and really undignified, but can I can your autograph?”

The smile widened a notch. “Got a pen?”

When Darcy produced one, Natasha scrawled something lazily across a cocktail napkin. Darcy smirked down at it, because that was totally not an autograph but somehow it was better, and Natasha signaled for service.

“Let’s get you a proper drink, shall we?” Natasha said.

*

Two vodka martinis and a rousing game of hangman with Clint on another cocktail napkin later, Tony arrived, short the blond man but with Pepper and Jane in tow. They sat down at Darcy’s table, and Tony waved a hand through the air and was delivered the best bottle of scotch that SHIELD’s cantina could provide.

He frowned down at the napkin Natasha had written on. “You never asked me to sign anything,” he said, once Darcy had explained.

“Tony,” she said, with a sad shake of her head. “I ask you to sign paperwork every day. Mostly you say no. The thrill is gone, my friend.”

Pepper laughed, and the new game became comparing stories of time spent as Tony’s PA. The
mute look of horror on Tony’s face when he realized he was surrounded and that there was no way out was so much funnier to Darcy than the stories were (although she did enjoy the one that involved Natasha choking a man into unconsciousness with her thighs).

Four vodka martinis later, Natasha leaned over to Darcy. She smelled faintly of alcohol and shampoo, and Darcy was feeling relaxed enough by then that she didn’t embarrass herself by screaming like a little girl and pulling away.

“Someone’s watching you,” Natasha murmured.

Darcy followed Natasha’s gaze. “Oh. Erik. Probably just making sure that I don’t mortify myself by getting too drunk to stand. Which is silly, because Jane told me that he and Thor once got into a bar fight after a few too many boilermakers. So, yeah, no high ground to stand on, that one.”

Funnily enough, Natasha’s Darcy-you-are-being-ridiculous-(and-also-kind-of-dumb) face was almost identical to Jane’s. “You didn’t tell me that you knew Banner too,” was all she said, though, and after a few minutes Darcy gave up on trying to get her slightly liquor sodden brain to figure out where the comment had come from.

“'We got drunk with Hawkeye, the Black Widow, and Tony Stark,’” Jane said the next morning. She sounded a little dazed, and also like she was maybe regretting her life.

Darcy shoved the sunglasses she had never given back to Tony further up on her nose and halfheartedly swiped at her out of reach coffee cup. “Don’t worry. I made sure that Tony deleted those pictures he took of you and Agent Woo trying to tango.”

Of course, she was also pretty sure that Tony had uploaded the pictures to an internal server well before Darcy had managed to get the phone out of his hands, but it was better not to hurt Jane by telling her that.

Darcy’s day was greatly improved when she arrived at SHIELD headquarters. Hungover secret agents were hilarious.

Her good mood lasted just as long as it took her to get back to Stark Tower, walk into the lab, and find thirty-seven coffee cups in varying states of ‘filled’ and ‘disgusting’ lined up around the edge of Tony’s worktable. He was doing this on purpose now, she just knew it.

Bruce was the only other current living and non-mold occupant of the lab. “Tell Tony that I hate
him and I hate his face, and that when I catch up with him my vengeance will be swift, gruesome, and... uh, vengeful.”

The corner of Bruce’s mouth tucked up, although his eyes never left the screen he was seated in front of. “Anything else?”

The mugs were lined up according to size and color.

“Yeah,” Darcy said slowly. “I’m not too happy with you right now either, Doctor Sexy.”

The following cough was obviously a thinly disguised laugh, and Tony was a terrible influence.


Darcy framed the cocktail napkin Natasha had signed and hung it up in her room. There were faint greenish margarita stains on it and the ink was a little smeared along one edge, but Darcy liked it.

That’s classified information, the napkin read. I could autograph this, but then I’d have to kill you.

– N.

The woman’s hair was tangled, and there were smudges of dirt and freckles on her cheeks. This was an old interview, taped right after the battle for Manhattan. “Captain America saved my life,” she told the cameras.

Thor returned to Earth on a Thursday.

Of course he did.

Chapter End Notes

There may be a slight delay before the next chapter. I wrote the first half of it on a whole lot of not sleepin’, and it’s going to require some hardcore editing. Also, the work week, and with it much less time to gad about my house and write about superheroes.

The article that I got the damage estimates from (and then promptly ignored for the most part).
The Stephen Colbert clip that I based his portion on.
“Thor,” Darcy said patiently to his forehead, “Thor, I can’t feel my ribs.”

Thor grunted, and the grunt sounded apologetic but he still didn’t put her down for a few seconds. She was smiling as she found her feet again, because Thor gave the best hugs, and it was almost worth her growing concern that her spleen had just become closely acquainted with her spine.

“Well met, friend Darcy! I hope you will forgive me my exuberance, but it has been many moons since last I gazed upon you, and I found myself overcome with the joy of seeing a familiar face in this strange land of the New Town of York.”

“It’s good to see you too, big guy,” Darcy said, and the only reason she didn’t end up face down on the roof of Stark Tower was because she saw the shoulder clap coming and braced herself accordingly. As it was, her knees buckled a little and Thor had to steady her.

It was pure chance that she had been on the roof when Thor had arrived. There were blueprints that Pepper needed, and that Tony had misplaced, and Darcy had gone to find them. The blueprints remained unfound. Thor, on the other hand, was very much found and made the best attempt of any Avenger yet to actually get Darcy to pee herself by stomping into the wrecked penthouse and lifting her a good two feet off the ground by way of greeting.

“And the Lady Jane?” Thor said, with an adorable and completely failed attempt at casualness. “If you have travelled hither, surely it was in her company? I know you to be a most stalwart and loyal companion, and do not believe that you would be easily parted from her side.”

Darcy checked her watch. Three and a half minutes. The big guy had actually held out pretty long before asking about Jane. “Aww, that’s sweet.”

And – it was a relief, too. Darcy hadn’t really read anything into his failure to visit the last time he had made it back from Asgard – there had been a world to save, after all – but that hadn’t kept her from worrying a bit that his no show was the godly equivalent of he’s just not that into you. Jane hadn’t been in a particularly happy place after Thor had gone; Darcy didn’t want to think about what her boss would have been like if the continued separation had been his choice, rather than a matter of circumstance.

“Yeah, Jane is here,” she continued. “If you want, I can take you to her. She’s in the lab, but I have this feeling that she’ll be willing to take a break if I tell her who landed on our doorstep.”

Thor’s brow wrinkled with concern. “I do not wish to disturb her in her scholarly pursuits. Truly, her wisdom is as great as her beauty, and I hesitate to distract her from—.”

A throat cleared behind them.

Darcy turned, and even if she hadn’t recognized that throat clearing, Thor’s booming, “Man of Iron! Hail, and well met!” would have told her who was waiting behind her.

“JARVIS told me,” Tony said in response to Darcy’s raised eyebrow, lifting a hand as he spoke to wiggle his fingers in a little wave at Thor. Thor seemed content to beam at him without hugging, which made Darcy feel a little smug. “I take it no introductions are needed?”
This time, the shoulder slap came out of nowhere and Tony had to lunge forward to save Darcy from kissing concrete. “Lady Darcy and I are already well acquainted, Howard’s son!” Darcy was standing a little too close to miss Tony’s grimace at that, but he let it pass. “Although she cannot match the skill of the Lady Sif or the ever-formidable Black Widow in battle, she is a brave and honorable shieldmaiden, who once felled me with her portable lightning.” A pause. “I was mortal at the time, of course,” he added hastily.

Tony smirked. “Shieldmaiden?”

“Shaddup,” Darcy said, and pushed away from him.

That did nothing to clear the smirk from Tony’s face, and he gestured for her to proceed him inside. “Come on. I suspect the, ah, Lady Jane is getting a bit antsy. By which I mean, ’she’s probably chewing on my lab equipment by now.’”

“I do not believe such a thing to be healthful. Let us go to her immediately, friends.”

Darcy hid a smile and led the way inside. Behind her, she heard Tony ask quietly, “Your brother?”

“The All-father’s judgment upon him was harsh, but just.” Thor sounded somber now, and Darcy kind of wanted to flick Tony for leeching some of the infectious joy from the Asgardian, even if she understood the necessity. “I do not believe Loki will be permitted to stir from behind Asgard’s walls until long after your children’s children have fought many fierce battles and turned gray with age and stooped with the weight of their own wise years. You need not fear his enmity in your lifetime.”

“Well, there’s that,” Tony muttered.

Erik, Jane, and Bruce were all in the lab. It didn’t particularly surprise Darcy when Jane went flying through the air and basically attached herself to Thor’s mouth.

A few long moments passed.

“Don’t you think we should give them some privacy?” Bruce asked.

Another moment.

“Personally, I’m thinking we should make some popcorn and settle in to enjoy the show.” Tony said, and followed it shortly thereafter with a decidedly amused, “Darcy?”

“Shut up. There’s something in my eye. And also, I am blinded by feelings. This is a perfectly natural response. Stop judging me.”

An finally, Erik: “Okay kids, I think that’s our cue. Out. Shoo. There are sides of Jane that I most definitely do not need to see.”

It was contented group that Erik herded around Jane and Thor and out the door. Tony was smirking, but it was softer than he usually managed. When he caught Darcy looking, he shrugged. “What? I like a good happy ending. Makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.”

Erik waved to them and started down the hall, wearing what Darcy chose to interpret as the smug expression of a man who had a surrogate daughter-type person capable of snagging the hottest piece of Norse ass around, and who knew he would one day call the King and Queen of Asgard his surrogate inlaw-type people. Once he was gone, Darcy reached out to pinch Tony’s cheek. He yelped and slapped her hand away, but he was still smiling.
“Aw, Tony. You have layers! You have a soft, gooey center of loooove. I never would have guessed it. I still don’t quite believe it. My mind, it is blown.”

“Yeah,” Tony said, “I’m going to need you to sign a gag order on that one.”

Darcy smiled.

“Seriously. See the legal department.”

Darcy... actually couldn’t tell if he was in earnest or not. From the utterly satisfied look on Tony’s face, he knew that she couldn’t tell. “And on that note, I’ve got to go see a lady about a horse.”

“Please tell me that you and Pepper don’t actually do anything involving horses.”

“Please don’t pretend that something of an equine nature wouldn’t be the most action you’ve seen since getting here.”

“You have no way of knowing that.”

“JARVIS knows all.”

Darcy considered that briefly. “Tony Stark,” she said after a moment, “if you’ve been watching me in the shower, I will kill you flatter than dead.”

“As gratifying as I’m sure that sight would be, Betty,” Tony said, casting a leering glance down her body even as he began to walk backwards down the hall and away, “Pepper would do the job of flattening me dead for you.” He grinned at her. “I make no promises about streaming to the internet, though.” He gave her a jaunty little wave and disappeared around the corner before she could think of a suitable retort.

“Oh, he’s in an excellent mood,” Darcy said. “Yay.”

“On the bright side, Tony in a good mood probably means less explosions.”

She arched a brow at Bruce. “Really? ‘Cause I’m pretty sure Tony in a good mood means massively more explosions, with clear skies and a high chance of naked bungee jumping off to roof of Stark Tower.”

“...point. Also, I think I lost a few IQ points in an attempt to expunge that mental picture from my brain, so thank you for that.”

Darcy chuckled, because Tony’s continued attempts to live life as a complete and utter troll were not enough to keep her from feeling relaxed and pleased just about everything and everyone around her. Jane was getting laid, Jane was happy, all was right in Darcy’s world; even grumpy scientists who couldn’t seem to give her cleavage the time of day got a free pass right now. “Let’s neither of us pretend you couldn’t afford to lose them.” She hooked a companionable arm through his elbow, and felt him tense almost immediately. Right, no touching. Before she could extricate herself, however, the tension in his arm and shoulders drained away, like it had never been there or, more to the point, like he had forced it not to be there. He still didn’t look exactly comfortable, but since he had made an effort she did too, pастing on an expression that was so cheerfully oblivious a five-year-old would have been ashamed to wear it. “‘Come on, Doc. My suite is going to be hostile territory tonight – eventually Jane’s going to remember that her delicate little machine babies live in that lab, and stagger back to our place with her hot little bit o’ god lovin’ – so you get to take me home with you, you lucky dog. I hear the Chinese takeout place down the street calling my name, and there’s a Greta Garbo marathon on TMC tonight.”
She sort of held her breath, because yeah, there was no way in hell that was going to work.

Much to her surprise, it did. Bruce smiled, and while it sat a little stiff and crooked on his lips, it also wasn’t the I’m-mocking-you-and-also-myself-inside-my-giant-brain smile that she usually got out of him. “I had noisy roommates in college,” he offered, after a moment. “Noisy, enthusiastic roommates. I can see how you might want to avoid that.”

Darcy beamed at him. “Precisely.” She thought about that for a moment. “Of course, I’m pretty sure that in college I was the noisy, ent—.”

“Please don’t finish that sentence.”

He looked a little pink in the ears, and his arm twitched beneath her hand.

Okay, so apparently dirty jokes were off limits too. How on earth he managed to survive sharing a lab with Tony, she would never know. Still, he allowed her to nudge him down the hall and toward wherever Tony had him squared away downstairs, so – progress. Maybe.

Bruce spent most of the night working, but he did it at the coffee table in front of the TV, and he let Darcy order Chinese take-out to her heart’s content and didn’t seem to mind when she talked at the screen (not her fault; that was how her dear old granny had taught her). He sat on the far side of the couch from Darcy, which she figured meant he had reached his touching quota for the day, but he also didn’t seem particular shy about reaching across her to claim another eggroll.

It wasn’t really that different from having a low-key evening in with Jane, except Bruce didn’t talk much and Darcy didn’t usually try to surreptitiously catch a whiff of Jane’s cologne when they were hanging out. He seemed relaxed though, more so than she ever saw him except when he was really absorbed in something in the lab, and she had a hard time deciding if that was because of the setting or because he had mad skills for tuning out her presence in favor of the Stark Tech tablet he was writing on.

She dozed off a little bit after midnight, Garbo’s Marguerite Gautier a quiet murmur in the background. She woke up on someone else’s couch for the second time since arriving in New York, and crept out in spite of protests from her still sleepy brain that really, it wouldn’t hurt anything to check and see if the good doctor slept in the nude. There were boundaries, and then there was Darcy, and after that came the boundaries that even Darcy had to recognize. Being a creeper at sleeping folks was up there somewhere pretty high on the list.

The blanket had covered her from neck to feet and, unlike the last time she had gone couch surfing, she hadn’t woken up with pieces of ridiculously soft cashmere afghan in her nose. Her glasses and a chipped Culver University mug filled with water had been sitting on the coffee table. Bruce was much better at tucking people in than Tony was.
“Oh my god.”

Darcy covered her eyes with a hand.

“Good morrow, Lady Darcy! It is a fine morning in Midgard! The birds sing and the sun shines brightly down upon us! Would you like to feast with me upon these fine earthly delicacies, which my Jane calls Pop-Tarts? I believe they are filled with delicious S’more, and I have missed them greatly in my absence.”

“Thor,” Darcy said, “I want you to know that this goes against every one of my deeply held personal beliefs, and that it kind of wounds my soul to even say it, but please, put on some pants.”

* 

There was a young man on the news that morning, one of the people some local station was interviewing in some kind of everyman/woman-on-the-street series. He looked like any one of the guys who had been in Darcy’s program at school, shaggy hair and jeans that were holding together on willpower and pocket lint alone, and he was frowning.

“Look, I’m not suggesting that they did something wrong by saving us, or that they’re awful, horrible monsters,” he said. “I’m just saying that having a group of people who operate outside of the law isn’t usually a good thing, you know? Especially when one of them can zap you in the head with lightning and another one is basically an enormous, green, angry eighteen-wheeler. I don’t see that ending well for anyone.”

* 

Getting into Fury’s office hadn’t been easy, and Darcy really and honestly expected to be thrown out on her ear once she explained her reason for being there.

The slightly mad glint in Fury’s eye said otherwise.

“Ms. Lewis,” he said, “I can honestly say it would be my pleasure.”

* 

It was three in the morning, and Tony had so far resisted all attempts by Darcy to cajole, threaten, or bully him to sleep. She had finally retreated to a corner of the lab, and was flipping idly through a two-month-old issue of Rolling Stone she had found on one of the tables.

“GO THE FUCK TO SLEEP,” Nick Fury’s voice boomed, echoing angrily through the lab.

Tony screamed. It was very satisfying. Darcy smiled without looking up from her magazine.
After a quick survey of the room proved that Fury had not, in fact, somehow come in without Tony realizing it (not outside of the realm of possibility), he turned an accusatory stare toward Darcy.

“You should know,” she said serenely, “that it’s on a fifteen second—.”

“GO THE FUCK TO SLEEP.”

“—loop.”

“I don’t know how you got JARVIS to agree to this,” Tony muttered. “Mute! Mute!”

“GO THE FUCK TO SLEEP.”

“Think lower tech, Tony,” Darcy chided. “JARVIS never would have agreed to help me with this. However, the thing about never neatening up your lab is that it becomes difficult for you to—.”

“GO THE FUCK TO SLEEP.”

“—figure out where the person who does clean up after you hid the iPod speakers.”

“I hope you realize,” Tony said, “this means war.”

“Looking forward to it,” Darcy said. Her smile was the smile of a woman who knew that she had won this round, and that she had been suitably avenged for all thirty-seven of those moldy coffee cups. She watched as Tony fled the lab.

“GO THE FUCK TO SLEEP.”

“Planning on it, Director Fury, sir,” she murmured, before she tossed the magazine aside and followed Tony out.

*

“You’re fired,” Tony said experimentally the next morning.

“Ahahaha, that’s cute,” Darcy replied.

Tony sighed.

*

“Pay up,” Darcy told Clint, and settled into their usual booth at the bar three blocks from Stark Tower and two from SHIELD Central.

“I told you Fury would do it,” Natasha said as Clint rifled a twenty dollar bill out of his pocket and handed it over to a triumphant Darcy. “He has a mean sense of humor.”

“I was actually betting on Teresa,” Clint said. “I didn’t think she’d let Darcy through the door.”

* When she met Captain America, it was mostly by accident. She had a day off – the first real day off she’d had in like a month, which was really all her own damn fault for spending every waking minute at SHEILD or in Lab #12 – and since she was pretty sure it had been a week since she had seen actual, real sunlight unfiltered by the windows at Stark Tower, she decided to take advantage of the gorgeous July day. She was living in New York City, and yet she hadn’t done anything even remotely resembling exploring the town Jane had so unceremoniously relocated them to.

The area around the tower still looked depressingly like a warzone, albeit one that was rebuilding: chunks of concrete and bricks torn loose from the surrounding buildings had been pushed onto the sidewalks to clear the way for cars, leaving only a thin strip of space for foot traffic. Half of the buildings Darcy passed still had blown out windows, scorch marks, or giant holes carved out of their sides. There were memorials like the ones Darcy remembered sometimes seeing at intersections set on almost every corner, pictures and flowers and candles with the occasional teddy bear that made Darcy try pretty damn hard not to think about what kind of disaster victim would have stuffed toys set out for him or her. Grand Central Station still looked hollowed out and sad, although Darcy had seen on the news the other day that repairs were far enough along for New York’s most famous transit hub to be back in service.

There were also people. Lots of people. Many of them were in suits or heels, obviously on their lunch break or hurrying back and forth to meetings, preoccupied with their daily tasks because three weeks after the fact, even an alien attack wasn’t an excuse to phone in sick to work. Many of the restaurants and shops that lined the street were open, their window displays neatly arranged even when the glass was missing; one clothing store had even incorporated the damage into their display, a plastic mannequin leaning out over the jagged edge of what had once been an enormous pane of window glass and raising her hand in a stiff, jaunty wave to the street. A taquería on the corner had a similar idea, with a sign posted inviting customers to enjoy their newly installed drive-through and an arrow pointing cheekily toward a gaping hole in the wall, through which Darcy could see the kitchen staff clearly. According to a police sergeant Darcy had seen interviewed the night before, there had been a surprising lack of looting following the attack. When the reporter speaking to him had tried to attribute that to people sympathizing with the victims or a sense of togetherness brought on in the face of a common enemy, the sergeant had smirked. “Togetherness. Yeah. I kind of like to think of it as New York showing its collective middle finger to those fucking aliens. They couldn’t bring us down. We’re not about to bring each other down.”

A hotdog vendor by the side of the road had posted a hastily written sign, which read ‘FREE LEMONADE FOR RELIEF WORKERS AND VOLUNTEERS. :)’ Darcy looked at it for a minute, and sort of thought, well, why the hell not? That wasn’t exactly the relaxing day off she had planned, but she thought that doing something physical after so many days cooped up might feel good – that it might feel good in general, and a whole lot more useful than making recordings of Director Fury to scare Tony to sleep.
She quickly found out that there were two parties of relief workers at work: the official workers, many of them belonging to government funded organizations or otherwise drawing a paycheck from Uncle Sam, and the less official, “fuck that, who needs help with what?” workers. Darcy gravitated toward the second group, and might have had some trouble figuring out who was in charge had thirty seconds of observation not allowed her to pinpoint a plump woman of middle years who wielded a megaphone like it was a weapon.

“I want to help,” Darcy said simply.

The woman grinned, for all the world like slapping drywall into place and hammering down nails was the most fun anyone could possibly ever have. “Awesome. I’m Grace. I shall call you Volunteer #204 until you have earned a proper name. Grab a t-shirt and find someone to tell you what to do.” She gestured toward a young man standing by a huge cardboard box, and then went off to yell at someone else.

“They’re so we can pick each other out in the crowd,” the young man said apologetically as he offered her a t-shirt from the box. “And so that Grace knows who to holler at when she wants something done. One of the local shops printed them up for us.”

Darcy took the t-shirt, and started laughing.

It was bright green, and it read in enormous dark green letters: *THE HULK SAVED MY CITY. I’M GOING TO FIX IT.*

A quick glance inside the box showed that there were equivalent t-shirts for all the Avengers: red for Iron Man, yellow for Thor, blue for Captain America, black for the Black Widow, and (Darcy couldn’t wait to mention this to Clint, she really couldn’t wait) vivid, eye-scalding purple for Hawkeye.

“Sorry,” the guy said, chagrined.

“No, no,” Darcy replied, pulling the t-shirt on over the tank top she had worn out that morning. “It’s brilliant. I love it.” Tony was going to have an almighty sulk when it came out that Darcy hadn’t chosen an Iron Man t-shirt, but whatever. “Now, what can I do?”

It turned out that there was a lot to do. Rubble needed to be loaded into wheelbarrows and carted to a central location where it was out of the way until the official aid workers could get rid of it. Windows needed to be boarded over until they could be replaced. Glass and dust needed to be swept up, and walls needed to be plastered over and painted. After a couple of hours, Darcy had sweated through her new t-shirt and her hair was plastered to her forehead, and she probably looked (and *smelled*) disgusting, but damned if she didn’t feel glorious.

Of course, she was also in imminent peril of being smushed to death beneath the door she was trying to help a fluttery little old lady shopkeeper lift into place, because that? That had not been her most brilliant plan in the history of ever.

“Goddamnit, 204!” she heard Grace yell through the megaphone, and she wondered a little distractedly if the woman was single and how she felt about men with eyepatches and interestingly covert careers. It would be a match made somewhere in Darcy’s worst nightmares. “Too heavy! Too heavy! Steven, give her a hand.”

Someone was behind her, and suddenly the door felt a lot lighter in Darcy’s hands. Like, ‘nearly weightless’ lighter. Steven must be *buff.*
She turned to look over her shoulder.

Her first thought was: *totally buff.*

Her second thought was: hey, she recognized that dude. He was the dude who had been sitting with Tony and Pepper at the S.H.I.E.L.D memorial.

Her third thought was: not only did she recognize that dude, she recognized that alarmingly angular and manly jaw.

Darcy had watched a lot of WWII era newsreels while she was working on her thesis. The combination of context and a familiar lantern jaw meant that it really only took her a minute to figure things out.

“Holy shit,” she hissed. “You're Captain America.”

He almost dropped the door. Darcy let out a squeak that completely lacked any kind of dignity, and didn’t even really care because Captain America had just almost dropped a freaking door on her, and that would be a really terrible and weird way to die. What the hell would the obituary even read?

They (by which she meant ‘he’) managed to steady the door, and he cleared his throat. “Steve is fine, ma’am.”

He said it pretty firmly, which Darcy translated as, “For the love of this fine country of ours and also adorable puppy dogs, kindly do not out me as Captain America in front of all these nice people.”

Which, okay, she could handle that. She worked for Iron Man and had a manicure appointment with Black Widow next Tuesday. She grinned up at him and said, “Darcy. I’m pretty sure we have a couple of friends in common, and I am very pleased to meet you.” She looked down at his chest and snickered. “Iron Man saved your city, huh?”

He shrugged. “Well, it’s true.”

They got the door into place while the shopkeeper hovered over them. By the time they were done, Grace was standing behind them and shaking her head like she had never seen two more disappointing specimens in her life. “Take ten, kids. Steven, you stick with this one for the rest of the day, because she’s obviously a hazard.” Which was totally not fair, but Darcy wasn’t about to contradict Grace if it meant that she got Captain America as her own personal co-pilot.

They got lemonades from the hotdog vendor and settled on a MTA bench that had somehow managed to avoid being completely demolished. “What are you even doing here?” Darcy asked. “There haven’t been any Captain America sightings since Loki was defeated, and believe you me, I’ve been looking. I sort of figured you’d blown town. Or that Fury had you locked in the basement somewhere. Whichever.”

Steve – and yeah, it was definitely ‘Steve’, because Darcy had a really hard time picturing Captain America with grime painted across his t-shirt and his face, slurping on a lemonade – looked uncomfortable. “I was supposed to leave. Fury wanted us to lie low for a while. I couldn’t. There was too much left to be done here.”

“That’s cool,” Darcy said, mostly because she couldn’t quite wrap her head around anyone who saved the world and then couldn’t bear to leave before repairs were finished. She couldn’t really laugh at it either, although anyone who was that much of a boyscout should have earned a snicker.
at least. Mostly she just felt like kind of a bad person by comparison. “Uh, do you want a hotdog? My treat.”

Steve smiled at her. “I would love a hotdog.”

It turned out that Captain America could eat a lot of hotdogs.

Steve walked Darcy to the tower at the end of the day. She offered to take him to a movie the following Monday.

“The Film Forum is doing two-for-one Hitchcock,” she said. “You might like it.”

He turned pink all the way up to his ears. “Darcy, I’m flattered and all, but—.”

Darcy started laughing. Steve looked nonplussed.

“I’m not asking you out,” she said. “That would be weird. You were, like, my Granny Lewis’ first crush. It would be like dating my grandpa. My enormously tall, somehow ridiculously young and hot grandpa, but my point still stands.”

“Thanks,” Steve said, his voice a little wry but the smile on his mouth real.

“You said you used to go to the movies a lot, and you seem like a cool guy. That’s all. Natasha and I go out for beers and get mani-pedis, and I’m not trying to get into her pants or anything. Although don’t think I haven’t considered it, because damn.”

Steve looked confused. Darcy played a little game where she tried to decide what had caused that look: the term ‘mani-pedi’, the idea that Natasha liked girl things (a lot of people seemed to stumble over that one; Darcy had no idea why), or the implication that Darcy might hit that. He was super old, after all. It was possible that maybe Darcy should avoid talking about her occasional enjoyment of lady bits until he’d had a chance to acclimate to the modern era.

“Natasha’s a very beautiful woman,” he said after a moment, seriously enough that Darcy had to bite back another laugh. He bounced back quick, at least. “And I think I’d like going to see a movie with you. I tried to go once, but – well. Hitchcock is good. I saw Secret Agent in the theater when I —when it came out.”

“Can’t go wrong with Peter Lorre,” Darcy said agreeably, and was rewarded with another smile.
Darcy went up to the lab even though she looked like death and felt not much better after a day of what was, essentially, moving heavy stuff around. She probably could have skipped it, because Jane at least had been otherwise occupied recently by massive amounts of godly sex and Thor made sure she was kept well fed on poptarts and coffee, but Darcy knew that if she gave Tony an inch, he would take a mile.

Bruce was the only one in the lab.

“Pepper just got back into town,” he said. “I think you’re off the hook for tonight.”

“Muh,” Darcy said with relief, and collapsed into the chair next to him. She leaned forward until she could press her forehead against the icy cold chrome of the table, and wondered if it would be poor form to fall asleep in the lab. Probably. At the very least, it was a bad idea, because Tony and Jane would totally take her falling asleep in the lab as permission for them to fall asleep in the lab. Neither of them would sleep in a bed ever again.

Something was touching her head.

Darcy froze as she tried to figure that one out. It took her an embarrassingly long moment to realize that what was actually happening was that Bruce was petting her hair.

It was nice. Soothing. Completely unexpected.

Completely frustrating, because she was pretty sure she didn’t have the energy to press her advantage and see if he’d let her upgrade hair petting to something a little more interesting. She could move slow! Hand-holding. Closed mouth kissing. Something.

After a moment, Bruce’s hand withdrew.

Darcy grumbled a protest.

“Nice t-shirt,” Bruce said.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, I want to thank everyone who’s left a comment, a kudos, bookmarked or subscribed. Ya'll are spectacular, and getting notifications from the archive (or seeing my story quoted on tumblr, holy crap) just brightens up my entire day.

For the approximately five people on the internet who haven't seen it yet: "Go the Fuck to Sleep."
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

What did I just write.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The girl was maybe four or five, and she pressed her face shyly into her father’s thigh as the reporter leaned in over her. He was smiling in that jovial, faintly patronizing way that grownups sometimes got when they were talking to little kids. That look had always make ten-year-old Darcy kind of want to punch people in the throat.

“What do you think of the Avengers, sweetheart?” the reporter asked.

The girl turned her head further, so that all the camera could see was a head full of corn silk fine black hair and the back of purple shirt pattered with pink and blue flowers.

“Do you have a favorite Avenger?” asked the reporter, apparently cottoning on to the fact that asking an introverted five-year-old to weigh in on current events and public policy wasn’t going to yield much in the way of results.

The girl was silent. Her father shrugged, amused but not particularly apologetic.

“Black Widow,” the girl said, and she was quiet with her mouth muffled against the denim of her father’s jeans but the mic picked it up anyway. “She’s really cool.”

“Oh my God, that is just precious,” Darcy said. “JARVIS, did you get that?”

“I am recording as requested, Ms. Lewis.”

The second time Darcy showed up on Bruce’s doorstep, it was well after midnight and she was clutching her favorite monkey blanket to her chest like it was her maiden virtue.

“They’re really loud,” she said in her most pathetic voice. “And Thor gets up in the middle of the night to make poptarts. Naked.”

Bruce looks bemused, but also sympathetic. “Naked Thor is a... bad thing?”

“Drooling over your best-friend-slash-boss’ man candy is always a bad thing,” Darcy said. “Total violation of the girl code. Also, I wasn’t expecting naked man in my living room at oh-god-oh-god-o’clock, and I screamed. And Thor thought there was danger, so he summoned Mew-Mew. And accidentally broke the wall.”

“He broke the wall.”
“Yes.” Darcy looked up at him through her lashes. “Can I sleep on your couch again?”

“I have a second bedroom,” Bruce said, and Darcy thought that she must look really pathetic, because he actually took her by the shoulders to guide her inside. She wondered if he knew that his thumbs were stroking little circles against the tops of her shoulders, or just how completely unfair that was since she thought her chances of bypassing the guestroom in favor of the bedroom were so low they approached zero. Doctor Bruce Banner was a freaking tease.

...she needed to get laid. If she was actually starting to think of her shoulders as erogenous zones, it had obviously been way too long. Either that or she was ridiculously far gone on the doctor, and that was probably going to turn out to be exactly as disastrous as it sounded in Darcy’s head.

Darcy sighed and pushed back into the touch. Just a little.

She felt rather than saw Bruce tense behind her, his hands tightening reflexively on her shoulders. A hot puff of breath, almost but not quite surprise, stirred her hair. He leaned a little closer, just close enough for Darcy to feel the warmth of him against her spine, and for a moment all she could think was yes and this.

She started to turn, and his hands dropped from her shoulders. He stepped away.

For a moment, Darcy was very nearly irked, because it was one thing if he wasn’t interested or didn’t notice, but it was kind of another if he was just messing with her. That wasn’t very nice, and it sure as hell wasn’t very cool. Darcy wasn’t big on playing games, and she didn’t like the idea of someone deciding to play one with her.

He didn’t look like he was playing. His face was carefully blank, and he was breathing deep and slow, in through the nose and out through the mouth like that chick had tried to teach her in the one yoga class Darcy had taken before realizing humans weren’t supposed to bend that way. He was also back to not making eye contact, and that had gotten old, like, weeks ago.

For a moment, Darcy wanted to just come out and say it, because ‘not interested’ was sort of sliding off the table but ‘completely oblivious’ was gaining speed, right alongside ‘damaged in some way that she wasn’t sure she was equipped to deal with,’ and whatever the case was, she wanted to know.

“Second bedroom is down the hall on the right,” he said, and it was entirely clear that he was trying to pretend that not a damn thing had just happened. Which, also not cool, but probably tomorrow’s problem rather than tonight’s. He already seemed a little edgy, and something warned her that, as always, it was better not to push him too far, or too hard.

“Okay,” Darcy said. “Okay, thanks. I appreciate it, Doc. I’ll see you in the morning.”

The guest bedroom was – weird. The walls were painted a soothing blue, but they were also covered in some kind of thick, hard plastic. There were no windows. The bed appeared to be bolted to the floor.

Whatever. Tony Stark’s weird decorating choices were another of tomorrow’s problems.

“My life, fuck it,” Darcy muttered, and collapsed onto the bed.

So, yeah. Definitely too far gone. That was one question answered, at least.
Bruce was gone by the time she woke up in the morning.

Of course he was.

It was odd, because Darcy sort of expected Bruce to be all weird after their little almost-moment. If anything, he was more chatty than he had been before. Chatty for him was still approaching silent when compared to Jane or especially Tony, but it was a hell of a lot more than she’d gotten from him before. “Favorite color,” he said the next day while they were working in the lab, and the sole reason Darcy knew Bruce was addressing her was that when she looked at Erik, the only other person in the room, he shrugged and stared at her pointedly.

“Green,” she said, baffled.

“Hmm,” Bruce said, and appeared satisfied.

“Why does Tony call you Betty?” he asked, two hours almost to the minute later.

“Boop or Page, according to him.” Darcy considered for a moment. “It’s also possible that he really and truly believes it’s my name.”

She was probably imagining the little huff of laughter that came from behind his computer console.

“Boxers or briefs?” she asked, because that only seemed fair.

He looked up from his computer briefly. His gaze caught hers, and for a second Darcy thought there was – a something, to it. Another little almost-moment. A hint of heat. He was smilingly faintly as he looked away. “I’m not going to answer that.”

“So they’re like Schrödinger’s underwear?”


“Am I allowed to ask other questions?” she wondered, trying to feel her way around the edges of whatever new rules Bruce had established while she was looking the other way. Flirting with a physicist was complicated.

He looked nervous, which just proved that he was as smart as rumors might lead her to believe. “O-kay,” he said slowly, like he already knew that agreeing was a bad idea.

Erik stood. “I’ve got to go. There are... things... which I must do.”

Darcy looked at him. She raised an eyebrow. Erik was a terrible liar. She had gotten Clint to score her the SHIELD recording of him trying to fib Thor’s way out of government custody while they had been in New Mexico, and it had been the most hilarious three minutes of listening to someone
awkward his way into an even deeper hole that she had every heard in her life.

He looked at Darcy. Then he sighed. “This conversation is horrible and it makes me uncomfortable. I am going to leave now. I would like you to never try to use quantum physics to flirt again.”

“I’ve already exhausted the entirety of my knowledge on the subject.” Darcy said cheerfully.

Erik looked like this statement was actually physically painful to him. He exited the room pretty quickly after that.

Darcy looked at Bruce.

Bruce lifted an eyebrow of his own.

“Cats or dogs?” Darcy asked.

*  


natasha i need your help, the text read.

Who do I have to shoot?

what? no! why would you ask me that? there will be no shooting.

A few seconds passed.

but you’re still on leave, right? i think i need you to go to brazil.

*  

from: Clint Barton <c.barton@shield.gov>

to: Darcy Lewis <d.lewis@shield.gov>

date: Sun, July 22, 2012 at 6:05 AM

subject: Re: OPERATION: DOG

Darcy,

You owe me so many beers when we get back.

Also, these codenames are stupid, and I refuse to use them.

I’m a bit player in a fucking romantic comedy, and it is all your fault.

- C
from: Darcy Lewis <d.lewis@shield.gov>
to: Clint Barton <c.barton@shield.gov>
date: Sun, July 22, 2012 at 10:27 AM
subject: Re: Re: OPERATION: DOG

    Whatever you say, Miss Kitty.

from: T. Stark <iownyourmom@si.com>
to: Darcy Lewis <d.lewis@shield.gov>
date: Mon, July 23, 2012 at 12:49 AM
subject: Tell me

    What is OPERATION: DOG? Tell me, tell me right now. I am your boss, and deserve to
    know these things, because anything that drives Clint to drink and admit that he watches romantic
    comedies is way too funny for me to be left out of it. Knowing will make me so happy. Don’t you
    want me to be happy, Betty?

from: Darcy Lewis <d.lewis@shield.gov>
to: T. Stark <iownyourmom@si.com>
date: Mon, July 23, 2012 at 08:12 AM
subject: Re: Tell me

    Need-to-know basis only, Tony.
    Also, Pepper is my boss.
    xoxox Darcy

from: Darcy Lewis <d.lewis@shield.gov>
to: Clint Barton <c.barton@shield.gov>
date: Mon, July 23, 2012 at 08:14 AM
subject: Fwd: Re: Tell me

    I told you so.
from: Clint Barton <c.barton@shield.gov>
to: Darcy Lewis <d.lewis@shield.gov>
date: Mon, July 23, 2012 at 4:20 PM
subject: Re: Fwd: Re: Tell me

I stand corrected.

- Miss Kitty

from: Nicholas Fury <n.fury@shield.gov>
to: Darcy Lewis <d.lewis@shield.gov>
date: Tue, July 24, 2012 at 7:52 AM
subject: See me in my office

We need to have a little chat about misallocation of SHIELD resources.

* *

“...so I go in there, right? And I figure he’s going to rip me a new one, and also that no one will ever find my horrifically mutilated corpse,” Darcy said, waving her naan through the air to illustrate.

“What happened?” Jane asked.

Darcy shrugged. “Nothing. I explained why I had asked Natasha and Clint to go to Brazil, and reminded him that they were on leave, and he just stroked his chin and said all serious-like, ‘I suppose that Doctor Banner will find that very soothing,’ or something.” She bit down viciously on the bread in her hand.

“Huh,” Jane said.

“I do not like this food,” Thor said sadly to his curry, “for it is mighty, and makes my tongue hurt.”

Jane patted his shoulder. “Come on, baby. Let’s make you some poptarts.”

* *

“It’s just not natural,” the woman told the camera, a Whole Foods sign visible over her left shoulder, a toddler on one hip and a grocery bag in the opposite hand. “People weren’t meant to have that kind of power.”
Darcy first met the Hulk because she really, really should have paid more attention during orientation, or maybe have read the manual.

It was a Wednesday, and SHIELD Central had kind of been invaded. Consuela had said something about panic rooms and anyone below a level three clearance before trotting off with what was apparently a top secret briefcase, handed to her by Agent Sitwell, and a gun. None of which was particularly helpful to Darcy now, because the panic rooms were, surprise, surprise, well hidden, and she didn’t have the faintest clue where to start looking.

All in all, Darcy was feeling pretty okay. She had already tased two guys in weird militaristic outfits and watched both of them go flying back, and god bless Tony fucking Stark for that.

Of course, she probably would have felt better had the man standing in front of her not managed to raise his gun before she could fry his ass.

Slowly, she let the taser drop and raised both of her hands above her head. It was worth a shot. The man smiled slowly, and Darcy was sure he was moments away from using the hand not holding the gun to twist the mustache that he totally had when this massive blur of green just shot around the corner.

The man half-turned, and had just enough time to shout out, “If a head is cut off, two more—urk!” before he ended up slightly flatter than he had been before on the floor near Darcy’s feet.

“Oh, good,” Darcy said, and felt relieved for the approximately two seconds it took her to remember that there was a Hulk standing in the hallway with her.

The Hulk stared at Darcy for a few seconds, then grunted. He reached out and patted her on the head twice with a green hand roughly the same size as a hubcap, before he kind of just muscled her aside and continued on his way down the hall. By the time he reached the bend of the hall Darcy had just about managed to register that she wasn’t a pancake, even if her scalp was most likely going to be bruised the next day. “Uh. Thanks?”

The Hulk paused, growled out something that might’ve been a reply, and then went around the corner.

It was over pretty quickly after that.

She found Consuela a short time later, her heels up on the edge of her desk and her jacket unbuttoned. The secretary was smoking a cigarette in long, leisurely drags, but Darcy couldn’t foresee anyone complaining, being as the wall behind Consuela’s desk was also smoking faintly.

“Well,” Darcy said, still a little dazed, “that was surreal.”

Consuela snorted and took another pull on her cigarette. “Darcy, sweetheart, that was a Wednesday. It’s just been a little slow recently.”

“Oh,” Darcy said.
“So, I’m thinking of quitting SHIELD,” Darcy told Jane conversationally when the other woman phoned up from the labs hidden away in the depths of the building to make sure Darcy was okay.

“Darcy,” Jane said. “I need you to listen to me closely, because this is very important: If you leave me alone with these maniacs, I will end you.”

Darcy stared at the phone for a moment.

“Okay,” she said, pressing it back to her ear. “Got it. Loud and clear, boss lady.”

Everyone around her was insane.

It had been wrongheaded to seek Bruce out as a bastion of sanity in the sick, sad world of SHIELD. Darcy knew that now.

She was just—well, she was still riding the adrenaline high of being not dead a couple hours later, and it seemed like a good idea at the time.

He was in his lab. He was also shirtless.

Darcy spent a moment weighing her options. On the one hand, this was the best look she had gotten of that chest yet, and Bruce being shirtless was never a bad thing in her book. On the other hand, it had been a whole big fat day of weird, and Bruce being shirtless at work after an attempted siege was just more of the same weird.

“I’m sure that this is for science,” she said, and tried to sound understanding. “I’ll just come back at a better time, shall I?”

Darcy took a sip on her coffee, and tasted soap and, hmm, salt.

She set the coffee down.

“Shampoo and table salt in the coffee?” she asked. “Dude, your age is showing. That’s old school.”

Tony glanced at her haughtily over his shoulder. “That’s just to hide the taste of the arsenic.”

She was pretty sure he was joking. She decided to risk it, and took another long swallow of the coffee just to prove that she could. When she looked back at Tony, he was watching her with something that very much resembled shock and awe.
“How are you even a thing that exists?”


Two days later, Jane walked into the living room of their suite. And stopped.

She looked at Thor, and then she looked at Darcy. She closed her eyes. “Why is this my life?”

Darcy didn’t think that question required a response, seeing as it seemed to be directed at a cruel and unfeeling higher power rather than either of the room’s occupants.

“Jane!” Thor cried joyfully, and while his hands remained gentle on Darcy’s hair she had to grab his ankle to keep him from ruining the hard work she was putting into his toenails. “The Lady Darcy has been sharing with me in the Midgardian tradition of ‘girl talk.’” He frowned. “At first I doubted her, because I am not a maiden, but she explained that the tradition is so named because in the past, brave warriors would often come together to speak of the dearly beloved ladies that they had been forced to leave behind in order to partake in glorious victory on the battlefield, and that in these magnificent days of gen-der equ-al-ity, it is not unheard of for comrades both male and female to gather together and paint their nails the color of blood to terrify their enemies while partaking in this ancient and venerable ritual.” He lifted his foot and showed his Really Red toenails to Jane with pride. “Truly, I feel honored that I am considered such a friend to your friend that she would wish to include me. She has even allowed me to place warrior locks in her hair!”

“I needed to talk to someone about the massive failure that is my love life,” Darcy said with a shrug. “I couldn’t find you, and Thor was here.”

“The Lady Darcy has gone through many a trial in order to secure the affections of the Doctor Banner, but he has not bestowed his favors upon her,” Thor said. “She wished to ask my advice in how to court him, since I have secured the hand of the most beauteous and wise maiden in the land.”

Jane whimpered. Thor eyed her with concern.

“We have mimosas,” Darcy told her placidly.

“Oh thank God, gimmee.”

Darcy reached out and handed Jane her own mostly full glass. Jane swallowed it down quickly, and held out the glass for a refill. Thor reached out to slap Darcy on the shoulder, and she mostly managed not to wince. “See how well my love quaffs her ale! She is truly a marvel among women.”

“That she is,” Darcy said, and handed Jane back the glass.

With a second mimosa in hand, Jane seemed a lot calmer. “Okay. I’m ready. Tell me what the problem is with you and Doctor Banner.”

Darcy shrugged, and went back to carefully lacquering Thor’s toenails. “I’m just not sure what to do with him. He flirts with me, and then he backs off. He spends weeks basically avoiding
anything close to me touching him, when I’m about ready to start humping his leg, and then freaks the hell out while giving me a shoulder rub. And then the next day he asks me all these questions, and I swear he was collecting data points, and somewhere there is a scatter graph on what Darcy’s favorite ice-cream flavor is—.”

“I enjoy the chips of chocolate in dough flavor,” Thor intoned.

“Darcy,” Jane said, in that patented I-will-be-patient-with-you-so-help-me-Darcy voice of hers. “Have you tried just asking him out?”

Darcy laughed darkly. “I tried. Oh, did I try.” She closed her eyes, and groped blindly for Jane’s hand. "Jane. Jane, it was so bad. It was an itty bitty baby step ahead of me having you go and ask him if he like likes me.”

“Oh dear,” Jane said.

The awful thing was, it had almost gone so well.

Darcy found Bruce in the lab that morning, because theirs was doomed to be an epic not-romance centered almost entirely around Stark Tower’s Lab #12. It was probably a good thing that Tony had never managed to finish writing that no girls allowed sign on the door.

“So,” Darcy said, because she figured she’d given him long enough to chill the hell out after that night in his suite, and really, Darcy had never been particularly shy about going after what she wanted. “I kind of have this ridiculously massive crush on you. I think you should take me out to dinner, and also that if you play your cards right you will get incredibly lucky after dinner.”

It wasn’t the most eloquent speech in the history of ever, but Darcy thought it conveyed her point adequately. More importantly, Bruce finally seemed to be getting the point. He leaned forward, and maybe he looked a little alarmed but there was also something suspiciously like pleasure or hope on his face.

He cleared his throat, and tugged off his glasses, polishing them against the edge of his shirt in what might have been either a nervous gesture or an attempt to buy time. “I would like that. If you’re sure. I mean – the other guy.”

Darcy’s brain stalled.

She had absolutely no idea why he would think there was some other guy. More to the point, she wasn’t sure who he thought this other guy was. Steve, maybe, except that she didn’t think anyone knew about her and Steve’s trips to the movies. Clint? No, anyone with two eyes and half a brain could see that Natasha was far too terrifying for anyone to try anything, even if nobody seemed entirely clear on what, exactly, Natasha and Clint were to each other. Tony was taken, and Darcy really hoped that Bruce didn’t think she was dumb or smarmy enough to go after a taken man. Fury? God, she hoped he didn’t think it was Fury.

Maybe he was thinking of Sid from the research department. Sid did hang out around her a lot, but that was just because he was depressed over getting bumped down to level two clearance after making one little mistake with the year that a baseball game had been broadcast, and Darcy was
good at cheering him up.

Still, Darcy had come too far to allow this one tiny hitch to derail all of her glorious plans. Better to brazen it out now and figure out what the hell he was talking about later, she decided. “Ah, not my favorite. Creeps me the hell out, honestly.” She cleared her throat, and hoped that he couldn’t see the what-are-you-talking—what about written all over her expression. “Totally.”

Bruce’s face just shut down, the pleasure fading out of it like someone had thrown the switch. “I can’t say I blame you,” he said, with that funny little smile she hadn’t really seen much of since her first few weeks at Stark Tower. He slid his glasses back onto his nose. “I’m not sure a date would be the best idea, Darcy.”

He said it very gently, but that didn’t keep the rejection from stinging.

* * *

Finally, Darcy opened her eyes. Jane’s hand had gone a little limp in hers, and she looked stunned, which was basically the reaction Darcy had been hoping for. “But—Darcy, you have to know. The Other Guy is what he calls the Hulk.”

“Huh?” Darcy sat up so suddenly that Thor’s hand caught in and tugged on her hair. “He thinks I have the hots for the Hulk? It was one t-shirt! And he said that he liked it!”

Thor looked confused. Jane looked like she might be having a very quiet little aneurism.

“Darce,” Jane said. “I hope you know that I say this with the utmost of love, affection, and fond regard for both you and your mental faculties. But I think you might just be stupid in your head.”

“Not supportive, Jane!”

“Wait,” Thor said. “Does the Lady Darcy not know that Doctor Banner is also the most fearsome Hulk, he who strikes terror into the heart of even Loki of Asgard?” He beamed at her. “This is a most fortuitous day, friend Darcy! You thought to win yourself a scholar, and have found that the one you pitch woo to is also a warrior of great strength, who will doubtless give you many strong man-children.” He paused, and evidently her little lesson on gender equality was still fresh in his mind, because he added heartily, “And woman-children, too!”

“What.”

“As I said, a most fortuitous turn of events!”

“Not fortuitous! Not!” Darcy snapped, then took a deep and calming breath because yelling at Thor was a little like yelling at an enormous puppy who could also put you through the wall if he wanted to. Sort of like Clifford the Big Red Dog on steroids and with a truly superior bleach job. “Ah, begging your pardon, big guy. I’m just having a little bit of a freak out over here.”

Thor nodded solemnly. “You excitement is understandable, and I hold no ill will over the harshness of your words. I believe I shall keep my peace until you have finished, as you say, freaking out.”

Darcy looked to Jane as the more sensible one, which was a mistake, because Jane had somehow
managed to plant her hands on her hips without ever leaving the couch. “Darcy,” she said severely. “You didn’t read your S.H.I.E.L.D orientation manual, did you Darcy?” When Darcy wilted in a little on herself, Jane jumped to her feet. “It’s mandatory reading for a reason! This is the reason! This right here!”

“Because S.H.I.E.L.D is worried that someone will put the moves on Doctor Banner without knowing he’s the Hulk?” she managed.

“Yes!”

When Jane found the manual in question (it was on top of the ‘fridge, Darcy didn’t know how or why), she sort of... threw it at Darcy’s head, which Darcy could just about admit that she deserved. It hit Thor’s chest instead, and bounced harmlessly down into his lap. He frowned disapprovingly at the dark blue binder, but apparently decided it was beneath his dignity to acknowledge any harm done to him by puny mortal paper goods.

With a sigh of pure resignation, Darcy grabbed the binder, blew off a thin layer of dust, and flipped the cover open to the first page.

**ATTENTION ALL S.H.I.E.L.D PERSONNEL OCCUPYING NON-COMBATANT POSITIONS AT A LEVEL THREE CLEARENCE LEVEL OR BELOW. PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING NOTIFICATIONS WITH CARE, AS THEY HAVE BEEN INCLUDED FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY AND WELL-BEING.**

Darcy skimmed over the information about emergency procedures, including escape routes and panic rooms, and yeah, it would have been good to know about those. Midway down the page, under a strongly worded recommendation about how to deal with Namor the Sub-Mariner during conference calls to Atlantis, she found the only item really relevant to the current conversation.

**DOCTOR BRUCE BANNER, GENERALLY TO BE FOUND IN THE LABORATORIES LOCATED IN S.H.I.E.L.D CENTRAL’S SUBBASEMENTS, IS TO BE HANDLED WITH EXTREME CARE. PLEASE BE ADVISED THAT DOCTOR BANNER’S ALTERNATE IDENTITY AS THE HULK MAKES HIM VOLATILE AND PRONE TO ANGER. HE IS A VALUED MEMBER OF THE S.H.I.E.L.D TEAM, BUT YOU WOULD NOT LIKE HIM WHEN HE’S ANGRY.**

“Oh,” Darcy said. “Oh, wow.” She leaned back against Thor’s knees. “I think I might actually be a little stupid. Yeah, good call, Jane.”

Chapter End Notes

So, when I stay up all night on some kind of strange writing bender, I tend to get a little loopy. Certain friends of mine get random emails with extremely lackadaisical use of capitalization, punctuation, and good taste, and I find things like this in my story notes the next day:

plot: where did I go?
me: you were there. but I think the crack and the shipping eated you.

Honestly, guys, I have no idea. The plot will be back next chapter, and it's looking like this is going to run seven or eight chapters instead of the originally estimated six.
“I need a new t-shirt.”

The young man in charge of t-shirt distribution looked conflicted. “Uhm, hi, 204. I’d like to do that for you, I really would, but Grace has this policy about t-shirts and—.”

“I don’t think you understand. I am emotionally conflicted right now. I cannot deal with wearing this t-shirt. You will give me another t-shirt.”

He swallowed hard. “I... would be delighted to give you another t-shirt?”

Darcy held out an imperious hand. The man deposited a purple Hawkeye t-shirt between her fingers, and she pulled it on.

A throat cleared delicately behind her. Darcy turned to look at Grace.

“Nice intimidation tactics, 204,” Grace said blandly. “Now, if you’re done wigging out over your sartorial choices, perhaps you could get the hell to work?”

Steve looked up at her approach, a ready smile already on his face. “Darcy. I didn’t know you’d be coming out today.” He studied her for a moment, and the smile faded into a frown. “Is something wrong?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Darcy said. “I just want to work. Give me something to do.”

He didn’t ask for clarification. He just nodded, and Darcy supposed that if anyone understood the desire to bury feelings in a mission, it was Captain America.

They worked silently alongside each other for a few minutes before Steve spoke again. “New t-shirt, huh? Don’t tell the big guy. You’ll hurt his feelings.” He always sounded a little stiff when he tried to make a joke, and normally Darcy found that hilarious in its own right. The tiny smile on his lips and the absolutely transparent attempt to cheer her up were both as sweet as American-made apple pie.

Darcy didn’t feel much like laughing, that was all.

“Already got that one covered, Cap,” she said, with a wry little salute. “Thanks.”

For a moment, Steve just studied her. Then he reached out and clasped a hand around the back of Darcy’s neck. Darcy froze. Like Bruce, Steve wasn’t really one for casual touching, although he lacked Bruce’s skittishness. Rather, he reminded Darcy of her grandpa a little, brought up on the manners of a bygone time when a man didn’t really touch any dame other than the one he was going with.
“You’ll be fine,” Steve said, and released her. From anyone else it would have sounded dismissive or patronizing, but Steve just sounded resolute, like he was daring the world to be anything other than fine for Darcy.

There was something enormously comforting in that.

They got back to work.

The bottle of tequila was set down on the coffee table with a solid clink of glass against metal.

Darcy cracked open an eye, which was about all she could manage after a day with the volunteers. She found Jane settled on the couch next to her, and felt instantly wary of the determined gleam in the other woman’s eyes.

“This is apology booze,” Jane said firmly, and placed a carton of Ben & Jerry’s beside the bottle, “and this is sympathy ice cream. I realized that I had been remiss in not allowing you to pour out the agony in your soul to me, and that it was my duty as a best friend and a scientist to do my best to be the sweet balm for your troubled mind.”

Darcy gaped.

Jane cleared her throat, and shrugged. “Thor thought that I was a little harsh. With the whole stupid thing, and the throwing of manuals and all.” As Darcy tried to imagine a scenario in which a Viking god thought someone was being a little harsh, Jane snuggled back further onto the couch. “Besides, you were there for me when Thor left, and I seem to remember that there was a lot of boxed wine and ice cream involved in that.”

“I like tequila,” Darcy said serenely, “and I like Cherry Garcia. You are a good friend, Jane Foster.”

An hour later, they were still curled up on the couch, just past buzzed and just shy of tipsy. William Powell was cracking wise about martinis on the television screen, and there might have been some pouring out of agony in the soul, although Darcy would never, ever admit to that.

“I don’t understand,” Jane said, gesticulating wildly with her spoon in one hand and the bottle of tequila in the other. They’d had a pretty firm no-bowls-no-glasses rule at the lab in New Mexico when it came to this kind of thing, and relocating to the considerably more swank Stark Tower hadn’t changed that. “Why don’t you just go to him, apologize, explain the situation, tell him that you’re completely fine with him being the Hulk, and then—.” Jane paused and, if the back-and-forth swipe of the spoon was to be believed, she was searching for a way to finish her thought. “Make-outs,” she decided on finally, and with a great deal of satisfaction.

“Yes to the first three,” Darcy said. She reached out the snag the bottle from Jane’s hand. “I’m still trying to figure out the rest of it.”

“Darcy,” Jane said, and said it in such a way that you are betraying my heart was widely implied. “Are you freaked out about Doctor Banner being the Hulk?”

There was something else to Jane’s tone, though. Like she might be disappointed if Darcy was
freaked, but also a little relieved. Which… yeah. Darcy worried when her friends tried to date men with anger management issues too.

“No,” she said. “I don’t know. Until I figure it out, I’d just be screwing him up more if I went in all, ‘this is totally fine’ only to find out a couple months later, oh wait, it totally wasn’t. I mean, the Hulk saved my life and didn’t plant me face first in a wall, so he’s pretty damn cool in my eyes, but I’m not sure I want to date him. Unless I can say for certain that I do, it’d be sort of a dick move for me to try to push things between us along any further.”

“Couples break up,” Jane said. “You can’t plan for every eventuality.”

“Yeah. But I can plan for the one that would hurt the most.”

The door opened. Thor stepped in, his red cape billowing out behind him. He took one look at them, and backed out. “I see you are once again partaking in the traditions of your people. I will return at a more opportune time, gentle friends.” The door closed behind him.

“Smart man,” Darcy said.

The next day, Darcy returned to the lab. She had been gone for two days, and that was so not okay, because Darcy Lewis was not the kind of woman who failed at her job because of guy problems.

She didn’t really think about the fact that it looked a whole lot like she had been avoiding the lab because of guy problems, not until she stepped inside.

Tony was standing about six inches away from the other side of the door, his arms crossed over his chest. Darcy made a mostly incoherent noise of surprise and jerked back to avoid planting her nose in his beard, which was a very real risk. “Well, well, well,” Tony said. “The prodigal returns.”

“Nyuh,” Darcy said, because Tony was still failing to observe the rules of personal space, but also because he looked well and truly peeved. Actually peeved, as opposed to his usual expression of I-am-pretending-to-be-irritated-Darcy-but-actually-I-find-your-puckish-ways-hilarious. She searched for an adequate response, and finally settled on, “Yes. Hello. Your mustache is looking particularly well groomed today.”

“I’ve been awake for forty-eight hours straight,” Tony said severely. “Last night, I found your iPod speakers and used them to build a robot. With laser pointers for eyes.” Darcy followed his gesture to the corner, where a sad little robot with what appeared to be butter knives for arms and a single laser pointer that Darcy knew belonged to Jane as an eye was bumping pathetically against the wall. Darcy thought it was probably trying to claw its way to freedom. She felt its pain. “I’m calling it the FuryBot. I had to leave the lab to get my own food, and I ended up calling Pepper for my social security number. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Donuts,” Darcy said, and lifted the paper sack she had been holding. The bag was spotted with grease and smelled like sugar. Darcy had come prepared.

Tony stared at it for a moment, then huffed. “Don’t think your tasty treats,” and because it was Tony, even in a fit of pique he stopped to sweep a leering glance over her, “any of your tasty treats have won my forgiveness.” That didn’t, of course, keep him from snatching the bakery bag from
her hand before he stormed back to his worktable.

Darcy caught Jane’s eye. Jane gave her a nod of solidarity, which was sweet but also a little unnerving, because between Tony’s crankiness (in conjunction with the fact that JARVIS knew all) and Jane’s show of support, she was starting to get the feeling that there were lines being drawn, which no. Just no. She liked her lab, she liked her silly little science nerds, and she refused to let there be any ridiculous Team Bruce/Team Darcy shenanigans here. Bruce was back to his whole I’m-not-looking-at-you shtick at his table in the corner, and this could not be allowed to stand. *Something had to be done.*

Rarely had Darcy been anything other than direct when confronting a problem. She didn’t think now was the time to start trying for subtlety, so she went and sat next to Bruce and sort of just jostled his elbow with her own until he looked at her. It was a faintly annoyed little sideways glance and he looked away pretty quickly, but still, eye contact! “So there’s this thing,” she said, “wherein, when someone asks me about the other guy, I actually think he’s talking about another guy.” She kept her voice low enough that she could at least pretend that Tony and Jane weren’t obviously listening to ever word. It was harder to tell if Bruce was listening, but from the tense way he held his shoulders, she thought he was. “Crazy, right?”

“You don’t need to apologize,” he said after a moment, even though she hadn’t actually gotten as far as apologizing. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine,” Darcy said. “I was kind of a jerk, which is usually okay because when I do things like leave Legos in all of Tony’s shoes I’m actually trying to be a jerk—.”

“I knew that was you,” Tony muttered around a mouthful of donut. “I knew it.”

“—but in this case, my jerk-dom was entirely accidental, and I think I might’ve upset you. So I’m sorry. I promise to read SHIELD manuals much more closely in the future. Or at all. That might be a better starting off point. Baby steps toward being a responsible employee of a covert organization.”

“You didn’t read the manual,” Bruce said, and she thought she had maybe stunned him out of whatever funk he was in because his voice actually had a tone now. It was, in a word, appalled. “Dar—Ms. Lewis, they tell you to read the manual for a reason. I’m in there for a reason.”

And yeah, probably she should focus on that last part, but she felt there was a much more important point which needed to be addressed. “If you up the awkward ante by calling me Ms. Lewis for the rest of the time that we work together,” she said seriously, “I will make sure that all of your tea comes to you bitter and oversteeped. So help me, I will.”

“Darcy,” Bruce said patiently, but she thought she saw a hint of a small, wry smile on his lips. “The tea you bring me is already bitter and oversteeped.”


The silence that followed was most definitely awkward, but Darcy couldn’t help but smile to herself. Between nights spent crashing in his suite and his newly revealed willingness to drink her awful tea, she was starting to think that maybe she hadn’t been the only one nursing a ridiculous crush. She couldn’t help but feel a little giddy at that, although she thought that the information would have been more useful had she not resolved to avoid finishing up this apology by climbing into his lap. The whole waiting until she figured out where she stood when it came to dating the Hulk thing was turning out to be awfully inconvenient, and Darcy lamented that she had made such a hastily responsible decision without taking into account the very pertinent factors of chest hair,
glasses, and a decided fluffiness in the top-of-the-head area.

“Besides,” she said, mostly to break the silence, “I’ve met the Hulk, and I would never classify him as not-my-favorite, since he saved my best work blouse by not allowing me to be shot in the chest while wearing it. He’s totally my favorite.” It took actual, conscious effort not to follow that statement up with so we should get that dinner after all. She was doomed. Darcy did not have the moral fortitude and strength of purpose to resist hot physicist temptation in favor of high-minded ideals; that sort of thing was really more Steve’s area of expertise.

“You met the Other Guy.” It wasn’t really a question, and he said it in much the same resigned fuck-me voice that Darcy might exercise upon realizing that Jane had once again used their coffee pot to brew up an inch and a half of brown sludge that was most certainly not coffee. Maybe with a little more ‘oh, shit’ implied than she would ever be able to muster, since the coffee pot was basically old hat by now.

She was forced to drag her attention back to the conversation when Bruce spoke again, more quietly this time. “Sorry.”

“Nah,” Darcy said with a shrug. “It was okay. I mean, don’t get me wrong, being in an enclosed space with your alter ego without ever having been properly introduced is a little pants wettingly scary, but he didn’t do anything other than smash the guy with the gun. And then he patted me on the head, which, admittedly: weird.”

A slow flush rose on Bruce’s cheeks, and Darcy considered it with a fair amount of interest. She remembered Bruce petting her hair in the lab the night after she had first volunteered with the Fixers (their name for themselves, not hers), and she supposed that the Hulk’s scalp liquefying head pats could be interpreted as a massively failed attempt at hair petting, which – okay, maybe this was like his version of her having kind of a thing for hairy chests, in which case she wasn’t sure she wanted to ponder the implications of the Hulk sharing that fascination.

She jostled his elbow again. “So no apology needed. Are we good?”

“Yes,” he said, and there was the briefest hesitation before he said it, but Darcy could work on that. “We’re good.”

* *

from: N.R. <n. romanoff@shield.gov>
to: Darcy Lewis <d.lewis@shield.gov>
date: Fri, August 3, 2012 at 11:13 AM
subject: (no subject)

The package has been acquired. Operation: Dog was a success. Miss Kitty and I are spending a few days in Rio, and then we’ll be back home.

- Big Dog
from: T. Stark <iownyourmom@si.com>
to: Darcy Lewis <d.lewis@shield.gov>
date: Sat, August 4, 2012 at 01:28 AM
subject: Natasha is the dog, isn’t she?

And OPERATION: DOG is a euphemism for some kind of weird sex. Please tell me it’s a euphemism for some kind of weird sex.

from: Darcy Lewis <d.lewis@shield.gov>
to: T. Stark <iownyourmom@si.com>
date: Sat, August 4, 2012 at 01:34 AM
subject: Re: Natasha is the dog, isn’t she?

Tony, you’d better hope to god that I never see a reason to forward that message to Natasha. Go to sleep, and stop reading other people’s e-mail like a creeper. Just because you CAN doesn’t mean you SHOULD.

* 

General Thaddeus E. "Thunderbolt" Ross’s hair was the indeterminate color that blond men got sometimes when they started to gray, receding gently from his forehead and messier than Darcy thought a military man would generally allow. His mustache needed a trim, and his bloodshot eyes might have suggested sleep deprivation had it not been for the red of his nose, which screamed alcoholic to Darcy. Her grandpa on her mom’s side had been more than a little fond of the bottle; she knew the signs. Still, he was wearing a lot of chest candy on that uniform, and Wolf Blitzer, who shared the split screen with him, seemed to be taking him seriously enough.

“I’m a patriot, Mr. Blitzer,” the general said. “Captain America was one of the crowning achievements of our fine nation, and any team that he’s a part of has my full support – provided they’re under the purview of the appropriate authorities. The Avengers did a admirable thing by protecting New York the way they did, a brave thing. Which isn’t to say that I don’t have my doubts when it comes to their future.”

“Yes,” Blitzer said, “you’ve been outspoken in your opinion of the Avenger known as the Hulk.” The video feed of Blitzer disappeared for a moment, to be replaced footage from the attack on New York: the Hulk flung himself through the air, one enormous hand reaching out to swat an alien jet ski with more ease than Darcy might swat a fly. Blitzer’s face reappeared, his small blue eyes intent behind their spectacles. “I believe you’ve said in the past that you consider him a danger to human life, a threat, a menace. Would you care to expand on that?”

“Certainly,” and maybe Darcy was projecting, but she thought that the polite smile on Ross’ lips looked a little mean. “The other Avengers are heroes, soldiers who are willing to fight and maybe even die on the frontlines. Tony Stark might be an asshole, but he’s a human asshole. The Hulk
isn’t. He’s an animal at best, and a monster at worst. Trust me, I’ve faced him down myself in the past, and I’ve seen him rip through good men like they were tissue paper. That thing in Harlem about four years back? Well, I can’t say for sure of course, but there was a lot of buzz at the time that maybe the Hulk was involved. I guess the real question is, do we want to trust someone to protect New York – and possibly the rest of the country – when before this he’s shown no desire to do anything but destroy? I know I don’t. He might have been on our side this time, but what about next time, or the time after that? I don’t want that creature on the loose at all, and if it were up to me he’d be remanded to military custody until such a time as we could be certain he’s not a danger. I’ll be honest, and say I’m not sure he ever won’t be a danger, but better that he live in comfortable captivity than that he be allowed to stay on the loose, walking among innocent citizens and children.”

“You make it sound like he’d have an easy time blending in with the population,” Blitzer said. “I’ve watched the footage. I can’t see how that would be the case.”

“You’d be surprised,” General Ross said, and something – the way his eyes slanted downward when he said it, or the involuntary twitch of his lips beneath the mustache – made Darcy’s hair stand on end.

He knew. She couldn’t have said how she was so certain, and maybe it was just that she had seen General Ross speak on TV before and never much cared for him then, but—he knew that the Hulk wasn’t always a Hulk, and he was still recommending indefinite military detention on freaking CNN.

Throwing her shoe at the TV was very satisfying, as was the inarticulate scream of rage that followed, even if the shoe bounced away harmlessly and the scream accomplished nothing. “You lying, fear-mongering, thuggish son of a bi—.”

“Ms. Lewis?”

JARVIS. Right. Darcy kind of missed there being a time when she could yell at her TV screen in an empty room without having to worry about invisible witnesses. She sat back, her shoulders pressed against the frame of her bed, and contemplated her bare left foot until she felt slightly calmer. “Sorry, Jeeves. You taped that for me, right?”

“I have been recording everything pertinent to Mr. Stark and his team since you first made the request. At present, there are two hundred and seventeen hours, thirty-four minutes, and two seconds of footage stored in your personal files on the Stark Tower servers.”

Which Darcy figured was JARVIS’ way of saying, “I’m a goddamn computer. I’m not going to forget to tape your favorite programs like that one completely useless boyfriend you had the last year of undergrad. Also, I’m artificially intelligent enough to resent being used as a glorified TiVo.” Darcy took a deep breath.

“Thanks,” she said. “Look, can you do something for me?”

“I am, as ever, here to serve the residents of Stark Tower in any way I am able.”

Darcy translated that one as, “Unfortunately, Tony hasn’t revoked your access to me, so I’m still subject to your whims, you crazy woman who throws footwear at perfectly good pieces of Stark Tech.”

“Is there any way you could use your super computer brain to look through those news reports and give me a breakdown on how many were saying good things, and how many were saying asshole
things?”

A brief pause, and Darcy wondered if that was JARVIS’ version of trying to parse what she was saying. “I have it within my capabilities to analyze the recordings based on facial expression, tone of voice, body language, and other physiological factors, and to run a comparison with existing data which will allow me to provide you with estimated numbers regarding how many of the views expressed were generally positive in their treatment of the Avengers, versus how many were negative. It will take me several hours to accomplish this.” Darcy felt sure that the subtext here was: “Do you know how many of Tony’s side projects I am running at any given time, as well as making sure that your suite never has another disastrous poptart shortage, because we all know what happened last time? You and your crazy are my last priority.” “Will that suffice, Ms. Lewis?”

“That would be super, JARVIS,” Darcy said. “Thanks. You rock. Can you tell me where Tony is?”

“He is in the penthouse. Shall I tell him to expect your arrival?”

“I don’t know. Are he and Pepper doing anything I shouldn’t interrupt?”

“As it is not yet five, I believe that Ms. Potts is still occupied with work,” and yeah, Darcy could definitely hear a very, very judgy little as you should undoubtedly be tacked on at the end there.

“Sweet,” Darcy said. “Yeah, tell him I’m on my way up.”

On the bright side, watching General Asshole rattle his jaw had been remarkably good for restoring Darcy’s clarity of purpose: she thought she was probably pretty okay with dating the Hulk, and also that she would maybe tase the next person to badmouth him on national television.

But before she could deal with that, Darcy had a mission.

*

Repairs on the penthouse had been finished the week before, and Tony had moved back in with an audible sigh of relief and an offhanded comment about how happy he was to be moving up from “the eightieth floor slums.” Darcy had, of course, made fun of him for being a pretty, pretty princess who couldn’t handle having anything other than top floor views from his Giant Penis Sky Mansion.

He was already waiting at the door when Darcy arrived, his arms crossed over his chest beneath the pale circle of blue light that bled through his shirt. His feet were bare, and that was sort of Tony in a nutshell: a beautiful combination of privilege and being all out of give-a-fucks for what other people thought of him. “Betty. What can I do you for?”

Darcy waggled the bottle of Jane’s wine that she had snagged on her way out the door in front of his face. “I come bearing gifts.”

Tony snorted. “You really think that your Two-Buck Chuck is going to be tempting to,” he paused to consider, “really, just anyone with even the tiniest modicum of taste?”

“At least it’s not in a box.”
He rolled his eyes, but stood aside and gestured her in. “So?”

“I was thinking that we should combine our powers—.”

“I’m already on a team of crime-fighting do-gooders, but thanks.”

“—for evil.”

He perked up almost immediately, and the corner of his mouth and his eyebrow both tilted upwards. “I’m intrigued. Tell me more.”

“I would sort of really like to stick it to Thunderbolt Ross. Really a lot.”

The mouth took on a different turn that Darcy could almost read as disdain. It was gone a moment later, replaced by his more habitual smirk. “I’m with you so far. What do you want to do to him?”

He moved over to the wet bar and poured her a glass, which Darcy took to mean that she had been forgiven some of her earlier trespasses even if the donuts hadn’t quite done the trick. “Homicide is off the table, because while I think it would be a totally reasonable course of action, Pepper would probably make her sad face if we tried it.”

“I was thinking you could find his address.”

Tony nodded. “I can do that.”

“And then maybe we could send him pizzas? Like, a lot of pizzas. All with anchovies and pineapple.”

“Oh, Betty,” Tony said, and shook his head sadly at her. “And you call me old school. I think we can do better than that. Much, much better.”

Later, everyone would pretty much agree that the night General Thunderbolt Ross returned home hours after his appearance on The Situation Room to find sixteen pizzas with a rich variety of inedible toppings, twelve incredibly confused strippers, seven flower deliveries in assortments that ranged from ‘gauche’ to ‘just really damn ugly’, and two singing telegrams (one for Valentine’s Day and one for his birthday) waiting on his doorstep had been a pretty memorable night in Avengers history.

Darcy made sure that there was something to show off and remember: she called in an anonymous tip to his local Channel 2 News crew. The story about a ‘prank gone wrong’ and the less-than-sensitive and quite possibly inebriated response from a certain decorated general who had been very much in the public eye since the attack on New York ran for two days after that.

(“That wasn’t very nice,” Bruce would say, some time later.

Darcy would smile and reply, “No, it really wasn’t.”)
“You’ve got those numbers, JARVIS?”

“I do.”

“Lay ‘em on me.”

“As of right now, we are seeing about a forty to forty-five percent positive rating when the Avengers are mentioned. This is down from almost sixty percent in the days immediately following Loki’s invasion. Of course, the individual members of the team are greeted with varying levels of approval. If you like, I can break the numbers down further.”

“I think I can guess the jist of it,” Darcy said. “Steve at the top, Hulk at the bottom, Tony somewhere much closer to the top than he probably deserves to be,” because Tony, for all his flaws and all his terrible decisions, many of them made within view of a camera, knew how to handle the media – or at least knew that there was a media that needed to be handled, “and the other three at varying levels of ‘you stink’ or ‘we love you’ or ‘who the hell is he, oh right, the one with the arrows.’”

“You assessment is essentially correct.”

“Awesome.” She yawned hard enough that her jaw clicked, and for a moment she hesitated because bed, but finally she said, “Cue up some of those videos for me, would you? The more recent ones first. I want to take a closer look at this.”

Close to three hours later, Darcy was drooping in her desk chair and her eyes were burning, but she had started to piece together an idea of what they were up against. The popularity the Avengers had won immediately following their victory over the alien invaders was dropping lower with every day that passed without anyone but Tony addressing the questions and concerns that were cropping up, and Darcy was pretty sure that as the city repaired itself, and the physical reminders of what the Avengers had been up against disappeared, the problem would only worsen. In a worst case scenario, in a few more months the public would stop looking for heroes and start looking for someone to blame – and Loki and the Chitauri were both well out of reach.

Darcy wasn’t stupid enough to think that she was the only one to recognize the problem, but she did seem to be the only one feeling motivated to fix it.

She let her head fall back against the back of the chair as she considered the implications of that.

Oh, this was going to suck so hard.

 Probably Darcy should have gone to Nick Fury with her idea first.

She went to Pepper Potts instead.

Chapter End Notes
I watched clips of The Situation Room for you guys. *I think I need an adult.*

As ever, big huge kissy thanks to everyone who has commented or left some other form of beautiful, wonderful feedback. Additional thanks to TheGreatSporkWielder, who read this over after I posted it and used her *hawk-like vision* to help me pick out some of my inevitable typos.
Chapter 7

The restaurant that Pepper chose to meet Darcy at was so ridiculously expensive looking that Darcy had debated finding a way to not touch the door while opening it, out of fear that they would bill her for the cost of buffing away her fingerprint smudges. That dilemma had been solved when the uniformed doorman had opened the door for her, but it wasn’t the reassuring kind of solution that Darcy had been hoping for. This was the kind of place that had an elegant little brass sign reading Jacket Required near the maître d’s station, and a maître d’ so obliging that he didn’t look twice at Darcy’s thrifty dress once she had told him whose table she would be eating at.

“Mr. Stark frequently joins Ms. Potts when she dines here,” the man said, and for a moment Darcy thought that he was bragging until she realized that he had actually been trying to reassure her: Tony spent half of his time in suits worth more than Darcy’s first car and the rest of it in jeans and t-shirts so worn they had holes in them, and she wouldn’t put it past him to wear the latter for the sole purpose of thumbing his nose at that little brass plaque, because no one was going to tell Tony Stark to put on a dinner jacket. He was also so intentionally inappropriate that Darcy was pretty sure that any accidental missteps she made would go more-or-less unnoticed in a place that Tony frequented.

At which point Darcy calculated the odds of ever eating in a place like this again, and decided to say ‘fuck it’ and just enjoy herself. Some of her earlier discomfort must have still been showing on her face when she made it to the table though, because the first thing out of Pepper’s mouth after ‘hello’ was, “Is this okay? We can go somewhere else if you don’t like it here. There’s a good burger place over on 56th, if that works better for you.” And shit, that was part of why Darcy liked Pepper: she was effortlessly elegant (and Darcy had seen her walk around the penthouse in cutoffs and a tank top; she was elegant even when there was nary a Louboutin shoe nor a Gucci blazer in sight) but she didn’t look down on mere mortals who couldn’t help little imperfections like morning eye gunk, or coffee stains, or sudden cravings for massive amounts of red meat. “The lines there can get a little lengthy during the lunch hour though, and I thought this might be better. Quieter.”

“This is good,” Darcy said quickly. “This is perfect.” Pepper’s comment did make her take a closer look around though, because it was very quiet in the restaurant’s dining room. It turned out that there was reason for this: there was no one else in the dining room. Darcy wondered idly if the restaurant was even open for lunch, or if someone was just making a very special exception for the CEO of Stark Industries.

Pepper smiled in an amiable sort of way once the maître d’ had left them alone with a promise that their server would join them shortly, and leaned forward to rest her elbows on the table. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

Briefly, Darcy sketched out in words for Pepper the situation as she saw it, pausing only once when the waitress arrived to take their order and leave them with glasses of water. “It’s a problem,” she said, somewhat inadequately, once she had finished. “It could be more of a problem than it is now in the future, if people start looking for someone to blame, or if the government starts looking for a fall guy. I get why Loki had to be shipped back to Asgard, but that kind of leaves everyone without a big scary bad guy to direct all their anger and hate at, and ultimately to see punished in some kind of super public venue. Even if that’s not the way the cookie crumbles, they could be in for a rough
time somewhere down the road if the people they’re trying to protect don’t like or trust them. 
Tony’s the only one handling the press right now, but the thing is, Iron Man is already a known 
quantity. No one’s curious about Tony, and he’s come through enough times in the past, massive 
property damage aside, that no one’s going to question his right to be hailed as a hero. People are 
asking questions about the rest of them, and none of those questions are getting answered.”

Pepper’s gaze was focused and intent on Darcy’s face. “You’re not wrong,” she said. “What would 
you suggest be done?”

“Steve – Captain America – told me that Fury told them to lay low. Disappear for a while. I’m sure 
he had his crazy paranoid covert ops reasons, but I’m not sure it was the best plan. The Avengers 
need to talk to the press, to be seen. If they had done that from the start, a lot of the media furor 
would have died down by now. The news is kind of by definition what’s new, and by keeping out 
of sight, the Avengers have also kind of kept this constant air of mysterious newness. They have to 
start talking for themselves, or,” Darcy’s mouth twisted as she thought of General Ross, “other 
people are going to do their talking for them.”

For a moment Pepper just continued studying her. Then she leaned back, a faint smile on her lips. 
“Well. I’d hire you. I might yet, if Fury won’t pay you for taking this on.”

Darcy sighed, and Pepper’s smile widened a notch. “You were really hoping I was going to take 
this off your hands, weren’t you?” At Darcy’s shrug, she chuckled. “Sorry. You said it yourself: 
The Avengers need someone running PR for them. Tony’s got his part of that covered, but this 
needs to be about the whole team, not Stark Industries or Tony Stark.” She ran one long, manicured 
finger around the rim of her glass thoughtfully. “Have you talked to Fury? SHIELD has to have 
someone on board to deal with the media.”

“If by ‘deal with,’ you mean ‘murder silently in their beds at night,’” Darcy replied. When Pepper 
just looked at her, she sighed again and relented. “They have a media relations department, but I 
was only mostly kidding. The only reason that department exists is to make up believable stories 
about weather balloons and training accidents. They’re not there to talk to the media; they’re there 
to silence the media.”

“Yes, I could see how talking openly to the press might run counter to their purposes,” Pepper said. 
“And Fury?”

“Not yet.”

“You should do that.” Another thought seemed to occur to Pepper. “Can you do this? I assumed, 
but—I don’t actually know much about your credentials. You can manage Tony, and that’s really 
the most important quality I look for in a PA, these days. Is a project like this going to be 
something you can handle?”

The fact that Pepper was assuming competence on Darcy’s part was actually kind of warm-fuzzy-
making, but the question was also too important for her to answer it with anything but honesty. “I 
don’t know. I studied political science. I mean, I spent a good chunk of my undergrad and some of 
my Master’s program reading up on campaign strategy and the impact of public opinion and the 
media on the political system, but I’m not sure how much practical application that’s going to have 
here. I know what kinds of things will impact someone’s image and what kind of effect that will 
have, but actually getting in touch with the papers and TV stations to—.”

Pepper waved her off. “That’s why you get minions. If you can plan a strategy, someone else can 
implement it.”
“I can,” Darcy said. “I think I can.”

A smile tugged at Pepper’s lips, and Darcy wasn’t sure if it was because she appreciated Darcy’s can-do attitude or because of the unfortunate Little Engine That Could echoes. “Talk to Fury. Get him to give you what you need to make this happen. He might not be thrilled with the idea, but you’re good at getting people to do things that they don’t want to do; I’ve noticed that about you. I’ll set up a meeting with the head of our media relations team. We might not be able to do this for you, but that doesn’t mean you can’t call us with questions and use us to show you the ropes.” She reached out, pressing a hand briefly against the back of Darcy’s where it rest on the tablecloth. “It’s a good idea, Darcy. Go run a campaign for the Avengers that will make New York sit up and take notice.”

It was a little easier to wrap her head around the task and stop feeling woefully inadequate to accomplishing it if she thought of this like a campaign rather than as public relations. She knew campaigns, knew in theory how they operated and what they were supposed to accomplish. “Right. Okay. Campaign to get the Avengers elected as the heroes of New York. Or something.”

Pepper snorted, but somehow the noise still sounded delicate and elegant. Darcy wondered why she couldn’t do that. Probably it was Pepper’s superpower. “They’re already heroes. You just need to remind people of that.”

* * *

This time, Darcy had an appointment.

It was a novel experience.

Fury didn’t look up from any of the three computer screens on his desk when she entered, turning his head to glance at one and then the next. Darcy cleared her throat a little awkwardly. “Hi. Uhm, Director. Colonel.” That just made her think of KFC. “Fury. Sir. There’s something I wanted to talk to—.”

“I already know, Ms. Lewis.” He finally looked up at her, and some of her surprise must have shown because the brow above his good eye lifted. “I run a motherfucking spy outfit, Lewis. Did you really think you’d get as far as meeting with Ms. Potts without me knowing what you were up to, and wanting you to be up to it?” There was a briefcase on his desk, and he shoved it toward her. “Read these files. Get a mission plan, a budget proposal, and a personnel request on my desk by the end of the day.”

“Uh,” Darcy said.

He sighed, and rubbed at the bridge of his nose in a way that Darcy had long since come to associate with my head hurts and you are the reason my head hurts, the fuck out get. “Suffice it to say, I had my reasons for asking the Avengers not to be seen right after the crisis. There were... questions being asked, and reasons it would be better for me to claim to be unable to answer those questions.” He turned back to his computer. “The original situation has been resolved, however, and things are different now. If the Avengers are needed again, when the Avengers are needed again, they can’t be up against not only the enemy, but a world that views them as a threat. Fix it, Ms. Lewis.”
Yeah, there was definitely a silent or else after that. “Why me?”

“If there was someone else, I’d be telling them to do it. There isn’t. You have coffee with Thor every morning. You’ve convinced two of my best agents to fly to Brazil to do you a favor. Captain America takes you to the movies, and yes, I know about that, don’t look so shocked. Mr. Stark invited you to live with him the first night you met, and Doctor Banner—well, we’re not going to talk about that. I don’t want to know anything about that. Ever. My point is, you’ve already shown yourself to be adept at getting the Avengers to work with you, and this position requires someone they’re willing to work with. There was maybe one other person I had on my team who could manage that. He’s dead, so it comes down to you.”

Darcy cleared her throat. “It sounds really impressive when you say it. I—it’s not. I mean, what they did, that was impressive, but they’re just people. People like people. I’m just one of the people they like.”

Fury looked up at her again. His face was carefully blank, but she thought that maybe the corner of his eye had started twitching. “I very much hope that you’re more articulate when you’re talking to the cameras.”

“Er.”


She heard him sigh as the door closed behind her.

*D*

Darcy didn’t want to read the files. It seemed like an invasion, and she wasn’t Tony or Fury, blithely sneaking through other people’s closets so she could peer at their dirty laundry. She read the files anyway, and once she was done she felt a little sick with herself, but she was also probably one of the few people with a working knowledge of the Avengers and their histories. She’d need that.

On the bright side, those pictures of Tony from the 80’s were hilarious.

*D*

natasha. hey natasha. do you know how to write a mission plan?

What?

What did you let them talk you into, Darcy?

Don’t agree to anything until I get home. Remember that whatever Fury says, you are NOT cleared for field duty.

i think my clearance level is higher now.
i’ll just ask sid from research. thanks! hope you’re enjoying rio.

Darcy. Darcy no.

Darcy?

*

Darcy approached Tony first, because Tony was easy.

Okay, fine. She really she approached Tony first because he was in the lab when she kind of dripped in through the door after a day of trying to figure out budgets and personnel requests for what she kind of hadn’t realized but now knew was going to basically be her little mini-department at SHIELD, and why had she thought that this was in any way a good idea? “Guh,” she said, by way of greeting. “Fury bad.”

Bruce looked alarmed, especially when she sank into her usual chair at his table in what she would like to think looked like a delicate swoon, but which probably more resembled an uncontrolled topple. Tony, meanwhile, appeared to be having a hard time not laughing at her pain.

“Do you want a cup of tea?” Bruce asked, after a moment.

“Tea gross,” Darcy mumbled. She rather thought she would like it if he petted her hair again, but that was probably not to be with Tony in the room. “Coffee good?”

“We’re out of grounds down here,” Tony said offhandedly. “And the pot’s empty.”

“Why?” Darcy asked. There might have been a little more wheedling to her voice than was strictly necessary, but she needed coffee. It was unfair that it be denied to her, when she needed it so.

“Because my assistant went on a date with my girlfriend instead of restocking the coffee bar?”

“Pepper is nice,” Darcy said thoughtfully. “Pepper would bring me coffee if she was here.”

“I’ll bring you coffee,” Bruce said, and Darcy could practically hear Tony roll his eyes. Bruce rose to his feet, and rested his hand for a moment on the top of Darcy’s head before stepping away. Darcy sighed, and propped an elbow on the table so that she could lean her cheek in her hand and keep her head in a more-or-less upright position.

“I think you’re going to need a new assistant,” Darcy said. “I can’t keep doing this three jobs thing. I’ll die. Like, for real.”

“You’re leaving me?” Tony asked, pressing a hand to his chest. “Wait, what’s the third job? Do you moonlight as a stripper? You could. I mean, I say that totally objectively, as a man who’s seen a lot of strippers in his day, and I do mean a lot: you really could.”

“I totally could,” Darcy agreed, “but no. New project for SHIELD. Helping the Avengers deal with the media. You’ll probably see even more of me.”

“I was so filled with hope for a minute there, but you dashed it.” He smiled as he said it though, so she sort of figured he was a little sad to see her go. “Media relations for the Avengers, huh? Good. I was getting tired of dealing with all of it on my lonesome. Maybe you can convince Bruce to come
on Leno with me, like I asked him to, and we can *blow their minds with science.*”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Darcy said, but really she planned to leave convincing Bruce for last, because Bruce...

Bruce wasn’t going to be easy.

---

When Darcy’s phone blared out a tinny rendition of the opening bars of *Killer Queen* into the silence of her room, she really and truly considered not answering. That was Natasha’s ringtone, though, so she grabbed to phone and managed to croak out a groggy, “Hello?”

“We’re in the lobby with the package. Want to come down and meet us?”

Darcy glanced at the clock and bit back a sigh. “Give me a couple, yeah?” At Natasha’s affirmative, she hung up and rolled out of the bed. She tugged a pair of jeans on under the t-shirt she had slept in, and didn’t bother with shoes because she refused to believe that the floors of Stark Tower were anything other than spotless enough to eat off of, never mind walk on barefooted. Well, with the possible exception of Tony’s workshop and lab. Darcy almost always felt like she would prefer to be wearing a hazmat suit before questing into those areas. A quick elevator ride later, she was walking across the broad expanse of Stark Tower’s lobby to greet Natasha and Clint. Both were sun-browned, and Natasha was wearing a sarong and a tank top in the place of her more customary black. Between them was a dog.

Darcy’s phone pinged, and she glanced down at it. Tony. *op: dog is an actual dog. i hate you with all of the loathing in my being. which is a lot.* With a glance at the security cameras posted around the lobby and a smirk, Darcy shoved her phone in her pocket.

“You owe me all the beers in the city of New York,” Clint intoned when Darcy got close enough.

“Why couldn’t you just get him a puppy, like a normal doting boyfriend?”

She shrugged. “He told me about *this* dog. He *likes* this dog. He was *sad* when he thought this dog was dead.”

Clint closed his eyes, and Darcy thought he might be counting back from ten, or possibly praying.

“You knew the dog might be dead when you sent us?”

“Did I forget to mention that part?” Natasha wondered. When Clint looked at her, she shrugged.

“We’re on forced leave. I wanted a proper vacation.”

“Hunting for a maybe-dead-dog for close to two weeks is not a vacation, Nat.”

“You said that about Budapest, too.”

“Budapest was definitely not a vacation.”

“Yeah,” Darcy said, and dropped to her knees in front of the dog. His tail started wagging even before she buried her hands in his fur. Aww, he was friendly. “I’m a little surprised about that, too. How is the dog not dead? I sort of expected you to be down there for a couple days, confirm the dead dog theory, and then you would go to Rio and I would buy a puppy. Or chocolates. I hear that
chocolates are a good bet when you’re trying to woo, although Thor swears by poptarts and research journals.”

“You’re sure you want to do that?” Natasha asked.

“Buy chocolates? Take romantic advice from Thor?”

“Woo.”

Darcy glanced up, but Natasha’s expression was unreadable. She shrugged, and turned her attention back to scratching the dog’s ears. “I’m good. I think the big guy likes me.” She wasn’t talking about the dog, but they both pretended that she was. “How’d you find him?”

“It took some asking around. Most of the people in Doctor Banner’s building had long since moved out or moved on, but there was an older woman there who remembered him. She also remembered his pretty downstairs neighbor, Martina, and when pressed she remembered that Banner had taken in one of the local strays, and that when he had left Martina had looked after the dog.”

“Wait. Pressed? Did you beat up someone’s granny?”

Clint snorted. “We asked someone’s granny nicely. Christ. Let her finish the story.”

“Thanks,” Natasha said. “It took some doing, but we figured out where to find Martina. She said she found the dog the night after someone called in a strike on Banner, and that it was staggering around. She thought it had been hurt in the struggle, and brought it inside to die. It didn’t – probably tranqued. Early orders on Banner were capture, not kill, and these were the days before anyone knew that bullets bounced off him like rubber. After, she kept feeding it what she could when it came around, and when she got married and moved to the other side of town, she took it with her. She said that mostly it just came around for the food she and her husband put out and to get out of the rain when the weather was bad, and that it was really skittish around people otherwise. She was willing enough to part with it after I told her Banner was still alive and that he sent us – something about owing him a favor. My Portuguese is a bit rusty. We found the dog and we brought it in.”

“He doesn’t seem skittish,” Darcy said. The dog’s tongue was lolling out and he seemed perfectly content to sit sprawled on the lobby floor as long as she kept petting.

“Clint might’ve spent our three days in Rio socializing it through the power of bacon,” Natasha said dryly.

“What? General Tom Thumb is a good dog. Aren’t you, boy?” He reached down to pat the dog on the head.


“I did not get attached,” Clint said, and he was wearing his best cold hard killer face, blank and grim right up to the eyes. “I just couldn’t keep calling him ‘dog’ all the time.” He looked away, and idly scratched the back of his neck before asking in a carefully casual voice, “Do you think Banner would let me visit him once in a while?”
tony? do you have any ribbon?

i'm not talking to you. operation: dog is an actual dog. i've never been so disappointed in my life.

There was a brief pause before the next text came through. Darcy, this is Pepper. We have ribbon left over from some project of Tony’s I’m happier not knowing about. Come up and get it any time this morning. I’ll order us some breakfast, and you can fill me in on your most recent plot.

And then another: you shouldn’t come. you should stay in your room and cry because of the burning of my hatred.

* 

The burning of Tony’s hatred turned out to be unequal to the task of maintaining itself through French toast and mimosas. More the point, Tony turned out to be incapable of giving anyone the silent treatment for longer than five minutes. Darcy was a little surprised he lasted that long.

* 

Darcy left the dog alone in her room for a couple hours while she went into SHIELD Central to finish up some paperwork. When she got back, the dog was staring sadly at the door. His tail tick-tocked back and forth once when he saw her standing there, and damned if that wasn’t the most adorably pathetic thing she had ever seen. She tapped her hand against her thigh. “Come on, boy. I think we should get you all dolled up and take you to get reintroduced.”

When Bruce opened the door to his suite, it was to Darcy with her fingers hooked carefully through the enormous metallic silver bow she had tied around the dog’s neck. (Pepper had claimed the ribbon was real silver, because Tony had no understanding of what the word ‘restraint’ meant. Tony had broadly implied that the ribbon was left over from an early attempt to pimp his ride. Darcy mostly sat there and tried really hard not to think about how their relationship worked. Although, glass houses and stones and all.) The moment the door opened the dog tried to squirm free of Darcy’s grasp, his butt wiggling with enough enthusiasm that he almost knocked her knees out from under her.

That, at least, relieved any worries Darcy might have had about the dog remembering Bruce. If what Natasha’s Brazilian old lady source had said was true, the dog had originally been a stray; Bruce might not have been the one to feed him most frequently or recently, but he had probably been the first. “I brought you a present,” she said, and pasted on her biggest smile, which turned into a wince a moment later when the dog lurched forward and tried to take her arm with him.

“You got me a dog.” Bruce pulled his glasses out of his pocket and slid them onto his nose, like he needed to double-check that he was, in fact, seeing a dog.

“If we want to get technical, I got you your dog.” And hey, Darcy was all about credit where it was due, so she added, “If we want to get super technical, Clint and Natasha went to Brazil and got you
your dog.” She finally gave up and released the dog, and Bruce leaned down automatically to rub its ears as it bounded up to him.

Bruce cast her a startled glance, then knelt to take a closer look. The dog panted up at him, open-mouthed and openly joyful the way that only a canine could be. “You’re not joking,” he said after a moment’s assessment. “I was pretty sure that you were joking. You got me my dog.”

His voice was stunned and a little strained. Darcy worried briefly that she had broken him. Tony would be mad if she broke his science bro. She took a couple steps closer, until she was looking down at the top of Bruce’s head where it bent over the dog. “Uhm, yeah. I kind of did. Is that okay? I mean, I thought it would make a good present. I also thought that maybe it would make you reconsider the whole dinner date thing.”

“You brought me a dog because... you want to date me?” The faint laugh that followed sounded like it had been strangled out of him. Darcy remembered the warnings about stressing Doctor Banner out, and basically ignored them. She was pretty sure he wasn’t going to Hulk out over a dog. Almost certain, in fact.

“Yes,” she said, and waved a hand through the air. “I considered trying the whole boombox-and-Peter-Gabriel approach, but your bedroom is like eighty stories above ground level, and I don’t think the windows open this high up. Also, I’m not sure where to get a boombox in this day and age, and my new iPod is awesome but it wouldn’t have quite the same impact, you know?”

“I think you might actually be crazy. I had wondered. Now I know.”

The smile kind of froze on Darcy’s lips, which was good because she didn’t really want to flinch. “Oh. Okay. Well, I tried. You can keep the dog, of course, and, like, no hard feelings or anything.” She started to step away, and he looked up.

“No, I didn’t mean—.”

He reached out and caught her before she could go more than half a step. He looked at his hand on her wrist, and seemed a little surprised at finding it there. His thumb rubbed a slow circle over her pulse, almost thoughtfully, and Darcy let out a shaky little breath. “Oh,” she said. “Good crazy?”

A tiny smile tugged at his lips, and it took him a moment to look away from his own hand, thumb still sliding lightly across the sensitive skin above her palm, and meet her eyes. Darcy was kind of doing her best not to start hyperventilating or something, because that would be an embarrassingly telling response when he wasn’t, objectively, touching her anywhere very interesting, even if the heavy eye contact wasn’t really helping, and—way too far gone. She had been right, and that was the only possible explanation: she was just way too far gone on him. “Good crazy.” He tugged her wrist gently until she was leaning in over him, and this close she could tell that his breathing was a little uneven, too. She had just a moment to feel gratified by that before he kissed her. The hand left her wrist and slid up over her shoulder, into her hair.

Doctor Bruce Banner kissed like he was waiting for her to change her mind, the hand resting against the back of her head tentative but his lips on hers greedy. Darcy sighed into his mouth and bent closer. She reached out and fisted a hand in the collar of his shirt, because he might feel like being a good sport by leaving her with an escape route, but she wasn’t nearly so generous. His mouth opened beneath hers, wet and hot, and the slide of his tongue against hers, the faint noise of startled wanting that he made when she nipped at his lower lip, they were fucking perfect.

The hand in her hair was firmer now, and there was another on her hip, tugging her gently but inexorably closer. Darcy didn’t resist, even when the dog protested and squirmed out from between
them, because closer was where she wanted to be. She took a second to think nice doggie because suddenly there was enough empty space between them for her to slide forward and down until she was straddling his folded knees. Their glasses clicked together when Darcy tilted her head for a better angle, and she ignored that too, ignored everything except his mouth against hers and the warmth of him between her thighs and against her body. His hand left her hip, and she almost protested but then there was an arm hooked around her waist, pulling her tight up against him, chest and stomach and hips and—she didn’t really feel that she could be blamed for grinding down on his lap, just a little, and making him moan. He felt so good, and she had wanted this for so long.

Heat pooled between her legs, coiled tight in her stomach, and when Bruce broke the kiss she chased after him. His eyes were dark, pupils blown wide, but he huffed out a wobbly little laugh and rested his forehead against hers rather than letting her kiss him again. “I owe you a date, don’t I? My understanding was that I wouldn’t, ah, until after the date.”

Darcy let go of the collar of his shirt, and smoothed out the fabric absently as she tried to get her brain to work well enough to form actual words that were sense making. She ran her hand down his shirt, buttons catching against her palm and knuckles scraping against the front of her own body. When her fingers slid over his stomach, she heard him suck in a breath and felt the muscles beneath her hand tense. She smiled a little to herself, and leaned forward to press a kiss to the corner of his jaw, right below the ear. “I could probably be convinced to renegotiate the terms of my original proposal if you were to take off all of my clothes in the next five minutes,” she said against his skin. “Just a thought.”

The hand that was still tangled in her hair spasmed, and she couldn’t quite help the little whine that escaped her lips when his nails scraped lightly against her scalp. “God, Darcy.” She sucked another little kiss into his neck and leaned back to find his eyes closed. “I find your new terms agreeable,” he said, each word very carefully enunciated. “We should probably get out of the hall, though.”

“JARVIS sees all,” Darcy said agreeably, and pressed her mouth to his again.

* *

They did eventually make it into Bruce’s suite and out of the hallway, but probably not before Darcy’s robot overlord gained the ability to tell Tony exactly what color bra she was wearing

* *

“Jane,” Darcy said, when she made it back to their shared suite sometime around noon the next day. “Jane, I think I’m in trouble. I think Doctor Bruce Banner might’ve ruined me for other men.”

Jane didn’t even look up from her coffee, but she was smiling faintly. “Physicists are pretty hot.” She sounded a little smug, but Darcy was of the mind that if Jane could also do that tongue thing, a little smugness was well deserved.

“Pass the coffee,” Darcy said.
In the lab later that day, Tony shook his head. “Jeez, Betty. Getting laid does marvels for your temperament. Of course you go and do it after you stop working for me, because I’m not allowed to have a placidly blissed out PA, oh no. Pepper hires me wretched harpies who make me stop working just because four a.m. has rolled around.”

“Tony,” Darcy said, and offered him a sunny smile, “if you keep talking about my sex life, I will tase you repeatedly in the face.”

“...okay, maybe you haven’t changed that much.”

Bruce was doing a good job of pretending that this conversation wasn’t happening anywhere near him, but he let Darcy drop a quick kiss on his lips once Tony’s back was turned, and when she grinned against his mouth he smiled back.

Steve was blushing violently red as they walked out of the theater.

“Sorry,” Darcy said. “I didn’t know there would be a snake dance. I possibly should’ve guessed.” In retrospect, taking Steve to see *Cobra Woman* had maybe not been the best idea, even if it had been released a scant year after Captain America had been put on ice. Most of the movies she took Steve to were forties or earlier, although she thought that maybe she would start easing him into something newer soon. Like the fifties. He could probably handle the fifties.

They found a bench to sit on down the street, and Darcy took a deep breath. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to talk to you about. Something I agreed to do for SHIELD.”

To his credit, Steve did not immediately shoot her down, although he did grow more and more tense as Darcy spoke. He was looking studiously at his hands by the time she finished. “You could probably get away with not doing it,” Darcy said. “People like Captain America. I mean, a lot of us grew up on that really awful TV show from the ‘90s where you had these ridiculous wings stapled to the sides of your head.”

“There was a TV show?” Steve said, with faint horror in his voice.

Darcy waved him off. “My point is, you’re a hero. Even if folks don’t know the half of what you did in the forties, they trust you the same way they trust, like, bald eagles, stars and stripes, and grandma’s apple pie. You’re a part of our national heritage. Having you be the first one out the door and in the public eye will help pave the way for the other Avengers, especially if you say nice things about them on camera.”

Steve sighed. “I get it. I do.” He didn’t look happy though, and she thought that the smile he offered her had a touch of bitterness to it. “I’m used to being the dancing monkey.”

“Oh, Steve,” Darcy said, and reached out to pat him on the shoulder. “I would never ask you to dance. I want you to do exactly what you’ve been doing. I just want you to do it in costume.”
The next day, Captain America showed up to volunteer wearing an *IRON MAN SAVED MY CITY. I’M GOING TO FIX IT* t-shirt over his uniform. Darcy thought that was a nice touch, even as she braced herself for the coming chaos.

There were a few camera crews already in place, called by one of Darcy’s new assistants at SHIELD. That had been advice from Pepper’s PR guy, who had looked at her seriously (and maybe a little despairingly, but that seemed to be his default expression when dealing with Darcy) and said, “Don’t wait for the news to find you. *Create* the news, and make damn well sure that someone is watching.”

The volunteers working for The New York Fixers basically degenerated into teenage girls screaming at the sight of a pop idol when Steve came into view, which lasted for all of five minutes before Grace caught wind of it and bellowed for them to get back to work. Darcy had kind of been counting on that, because Grace had her people too well conditioned to be terrified by her bellow for them to act out on her watch. They went back to their respective jobs like soldiers marching onto the battlefield, leaving only Grace in front of Darcy and Steve.

“What,” Grace said, hands on her hips, “am I supposed to do with you?”

“Put me to work, ma’am.”

For a moment Grace looked stunned, but then she gestured down the street. “There’s some rubble on the corner that they haven’t been able to clear without roping off the street and bringing in construction equipment. You’re supposed to be super strong, right? Think you can handle that?”

“Yes ma’am. It would be my pleasure.”

“Hop to, then.”

Steve hopped to. Grace waited until he was gone before she reached out to clutch at Darcy’s arm. “Was that Steven?”

Oops. “How’d you guess?”

“No one ma’am’s me except him.” That was true, Darcy supposed. Every one else tended to call her Grace or, on occasion, whimper out a frightened ‘sir.’

“Mum’s the word,” Darcy said, and pressed a finger to her lips with a smile.

Grace sighed and rubbed a finger between her eyes. It was a familiar gesture. “I suppose that lot will be hanging around until he leaves?” she asked, and gestured to the nearest camera crew.

“Yeah,” Darcy said, “but you can use them to your advantage. Just *think* of how many people will come pouring in to help the Fixers once they know that Captain America is a member.”

Grace considered that, and a slow smile spread over her face. “You’re a good person, Darcy Lewis,” she said, and when Darcy cast her a startled glance she shrugged. “What? I think the free publicity is enough for you to earn your name.”
“Just as I was getting used to answering to 204,” Darcy said mournfully.

“Yeah, it’s a hard knock life you lead. Now put on your t-shirt and get to work. Chop, chop. Being buddies with Captain America is no excuse for slacking off.”

Later that night, one of the local news stations showed footage of Grace putting her hand over the lens of a camera that had gotten shoved up a little too close to an alarmed Captain America’s face. Either the camera man stepped back or Grace had given him a push, because a moment later the camera refocused on her, scowling and with hands planted firmly on her lush hips. “The man is working. Have some freaking respect.”

“Miss,” the reporter who had accompanied the camera said, obviously not knowing what he was getting into. Darcy almost felt bad for him. “Miss, how do you feel about Captain America joining you today to clean up the streets of New York? Were you surprised?”

Grace snorted. “Surprised? That boy’s been out here and working his butt off for weeks.” The stink-eye that she directed at the reporter was so pronounced that Darcy was a little shocked that he didn’t combust on the spot. “It’s not my problem that you people didn’t know Captain America was sitting pretty in your own backyard until today, and I’m not going to let you get in the way of what we’re doing here just because you’re super excited by the discovery.”

The reporter looked cowed and not a little unhappy, but since Grace had given all of her people orders that no one except herself, Darcy, and the Captain were to talk to the news until told otherwise, he stayed where he was. This was the most luck any of the news crews had gotten all day. “What are you doing, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“We’re the New York Fixers,” Grace said proudly, and stretched out her t-shirt so that the bold lettering could be clearly read by the camera. Today her shirt was black, and bore Black Widow’s version of the Fixers’ catchphrase. “We fix the things around here that need fixing. The government relief workers have been great, don’t get me wrong, but there are still plenty of people around here who need a hand, and who need it right now if they’re going to keep living and making a living. We love this city, and we love the people in it. We want to help them. I guess Captain America feels like we do, and anyone who thinks he’s in the right about that is more than welcome to join us. We’re here all day, every day, dawn to sundown.”

“And Captain America has been here with you? Every day?”

Grace rolled her eyes. “Did I stutter? All day, every day, almost since the first time we started out here. Not in costume, of course, and I can’t say I blame him. That thing doesn’t look like it breathes at all.” She turned and snapped at a passing volunteer, “Go grab him some lemonade, 187! We don’t want the poor guy passing out, do we?”

Darcy could hear Steve’s faint, “I’m fine, really,” in response, but Grace waved him off and turned back to the camera. “Look, I’ve been told that the Captain is going to make a brief statement at the end of the day. Leave him alone until then, and you’ll get all the answers you want. Okay?” The quiet menace in Grace’s voice was probably a lot of why the reporter agreed so quickly.

There was some more footage of Steve working throughout the day, and a commercial break.
before they played the short statement he had given the press.

By the next day, most of the big national stations and papers had picked the story up. An internet meme was circulating, showing a picture the Washington Post had run of Captain America smiling awkwardly into the camera, with captions like: “I SAVE THE WORLD... I AM ALSO AVAILABLE FOR BIRTHDAY PARTIES AND BAR MITZVAHS,” and “I GO TO THE STORE TO BUY CAKE... AND END UP FEEDING IT TO HOMELESS ORPHAN KITTENS.”

“Getting rid of Loki made the world safe again,” Steve had said in his press release. “That doesn’t mean I get to brush my hands off and call it a job well done, go home and relax by the TV. That’s not what any of The Avengers have done. New York is our city too, and just because you haven’t seen much of us doesn’t mean that we’re not still here.”

The next morning, Fury called Darcy into his office. There was a copy of the Times on the edge of his desk, Steve’s masked face smiling up from the lower half of the front page.

“It’s a good start, Ms. Lewis,” he said. “Carry on.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh my god, thank you. I have been and remain on the floor over the amount of really lovely feedback I'm getting from you all. Special thanks once again to TheGreatSporkWielder for finding my typos, and to vaarna over on Tumblr for making me a pretty, pretty picture. Seriously, I'm sure that's the look on Bruce's face during about 70% of the conversations he has with Darcy.
Roping Thor into doing some PR work was incredibly easy. Controlling the direction that PR work took was basically impossible.

He caught on to the idea of engaging with the public for the purpose of raising the Avengers’ reputation with more ease than Darcy had expected. She was midway through attempting to explain the concept in terms he could follow when his face brightened. “It is as when my father would ride through the worlds in days long since past, sitting atop his mighty eight-legged steed with his warriors arrayed fiercely behind him, so that his enemies could gaze upon him and know that to trifle with the All-Father was to trifle with death.”

“Sort of,” Darcy said, and bless him he was trying. “I, uhm, don’t think we want people to associate you with certain death, though.”

Thor looked sad.

“Hey, wasn’t that eight-legged horse your brother’s—.”

“We do not speak of that.”

“Right.”

For a moment, they sat there in silence. Awkward, awkward your-brother-did-a-horse silence.

“My father would also don a traveler’s cloak and walk the land in the guise of a simple old man, seeking wisdom and bestowing favor upon those who offered him hospitality,” Thor said eventually. “I could—.”

“I don’t think so,” Darcy said quickly, her brain overrun with images of Thor smiting the first New Yorker who refused to let him crash on the couch for a night. Possibly she and Jane had ruined him for the notion that not all Midgardians were willing to invite large, strange men into their homes. “We want people to know it’s you, and that they can depend on you if another crisis ever comes up. Going around disguised would kind of defeat the purpose.”

“I see,” Thor said, and stroked his beard thoughtfully. “You believe that I must go among the people in my own likeness, to win their trust and favor as their protector.” He stood suddenly, and from her spot on the couch, Darcy looked up at him. He was grinning, which was a good sign. Probably. “I believe that I am willing to do this thing for you, Lady Darcy. The people of Midgard do not know my reputation as a warrior. It is understandable that they would have their doubts.”

“Awesome,” Darcy said, relieved. “I mean, we might want to emphasize how you’re a really super nice guy as well as your ability to bash in heads, but—.”

“I shall go forth immediately to reassure the good people of both my intentions and skill!”

“What.” Darcy said, before her brain caught up to what he had said. “Thor, no.”

He didn’t seem to hear her, or else he was ignoring her, which was always a distinct possibility with Thor. He had selective hearing, especially when it came to the word ‘no’ in conjunction with
his name. No, Thor, please put on some pants was a prime example. He just patted her on the head, and a moment later he was out the door.

“What have I done?” Darcy asked the empty room, in tones of dawning horror.

Over the next three days, Thor was everywhere. There were several blurry iPhone videos of him buying rounds at a local bar. Pictures began to crop up of people posing with him on the streets of the city. Channel 2 News caught up to him while he was taking part in an eating contest at a county fair somewhere in Upstate New York.

He grinned broadly into the camera, his mouth still half full of hotdog. He was wearing a gray t-shirt and a pair of jeans, but Mew-Mew was propped proudly against the metal folding chair he was sitting in; no one was going to doubt that it was the god of thunder joyfully gobbling fistfuls of loaded down hotdogs. “This is a fine feasting game!” he exclaimed to the bemused reporter. He shoved the last of his hotdogs into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. Still sporting an enormous grin, he lifted his empty plate in the air. “Another!”

Someone hurried forward to bring him another heaping plate of food, which Darcy figured was basically Thor’s version of heaven on earth, or Valhalla on Midgard, or whatever. He grabbed another hotdog and bit it cleanly in half.

“Well, I’m sure our viewers will be happy to know that you’re enjoying yourself,” the reporter said, and she seemed to be having some trouble controlling her expression. “They’ve been very curious about you, Mr... Thor. Is there anything you’d like to say to our audience at home while we have you here?” She held her microphone out to him.

Thor positively beamed at her, and grabbed the mic, pulling it closer to his face so that he could examine it. “And this strange device will allow me to speak to these audiences in the home?” At the reporter’s nod, he pressed his mouth against the microphone. “GREETINGS, PEOPLE OF MIDGARD—!”

The reporter and everyone else within ten feet of Thor winced. “Ah, you don’t have to shout, Mr. Thor. And you can talk to the camera. That way, they’ll be able to see you as well as hear you.” She gestured him in the right direction, and Thor turned so that he was looking more-or-less out of the screen at Darcy.

Darcy braced herself.

“Greetings, people of Midgard! I am Thor Odinson of Asgard. I wish it to be known that all who call Midgard home may look to me as a friend and ally, and that I look forward to meeting your enemies in glorious battle, should you ever call upon me to do so. Let it be known that the god of thunder would gladly lay down his life to safeguard your realm, and that, should such a day ever arrive, I will listen with much pride and elation to the songs sung in the halls of Valhalla to honor the deed. With much gladness will I defend Midgard, for I find myself increasingly fond of this world and its people, and also of its coffee drink and the tarts which one puts in the toasting oven.” He banged a hand against the table for emphasis, and nearly sent his plate of hotdogs hopping off the edge. “This do I pledge to you, good people, and never have I been called an oathbreaker!”
Darcy whimpered.

The reporter was apparently made of sterner stuff than Darcy was, because she forged bravely on. “I’ve been given to understand that the most recent enemy you faced was your own brother. Would you be willing to confirm that?”

“Oh, fuck no,” Darcy said. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem that Thor was listening, because he nodded solemnly to the camera.

“It saddens my heart, but you are not in error. My brother, Loki of Asgard, has taken leave of his senses. In his madness, he sought to rule over your world, and left much death and destruction in his wake. Know that I mourn with you for the lives lost, and that it grieves me that one of Asgard bears the responsibility for so much senseless and needless violence against people who offered him no harm.”

The reporter—wait. Darcy pulled off her glasses and scrubbed them clean against the edge of her shirt, then replaced them on her nose. No, she wasn’t seeing things. The reporter was patting Thor’s shoulder, and there was a distinct you-poor-baby expression on her face. Which, yeah, Thor did look sad, and Darcy kind of wanted to give him a hug, but what?

“Know also,” Thor said, “that Loki is being punished for his wrongdoing by judges far more severe and far less easily swayed by mercy than those who serve justice in your own realm. He has not escaped unscathed, and I believe he will learn to regret the choices he made, and perhaps, with time, to understand and correct the confused and wrathful thoughts which led him to make those choices. For now, it is my belief that Asgard is in Midgard’s debt for the blood that one of her sons has shed, and we will find some way to settle that debt.”

“Of course you will,” the reporter said sympathetically, and seriously, what? “Thank you for your time, Mr. Odinson.” She turned toward the camera, smiling. “For Channel 2 News, this is—.”

The rest of what she said was mostly drowned out by Thor suddenly remembering the presence of the camera. The smile returned to his face, like a light switch be flicked back on, and he waved enthusiastically. “I also wish to send fond regards to the Lady Jane, and to her dear friend the Lady Darcy!” he yelled, apparently forgetting his earlier lesson on how he really didn’t need to do that. “I shall return home shortly, and tell you of my many adventures!”

“Hi, Thor,” Darcy said to the TV screen, and buried her face in her knees. “You seem to be having an excellent time. I am so glad to hear you’ll be coming home soon.”

Thor’s impromptu interview didn’t turn out to be quite the unmitigated disaster Darcy thought it would be. Sure, a few right wing pundits started to foam at the mouth because he’d called himself a god, but people in general – well, they liked Thor. The general consensus seemed to be that he was possibly crazier than a sack of mad badgers, but a significantly more harmless kind of crazy than his brother had been, and probably a really fun guy to sit down and have a beer with. People trusted Captain America, but they wanted to party with Thor. Which, considering that was basically how Tony continued to score high in most public popularity polls, Darcy wasn’t too worried about.

As such, when Darcy walked into the living room two days later to find Thor snoring loudly on the
couch, she was in a much more beneficent mood. She even smiled at him when he snorted and startled awake.

“I have thus far enjoyed relating to the public,” he mumbled. “I think that I would like to dance among the stars next.”

Darcy could feel her eyebrows creep toward her hairline.

“You know what, big guy? I’ll see what I can do.”

Thor gave a contented murmur and fell back asleep.

* *

“So, wait,” Darcy said, and used her toes to poke Bruce in the stomach. “You never guessed that I was coming on to you? I mean, I’m a lot of things, but you might’ve noticed that subtle isn’t exactly one of them.”

“I don’t know,” Bruce said, the corner of his mouth twitching. “That thing with Fury and the iPod speakers was pretty sneaky.”

Their planned dinner date had turned into a night in Bruce’s suite with dinner ordered from Stark Tower’s kitchens, because Darcy didn’t really care if she was wined and dined in style, and because Bruce was still a little anxious about maybe accidentally breaking portions of the city again. Bruce had gone through the effort of lighting a candle (and yeah, it was stuck lopsidedly to the bottom of the Culver University mug Darcy had used the first time she had slept at his place, but it was the thought that counted), and Darcy was content with any dining scenario that allowed her to sprawl comfortably across the couch and prop her feet up on Bruce’s lap instead of sitting stiffly across the table from him.

She also thought that her chances of getting some tonight were significantly higher if he didn’t have a long cab ride between the restaurant and home to over think things. Darcy had gotten a few too many polite pecks on the mouth over the past few days, and even if some of that was Bruce being conscientious of the fact that she was freaking out over Thor’s little outing, it was enough to make her wary of what was going on in that big brain of his.

“Sneaky, but not subtle,” Darcy pointed out. “You should stop avoiding the question. Avoidance gives me hives.”

She got another little smile out of him, and he skimmed his thumb over the arch of her foot, which was nice. “It’s possible I realized. Eventually.”

“Sneaky, but not subtle,” Darcy pointed out. “You should stop avoiding the question. Avoidance gives me hives.”

She got another little smile out of him, and he skimmed his thumb over the arch of her foot, which was nice. “It’s possible I realized. Eventually.”

“And you just let me twist on the line?” Darcy asked dryly, and prodded him again. “Harsh, Doc.”

His hand stilled, warm and solid where it rested over her toes. “Not on purpose. I—I’ve avoided this kind of thing for a long time. Relationships. Any kind of relationship. Friends and girlfriends,” and to his credit, he only stumbled a little over that last word, “are at risk. More risk than everyone else. I mean, statistically, if anyone is going to get in the Other Guy’s way and end up hurt, it’s you and Tony. You’re the ones I spend the most time with.” His hand slid up until he could wrap his fingers around her ankle. “I’ve injured people I care about before, during an incident. I don’t want that to happen again. It seemed like the best way to make sure of it was to just not get attached.”
The twist of his mouth was sharp and a little bitter. “Keep moving. Stay on the outskirts.”

“The Other Guy doesn’t seem that bad,” Darcy said carefully, because this was mostly uncharted territory, and sure enough she could see the protest forming on his lips. “No, hold up. He was pretty friendly with me when we met. I mean, there was a distinct lack of smashing. He worked well with the Avengers when you were fighting Loki – even saved Tony.” And the Hulk might’ve hurt Betty – the real Betty – once, but he had protected her after that. Darcy didn’t mention that one; she wasn’t quite sure what the dating rules were when it came to reading a guy’s Top Secret government file. Probably ‘don’t do it, that’s creepy,’ but Darcy said that the people who thought that way had never been unfortunate enough to work for SHIELD. “He’s obviously not completely out of control, or else Tony and me both would be so much splat.”

Bruce winced, which, yeah, not the most sensitive word choice on her part. Her point still stood.

“I think it’s better when I let him out on purpose,” Bruce said. “We still don’t know how he’d react to you if he were to come out because I was injured or threatened. I’m pretty sure that’s the point when everything and everyone becomes a target. He almost killed Natasha, and I don’t exactly think he was trying to teach Thor to tango.”

“That was before you and Natasha were buddies, though,” Darcy pointed out.

From the mildly poleaxed look on Bruce’s face, ‘buddies’ was not the right word, but Darcy didn’t think that ‘mutually terrifying cohorts for world-saving purposes’ had quite the same ring to it. He shook himself after a moment, and carried on with the conversation like she had in no way just given him some kind of images-of-having-brunch-with-Natasha induced seizure. “Maybe, but I would probably feel better if I knew that he wouldn’t try it again the next time I scrape my knee.”

“Exploding helicarrier,” Darcy muttered, “scraped knee. Totally the same thing.” He shot her a rueful sideways glance, and since at that point it was either let the conversation die an inglorious death or introduce the subject she had been avoiding, she said, “And Betty?”

He didn’t seem surprised that she knew the name, so maybe he assumed someone else had told her or maybe he was just eerily okay with the idea of SHIELD giving out his personal history with a very free hand. “That’s been over for a long time,” Bruce said hastily.

“Dude,” Darcy said, and couldn’t help a smile. “Chill. I was asking about Betty and the Other Guy. I am surprisingly blasé about the really wild idea that the hot older guy I’m seeing might’ve once dated someone not me.”

“Oh,” Bruce said.

When he didn’t seem inclined to continue, Darcy spent one very confused moment trying to decide whether this was another foot-poking situation, or if she should just let it go. She started when he spoke again. “Betty was – different,” he said, and he gave her another sideways glance, like he was expecting her to react badly. “We were together for a long time before the accident. I can’t count on the Other Guy reacting to anyone else the way he reacted to her.”

And—really, Darcy was actually mostly of okay with that. From what she had read, Betty had been different. Betty Ross was the kind of woman who would ride the Hulk like a rodeo bull if she thought it would improve a situation, and Darcy wasn’t sure she had it in her to be that kind of woman. She wasn’t sure she wanted to be, because everything in Bruce’s file made it sound like he and Betty had been in the kind tragi-epic love story that always made Darcy’s mom bawl like a leaky faucet in the movie theater, and Darcy didn’t really think that was what she wanted her life to become. Those stories never ended well. She could deal with being less if it meant having more.
Of course, some of her being-okay-with-it probably did stem from the fact that Bruce had said that he and Betty were over, and also that she had access to sealed government records which told her that Betty had spent the past three years in the Amazon to study the effects of some kind of rare plant on gamma poisoning, happily married and with her first kid on the way. Darcy was dealing, but she wasn’t a saint.

“Alright,” she said. “I see what you mean. You can’t plan your life around wanting one hundred percent certainty, though. I mean, it’s never gonna happen. You might Hulk out, and he might get all smashy, but there really isn’t a better place for that to happen than here. Tony and I are the statistically likely casualties, right? He’s got the suit, I’ve got my mad running the other way skills, and Thor’s on hand to, like, arm wrestle with the Hulk until he calms the fuck down, or something. It’ll be okay.”

“Maybe,” Bruce said, and he didn’t sound convinced, but she thought she felt his fingers relax a little around her ankle.

“Okay,” Darcy said, and she scooted forward until her knees were hooked over his legs and she could touch the corner of his jaw. He turned to look at her. “Fine, cool. No promises, at least not yet. But you asked me if I minded the Other Guy, when I tried to get you to go out for dinner with me that first time. The truth is, I don’t mind him, as long as I get to hang out with you. I need you to try not to mind him, either.”

Bruce snorted. “You know you’re asking the impossible, right?”

“Pretty much.”

“Just checking.”

She laughed, and he leaned forward to rest his forehead against hers. His hand was on her thigh now, and he was stroking absent circles into her pants leg. Darcy refused to be distracted. “No promises, except one,” she said.

“Mmm?”

“If you have a little Hulk-related crisis and decide to run, you talk to me first. Or Tony, I guess, but I would rather it be me, because Tony is possibly the least reassuring individual to ever walk the face of the earth. Yeah, on second thought, just talk to me. Give me a chance to convince you to stay.”

“Tony isn’t very reassuring,” Bruce said agreeably, and he was stalling for time, but she was willing to allow that.

“No at all.”

“And you are very convincing.”

“Baby,” Darcy said in her throatiest voice, and wiggled her eyebrows for good measure, “I will convince you all night long.”

That startled a laugh from him. “Promise?”

“You first,” Darcy said.

He closed the last little breath of space between them to kiss her, lingering and sweet, and Darcy figured that would have to be close enough for now.
“No,” Natasha said. She said it in a perfectly pleasant tone, but it was still a very flat kind of no.

Darcy looked at Clint. Clint shrugged. “I’m willing to do it. If we get to pick, I want to go on The Daily Show.”

She started to turn toward Natasha and paused. “Jon Stewart? Really?”

“What? Just because I work for the government doesn’t mean I’m Captain America or anything. I can handle a joke. Stewart makes me laugh.”

The fact that Clint said this with no discernible facial expression at all was not reassuring in the slightest, but Darcy nodded. “Okay. Daily Show. Noted.” God, her life was weird.

She turned her attention back to Natasha, who was watching both of them like she was having severe doubts about the company she kept. Darcy felt that way at least twice per day, so she wasn’t going to take offense. “I’m a spy,” Natasha said patiently. “Forgive me if the thought of strutting around on television doesn’t exactly thrill me. I work better when people don’t know my face.”

“People already know your face,” Darcy said. “Your fight with the Chitauri was pretty widely publicized.”

“There’s a difference between patchy warzone footage and sitting down for an interview, and I think you know that,” Natasha said.

With that tactic roundly defeated, Darcy chose another. “C’mon, Natasha. I thought we were bros.”

And wow, that had really not been the way to go. Darcy couldn’t put her finger on what, exactly, had changed – Natasha didn’t look any different, and she hadn’t moved an inch – but there was suddenly enough of a chill in the air that Darcy could have sworn she saw frost forming on the pint glass between Clint’s hands, which he was now contemplating carefully rather than looking at either of them. “I like you, Darcy,” Natasha said, “but don’t ever try to use our friendship against me.”

Right. Okay. So that plan had been a very not good plan. Excellent to know.

Darcy cleared her throat, because she hadn’t felt nervous around Natasha since sometime around the second or third time they had met up, but damned if she wasn’t feeling a little curl of anxiety in the pit of her stomach right about now. “Sorry. Terrible joke. Totally my bad.” She would never be sure if it had been the right thing to say or if Natasha had just become aware that her eyes were doubling as death rays, but whatever the case might be, the atmosphere at the table became a little more relaxed, and Clint stopped studying his beer like it contained all the secrets of a less terrifyingly awkward universe.

“Look,” Darcy said, and the last thing she wanted to do was continue this really awful conversation, but the last time she had been in Fury’s office she had asked him what she was supposed to do if any of the Avengers didn’t want to do publicity work, and he had said, “Tell them it’s an order.” Darcy wasn’t a big fan of being ordered around, and she didn’t really think that a woman who could kill men with her thighs would be much happier at being told to do something unappealing because Fury had commanded that it be so, even if Natasha probably would follow
orders. Darcy was just as happy not to find out how uncomfortable working with Natasha on PR would become if she had to resort to playing that card, so she figured she’d keep it close to the vest for now. “Let’s talk about the practical side of making sure people know your face, and like your face. Let’s talk about strategy.”

Natasha leaned back against the booth and, even if she still didn’t look too happy, that was definitely a this ought to be good raise of the eyebrow. Darcy took it as a sign that she could continue without anyone possibly stabbing her in the face.

“So, you’re working with the Avengers,” Darcy said. “There’s, jeez, I don’t know, there’s an orphanage burning down. And you race in to save the little orphans, some of whom have adorable British accents, and possibly some kittens, because that’s what heroes do.”

Clint choked on his beer. He coughed once and recovered. “Do the kittens have adorable British accents, too?”

Darcy waved a hand. “Yeah, sure. Why not? I don’t care about the nationality of the kittens. The point is that there are kittens, and also orphans. The orphans are trapped in a burning building, and they’re all, ‘eeee, someone save use!’” she flailed her arms a little for emphasis, “and you rush in all, ‘I will save you, tiny people!’ Only you can’t, because you’re the Black Widow, and they all promptly piss their little pants and run the other way when they see you. And then maybe the orphanage falls down on your head.”

“I like to think I’d be smart enough to leave the orphans to fend for themselves once they started spontaneously peeing on themselves at the sight of me,” Natasha said, but there was the slightest hesitation before she said it.

“I think you might be exaggerating a little,” Clint said, his lips tilting into a smile. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I enjoyed it. I especially like how you did the voices and everything.”

“Thanks,” Darcy said, “but I’m not exaggerating. I mean, only a little.” She reached into her bag, and pulled out a copy of a small press local paper, dated two days before. She tossed it on the table between them. The headline read, THE SILENT AVENGERS: WHY ARE THEY HIDING? and the article that followed wasn’t necessarily kind, but it was also a lot more balanced than some of the things that were being said on the radio or the TV. “This isn’t the worst of it, and it’s been going on for months. When you don’t talk to people, they assume you have something to hide. And yeah, Natasha, before you say anything, I get that you do have things to hide, but you’re going to have problems if you keep trying to hide everything. Maybe not orphanages falling on your head, but problems. I mean, try to imagine doing your job when the people you’re trying to help are suspicious of you, or when there are reporters getting in your way because you haven’t been seen in weeks and they want to get a quote. Throw them a bone. Clear up some of the mystery, make it seem like you’ve only been avoiding the publicity because you were recuperating or because you needed a damn vacation – no one will blame you for that – and they’ll stop looking quite so hard for some buried secret.” She leaned forward and rested her elbows on the table. “The thing is, as much as I’m sure we’d all have preferred it if the Loki business could’ve been wrapped up without you ending up in the public eye, you are in the public eye. People know you, or at least know of the Black Widow. They’re going to keep digging until they find something, or they’re gonna freak the hell out when they don’t find anything. Either way, it ends up smelling fishy.”

“You’re saying that I’ve been compromised.”

“Well, yeah.”

“And Director Fury agrees?”
“Director Fury agrees hardcore enough that he’s given me a budget and some SHIELD agents to do my bidding. Me. Think about that for a moment. Revel in the pure kookiness of it all, and think about how desperate he must’ve been to get this taken care of, that he thought giving me a piggy bank and some minions was a good idea.”

Natasha smoothed the newspaper with her fingers, and was silent. Darcy spent the next few minutes sipping on her own sadly neglected beer, and gave Natasha what time she needed.

“Codenames only,” Natasha said finally. “We’re not all Stark, and if Cap can keep hiding behind the shield then I get to be Black Widow to the press. Any decision on who I talk to and when is run by me before you approve it, and as soon as some of the sensation dies down you limit my public appearances to the bare minimum.”

“That’s fine,” Darcy said. “No, that’s great. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” Natasha looked up from the paper and smiled, just a little. “Now, I think you promised Barton all the beers.”

“You did,” Clint agreed.

Darcy laughed and signaled for another round, relieved that Natasha seemed to have forgiven her and giddy with having gotten what she wanted.

It didn’t occur to her until several hours later, after she had teetered out of the bar and while she was waiting for one of the cabs speeding by to stop ignoring her, that just maybe Natasha had gotten everything she wanted.

“Son of a bitch,” Darcy said, but she was smiling.

*

Natasha’s appearance on Ellen went smoothly. She looked gorgeous in her cream colored dress, her vibrantly red curls a close match to the chair she sat in. She was charming and witty and so perfect that Darcy didn’t even mind that Natasha had totally played her, because she was equally adept at playing a studio audience.

She talked about her recent vacation to Rio and her previous career as a ballerina, mentioned that her favorite food was a New York bagel slathered in cream cheese, and answered every question posed to her about the Avengers and the battle they had fought in the streets of Manhattan. Darcy had no idea how much of it was true, and she didn’t really care, because every single word sounded like it was nothing but the most shining honesty when dropped from Natasha’s lips. Steve couldn’t pull off that level of sincerity, and he was almost always legitimately sincere.

At the end of the interview, Natasha accepted the action figure in her likeness that DeGeneres pressed on her, and walked off the stage smiling.

“I kind of love you,” Darcy said, once the other woman had made it backstage. “Have I mentioned that recently?”

“It was implied,” Natasha replied. She tossed Darcy the action figure with a smirk.
Darcy studied it for a few moments before deciding she was totally going to need to get some of these made. From what her little worker bees at SHIELD told her, the fervor of true converts to the cause of public relations burning brightly in their eyes, Hasbro had been begging for the rights for weeks now; it wouldn’t be that hard to arrange.

(Two months later, Darcy would nearly choke to death laughing over the Hulk figure with his bitty ripped up pants and his hilariously proportionate pants bulge. Bruce would be significantly less amused.)

* * *

Clint’s appearance on The Daily Show didn’t go quite so smoothly. Darcy comforted herself with the notion that most likely, that bit where he had pinned Stewart’s jacket to part of the set with an arrow had been planned. She also comforted herself with chocolate. A lot of chocolate.

* * *

“I remember a time when I was happy that Tony talked to the press,” Darcy said without opening her eyes. “Now I just wish that he would stop.”

“I often wish that Tony would stop talking,” Bruce said agreeably. “Darcy, why are you using my dog as a pillow?”

“He is warm and fluffy, and when I use him as a pillow he doesn’t try to rest a tablet on my face because he got distracted by science.”

“That was one time.”

“And yet, the memory lingers.”

Bruce made a noise, but after a moment’s consideration Darcy decided he sounded more amused than indignant. She snuggled a little closer to the dog and sneezed. “Okay. I’m coming back to the couch, but only because the floor is hard and the General sheds.”

The dog had become the General a few days earlier, because when Darcy had asked Bruce what his name was, Bruce had looked at her uncomprehendingly and said, “I just called him dog.” That was too depressing to contemplate, so Clint’s name had stuck. After a day of having to work her way through General Tom Thumb ever time she wanted to talk to or about the dog, Darcy had decided that was a dumb and unnecessarily long name for an animal and told Bruce is was either General or Tom.

“...but General seems a little too evocative of General Ross,” she had said. “Maybe stick to Tom.”

Bruce had ducked his head and smiled. “Really? I kind of like General. It seems fitting.”

Darcy had peered at him suspiciously. “Is that your roundabout way of calling General Ross a son of a bitch?”
Darcy had no real objections, and the name had spread, mostly she thought because Tony was tickled by the idea that, of the many generals who occasionally came and went from Stark Tower, the only one who really mattered was a dog.

“What did Tony do?” Bruce asked, once Darcy was comfortably settled with her head in his lap. He even started petting her hair absently, fingers stroking against her scalp in a way that made Darcy wonder if purring would be a completely inappropriate response.

“I was standing at the edge of the stage during his press conference,” Darcy said, “and he might have pointed me out and asked me in his loudest Tony voice who my daddy was, and yeah, he was obviously joking, but there’s this little thing where reporters don’t have much of a sense of humor, especially when missing a joke will sell papers or get ratings. I mean, most of them are going to fact check it to make sure and find that it leads to nothing, but I’m pretty sure that some of the tabloids are going have headlines tomorrow about how I’m Tony Stark’s bastard daughter. My mother has been calling me crying all morning, because people have been calling her, and she really wanted to let me know that she and my dad were happily married more than nine months before my birth. Which, duh, I’m a middle child and—.” Darcy paused, and a look of stunned horror crossed her face. “Oh god. I think this means he won the prank war. There is nothing I can do that will beat this.”

The fingers on her scalp stopped stroking and started shaking, as did the lap her head was resting on. “Bruce Banner, you had better not be laughing at my pain when I open my eyes. Those had better be shoulder-shaking sobs of sympathy that I’m feeling right now.”

“Of course they are,” Bruce said, in a strange, muffled voice. Darcy sighed and pressed her cheek against his stomach, letting his laughter shudder through her, because she was willing to let him laugh at her if it meant he was laughing.

“We’re going to have to stop dancing around this sooner or later,” she mumbled, once he had calmed down.

He smoothed a hand over her hair again. “Dancing around what?”

“The press. You.”

“Darcy.”

“All the cool kids are doing it, Bruce.”

“The cool kids aren’t risking an incident in a room full of cameras and reporters.”

“He’s going to have to meet his public eventually. Better that it be at a time and a place where you can let him out and everything is chill.”

“He—?” Bruce’s hand curled into a fist, although he was careful not to tug on her hair. “Darcy, you can’t be talking about introducing the Other Guy at a press conference. That would be stupid, and you’re not stupid.”

She didn’t think he’d meant for the words to sting, but they did anyway. She opened her eyes, and kind of regretted that from this angle all she could see was his shirt and the bottom of his chin. This was not the position to be conducting a negotiation from. She swung her legs off the edge of the couch and pushed herself up until she was sitting next to Bruce instead of sprawled across his lap. “I’m not stupid, and neither is my idea. You’re not the one getting the all the bad press. You’re not...maybe.”
the one that people will recognize, not unless they’re super well-informed physicists. You’re not the one people are afraid of. *He* is. He’s the one whose image we have to fix.”

Bruce met her gaze, and he was frowning. “Maybe people are right to be afraid of him.”

“He’s a pretty scary dude,” Darcy allowed, “but if you’re planning to bring him out again if you need to – and don’t make that face, obviously you *are*, because otherwise you would have blown town months ago, or when SHIELD was attacked you would have hidden away in the panic rooms with all the other nice scientists rather than letting the big guy out to play – you have to make sure people *aren’t* afraid of him, or at least not any more afraid of him than they have to be in order to know that they should sensibly get out of his way. I think we can agree that if anyone decides that the appropriate response to the Hulk is to reach for grandpa’s shotgun, you’re going to have a mess you don’t want on your hands.”

He took a sharp breath, and then let it out slowly. “There’s already a mess on my hands,” he said, and then, “I think you need to leave now.”

Don’t push Bruce too far, or too hard. Don’t make him angry. Tiptoe the fuck around him. Right.

“Fine,” Darcy said, “I’m gone.” She grabbed her shoes from the floor near the couch and felt only a little better for slamming the door on her way out.

She didn’t go very far. She was about midway down the long stretch of hallway between her suite and his when she sat down with her back against the wall and just sort of stayed there. Darcy was never the one to leave during a fight; she wasn’t quite sure what to do with herself. When she and Jane fought, Jane was always the one to storm out first, to her little sanctuary on the roof when they had been at the station in New Mexico, or to take a walk around the block now that they were in New York.

Darcy made it through about ten minutes of contemplating her toes and feeling kind of like an idiot for not just going back to her room before Tony arrived. He was still dressed in the suit he had worn to the earlier press conference, although he’d loosened his tie and abandoned his shoes somewhere along the way. When he sat down beside her, his socked feet lined up next to her bare ones.

“You looked a little blue on the security feed, and—.”

“Pepper sent you, right?”

"Don't be ridiculous," Tony said. "No one sends me anywhere." He paused. “That’s pretty much the way of things, yeah.”

“Does she know what a bad idea that was? I mean, you’re basically the opposite of comforting.”

Tony smirked. “Now, is that any way to speak to your dear old dad?”

“In the face, Tony. Repeatedly.”

He was silent for a moment, idly considering his socks. “Do you want to talk about it?” he asked. His tone implied that he would find swallowing a bag of live mice more pleasant.

“With you? Dear god, not even a little.”

“I thank you from the bottom of my soul for that.”
He still didn’t move, and Darcy sighed. “Pepper gave you a time limit, didn’t she?”

“Ten minute minimum. I think she feels that I owe you for the press conference, and should settle my debt in awkwardness and suffering if I can’t offer sage advice.”

Darcy had to be on the far end of desperate to even be considering asking this, but, “Got any?”

“Ahahaha. No.”

She snorted.

“Except that I generally feel that anyone Banner kicks out of a room is doing things right.”

“Tony Stark thinks I’m doing things right,” Darcy muttered. “I am obviously doing everything wrong.”

“No, no, wait, I have a theory. You see, Bruce doesn’t trust himself. He doesn’t test himself. So I think he needs people to poke and prod at him, people like me, so that he can see that his control is a lot better than he thinks it is.” Tony smiled fondly. “I was really happy when he started dating you. You’re like girl me.”

“You take that back.”

“Of course, you’re not as fantastically good looking as I am.”

“You take that back. My boobs are much better than yours are.”

Tony swept an appraising glance over her. “Hmm. Yeah, that’s accurate.” He slugged her lightly in the shoulder. “Go on. Get back in there, tiger.”

"Tiger?"

"Rawr." "You need to stop talking to me. Because everything you say is awful.”

“I get that a lot.” He rose to his feet, and motioned at her impatiently until she stood with him. “My ten minutes aren’t up, but I think I can get away with going back now if the next time you see Pepper, you tell her I was very helpful and that I warmed the cockles of your heart.”

“Or you could tell her that I threatened to tase you if you kept trying to make me feel better,” Darcy said thoughtfully. “She’s more likely to believe that.” Still, she patted him on the cheek and did feel a little better. Judging from his smirk, Tony knew it. With another soft sigh, Darcy turned and doubled back the way she had come.

Tony was humming *Eye of the Tiger* behind her.

“Tony, stop it.” His snickering followed her all the way to Bruce’s door. He stopped when she knocked, and she didn’t check to see if he was still standing there, because really she didn’t want to know if Tony had decided to start doing his spying in person.

“I'm not going to apologize for this one,” she said as soon as Bruce opened the door, and tried not to feel too thankful that he had decided to open the door. “You called me stupid. If you don’t want the Hulk to play with the other kids, I get it, but you need to talk that out with me and find another
way, not just end the conversation and boot me out of the room.”

“I didn’t call you stupid,” he said, and he seemed calmer now. At Darcy’s raised eyebrow, he amended that to, “I didn’t mean to sound like I was calling you stupid, and I’m sorry. You didn’t want to talk it out, though; you wanted to dig in your heels and fight. There are reasons I can’t do that, Darcy.”

And yeah, okay, “That’s fair. It’s cool if you need a time out, but I can’t just drop it every time we run up against something that’s going to make you uncomfortable. Maybe we can have a signal? I could work with a signal.”

A small smile pulled at the edges of Bruce’s lips. He held up his hands and formed a T with them, the universal playground symbol for time out. The laugh that Darcy offered in response was a little shaky and more relieved than amused, but they both pretended not to notice.

“Well,” Darcy said, and reached out to slide a hand into his, “maybe not right now.” She stepped across the threshold into his suite, tugging him further inside with her. “I mean, traditionally, there’s this thing that couples do when they have a fight and then make up.” She reached past him to close the door.

“Oh?”

A moment later: “Oh.”

Then: “Well, who am I to question tradition?”

“What we need to do,” Darcy said, some time later, and she paused to take a bite from the container of leftover fried rice that she had balanced on the mattress, “is humanize the Hulk for people. It’s okay if they’re a little scared of him. Probably it’s even smart for us to make sure they stay a little scared, but what we can’t have them doing is looking at him – at you – like you’re something less than human, some kind of unfeeling and unthinking monster who doesn’t care who gets in his way when he’s running around and mucking shit up. That’s the point where people start to reach for their shotguns and their tasers, or call in the U.S. Army for an airstrike.”

“It’s true, though. The Other Guy isn’t really much for the thinking, and the only feeling he seems to do is I really enjoy this mucking stuff up.”

“Agree to disagree,” Darcy said with a shrug. “I still say he isn’t as bad as you paint him. My point is, if we can’t humanize him, we’re going to have to humanize you.”

“I’m not going to like this, am I?” Bruce asked mildly.

“You really aren’t.”

Bruce sighed. “Go on.”
The flash of cameras and the harsh overhead lights in the room highlighted the gray in Bruce’s hair and the discomfort on his face, made him look older and more tired than he usually did. He tapped the microphone once, even though Darcy had already checked and triple checked the sound.

“Hello,” he said, once the background chatter of the gathered reporters had died down a little. “My name is Doctor Bruce Banner, but you may know me better as the Hulk.”

Chapter End Notes

Once again, big thanks to all of you lovelies and to TheGreatSporkWielder for her typo-spotting skills. Any remaining typos are entirely my fault, because (as anyone on my Tumblr can tell you) by the time I finished the rough draft, I was at the point of "eff this motherf*cking chapter." As such, my editing might've been a little more shoddy than it usually is (and I usually miss something).

On that note, I keep meaning to invite people over to my Tumblr. I’m things-with-teeth over there, and I love it when folks drop on by the chat.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Silence greeted Bruce’s statement. That silence was distinctly skeptical. The whispering that followed was decidedly more so.

Darcy – hadn’t really planned for this. When she had found out that Bruce was the Hulk, it had been a puzzle piece clicking into place: comments made about keeping Doctor Banner calm, the second bedroom with the bubble walls and the bolted down bed, the general *weirdness* that started with basically everything that Bruce was and ended with finding him shirtless in his lab, all combined with the fact that SHIELD’s ways of hazing new employees were a lot more subtle and a lot more likely to fly under the professionalism radar than printing a joke in the orientation manual. She hadn’t actually prepared for the possibility that no one would buy into the idea that mild mannered scientist guy equaled green rage monster of death.

“Doctor Banner,” said a clear, ringing voice, “could you please clarify that statement?”

Christine Everhart was a godsend, Darcy decided. A strange kind of godsend, because it had taken Darcy all of one phone conversation to decide that Everhart was more than a little awful. However, she also had some kind of odd rapport with Tony and, while she never pulled any punches in her reporting, she had been one of the few reporters to consistently offered a *balanced* view of the Avengers. The articles she had written on the subject – and there had been a few – had contained neither gushing hero worship nor hasty condemnation, and Darcy appreciated that well enough that not only had she invited Everhart to the press conference, she had granted the woman a front row seat.

That had rankled a little, because Darcy had also sort of wanted to grant her a punch to the face. Being in charge was *hard*.

Bruce paused, and shoved his glasses up on his nose. The glasses were probably not helping his I-am-the-Hulk case, but he needed them for the note cards. Bruce had written up honest to God note cards, and Darcy found that a little adorable, because she was used to working with Tony, who probably wrote note cards and cackled with glee as he burned them right before a public appearance, and Steve, who wrote note cards with Darcy’s help and then consistently abandoned them midway through because he had *feelings* which wanted expressing. Bruce... well, Darcy was a little bit concerned about what would happen if Bruce was forced to deviate from his carefully written, numbered, and color coded note cards, which was why Darcy had a secret contingency plan sitting in the seat beside her own.

“I’m not sure what you think needs to clarified,” Tony said. “I mean, that seemed pretty clear cut to me.” He pretended to consider. “Maybe use smaller words, Bruce? They’re paid by the word, I think. Use many small words. It’ll work. Trust me, I’m a *professional*.”

Darcy had never said it was a *good* secret contingency plan.

She could see the muscle jump Everhart’s jaw from where she sat.

“I don’t think anyone would ever accuse you of being that, Mr. Stark,” Everhart said, in an impressively restrained tone. She turned back toward the front of the room, her handheld recorder pushed out in front of her like a talisman. “I’m sorry, Doctor Banner, but you have to see how
unlikely that sounds to us. You don’t much look like a Hulk.” She smiled, a diamond bright, polished little smile that invited others to join in the joke, and earned a few faint laughs in response. “Can anyone confirm your story?”

“Ooh,” Tony said, and raised a lazy hand into the air. “Pick me, pick me. I’ll confirm it. Can I confirm it? Darcy, this is your pony show. Let me confirm it. I’ll be good, I swear.”

The room exploded back into whispers, a few louder voices vying for attention now that Tony had offered them the verification they needed. Darcy used the noise as cover when she drove an elbow into Tony’s side and muttered, “Stop it. And this isn’t a pony show. You’re not allowed near ponies anymore, remember? Not after that last time.”

“Oh. Right. You never let me have any fun.”

“It’s my biggest joy in life.”

Her secret contingency plan had, in fact, been awful.

Darcy cleared her throat, which accomplished absolutely nothing until Tony, with a baiting smirk in her general direction, stuck two fingers in his mouth and let loose a whistle shrill enough to shatter glass. Darcy hadn’t actually known that Tony could do that. It seemed awfully plebian for His Highness. Then again, Tony seemed to delight in being simultaneously the most fastidious and the most tasteless billionaire in the world, so Darcy thought that maybe she shouldn’t be surprised that he seemed to be as entertained by abusing the eardrums of a room full of reporters (and his friends) as the average five-year-old was by a good poop joke.

Darcy sort of wanted to tell him of the great and dire hatred she had for him and his stupid beard both, but since most of the reporters and the cameras were now directed at her, she refrained. Instead she stood, smoothed her skirt with nervous hands, and smiled her brightest smile. “Hello. My name is Darcy Lewis. Most of you know me, at least as a voice on the phone. On behalf of the Avengers,” she swatted Tony’s hand away as surreptitiously as she could when he poked her in the side, “including Tony Stark, I would like to confirm Doctor Banner’s statement. Now, if we could please let him continue?” She felt that the subtext of can we please get this over with? was hard to miss, and the room settled down after that.

When she sat back down and looked toward the front, Bruce was staring hard at her. She thought that he might give her that look if she were to unknowingly offer him a cupcake with a razorblade inside: one part panicked, one part pained, and just a pinch betrayed. Either he was wondering why she had brought Tony with her, which was fair because Darcy was sort of wondering that herself, or he was attempting to communicate to her that this sucked when she had said it would not suck. On the plus side, he didn’t look angry.

“Doctor Banner,” she said, “perhaps you would like to explain the nature of your condition to these nice people?” She was pretty sure he had a note card for that.

Sure enough, he cleared his throat, nodded sharply, and picked up more-or-less where he had left off before the interruption.

“A man in a flying metal suit, a geriatric yet still hunky star-spangled man with a plan, and an alarmingly hammer-fixated god, they accept without question,” Darcy muttered to Tony. “This, they have trouble swallowing. Why is this my life?”

Tony snorted. His eyes were already on his phone, because apparently Tony got bored once he could no longer make a spectacle of himself. “I hate to point this out, Betty, but there’s high ground
when it comes to believing Bruce is the Hulk, and then there’s where you’re standing, which is somewhere about ten feet below sea level.’”

“Shut up,” Darcy said placidly.

“Besides, you know she was just looking for a pretty quote to put in her article,” Tony said, and his soft voice (soft for Tony, which meant that the two reporters nearest them were giving the side eye, like, wow) shifted into a whining falsetto. “Sources close to the Avengers were able to verify that Doctor Banner does, indeed, turn into an enormous rage monster, and not only on the full moon or during his period. Full story on page sixty-four.”

Right. Obviously she had brought Tony not for the support, but for the commentary. Darcy smiled. The rest of the press conference went off without a hitch, Bruce giving carefully edited answers about the Hulk, how he had become the Hulk, his history, the Avengers, and the attack on New York. Toward the end, a few reporters slipped in more personal questions, including one enterprising soul from Cosmopolitan who asked about his favorite position in the bedroom. Darcy did kind of wonder how a Cosmo reporter had ended up on the short list for the press conference, and resolved to have a word on the matter with her minions, but mostly she considered it a win since the audience laughed appreciatively when Bruce turned purple instead of green and said, in his calmest voice, that he preferred to sleep on his left side.

When Tony looked inclined to add something, most likely in his outside voice, Darcy elbowed him mercilessly and didn’t feel bad in the slightest.

The reporters stood and began to file out, talking idly among themselves. Some lingered, no doubt hoping to ask a few final questions or film some closing remarks once the room had emptied, but Darcy trusted the SHIELD agents who had been stationed around the room, cunningly disguised as Stark Industries security, to chivvy out the loiterers.

“Well,” she said, “that wasn’t awful. Go team.”

Tony slid his phone back into his pocket. “Congrats, you’re not a complete failure at your job,” he said cheerfully. “Might want to get that under control before you join the big guy on stage, though. He’ll take it personally.” He jerked a nod toward her hands, which was the first clue Darcy had that that they were trembling a little where they rested against the dark brown pencil skirt that Pepper had helped her pick out.

“Please,” Darcy said. “I was worried about them ripping him apart, not the other way around.”

“Yeah,” Tony said, drawing out the word to a good three or four dubious syllables instead on one. “Somehow, I don’t think he’s going to be able to tell the difference.” He was right, so Darcy sat in her chair a few moments after Tony had stood. Once she was sure she had herself under control, Darcy followed him to Bruce, her heels clicking softly against the three short steps leading up onto the stage.

Tony was saying, “Now you can come play with me on Leno,” his hands spread wide in one of the big gestures that he seemed to favor. Bruce was smiling tolerantly, but he glanced sideways at her when she reached them. His hand twitched, like he had started to reach for her and then thought better of it. She smirked and caught the hand before it could fall back to his side, wove her fingers through his, and didn’t worry much about the last few reporters who were being shepherded out the door.

Maybe she should have, because the next day, that was the picture the New York Times ran with
their article on Bruce outing himself as the Hulk: the exuberantly gesticulating Tony, Bruce’s patient smile, and her hand joined with his just barely visible past Tony’s hip. It might have bothered Darcy to have what had essentially been a private moment between friends blasted all over a national newspaper, but she thought that one picture did as good a job of humanizing the Hulk as anything that had been said during the press conference.

*

Steve swiped the back of his gloved hand over his cheek, one of the few parts of his face left exposed by the mask and just as sweaty and grime-covered as the rest of him. “I think the frenzy is dying down a little,” he told Darcy with a wry smile. “They must’ve gotten tired of just standing around and watching me lift rocks all day.”

“Nonsense,” Darcy said from her seat atop his loaded down wheelbarrow. “No one with half a brain and an ounce of hormones would ever get tired of watching you lift heavy things. I refuse to believe such a thing is possible. Lies, lies and slander.”

She was pretty sure he had gone red under the mask, but whatever, his blush matched his costume. “The press is quieting down some, but it looks busier out here than ever.” There were a lot of new faces on the street, a lot of new bodies in a rainbow assortment of t-shirts proclaiming the Avengers’ status as heroes and their own commitment. Darcy could still pick out the original Fixers in the crowd, their t-shirts thin and faded with constant wear. It was a little strange to look at her own Hulk t-shirt and realize that part of the stack had been scraped away sometime last week, that the fabric was stained with the dirt of long days that wouldn’t come out in the wash, and that the collar and hem were going a little ragged. She hadn’t actually thought about how much time she was spending out here until she was forced to really think about it.

The time spent probably wasn’t time she could afford to spend, not with her new job, but Darcy was having a severe case of the screw its when it came to that. She’d get the job done, and she would still make time to do the things she wanted; she wasn’t going to turn into Fury, who, rumor had it, actually never left SHIELD Central unless it was for the newly repaired Helicarrier. The new agents spoke in hushed tones about the fact that he hadn’t taken a personal day in over thirty years, but Darcy wasn’t sure how that was a good thing. Like, at all. Probably it explained a lot about Fury, really, assuming that rumor was true (although that was a big assumption, given that the same baby agents claimed that Fury never slept, or ate, or took a shit. Darcy just thought he had mastered sleeping with his eye open, and she had seen him eat. The last item on the list she absolutely refused to contemplate).

“Grace must be thrilled,” she added.

“She’s ecstatic,” Steve said. “Can’t you tell?” He gestured toward where Grace was standing at the edge of the sidewalk, a scowl on her face and her arms raised like the conductor of some mighty orchestra. She was, as usual, getting shouty with some volunteer whose name she had yet to bother learning. “I think she’s been hollering about three times more than usual,” Steve said thoughtfully. “Kind of reminds me of an old colonel of mine, actually.”

“I doubt she’d be flattered by the comparison.”

“I really doubt Colonel Phillips would have been, either. Doesn’t make it any less accurate.”
They shared a smirk. Well, Darcy smirked. She maintained that Steve was too wholesome for a proper smirk. It did kind of look like one, though. Possibly she should stop hanging out around Steve too much; she was obviously corrupting him, and it would be incredibly bad PR for Captain America to turn up corrupted. Also, it would make Darcy’s Granny Lewis cry, and maybe disown her. Then there would be the treason charges, and it was all downhill from there.

“It’s been okay, though?” Darcy asked. “The new volunteers have been working out? The press hasn’t been bothering you or them too much?”

“It’s fine, Darcy,” Steve said, amused and tolerant both. “Stop worrying. If the press was going to corner me, this really was the best place for it to happen. They ask a couple of questions, and then Grace yells at them until they go away. A few have even been coming back during their off hours to help out.”


“Now get down off of my wheelbarrow. Some of us are planning to do actual work today.”

“Like you couldn’t lift it with me on there,” Darcy said. She slid down anyway, bits of stone and plywood catching against the seat of her jeans. “Fine. I know a pointed comment when I hear one. Put me to work before Il Duce realizes that I was just sitting around.”

“Hey,” Steve said, pleased, “I get that reference.” Then, a little reproachfully, “That wasn’t a very nice reference.”

“Too soon?”

“Definitely not nice.”

“I know,” Darcy said, and smiled a sunny smile up at him. “I’m really not a very nice person.”

“Lies,” Steve said, his tone dry as he quoted her own words back at her. “Lies and slander.”

Darcy was totally not blushing.

Maybe a little.

* * *

“Whatchya doin’?”

“Nothing,” Tony said hastily. A quick flick of his wrist closed the files he had been looking at, shimmering blue lines of light collapsing in on themselves until all that was between him and Darcy was empty air.

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said, and she considered pointing out that, while keeping up with Tony’s brain hamster was basically impossible, she was actually smart enough to recognize a building schematic for the building she lived in. Stark Tower was pretty uniquely shaped. She was, in fact, familiar enough with the building to know that it wasn’t that tall; the digital blueprint that Tony had been looking at had a few added floors up top, above Tony’s swank penthouse. Darcy hadn’t gotten a good look, but she would have sworn that there were little glowing symbols next to each floor, a
familiar hammer and a bow among them.

However, experience proved that the fastest way to keep Tony from doing something nice was to point out that he was doing something nice, so she just said, “Planning more renovations already? A three-story penthouse with views of the Manhattan skyline was just too cramped for your lifestyle?”

The set of Tony’s shoulders relaxed, and he offered her a smirk. “I’m a man of many needs. I mean, it takes a lot to let genius like mine thrive. Good food—.”

“Do burgers, donuts, and bottles and bottles of expensive booze really count?”

“—fine women—.”

“Women, plural? Does Pepper know that you’re seeing someone on the side? Or have you finally succeeded in cloning her?”

“—fast cars—.”

“Flying suits.”

“—and a clean and spacious living environment.”

Darcy snorted. “If it weren’t for JARVIS, your staff, and yours truly, you’d be SOL on that first one. I’ve seen your workshop, and the lab.”

He frowned at her. “You’re a laugh riot.”

“It’s one of my charms,” Darcy replied.

“Well,” Tony said graciously, “you have so few, I’d hate to deny you that one.”

Darcy smiled at him. She thought that he was hiding an answering smile behind his raised lowball glass. “What brings you to my not-so-humble abode? I’ll ask later why JARVIS is letting you in without notifying me.”

“I think I just make him tired,” Darcy said, thoughtful.

“He’s an AI!”

“A very tired one.”

“Jesus.” Tony lowered his glass. “I am not getting into a conversation with you about the probability of a computer program getting sleepy, or whether or not he can dream of electric sheep when he gets that way. What did you want?”

“So, you know how the Leno thing fell through?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Insurance issues with bringing a possible Hulk on the show. I know. Asshole.”

“I think I found something much better.” Tony perked up, and Darcy grinned widely at him. “You’re gonna love this.”
“This is a terrible plan,” Bruce said, and the sounds of people talking and cars in the background leached most of the tone from his voice. “I know there’s no turning back. I’m just saying that now so that I can say ‘I told you so’ later, when San Francisco is nothing but a smoking crater along the western seaboard.”

Darcy smiled, the phone pressed between her cheek and her shoulder. “You need to stop saying that all my plans are terrible plans. I’ll develop a complex.”

“You’re already too complex for my liking,” Bruce said. “I can’t figure out what made you think that this is where Tony and I should do our guest appearance. I mean, of all the—.”

“Don’t be like that, Doc!” someone said, loud, jovial, and close enough that Darcy could hear every word distinctly through the phone. “We’re the safest show on television, and our insurance covers Hulk. Which, who knew, really? I mean, is that a standard insurance clause?”

“Not unless Stark Industries has started buying up insurance companies,” Bruce said wearily. There was a brief pause, and then he said with dawning suspicion, “Tony?”

“I have no idea what you’re implying!” Tony shouted, and he must have been some distance from Bruce and the phone, because Darcy could barely hear him. “I never left Sheboygan!”


“Now, let the nice lady go, and come play with us,” the mystery voice said. “We’re going to have so much fun.”

“Yay.”

“Go play science with the other kids,” Darcy said. “Play nice. Don’t get angry with them.”

“That’s going to be hard. It’s like Tony times five. I think I hate my life.”

“Well, think about this: it turns out that I miss you a lot while you’re out of town, and when you come back you’ll get to play with me.”

“...I maybe hate my life a little less.”

“Popcorn’s ready,” Darcy said, and flung herself onto the couch hard enough that a few kernels bounced out of the bowl and into Pepper’s lap. Pepper looked down at the offending pieces of corn with a hint of disbelief, before plucking them out of her lap and tossing them back into the bowl.

“I like this,” Jane said, her voice serene as she stroked a hand through Thor’s hair. He was sitting in front of her spot on the couch, his back pressed against her legs. “We should do this kind of thing more often. Like a movie night, maybe?”
“Tony gets bored during long movies,” Pepper said. “Anything over an hour and a half and he starts to tinker. We don’t want him tinkering outside of the blast-proof walls of his workshop or the R&D labs. Because things will blow up.”

“So, short movies?” Jane suggested.

“Or we hold movie night in R&D.”

Jane’s eyes narrowed. “No. The guys from the bio labs will want to come. They’ve been trying to get an in for months. I won’t give it to them that easily.”

Pepper looked askance at Darcy. Darcy rolled her eyes. “Nerd wars. Don’t ask.”

From his place on the floor, Clint snorted. He didn’t look up from the beer Darcy had handed him upon his arrival (she was still paying that debt), not until the commercial break had ended. He flicked a glance at the screen, and his eyebrows lifted when he saw the title card at the start of the show. “You’re kidding me.”

“Nope,” Darcy said.

“Pass the popcorn. This should be good.”

“It may not look like it,” said the mustache on the TV screen, and okay, there was a face behind the mustache, but mostly Darcy just saw the mustache, “but we’re professionals.”

“My God,” Pepper said. She sounded a little numb. “Professionals. You put Tony on a show with people who blow things up professionally.”

“He should feel right at home,” Darcy replied, although most of her words were drowned out by the maniacal cackling of the show’s second host as Tony, dressed in his Iron Man suit, hovered into the upper edge of the camera frame behind the mustache, his hands hooked under the second host’s arms and both of them a good twenty feet above the ground. The yell of, “Don’t try this at home!” sounded particularly unconvincing and, given the distance and the fact that his mouth still moved like he was laughing instead of talking, it had probably been dubbed in after the show was filmed.

As the opening narration and episode clips started, Pepper buried her face in her hands. “Do you hear that? That’s the sound of Fury having an apoplexy because Tony endangered a civilian. Again.”

“Now, now,” Darcy said. “I’m sure Tony would never do such a reckless and horrible thing,” she paused when Pepper moaned, then continued, “and look at what fun they’re having!”

“Today, Adam and Jamie are joined by special guests Tony Stark and Bruce Banner, as they test the movie myth—.”

“Bruce doesn’t look like he’s having much fun,” Jane remarked, and Darcy glanced at the screen. Bruce was standing behind a clear Plexiglas blast shield, his face buried in one hand in a pose not unlike Pepper’s, while Tony helped to rig something that looked very much like an explosive charge.

“Stark Industries manufacturing at its finest,” Tony informed the camera, with a manic grin.

“How can you tell?” Darcy asked. “Bruce never looks like he’s having any fun.”
“Never?” Clint had gone back to contemplating his beer, his other hand buried wrist deep in the popcorn.

“Well,” Darcy said with a smile, “almost never.”

Clint grimaced. “I don’t think I need to know any more.”

“I am sure the Lady Darcy makes him very joyous in the bedchamber,” Thor said loyally. “I believe that was the purpose of her jesting, yes? That he shows gladness during their conjugal affairs?”

“Seriously, no more.”

“That’s enough, sweetie,” Jane said, petting a fond hand over Thor’s hair. “I think everyone understands the joke now.”

Darcy reached out and snagged the bowl of popcorn from Clint, taking a handful before offering it to Pepper. “Come on. Let’s watch. This is going to be awesome.”

* *

“Hey, J. What’re my numbers looking like?”

“Up from last week, Ms. Lewis.”

“Boo-yah. That’s what I thought.”

“Public opinion is still mixed, however.”

“Yeah. I guess you don’t get one hundred percent approval ratings overnight, huh?”

“So it would seem. I would not be concerned, however. Mr. Stark’s ratings have never broken seventy-five percent, and only infrequently do people attempt to assassinate him or report him to some kind of government review board.”

“You’re such a comfort.”

“Thank you, Ms. Lewis. I do try.”

* *

“They’re heroes,” the woman said, with a shrug of her rounded shoulders. “I had my doubts at first, but I guess we can’t deny it now. They were there for us when we needed it, and they’re still here now. My little Annie can’t wait to be Iron Man for Halloween. Maybe there are some kind of big implications to the Avengers existing, but, well – I’ll leave that for the politicians to argue over. That’s why we elected them, right? Not that I voted for Bloomberg, mind you. I’m just going to say that I’m glad to be having real life superheroes living in my town, and leave it at that.”
“You really want to know?” the man snapped, wheeling to face the reporter. His eyes were red-rimmed and his face speckled with patchy stubble, like he had tried to shave and not done a very good job of it. In contrast, his suit was neat, crisp and sharp and the color of graphite. “I think they’ve got a lot to answer for. They can pretty up and talk to you all they like, but who’s to say that some of the people who died didn’t die because of them?” His voice broke, and he smoothed a hand over the front of his jacket, taking a moment to compose himself. “Civilian casualties. That’s what the newspapers call it, right? They never say that the bad guys weren’t the only ones causing them, and it’s always good and fine as long as everyone else made it out okay. As long as the gains outweigh the losses. Fuck that. Just... fuck it.” He turned and walked away from the reporter in quick, jerky steps.

“Captain America saved my life,” the waitress said, old footage dredged up from right after the attack and still shown from time to the time, because even dirty and tired she was pretty as a picture and good for making a point.

“Director Fury?”

He glanced at Darcy, and sighed. Darcy was pretty sure Fury was starting to count her among the things that made him regret breathing. “Yes, Ms. Lewis?”

“Hi. I just, I had a thought I wanted to run by you. Things have been going well with getting the Avengers out there, and I think it might be a good idea to have them give a press conference. Like, all of them. Together. Maybe some kind of public meet-and-greet after.”

Fury looked at her for a long moment. “Are you asking me permission?”

“I thought I... should?”

“Look,” Fury said, turning his attention back to the paperwork spread across his desk. “You’re the head of your own department, a fact which my mind boggles at every single day. ‘What was I thinking?’ I ask myself. Be that as it may, your department is performing at or above expectations. That means you get to do whatever you damn well please, so long as it falls within your purview and you don’t set anything important on fire. If, in the future, I have questions or doubts concerning you or your department’s performance, you’ll know. Believe me, you’ll know. For now, proceed as you think best.”

Darcy spent a moment trying to untangle that. “Was that a compliment?”
“Christ.”

“Did you just compliment me, sir?”

“Yes. Now get out of my office.”

“So, your office doesn’t fall within my purview?”

“Out.”

“It’ll be okay,” Darcy said, and slid her arm around Bruce’s waist. “You’re going to kill out there.” She pressed her face against the place where his shirt collar met his throat and inhaled deeply. God, she really—.

She really liked this guy.

“Killing is what I’d like to avoid,” Bruce said, but he ran a hand down her back until it rested, large and warm, against the base of her spine.

“No hugs for the rest of us?” Tony said, and Darcy could hear him messing with the little mic attached to the neckline of his shirt again. She was going to slap his busy little fingers in a minute, she just was, especially if he did anything to alter the mic in some unfortunate way. “How about some rousing words of encouragement from our fearless leader?”

“Sure thing,” Darcy said into Bruce’s shirt. “Steve, have at. Tony wants you to arouse him.”

“No, thank you,” Steve said politely.

Darcy pulled away from Bruce, and gave him one last quick kiss before going to make sure everything was in order. There was a lot to order – Tony’s mic to rescue, and water to set out for the entirety of the team, but especially for Bruce, because he liked something to fidget with when he got nervous. There was the final sound check to perform, and faces to make at Clint until he stopped arguing with the wardrobe girl on loan from Stark Industries. No one could get him to budge further than “not black” and “not armor,” so he was in jeans and a dark purple t-shirt that would probably look black on camera, but that would have to do. Darcy saw him stash his folded down bow and his quiver beneath the table that they would all be sitting at right before she let the press in, but she didn’t really care as long as both bow and arrows stayed under the table. Thor couldn’t be convinced to let go of his hammer, but Jane had talked him into an honest-to-Odin suit, and Darcy managed to get rid of most of poptart crumbs decorating the front of his jacket. He grinned at her and held out his silk tie for inspection. “It is of a color with my cloak. And my toes.”

“That’s very nice, Thor,” Darcy said, before turning to Natasha. “You’re so well behaved,” she told the other woman, and started to step past.

“I’m currently carrying twelve knives and a handgun with an extra clip,” Natasha said with a bland smile.

Darcy paused. She looked Natasha over, taking in the tailored red sheath dress with its pencil skirt and equally fitted bodice. “How? No, never mind, I don’t care. Well, I care that you’re awesome,
of course, but I’m probably happier overall not knowing how you managed it. Just make sure that none of it comes out in front of the cameras, yeah?"

“Please. I’m a professional.”

By the time the press was seated and ready to begin, Darcy was feeling a little wilted. Bruce glanced at her as he and the rest of the Avengers filed out to take their seats at the long, white-draped table, and after a moment he patted her on the shoulder. “We’ll be fine,” he said, and he didn’t sound convinced, because Bruce never sounded convinced when talking about the best case scenario, but he was trying to reassure her, and that was nice.

As it so happened, they were fine; the press conference went well, or as well as could be expected. The Avengers did a good job fielding the questions thrown at them, with Tony and Natasha – and occasionally Steve, who had some understanding of how publicity worked even if he wasn’t used to being this close to the front lines – picking up the slack when one of the others was stumped. Tony usually did this by doing or saying something flashy and distracting enough that everyone looked at him; Natasha favored the more subtle approach of answering a question so well that the person who had asked it forgot that it had originally been directed at someone else. Steve was just Steve, albeit in his Captain America costume, larger than life even to Darcy, who knew him pretty well, and about three times as big to anyone else; even when he wasn’t trying, he pulled at people’s attention, made them want to listen to whatever it was he had to say.

The press conference ended, and people began to file out. They didn’t leave Stark Tower, however; instead, they were guided down the hall to the Tower’s lobby, the largest open space in the building, where the Avengers would greet their public. There were drinks and refreshments already set out, along with piles of glossy 8x10 photographs for signing.

(“Autographs,” Natasha had said flatly, and looked at Darcy like she was crazy or possibly about to be killed gruesomely. “Just don’t sign them the way you did mine,” Darcy had said. “Someone will take you seriously. Use your superhero name. Uh, codename. I meant codename.” “I really don’t think you did,” Natasha had replied, but she hadn’t argued any further.)

Darcy had been seated in the front row with Pepper, Jane, and Erik during the press conference. The others had gone on ahead, but she waited for her own little band of PR nightmares to join her before leaving the room.

“I’ll go in ahead of you,” she told them. “Introduce you guys, let everyone know you’ve arrived, remind them to tip their waiters, that kind of thing.”

“We have waiters?” Clint wondered.

“Not even a little,” Darcy said. “I have a budget that’s supposed to last me through the end of the fiscal year. You have finger sandwiches and fruit punch. Tony, that flask you think I don’t know about had better stay in your jacket, and not in the punch bowl. Some of your adoring public is underage.”

Tony shrugged. “More for me. If I make a large donation to your budget, can we get an open bar next time?”

“No,” Darcy said, and thought maybe. If there was anything left of her nerves by the end of today, she’d be shocked. A margarita or three would be helpful right about now.

“I’m running interference for Bruce,” Darcy added, because it had been agreed well ahead of time that if the Hulk, or even his more mild-mannered counterpart, was going to be making public
appearances, the buddy system needed to be in effect to make sure that someone didn’t accidentally jostle him into a wall or do anything else that might result in a very public (and, uh, dangerous, that too) incident. Mostly that had been decided by Bruce and Fury, in a meeting Darcy had only belatedly been invited to; Tony hadn’t been wrong when he’d said that Bruce didn’t trust himself, but if it made him feel safer to have someone nearby to keep the people he’d be talking to out of his bubble, Darcy was happy to oblige. “The rest of you are on your own.” She pushed open the glass doors leading into the lobby.

“How much do you have in that flask?” she heard Steve murmur to Tony when he saw the crowd.

“Not enough to get a super soldier drunk. Not enough to get me drunk. Christ.”

“Okay, so maybe it’s a little crowded,” Darcy said, and flashed them a smile over her shoulder.

“I’m just wondering how you warped space and time to fit the entire population of New York inside my lobby,” Tony said. He reached out and slapped Bruce in the shoulder. “We should get on figuring out how she did that. I bet we could warp space and time if we wanted to.”

“Does it mean we get to go back to your lab now?” Bruce asked, gazing dubiously at the packed lobby. “Because if so, I’m all for creating a possibly cataclysmic hole in the space-time continuum. I think it would be both fun and educational.”

“That’s the spirit!”

“That’s so not the spirit,” Darcy said, and cast both of them a stern look before stepping out into the lobby. There were a lot of people, but security on the door had kept the room below capacity; she blithely pretended that she couldn’t see the people queued up outside, waiting for their chance to come and meet the Avengers in person as others left. The Avengers had been doing public appearances for weeks now, but this was the first time they were doing one as a full team, and the first time it involved the public as much as the press, with the exception of Steve’s volunteer work and Thor’s frolics in the outside world. People wanted to see them in person, wanted to meet them. Darcy chose to take that as a good sign.

One of Darcy’s employees from SHIELD scurried over from where she had been working the crowd to hand Darcy a mic. “Hello,” Darcy said, and watched as every eye in the room swung toward her. “I could say something, but I’m not who you came here to see. New York’s heroes, ladies and gentlemen. Let’s have a round of applause for the Avengers.”

They entered the room. The clapping mostly drowned out Natasha’s voice when she slid up close to Darcy and murmured, “I thought you’d be giving a longer introduction, Darcy.”

“And give the rest of them time to bolt? Hell no.”

She handed the mic back to the woman who had brought it over, and insinuated herself at Bruce’s side. He skirted the edge of the room until he found a mostly empty corner, and Darcy didn’t protest. Just getting him here had been a major victory; she wasn’t dumb enough to ruin it by insisting that he be front and center.

He leaned closer to speak into her ear, which was basically the only way to be heard over the noise in the lobby. “This is a terrible—.”

“Don’t even finish that sentence. You’ve been fine so far, and I don’t see how this is any more stressful than playing doctor in India.” She smirked at him. “Speaking of playing doctor—.”

A flashbulb went off, leaving both of them blinking and dazed. “Doctor Banner,” someone said.
“Dana Lincoln for Us Weekly. We couldn’t help but notice that you seem awfully cozy with this lovely young lady. What’s the nature of your relationship?”

“Definitely more stressful than India,” Bruce muttered to Darcy, before turning a hard little smile on the reporter. “Private.”

The reporter looked at Darcy, and she shrugged. She wasn’t above using their relationship to make the Hulk more sympathetic in the eyes of the media and the public, but on a personal level she was also pretty okay with not doing that, if that was how Bruce wanted things. “I’m the press liaison for the Avengers,” she said, with a much nicer smile. “Doctor Banner and I were just liaising.” Unspoken were the words, I have the power to ban you from every future press conference we hold, ever. The reporter let the subject drop, and went off to hassle Pepper and Tony.

People started approaching after that: parents with their children, college students who wanted to pose with Bruce, teenagers who held out glossy photographs of the Hulk for signing (and Darcy had needed to hunt through a lot of the footage in SHIELD’S archives to find a frame that wasn’t blurry or terrifyingly scowly), and tourists dressed in the t-shirts that some of the local shops had started to churn out, cheap things with artist’s renderings or publicity shots of the Avengers printed on them, because even so soon after a devastating crisis, New Yorkers weren’t above making an easy buck on the tourist trade. It was part of their citywide heritage, after all.

One of that last group stopped as she was stepping away after shaking Bruce’s hand. Her t-shirt had a bad caricature of the Hulk against a red background, and the crisp creases along the front and the shoulders where the shirt had been folded made Darcy think that the woman had bought it today. “We really did want to thank you,” she said, half turning to face Bruce. “When we heard that this was going on today, we knew that we had to come. We’re from Iowa. We weren’t anywhere near here when – everything – happened. We could’ve been, though, if we had planned this vacation earlier in the year, or if those aliens hadn’t started and been stopped in New York. So – thanks. Thanks for that.” She smiled a little awkwardly and hurried to catch up with the rest of her family.

Bruce was silent for long enough after the woman had left for Darcy to worry. He shook a few more hands in that awkward way he had, like he really didn’t want to be touching the people who approached him but wasn’t sure how to get out of it gracefully, and smiled at them but said nothing. Finally, Darcy rifled through her purse until she found a quarter, and presented it to him. “For your thoughts.” When he just looked at her, she shrugged. “You’re, like, a genius. I figured a penny would be underbidding.”

He smiled, but it was a distant kind of smile, his mind still obviously elsewhere. “I was a doctor in India.”

“Yeah,” Darcy said. “I know. Unlicensed. I think it’s cool, but let’s not talk about that to the press, hmm?”

“It was a way to make a living, but it was more than that, too. I thought I could – strike some kind of balance. The Other Guy has caused a lot of damage, and I guess I figured that undoing some damage would, I don’t know, somehow make it even out in the long run. I never really though that being the Other Guy could also do that.” He shrugged, and Darcy knew that she was supposed to say something, but damned if she knew what that something was. She was almost relieved when Natasha came sliding out of the crowd, a faint smile turning up the perfect bow of her lips. “Red in your ledger, Doc?” she asked, and there was something about the way she held herself that made it more than the casual question her voice wanted it to be. “Except it’s not really yours, now is it? Who better to rub it out than him, if he was the one to cause it?” She cast Darcy an indecipherable look, and jerked her head toward the refreshment table. “Why don’t you take a
break? I’ll play guard dog for Banner for a while.”

Darcy nodded and stepped away. She could just barely hear Bruce murmur, “Who are you guard
dogging?” and Natasha’s answering chuckle.

She retrieved two plastic cups of punch and turned to make her way back to where Natasha and
Bruce were waiting, only to be waylaid by another reporter. “Ms. Lewis. Can you please comment
on the rumors that you’re secretly Mr. Stark’s daughter?”

Darcy let her glasses slide down on her nose until she could give the reporter an appropriately
disdainful look. “Really?” she asked in an undertone low enough that she was pretty sure his tape
recorder wouldn’t pick her words up above the ambient noise of the room. “We’re going to do
this? Really?”

To his credit, the reporter looked a little embarrassed. He shrugged apologetically, but that didn’t
stop him from shoving the recorder right under her nose. Over his shoulder, Darcy met Bruce’s
eyes, and rolled her own before turning back to the reporter.

“My mother did not have relations with that man, Tony Stark,” Darcy said as distinctly as she
could. She saluted him with one of her cups of punch and stepped around him. Natasha caught sight
of her, and nodded once before stepping away. Bruce turned to greet the next person eager to shake
hands with the sometimes-Hulk, a rangy man in a well-tailored suit. “Doctor Banner,” the man
said, and Darcy just had time to think that there was something passing familiar about him—.

She wasn’t sure quite what happened next – it was too fast, too strange, too far from anything she
had expected today. There was the glint of metal in the man’s hand, and Bruce doubled over.
Natasha turned back around, and not more than a few seconds later she had the man in the suit on
the ground, her knee planted firmly on his back and her deceptively delicate little hand twisting one
of his arms up behind him. Something splashed, wet and cold, against Darcy’s ankles, and it took
her a moment to realize that she had dropped her punch.

“Kitchen knife,” Natasha said, her tone crisp and perfectly controlled. She held the knife up
between the fingers on her free hand, a big serrated bread knife, the first two inches of it bright
crimson with gore.

Darcy took two steps forward. She heard something rip, and distantly identified the sound as
having come from Natasha’s dress; that tightly fitted pencil skirt had not been made for fighting in,
and the man Natasha had pinned to the floor was struggling beneath her.

“Darcy,” Natasha said, and there was some strange underlying tension to her voice now. She
wasn’t looking at the man beneath her, or the knife, or even at Darcy. Her head was turned to the
side, eyes large and watchful. “Don’t come any closer. Back up slowly, and get everyone out of
here.”

Darcy followed her gaze.

Oh.

Oh, crapcakes.

That hadn’t been Natasha’s skirt ripping.

Bruce was still doubled over, and Darcy couldn’t see his face. She could see his back, though, and
the way his blue button-down had split down the middle. She could see the way the skin beneath it
was rippling and shifting, how that same skin had a distinctly greenish cast.
She stood frozen, other than the sharp in-and-out rasp of her own breathing. Somewhere out in the lobby, someone screamed. Steve’s voice lifted to carry over the sudden burst of noise, ordering people out of the Tower. Darcy heard one of her assistants take up the shout a moment later, and the low mutter of Tony swearing a blue streak wove a quiet harmony to the yelling. It was that, more than anything, that made Darcy look away from Bruce and toward the crowd. Some of them were running toward the exit. Not enough; many seemed to have been caught and held by the spectacle, and some of the reporters present still had their cameras running, the fucking morons.

Not enough people running, and – a roar loud enough to rattle Darcy’s bones – not nearly enough time.

One of the small side tables Darcy had set out with pictures of the Avengers when flying past her head, and she flinched back automatically. It hit the far wall and splintered, but not before sending photographs snowing down across the room.

She turned back to the Hulk.

It didn’t seem possible, but she had actually forgotten how big he was. He stood there in the dark corner of the lobby that Bruce had used to hide, and he filled it, a green mountain of muscle and temper clothed in the tattered remains of Bruce’s shirt and pants. A low growl rumbled out from between his lips, and Darcy flinched again.

“Jesus Christ,” someone said behind Darcy. The pushy reporter who had stopped her on her way from the refreshment’s table, and somehow Darcy wasn’t even remotely surprised that he hadn’t moved an inch. She was starting to think that maybe she had done too good a job of making the Hulk sympathetic to the press. Or she might have, if she had been thinking much of anything at all that wasn’t directly related to the likelihood of her not peeing herself in the next thirty seconds.

After the Giant Flamey Robot Thing (and Darcy knew now that it was called the Destroyer, but she liked her name better) had attacked Puente Antiguo, after that whole mind-blowing disaster was over and done with and Thor was gone, Jane had patted Darcy on the shoulder and told her that she had been very brave. Darcy hadn’t really seen it that way, because mostly she remembered mindless terror and the need to clear people out. Bravery required the ability to think, to know what she was risking. Darcy didn’t think in a crisis; she went to some kind of weird happy Zen place where she didn’t recognize until much, much later that holy shit, she could have died, like, for real.

Which sort of explained why she was now standing in front of the Hulk, her arms stretched out to make herself as big as possible, her body between him and the crowd. She was shaking, and she sort of hoped he didn’t notice that, because moving the wrong way would probably send her bolting toward the door. “Hey. Hey, big green. Let’s just calm down, shall we?”

He swayed forward on the balls of his feet, his lips pulled back to show his teeth. Darcy’s stomach lurched, and she swallowed hard, because throwing up on what was left of the Hulk’s shoes definitely wouldn’t improve the situation. “It’s all fine,” she said, and she wasn’t really paying attention to what she was saying, so whatever it was, hopefully it was good. “There was some trouble, bit of a security breach, but it’s taken care of, yeah?”

For a few wrenchingly long seconds, his gaze and his snarl both remained directed at her. She could see the moment when he considered swatting her aside so that he could go about smashing the room as originally intended. He could do it. He could send her flying as easily as he had had the table, and probably with much the same results. Bruce had told her that statistically she and Tony were the ones most likely to get smushed if the Hulk ever came out to play. She really, really didn’t want to be a statistic. Her breath hitched in her throat, but after a moment the crude calculation in
his gaze settled back into something closer to plain old anger. “Hurt,” he said, and she was pretty sure that was Hulk’s inside voice, but it was still loud enough that she heard some of the microphones the reporters were holding whine and crackle with feedback.

Darcy used one of her outstretched hands to point frantically at Natasha. “Na—Black Widow already took care of it. She, uh, smashed. She smashed real good. See?”

After another painfully long breath of time, the Hulk turned to look at Natasha.

Natasha was very still, her knee still planted firmly on the man’s back, and much like Darcy she was in the unenviable position of being within ten feet of the Hulk. The look she cast Darcy was distinctly displeased, either because Darcy had pointed the Hulk in her direction or because Darcy was obviously reckless and stupid; either was a distinct possibility. After a moment, though, she put the knife down slowly, well out of reach of the would-be assassin (who appeared to be suffering some minor difficulties breathing, between Natasha’s very chic knee on his spine and Stark Tower’s lobby’s equally chic marble floors against his face), and gave Hulk the thumb’s up.

The Hulk grunted, but he sounded almost satisfied. “Team good,” he decided eventually. “Team smash puny god. With Hulk.” He rolled back onto his heels, and it was probably Darcy’s imagination that the floor rolled a little with him, because there was no way he was that big.

“Yes,” Darcy said, and abstractly she hoped that no one could tell that her nearly cooing tone was pure, blind panic mingled with the beginnings of giddy relief. If she was a better person, the relief would have been because the Hulk wasn’t about to go rampaging through a bunch of innocent victims, but mostly she was just glad that she wasn’t about to become intimately acquainted with a wall. “Yes. Team very good.”

“Darcy?” She didn’t turn to look, but that was definitely Steve’s voice, laced through with tension but still comforting in how utterly steady it sounded.

“We’re okay,” Darcy said, and she didn’t even convince herself when she said it, but since none of the other Avengers immediately moved to intervene he must have trusted her at her word. “Everything’s okay.” She took a step forward, even though her lizard brain was busily shouting nodon’tstopbadstupid rather insistently.

The flash of a camera reminded her that the Hulk wasn’t the only threat in the room.

Shit. The media. They had just watched Bruce freak out and turn into the Hulk, and unless she did some kind of damage control this was definitely going to undo some of her hard work. Well. She had been the one to tell Bruce that the Hulk needed to meet his public. She really wished it had been under better circumstances, though.

She turned around to face the rest of the room, lowered her arms, and pasted on the best smile she could manage. It was seriously one of the hardest things she had ever done. She was super aware of the Hulk at her back, and nothing she told her lizard brain about how keeping an eye on him probably wouldn’t actually help anything if he changed his mind about introducing her to the wall did anything to quiet that whimpering and steady stream of panic. “As you can see,” she said, and was obscurely proud of the way her voice only wobbled slightly, “Doctor Banner isn’t really in a condition to be signing autographs. We just don’t have any pens big enough.” The titters that earned her sounded distinctly nervous, but at least they were laughing. “Sorry, folks. We’re going to have to ask you to clear out now, since undoubtedly the police will want to question the guy who attacked New York’s favorite big an’ scary green giant. Sad how one sourpuss can ruin the day for everyone, right? Like, this is why we can’t have nice things.”
A few more scattered laughs, but this time the people doing the laughing sounded more sure about it. She even heard one or two groans of protest, and yeah, she was seriously going to have to consider the possibility that she had done her job too well.

That didn’t keep her from continuing to do it.

“Now, Mr. Hulk and I are going to go sit down in the corner until he’s had a chance to calm down. If you have a press badge, you’re welcome to stick around a few minutes to snap a picture or get some footage, but people will be coming through to check your credentials, and if one of them asks you to exit the building I’d like you to listen. Thank you all for attending, and please get home safely.”  Please leave the lizard brain added, apparently having resigned itself to the fact that Darcy wasn’t going to follow her own very good advice.

A camera flashed. Darcy heard the Hulk rumble with displeasure behind her. “No flash photography,” she said, a little more sharply than she had meant to, before pivoting to once again face the Hulk.

He was much closer that she remembered, which sort of made her wonder if he had snuck up behind her, except that he was probably the absolute worst at sneaking. Her neck actually ached a little when she tried to look up at him from this distance, and her heart was still pounding hard enough to hurt, like it would bruise itself against the hard lines of her ribs and breastbone. Her stomach and throat and thighs all throbbed with the too fast thrum of her pulse, and she felt flushed a little dizzy with adrenaline, but she was still standing, which wasn’t a lot but it was something. Her palm was clammy cold when she put it on his arm, and he looked annoyed at the intrusion but not annoyed enough to punch her head off. It was more than a little terrifying that this had become her litmus test for success. When she took a step forward he took a step back, and they continued like that in an awkward pseudo waltz until she had him up against the line of folded chairs pushed against the wall. When she sat down, hand still on his arm, he sat with her, and thankfully not on her. The three chairs the Hulk claimed groaned and sagged alarmingly, until he was sitting a few inches above the ground on a twisted heap of bent metal, his legs sprawled out in front of him.

Them sitting seemed to serve as some kind of cue, because the room became a bit more lively once the Hulk was no longer towering over it like a monster truck given vaguely human form. Darcy watched as the civilians were herded out by SHIELD and Stark Industries’ security. Most of the press remained; a few were sensible or sensitive enough to make an immediate retreat, because dealing with their editors had to be preferable to dealing with a Hulk. Without Darcy even having to say anything, a few of the suited members of the in-house security team formed a perimeter about ten feet away from her and the Hulk and kept the press from rushing them. Pepper’s media relations manager, who Darcy had worked with briefly when she was learning the ropes, straightened his tie from outside of that perimeter, smoothed a hand over his thinning hairline, and actually lowered himself enough to wink at her. His doing, then, and Darcy was unspeakably grateful. That done, he gathered her SHIELD assistants to him and began to work the press.

She was grateful for that too, since she was essentially stuck with the Hulk. He didn’t seem inclined to smash right now, and she wasn’t sure how much of that had to do with her hand on his arm, since he seemed at least marginally disinclined to smash her. It didn’t seem like a strong enough tether, but it was all they had, and Darcy was willing to work with that. By which she meant, ‘still kind of considering throwing up on someone’s shoes,’ but she’d take it.

She’d take it.

Chapter End Notes
So, one more chapter. Because this was already 10k, and the thought of editing something twice to three times the length of my average chapter made me cry salt tears.
Chapter 10

The next hour was surreal as fuck.

Tony was the first to worm past the perimeter his security had set up. He lifted a hand in an utterly careless wave, and the way the Hulk bared his teeth in response looked almost like a grin. The grunt he offered was more approving than not, and yeah, her boyfriend’s violent alter ego obviously had a bigger crush on Tony Stark than he did on her.

“Hey, Jolly Green. Hey, Betty.” Tony smiled at her. “How we holding up back here?”

He stayed for a few minutes, to what purpose Darcy wasn’t entirely sure. “You’re doing swell, girl-me. Nice job,” he said before departing, and seemed to feel that to the Hulk-wrangling victor went the spoils, because he actually relinquished his flask to her. She took a covert slug of the flask once he had gone. Whatever was in it was a lot stronger than his usual Scotch, and she coughed once before deciding maybe it was better to wait on it until after the cameras had gone.

Clint came by after that, his expression dour. For all of that, he leaned casually against the wall beside her and didn’t spare more than a glance for the Hulk. “We have our would-be assassin secured in one of the conference rooms. Nat is talking to him now; if there’s anything more to his cause than ‘I hate the color green,’ she’ll find out. What do you want us to do with him when she’s done?”

Darcy’s mind boggled at the idea that she was supposed to make that decision. “No one else has given you orders?”

“No yet.”

So...yeah. She smiled brilliantly at the cameras to buy a moment as she turned the problem over in her hear. “If he’s not, like, the shittiest hired gun or Hydra flunky ever, and there really isn’t anything else to this, call the cops, assuming someone hasn’t already. It’s their job more than ours, right?”

“Fury isn’t going to be happy about that.”

Darcy took a deep breath, steeling her courage less at the thought of the massive bulk of the Hulk beside her and more at the image of Fury in a seething covert hissy fit. All the Hulk could do was smoosh her; Fury would... well, the body would never be found. “Tough cookies. Him attacking Bruce was very, uh, public. If this guy disappears into the depths of SHIELD, Fury isn’t the one who’s going to have to beat off the government conspiracy theorists. I’m pretty sure that falls under my purview, so I’m... purviewing. Yeah.”

Clint nodded, as if that was the answer he had expected. He was silent for a moment. “I oversee security on public appearances from now on. If I’m on assignment, I get to pick who’s in charge while I’m gone. Some amateur with a goddamn bread knife? This never should’ve happened.”

“You think amateur, then?”

He shrugged. “Nat will find out for sure, but honestly? It was a bread knife. He probably got it from his kitchen. I don’t think he’s a professional.”
“I’ll trust your greater expertise on that one.” Darcy took another deep breath. It was soothing. Deep, slow breaths meant that she wasn’t hyperventilating. It had been a very stressful day. “I’ll talk to Fury, but I don’t think there’ll be a problem with you doing your own security thing. I mean, I’d like that. A lot. Go Team Hawkeye.”

The expression on Clint’s face could probably be read as, why are you even more incoherent than usual?, but he just nodded to her again and left. Steve took his place almost immediately, although he failed to imitate Clint’s pose, favoring the stiff soldier routine over wall-slouching like a pro.

“You’re okay?” he asked in an undertone.

“I’m dandy. I hope you are not doubting my dandiness, Steve. Can you not see how calm and accepting I am of this entire situation?”

He nodded, allowing that as truth even if Darcy wasn’t too sure about her own honesty. “We’ve got the civilians out like you wanted. Just wave someone down when you need the press gone, and we’ll make it happen.”

Darcy was busy wondering how she had ended up in charge when Steve leaned awkwardly across her to pat the Hulk’s arm in a manly fashion, and she heard the snap of the cameras. Oh. This wasn’t about her being so freaking indispensable to the security side of things that they needed her input – it was about finding an excuse to come by and chat, so that they could make a very public show of support, and make it clear that they weren’t afraid of the Hulk, that he was one of the team. Darcy could’ve kissed whoever had come up with that, except she was pretty sure it had been Tony, and she didn’t want to kiss Tony.

“If you need anything—,” Steve started to say, but ended the sentence with a shrug, a shadow of concern still lingering on the part of his face she could see past the mask.

Darcy considered. “A kitten,” she decided, because Steve had enough cares without adding worrying about her to the list. “A fluffy one.”

His sigh held a trace of exasperation, but he smiled a little and he ruffled her hair before he stepped away. She had a spare moment to wonder if he was actually planning to go find her a kitten, when a something big and heavy settled on the top of her head.

Darcy sat very still as the Hulk slid his hand over her head, then down over her back to the curve of her waist. He was big enough that his fingers could wrap around the greater portion of her ribs, and she bit back a startled yelp when he tugged her back further in her chair, until her hip was more-or-less resting on top of his thigh. “Mine,” he said, and it was still loud enough to make Darcy’s eardrums ring when she was this close, but it also sounded distinctly sullen, like a grade-schooler who was unamused by the other kids touching his things.

She wasn’t usually at all tolerant of pushy, possessive behavior from her boyfriends, but thought that it might be wise to make an exception for the Hulk. Possible smashing aside, she really didn’t think he was up to a whole long I’m-a-human-being-not-property-respect-my-personhood talk. “Right.”

His expression didn’t change and he didn’t make a sound, but the vice-like grip on her waist eased a little. Darcy still wasn’t willing to risk a flare-up of the Hulk’s rather formidable temper if he felt that other people were honing in on his – Territory? Buddy? Special friend? Girlfriend? She had no idea what was going on in that green skull of his, except that whatever it was, it had been enough to keep him from bowling her and more than a few innocent bystanders over, so, well, probably better not to look at that gift horse too closely. When Jane and Thor approached the
perimeter, Darcy waved them off. If Big Green was feeling possessive, it was poooossibly better not to exacerbate the issue.

“I think,” she said, a few minutes later, “that we should consider couple’s therapy.”

The Hulk grunted, and continued to glare at the cameras clicking to life just outside of the security perimeter.

Darcy gave it thirty minutes, until the knots forming in her shoulders and the low-grade stress of sitting next to the Hulk and facing the press got to be too much. Then she waved Tony over from where he and Pepper were bickering over a bottle of champagne that she knew she hadn’t arranged to be present at this event, because while it might’ve been wise to let the cameras and microphones stay on a little longer, oh boy was she done.

“Make them leave,” she breathed to Tony as soon as he slid past security. She expected him to draw things out with a joke and a smirk, but he just nodded, and his habitual smirk had faded into something more like determination.

He stepped forward, the champagne bottle raised like a battle standard, and Darcy let her eyes close. She heard Tony drawl something along the lines of, “That’s it, show’s over, you don’t have to go home but you can’t stay here,” and from there it was just the buzz of the press grumbling protests or recording final comments as they filed out of the building.

It seemed like an eternity later when she heard Steve say, “Okay. They’re gone.” Darcy opened her eyes, and like a miracle, the lobby was clear of everyone – including the staff – who wasn’t an Avenger, Jane, or Pepper. She was grateful enough that she felt a little bit like crying and a little bit like making rash promises of sexual favors that would make Steve blush and Tony say unforgivable things, and in the end did neither.

“Good,” she said, “Great. Lock the doors and someone go get clothes for Bruce when he comes back to us. I need a minute.”

She was grateful, too, that Hulk didn’t show any signs of wanting to stop her when she got up. He stayed where he was, although she could feel his eyes tracking her to the glass doors she had led the Avengers through what felt like eons ago. She let herself into the hallway and made it a few feet before she had to lean against the wall. Her knees felt too weak to support her, and she couldn’t stop her hands from shaking.

“It’s bad, the first time.”

Darcy started so badly that she almost bashed her head against the wall, and really, knocking herself unconscious only could have been an improvement on the day. She turned to Natasha, who was still glorious if a little rumpled in her red dress. “What is?”

“The adrenaline rush. The fear. Feeling like you shouldn’t be weak enough to be showing either, and knowing that you can’t until the job is done.”

Darcy had seen Natasha’s file. A lot of it was redacted, but Darcy had seen enough to say, “I’m not sure it’s the same thing.”

Natasha smiled, shrugged elegantly. “I’d rather be facing bullets than cameras.” She held out one of the Stark Tech tablets Tony had gifted them all with in one of those fits of I-have-more-money-than-sense that seemed to strike him from time to time. “I just spent some time chatting with our new, knife-wielding friend. He’s not a threat, but I found something interesting when I was cross-
referencing his information with the system. He wasn’t in any of SHIELD’s databases, he doesn’t even have an arrest record, but he was on file. Your file.”

“What?”

“Watch it.”

Darcy’s hands were steadier when she pressed play. She was oddly proud of that.

“I think they’ve got a lot to answer for. They can pretty up and talk to you all they like, but who’s to say that some of the people who died didn’t die because of them?” a voice recited, the tinny speakers stripping most of his tone. The man in the video – and Darcy recognized him, recognized his red rimmed eyes, saw him now with a knife clutched in his carefully manicured hand – smoothed that hand over the pencil-lead gray of his jacket. The logo for a local news station bounced in the corner of the screen. “Civilian casualties. That’s what the newspapers call it, right? They never say that the bad guys weren’t the only ones causing them, and it’s always good and fine as long as everyone else made it out okay. As long as the gains outweigh the losses. Fuck that. Just... fuck—.”

She stopped the video.

“It’s probably true,” she said, because if anyone could handle that it was Natasha. “I mean, nobody knows for sure, and you guys definitely did more good than harm, and no one should be stabbing my boyfriend over it, but – it’s probably true.”

“I know,” Natasha said.

“Bruce shouldn’t,” Darcy said suddenly, the words pushing their way out of her mouth without any real intent.

After a moment, Natasha nodded. “I know. Banner probably already knows – or guesses – but it’s better not to shove it in his face like this. I’ll hand our would-be assassin over to the police, and then I’ll bury it.”

“Not literally, right? I mean, like, not ‘I’m going to receive a call at 3 a.m. because you forgot a shovel’ bury it?”

Natasha smiled. “Not literally.”

“Oh. Good.” She looked down at the tablet in her hand, then pushed it back at Natasha. “Do we know his name?”

“I do. Did you need it?”

No. Yes. “I’m going to need to make a statement at some point.” She didn’t want to deal with it now. “Can you e-mail it to me, along with anything else you have on him?”

“Of course.”

“I should go check on things.”

Natasha considered her for a moment, then sighed. “No you don’t. Not yet.” She hooked an arm through one of Darcy’s, and led her toward a door Darcy was pretty sure opened into a conference room. “I think we need to talk.”
“About?”

“What makes a soldier, and what makes a general.”

“I don’t really think I’m either.”

Natasha smiled again. “From the woman who sold me on PR by comparing it to tactics and strategy?” She pushed open the door. “There are different kinds of soldiers, and there are different kinds of generals. Before you’re one or the other, you need to decide if you’re willing to be either. You kind of fell into this job, but I think you’re informed enough at this point to make a decision.”

“Oh,” Darcy said again, because she had apparently used up her quota of words for the day. “All right.”

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“Natasha, this is the ladies’ bathroom.”

“I’ve been reliably informed by highly trained government agents that it’s traditional.”

* *

Darcy wasn’t sure how Natasha managed to get tea delivered to a public restroom on the mostly abandoned ground floor of Stark Tower, but she did, and maybe that was a part of standard spy training? Darcy dumped a little bit of Tony’s flask into both of their cups, they spent a while leaning against the walls of one of the extravagantly large bathroom stalls with delicate porcelain saucers balanced on the back of the porcelain throne, and she mostly felt better by the time she left.

They didn’t actually talk much about soldiers or generals, but that didn’t mean that Darcy wasn’t thinking about it.

Darcy had read Natasha’s file. She thought that Natasha knew a little bit about what happened to women who made decisions that weren’t their own.

The thing was, Darcy’s decisions since coming to New York had never been anything but.

She was okay with that.
Darcy swanned through the lobby briefly. She took in the destruction with a critical eye (it wasn’t so bad, which left her feeling a lot more cheerful). Most of the Avengers were still there, although Clint had departed and the Hulk – Bruce – was nowhere to be seen.

“How fare you, Lady Darcy?” Thor boomed as she entered the lobby. “We were filled with much disquiet when you left us so suddenly. Is all well?”

This time, when she smiled and said, “Dandy,” she meant it.

“I was very proud of you all today,” she added grandly. “My babies, all grown up and facing the scary reporters like champs. Not once did any of you suggest that I might be your ill-begotten by-blown. It was amazing.”

“That was only once,” Tony protested. “I haven’t implied that I made sweet, sweet love to your mother since.”

“I hate you and everything you represent,” Darcy said, and the words were rote enough at this point that she didn’t even have to think about saying them, but they also made her feel better for all of their familiarity. “Where’s Bruce?”

Tony shrugged. His fingers were glued to his phone, but she thought she could see him watching her out of the corner of his eye from where he sat in a folding chair pushed to the middle of the room. “He let my med staff poke at him for a bit and then he slunk off to put a shirt on. Haven’t seen him since. JARVIS?”

The reply was immediate. “Dr. Banner has retreated to his quarters, Mr. Stark.”

JARVIS’s tone was enough for Darcy to make an educated guess that Tony already had eyes on Bruce and was asking just to keep anyone from guessing that he had maybe approached a feeling (which was fair, because Darcy would never, ever have stopped making fun of him and also puppies and rainbows and frolicking in the fields amongst the wildflowers), and it was actually still a little alarming months later that an AI could master a judgmental tone that well. The fact that Tony squawked and pulled away indignantly when she tried to glance at his phone over his shoulder was basically confirmation enough.

Since she was pretty sure that the only way to actually get a glance at that phone would be to have Steve pin him while she wrestled it from his grasp, she settled for ruffling his hair in the most annoying way possible and dropping his still-mostly-full flask into his lap. “Be prepared,” she said as she headed for the elevators. “If he’s being difficult, I’m calling in reinforcements.”

Darcy wasn’t entirely joking. If dating Bruce Banner had taught her anything, it was that he could be just as immovable as his alter ego.

She revised her assessment of the situation pretty much immediately upon entering Bruce’s suite, because he was in the bedroom, and there was an open suitcase on the bed beside him.

“That seems a little extreme,” she said. She sounded very calm. She was surprised by how calm she
sounded. No one whose mind had descended into gibbering, furious panic as quickly as hers had should sound so calm.

Bruce paused, a half-folded shirt held loosely between his hands. “JARVIS let you in?”

“JARVIS and I have an agreement,” Darcy said, waving a dismissive hand through the air, “based on mutual animosity and the fact that apparently his system actually can’t register certain pitches I hit when I’m whining at him. I make him tired. Tony says he doesn’t dream of electric sheep. JARVIS, that is, and I hope you know that none of this is going to successfully deflect from the fact that you’re packing a suitcase.”

A faint smile tugged at his lips, but it looked wrong, tension pooling like water at the corners of his mouth. “Have I ever successfully deflected with you?”

“No,” Darcy said, “but that doesn’t mean you aren’t trying.”

He was silent.

“Hives, Banner,” she said. Her voice sounded too flat for what had started as a joke between them. “Deflection gives me hives.”

He looked down at the shirt in his hands. Absently, he continued to fold it, his movements awkward with his thoughts obviously elsewhere. Or maybe not – she wondered how often he had actually gotten a chance to pack his belongings before leaving a place, in the past however many years. Maybe not very often. Maybe he was awkward about it because his hands had forgotten the gestures. None of which brought her any closer to understanding why he was packing now.

“No one did.”

Bruce tossed the shirt into the suitcase and looked at her patiently. “And next time? And the time after that?” He shook his head. “You weren’t wrong when you told me that being a part of the Avengers meant being more in the public eye. Needing to be more in the public eye. Unfortunately, being around the public for me also means being a risk to the public. I have to figure out if the risk is worth the potential gain of having the Other Guy around if he’s needed.”

“And you can’t figure that out here?” Darcy took a deep breath. “Look, I know why this makes you nervous. I get it. I definitely get it after what just happened. Here’s the safest place for you to be, though. I mean, you’re never going to be entirely free and clear of people, not unless you’re looking to make a permanent move to the Antarctic,” actually, probably better not to give him ideas like that, “but at least here there’s someone to keep you in check. You’ve got Thor if the Other Guy is looking for a brawl, and you have me and Tony if he needs to be—calmed down. He knows us, and he doesn’t want to hurt us. Today proved that, at least.”

He let out a shuddering breath. “He didn’t hurt you, then?”

The Hulk had scared the ever-loving crap out of her. She still wasn’t entirely sure her heart had climbed back down out of her throat yet. There had been a distinct moment there where she’d been sure he would be okay with hurting her.

None of that was going to be remotely helpful if she was trying to talk Bruce off the metaphorical ledge.

“Dude,” she said, “I think he tried to cuddle me.”
Bruce jerked with surprise, and Darcy took advantage of the fact that she had apparently stunned him into silence to plow forward. “Your alter ego is seriously handsy and possessive, by the way, and we’re going to have a talk about that at some point. It was all very traumatizing, in a first-date-with-sweaty-palms kind of way. It’s not just me, though. He recognized Natasha. He, uh, seems to approve of her ability to smash. Which, I mean, who doesn’t? He was okay with Steve and Clint dropping by. I think he has a little love connection with Tony, not that I’m jealous. The only casualty of the day was a table and some of those folding chairs in the lobby. And this was the *first time* we’ve had to deal with the party being interrupted on account of inclement Hulk. Clint is going to take over security. I’ll be a little more careful about your public appearances. We’ll get better. Next time, even the furniture won’t have to suffer.”

For a moment, it seemed like Bruce was going to listen. His head was tilted, his mouth pursed in thought. Then he reached for a pair of slacks from the bed, and Darcy had been wrong: her heart was fine with vacating her throat in favor of the prime real estate in the pit of her stomach.

“I just need time to think, Darcy,” he said. “Time away from here. There are – there are too many temptations to stay. I don’t think I’d be able to look at the situation objectively. It would be easy to get caught up in Tony and the lab and *you*, and forget that me being here, me being happy, means potential repercussions for other people. I’m not running away, not again. Not this time. I’m not saying that I’m never coming back. I just need that time.”

“What will you go?” she asked. “Back to India? South America? Maybe Nepal, I hear it’s nice this time of year.”

He sighed. “Darcy.”

“Were you even planning to tell anyone where you were going? Were you even planning to tell any of us that you *were* going?”

“Darcy.”

“Or were you – *are* you – just going to leave me guessing? How long is ‘time’? Will I get a phone call if you decide not to come back, or is that gonna stay a mystery? I won’t *wait* on you, Bruce. I’m not going to sit and twiddle my thumbs and put my stuff on hold in the hopes that maybe you’ll remember that there’s this chick and this life that you left behind in New York. I’m not Betty.” Except even Betty hadn’t waited, not forever. Maybe she had been smarter than Darcy, had realized ahead of time that Bruce was going to leave and that when he did, he probably wasn’t coming back. “I don’t have it in me. I’m finally starting to figure things out for myself, I think I might even be able to answer that stupid college essay question about where I see myself in five years, and I really like you, I do, but I can’t—.”

His hands closed around her wrists, firm but infinitely gentle. The slacks were sitting in a half-folded jumble on top of his suitcase. “Darcy. Calm down.”

She glared at him. “You did not,” she said distinctly, “just pull this I-own-the-entire-Smiths-discography teenage runaway shit, and then tell me to calm down.”

Bruce smiled. It was a different smile this time, more solid and real with some of that terrible tension gone. “I told you. I’m not running away.” The smile turned a little rueful. “After all, I’ve tried that before, and isn’t the definition of insanity trying the same thing, over and over, while expecting different results?”

“You’re not running away, but you’re packing a suitcase and leaving for parts unknown. Not sure what else you’d call it, Banner.”
He let go of her wrists and stepped back. “I told you. I just need a little time.”

Darcy was silent. She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do. Climb him like a tree and hope that her super seduction techniques did the trick? Call Tony for reinforcements, like she’d said she would?

Was it even worth keeping someone when he didn’t want to be kept?

“I need to leave,” he said, almost to himself. He was watching her closely, like he was waiting for his words to trigger another rant.

“You want to leave,” Darcy corrected.

She sort of expected him to protest, but he just nodded. “Yes. I want to.”

The room felt too still, too quiet, when Darcy didn’t immediately reply. There was only the harsh rasp of her own breathing and the lump in her stomach and her throat, a warning sign that if she didn’t get out of here soon things were going to get a lot messier than just ranting. There might be tears. She didn’t want that. Dignity was going to be a pretty damn cold comfort once Bruce was gone, but she thought she should hold on to what little of it she had.

She took a step back.

Bruce was still watching her with those careful, intent eyes.

“I don’t suppose,” he said, “that you’d like to come with me.”

Tony was the first one Darcy went looking for after she left Bruce. He was still sitting in his chair in the middle of the now-empty lobby, champagne bottle in one hand and phone in the other, like a king holding court in an abandoned castle. Darcy chose to believe that he was really involved in a rousing game of Frogger, and not using the phone for purposes of creeping on his various and strange houseguests.

The corner of his mouth tucked up into a smirk as she entered. “Your lipstick is smeared.”

Wiping it away would give him far too much satisfaction. “I’m a trendsetter. I’m setting a trend.”

He snorted. “Everything all sorted?”

“Not really.” She crossed the lobby to him, her heels clicking out an easy rhythm. “Bruce is leaving.”

It was hard to gauge Tony’s emotions, most of the time. His smirk never wavered, and the way his shoulders tensed briefly before he forced them to relax would have been easy to miss. She wondered when she’d gotten to know him well enough to notice his little tells and how much time she’d spent watching him to learn them in the first place.
“Huh. I thought he had pretty much kicked that habit. I owe Fury a twenty.”

“Don’t pay up just yet, cowboy,” Darcy said. She plucked the phone out of his unresisting fingers, leaving him with no other option than to make eye contact. “Here’s what’s going to happen. I’m sure you’ve got a dozen high-class bachelor love shacks scattered around the continent, all sitting sad and neglected ever since you were lucky enough to snag the nation’s most terrifying woman in a Valentino suit. You’re going to give me the keys to one of them.”

“I am?”

“Yes, because the goal here is to keep him in the country.”

The last of the subtle tension Tony was holding dissolved at this evidence that Darcy was handling things. “As long as I’m risking my security deposit for a worthy cause.”

“Like you rent.”

He smiled lazily up at her, and tilted his chair back until it rested precariously on its back legs. “There’s that. I’ll tell you what, you can have the Malibu house. Sun, surf, and as many miles between it and New York as you can get without swimming, freezing, or having to convert to the peso.”

Darcy considered that. “Cool,” she decided. “You’re also going to call someone and have them gas up one of your smancy jets for the trip. Tonight would be good.”

Tony overbalanced in his chair, and Darcy reached out with her free hand to grab the front of his shirt, tugging him forward before he could bash open his brilliant, idiotic head on the floor. The champagne bottle dropped but didn’t break, rolling until the empty receptionist’s desk at the far end of the lobby stopped its progress. “That’s a pretty short timeline you’re working with. On second thought, maybe I should give you a place where it’ll be a little harder for Banner to hitchhike his way to the border.”

The front legs of the chair settled on the floor with a faint thump, and Darcy released him. Impulsively, she leaned forward and brushed a kiss across the stubble on his cheek – then smirked at the resulting red smear. “Don’t worry,” she said, and then, as he opened his mouth to protest that he wasn’t worried, she added, “I’m going with him.”

It wasn’t as easy as that, of course.

Darcy had a life, she had responsibilities. She hadn’t been able to leave Jane when Jane had come to New York, and back then she had been motivated mostly by vague fondness for her boss and a kind of aimless loyalty. Jane had come here because she had a job and things to do, and now – now, so did Darcy. Her little PR project for the Avengers was still in its infancy, and not quite yet at the point where she could hare off to distant climes and leave her minions to their own devices while she pulled on their puppet strings via phone or e-mail.
Not that she was, like, controlling or anything. She welcomed initiative in her little baby department. Last week, Agent Perry had gotten her a cup of coffee without her even having to ask, and she had appreciated his enterprise and his can-do attitude very much.

(He had been so pleased by her effusive praise that he had actually cracked a smile, and probably broken a dozen SHIELD regulations regarding proper conduct for an agent and some of his more important facial muscles in the process. She sort of thought she was starting to win them over. At the very least, they were fully swayed to her cause, which was quite an accomplishment given that most of them were transfers from the Department of Covering Up Shit The Man Doesn’t Want You To See.)

The point was, they couldn’t be left alone. They might return to their prevaricating ways! Also, the Avengers couldn’t be left alone. Tony would lie terribly to the press to amuse himself. Steve wouldn’t lie to the press enough. Thor would probably reveal the color of his underwear if asked. There would be explosions and possibly a wet t-shirt contest. It would be a disaster.

A very entertaining disaster that would probably be great for some network’s ratings, but still a disaster, and Darcy wasn’t willing to see all of her hard work get flushed down the toilet.

In the end, she put Bruce on his plane alone.

His lips were warm and a little chapped against hers, and she was pretty sure she was clutching at the back of his neck hard enough for it to be uncomfortable, but he didn’t complain. Humid New York summer was wending its way into chilly New York autumn, and Darcy used that as an excuse to press a little closer, to leech the heat from his chest and deepen the kiss into something a little dirtier, a little less appropriate for saying goodbye on the tarmac of the private one percenter’s airport that Tony stabled his spare planes at. Bruce’s hand was firm on her hip, tugging her forward and up against him like this was the start of something they probably wouldn’t be able to finish, or the end of something they wouldn’t be able to start again.

When they finally broke the kiss, she rested her cheek against his for a moment before pulling away.

There were things she couldn’t say, so she reached with grabby hands for her sense of humor and managed, “Sorry I won’t be able to induct you into the Mile High Club, babe.”

His smile was faint, but it stayed on his face even as he stepped away from her. “What makes you think I’m not already a member?”

Trying to unravel this small new piece of the enigma that was Doctor Bruce Banner kept her suitably distracted long enough that she didn’t develop actual grabby hands when he picked up his suitcase and took a few more steps toward the plane.

It was probably a testament to how far they had come that when he said, “Be seeing you,” he actually sounded like he meant it.
Sunday:

There was coffee waiting on Darcy’s desk when she got there the next day. The handle of the glossy black mug was shaped like a pistol grip, and the coffee was tepid, which probably meant that whoever had left it for her had expected her to roll in at her usual time of somewhere-between-eightish-and-nineish instead of straddling the line between ten and eleven.

Her employees were watching her warily. Out of the corners of their eyes, and while apparently focused on other tasks. They were, after all, highly trained covert agents. Only someone accustomed to their wily ways would notice that Agent Worth hadn’t turned a page in the file she was reading since Darcy had walked in.

Resignedly, Darcy sipped at the coffee. If Fury had decided to have her poisoned for ‘Performing Below Expectations,’ it was probably better to know before she bothered to settle in at her desk.

Darcy paused. Sipped again.

It was good coffee.

SHIELD didn’t have good coffee.

In this one way, it adhered to the unspoken rules of both law enforcement agencies and shitty office jobs everywhere: the coffee was always burned, with the vague suggestion that some exotic alien culture was spawning in the half inch of grounds congealed at the bottom of the pot. Which, given that it was SHIELD, was actually sort of a possibility.

They were still watching her.

“Oh my God,” Darcy groused, “it’s not like I’m dying. Seriously. You can begin to worry if I start listening to Hank Williams on repeat, but until then, don’t we have some actual work to do?”

The room remained silent, but Darcy thought that her minions relaxed a hair. Agent Worth’s sigh rattled the edges of her file, and she finally flipped to the next page. “I have a request from Stark Industries for some kind of joint operation—.”

“Someday, I will wean you off of your pseudo-militaristic jargon,” Darcy said. “Don’t get me wrong, I find it endearing. Like a kitten with a big gun. But you’re going to scare our friendly civilians with the cameras and the microphones.”

Worth paused. Her expression was strained. “They want to... go on a play-date with us?” Every word sounded like it had been dragged unwillingly from between her lips.

“Better,” Darcy allowed. “Keep working on it.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Darcy sat down at her desk with a smile, and got to work.
Wednesday:

This time, when Jane showed up with ice cream and tequila, she brought Pepper.

“I’m actually fine,” Darcy said, but that didn’t stop her from letting them in. Jane had brought sugar and alcohol, after all, and Mama Lewis hadn’t raised no fools.

By executive decision, there was no hair braiding or toenail painting, although this was mostly because Jane worried that Thor would feel left out.

* 

One Week Later:

“I’m maybe a little sad,” Darcy said.

“Jesus,” Tony said, “all I asked you to do was pass me that wrench.” He squinted at her, like he was daring her to have a feeling in his presence, but she thought that maybe he missed Bruce a little bit too.

She couldn’t even mock him for it.

Half an hour later, when Tony fled his workshop as she yelled, “Wait, I wanted to cry into your manly bosom!” she amended that to much. She couldn’t mock him much.

* 

Two Weeks Later:

“Tony Stark,” Grace said, in tones of grim foreboding. Darcy felt foreboded at least, mostly because said tones and the associated glare were both directed at her.

Darcy buried her face behind her burger. Some of the veteran Fixers had decided to go out for a celebratory meal following the official reopening of Grand Central which, given that the trains had been running for quite some time now, was more of a ‘holy shit, it looks like a building again, quick, someone important give a speech’ type thing than it was an actual reopening. She shot a glance at Steve, who was seated across from her and for once allowed back in his street clothes in recognition of the fact that rarely did the Fixers take an entire night off, but he was doing his best
impression of furniture, undoubtedly in an attempt to keep Grace from remembering that he knew Tony too and turning her ire on him.

Honestly, Darcy didn’t blame him a bit. That didn’t keep her from muttering, “Way to show that famous all-American courage, Cap.”

He flicked a glance in her direction, but didn’t move otherwise.

“Traitor.”

One blond eyebrow rose. Steve appeared entirely unrepentant, so Darcy turned her attention back to Grace, and really, what had she been thinking to let her attention waver for even a second? Grace was dangerous. Grace might lunge. For Darcy’s jugular. With her teeth.

Okay, probably not.

Probably.

“What about Tony?” Darcy asked meekly.

“He’s been snooping around.”

“I would claim that no one as ostentatious as Tony could snoop, but Tony totally snoops. Tony is a snooper.”

“Make him stop.”

Darcy’s mind counseled that it was unwise to contradict Grace, whose last name she had long since begun to suspect was secretly O’Malley or maybe just My Parents Gave Me My First Name Ironically, but she soldiered on. “It’s for a PR project I’m working on with Stark Industries. Tony shouldn’t be involved at all, but – well, it’s Tony.”

She prepared to dig in her heels for a fight she would inevitably lose, but Grace’s glare turned thoughtful. “Good PR?” she asked, and right, Mama My Parents Gave probably hadn’t raised any fools, either. Grace seemed determined to take the attention the Fixers had garnered and run with it, maybe even beyond the point where New York was Fixed. Darcy wondered idly if Grace had political aspirations, like running for mayor, or president, or Supreme Dictator.

“Nothing but,” Darcy said from behind a particularly large piece of Romaine lettuce. “Trust me. It’ll all be in the works by the time I leave New York, and ready to be put into action when I get back.”

That caught Steve’s attention, enough so that he gave up his pretense of being a particularly handsome chair. “You’re going, then?”

“That’s the plan,” Darcy said, and tried carefully to avoid sounding like she cared. “Another week, maybe two, and my little darlings should be ready to operate without completely screwing things up.”

She didn’t quite succeed. Her voice came out sounding a little wistful. If anyone else noticed, they were good enough not to comment, and soon the conversation turned to more cheerful topics, like the most efficient way to clear rubble and whether or not Steve could wear underwear in that skintight costume.

Darcy chose to view the introduction of that later topic as her sweet, sweet revenge for Steve’s
earlier forfeiture of the field, and from the look on his face, he knew it. It wasn’t enough to stop him from resting an arm around her shoulders, briefly, as they left the restaurant, giving her a quick squeeze before withdrawing.

Which was ridiculous, of course. It wasn’t like she was never going to go out and see Bruce. It wasn’t like he was never coming back.

* *

**Three Weeks Later:**

“I told you,” Natasha said, and she was too well-trained to hold her hand up to the ear that still had to be ringing or to show any flicker of discomfort, but Darcy thought that she probably wanted to, “that trying to teach her to use a weapon was a bad idea.”

Clint was limping a little as he guided Darcy out of the firing range. “My mistake.”

“I will never,” Darcy said, still a little stunned, “touch a firearm again, for as long as I live.”

“I think that’s probably for the best,” Natasha agreed, with admirable restraint.

* *

**One Month Later:**

“It’s not that we don’t love you,” Jane said, her pretty brow furrowed.

“Thanks, mom. I know the divorce isn’t my fault.” Darcy eyed Jane. “You know the coffee pot is moving with me, don’t you?”

Thor made a pained noise.

“You’re asking me to move out, Beowulf. You don’t get to complain.”

Later, Darcy will pretend not to notice when Thor hides the coffee pot under his and Jane’s bed; she will simply go out a buy another one, because Thor might have been a god, but he hadn’t quite figured out yet how his AmEx worked (“And this strange, thick paper is considered currency in Midgard? I think you are trying to jest at my expense, Lady Hill. No, no, it was a fine attempt! Do not feel bad that the god of thunder was too clever to fall for your cunning ruse. How we shall laugh at this in the days to come!”).
She’d be lying if she said it didn’t sting, a little, but they were a couple, and they needed their space.

Jane suggested, tentatively, that maybe Darcy would move into Bruce’s empty apartment, with its bubble walls in the second bedroom and its familiar couch.

Instead, Darcy took the suite that Tony offered. The paint was lime green, this time. There was a projector dominating one of the living room’s vast walls, and the projector was hooked in to Stark Tower’s mainframe, the better to watch her hours upon hours of captured news footage and interviews.

They weren’t there yet. They might never be. Darcy was okay with that; she needed her space, too.

* *

“Captain America saved my life,” the waitress said.

“Sweetheart, I know,” Darcy replied, and turned off the projector.

* *

“I think we’ve got it,” Agent Perry said, unsmiling.

“You know, I think you’re right,” Darcy replied. Then she added, “Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Ma’am, I would never.”

* *

Almost two months had passed by the time Darcy made it out to Malibu. It was not, as the brochures had advertised, sunny. The sky was a smoggy gray. There were still a few surfers congregated off the shore, tiny specks of brilliant blue and yellow like colorful seagulls.
The house was a masterwork of glass and chrome rising out of the cliff above the beach. She knew for a fact that JARVIS was as omnipresent here as he was in New York, but the security system beeped lazily at her as she pushed the door open, a vague acknowledgement of her presence and nothing more.

The General was more than happy to make up for JARVIS’ shortcomings. She hadn’t made it more than three steps inside the door before he was there, his tail wagging with such fervor that the entire back of his body moved with it. She let go of the handle to her rolling suitcase and dropped to her knees, her hands immediately buried in his fur.

“I bet you didn’t have to fly commercial,” she cooed. “Yes, you had the billionaire jet all to yourself. Did the strippers feed you biscuits? I bet they did. Yes, they did. Who’s a good boy? Did you miss me?”

“I did,” Bruce said, chrome and glass like an abstract painting behind him, and the dog was basically forgotten after that.

* *

Years later, Darcy will remember the days spent at the Malibu house as some of her best. She will speak of it (carefully edited for content) to her grand-nieces and -nephews, and they will humor her, just a funny old woman holding up her stories of superheroes and gods like trinkets.

* *

She was not that old woman yet, and it was barely two weeks before she turned to Bruce and said, “We really should get back, you know.”

Bruce traced a hand down the long line of her spine through her sundress. Even California had autumn and winter, but the air in Malibu was heavy with heat and moisture, the overcast sky like a fishbowl holding everything in beneath it. He didn’t comment on her assumption that he would be returning to New York with her, but her didn’t really need to; it had been there from the start, ever since she had shown up on the doorstep of the Malibu house and found him still there and waiting.

“Let me guess,” he said wryly, “there’s another press conference.”

Darcy smiled, serene and sure of herself. “Better.” She reached out and tugged on the collar of his shirt with easy affection. “I think it’s time that we recognize some of New York’s other heroes. Assuming you don’t mind if the Avengers share the spotlight. I mean, I know you’re such an
attention whore, this will be hard on you, but I’m counting on you to cowboy up and pull through.”

The quick flash of teeth didn’t look quite right on Bruce’s face, although it would have been perfectly at home on his alter ego’s.

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“There were more aliens,” Tony informed them once they had returned. “Gooey ones. You were gone. You didn’t answer your phones. You’re the worst.”

“I watched you on TV,” Darcy said. “You were fine. I like how you didn’t fail at looking heroic and smiling at the camera.”

Tony looked down his nose at her. “That,” he said, “is because I’m the best.”

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* * *


Real Life Heroes, Good Life Parties

By JACOB LEONARD

Published December, 2012

IF you were invited this past Friday to a very select gathering held at The Plaza Hotel, you may had been privy to what was undoubtedly the social event of the year. From Hollywood hotshots to the crème de la crème of New York’s upper crust, everyone who’s anyone was in attendance for what might seem, at first glance, to be a unusual cause for celebration among such rarified personages: the average man.

Or woman, as the case may be, since this event was held to honor the New York Fixers, an organization which sprung up in the wake of this summer’s tragedy, spearheaded by their executive director and general Lady in Charge, Grace Hightower.

The event was co-sponsored by Stark Industries and the Avengers Initiative, and acted as a fundraiser for the Fixers’ future efforts to return New York to its former glory, with attendees paying in the high thousands for a plate and pledges ranging into the hundreds of thousands –
although some particularly generous attendees, including the Avengers’ Tony Stark, made significantly more generous contributions. Hightower addressed her would-be benefactors prior to dinner as follows:

“Look, this is some fancy sh—stuff we have going on here,” Hightower said, redolent in a gold lamée gown by Dolce. “I’m not a fancy woman. Things needed to get done and we got them done. We’re still getting them done. If you think that’s something worth doing, then you can write me a check. If not, enjoy your dinner. Whatever.”

Hightower went on to acknowledge the role that the group known as “The Avengers” played in the events of last summer, and presented each member with one of the Fixers’ signature volunteer t-shirts. The one presented to Dr. Bruce Banner was particularly noteworthy, as it was roughly the size of a bedsheet and read, “THE HULK SAVED MY CITY. I’M GOING TO FIX IT.” Dr. Banner relinquished the podium shortly after receiving his shirt, but appeared noticeably touched by this gesture.

“So, yeah,” Hightower said in conclusion. “Go on. Have fun. Come out and help us if you feel like working off the calories from this [redacted] chicken.”

Later in the event, Hightower could be seen dancing with a most mysterious man wearing an eyepatch. The New York Times does not feel qualified to speculate, but romance may have been in the air. When asked to comment, Hightower stated, “Really? Like my personal life is any of your [redacted] business? Get a [redacted] life.”

Dinner was roasted capon au jus with a citrus-sherry sauce, served with lemon green beans with walnuts and sweet potato gratin. Dancing followed.

An official source close to the Avengers commented, “They [The Avengers] did their part. They saved the city. But there wouldn’t be a city without people like you and me, doing our part to make sure that there’s a city left to destroy. You know, the next time aliens invade. Champagne? I’ve had a bit, myself. Bubbly for everyone! How long until we’re done? It’s, like, eleven. Why aren’t people leaving? You should leave.”

Donations can be made out to The New York Fixers, 81 First Ave, Suite 201B, New York, New York 10003.

Darcy Lewis Exclusive Interview – Vanity Fair

As Seen on TV: PR, Superheroes, and Behind “Behind the Mask.”

By CHRISTINE EVERHART

Published May, 2016
IT’S humid, a blanket of New York summer lying thick over the cracked pavement and sprawling high-tech high-rises of the city. May 4th has rolled around again, bringing with it a slew of memorials and events commemorating the Chitauri invasion of 2012. Festoons of red-white-and-blue balloons and crepe crawl over Midtown and bedeck Grand Central Station, a testament to the fact that, even rebuilt, the city still remembers how close it came to destruction and celebrates the way it has emerged, phoenix-like, from the ashes of that fateful day.

I meet Darcy Lewis near the edge of the Garment District, where she declares that she’s, “just scored some totally rockin’ heels, seriously, take a look at these babies.” She shows me her haul with a smile more sly than shy, but it’s clear that she’s there for more than fashion; there’s a bouquet of white roses in her free hand. We walk together toward the corner of 34th Street and 7th Avenue, where one of the city’s many unofficial monuments to the dead has arisen, incongruously stationed with a subway stop to one side and a McDonald’s to the other.

She sets her bouquet down when we get there, wedged between the ubiquitous teddy bear and an unlit taper candle. She tilts her head and considers her handiwork. Four years after the invasion, she’s closer to thirty than she is to twenty, but there’s a kind of youthful energy to her face and she wears her well-tailored suit like a girl dressing up in her mother’s clothing: not quite comfortable but relishing it all the same, giving the impression that everything is a size too big even though it was undoubtedly cut to fit her. Darcy Lewis does not, I reflect, look like one of the greatest minds in public relations that New York has ever seen, and it’s probably one of the great ironies that a woman so adept at managing other people’s public images does so little to manage her own.

“You said you wanted to ask me some questions,” she says, without looking away from the memorial. She shifts as though her shoes are hurting her, but gives no other sign of discomfort. Her smile is wide and open, the same smile that has convinced me to attend press conferences with Tony Stark for the last four years running. “Go ahead. Ask. I dare you.”

I’ve prepared some, but none seem appropriate now. Instead, I find myself saying, “How on earth did they convince you to do this?”

‘This,’ for the uninitiated, is managing some of the strongest personalities in New York for those same four years: The Avengers, New York’s heroes, now the nation’s heroes. The Avengers might be larger-than-life, but that doesn’t mean they, like any politician or budding film star, don’t need someone on the sidelines, making sure that the world is looking the right way when they celebrate their victories and hastily sweeping any embarrassments under the rug.

That’s where Darcy Lewis comes in. For the better part of half a decade, she has been the person responsible for highlighting the good and hiding the bad when it comes to the Avengers. Most people know of The Avengers; by the same token, most people wouldn’t recognize Lewis if they passed her on the street. At press conferences and public events she’s always there though, scurrying around the edges, just out of sight of the cameras, just out of reach when it comes time to gather quotes. It’s a thankless job, being the head media relations consultant to America’s real life superheroes, but an important one nonetheless.

“I kind of fell into it,” she says, her smile widening a notch. Her teeth are very white against the burgundy-red of her lipstick. I laugh, thinking that she’s joking, but she waves a hand impatiently, “Seriously. They needed someone to do it and I kind of knew how to do it, and everything else I sort of learned along the way. Next question.”

She’s very to-the-point. I can’t resent her for it; there can’t be much time in her life to slow down. Still, I also find it hard to accept her words at face value. “There has to be more to it than
“Not really,” she says, her shoulders rising in a shrug beneath the black twill of her jacket. The traffic behind us is loud enough that I have to lean in to hear her. “Look, you said that you wanted the truth, that you wanted to – how did you put it? – show people the woman behind the Avengers. Which is kind of ridiculous, by the way. The Avengers are behind themselves. I just made sure that people had a chance to – well, see them for how they are. To see the best possible versions of them.”

“What do you mean?”

She blows out a gusty sigh, and for a moment I think she won’t answer. She’s stopped smiling. Her eyes are distant, focused on events that are now years past, and when she speaks her voice is slow and thoughtful.

“After the invasion, there was this news footage that kept getting recycled. You probably don’t remember. It was this waitress, and it was just a few seconds, this little sound bite about how the Avengers saved her life, but the local stations really loved her. God, she used to drive me crazy, because I’d be flipping through the media coverage and she’d always be there, yeah? It got repetitive after a while. Now, though, now I think she had the right of it, you know?”

As an interviewer, you get a certain feel for things: when to ask a question, when to stay silent and let the subject continue without being prompted. This is one of those times when I know better than to speak.

“The things I say to you, to the press, to the people around me, I believe those things. That the Avengers are good people, that they’re heroes, all that silly, corny stuff, I believed it then and I believe it now. I studied political science in grad school, did anyone ever tell you that? I know the difference between publicity and propaganda, and I know what can happen when you give someone a reputation they don’t deserve, one way or the other. I wouldn’t try to convince people to think a certain way if I thought that doing so was, well, wrong.”

The corner of a photograph has come loose from the wall behind the roadside memorial, and she reaches out absently to smooth it back into place, her fingers unconsciously tracing the edge of the swarthy, bearded face in the picture. New York is what it was before the Chitauri invaded, or close to, but that doesn’t mean that there aren’t holes left in the fabric of the city, absences that can’t be paved or plastered over. In these past four years, Darcy Lewis has done her best to remind people that there are not as many holes, fewer and further between, as there might have been had the Avengers never arrived in this city. There have been new challenges and new dangers in those intervening years, and New York’s heroes have faced those too, but on a day like this, when the air is heavy and thick and people paste pictures of their lost loved ones to the walls and leave flowers in remembrance, that first time seems the most important: the way it all began, or at least the turning point.

That’s not what I’m interested in today, though. I’ve told Tony Stark’s story, and Madam Natasha’s, and Captain America’s, we all have, and we’ll probably tell them again and again as the years go by. Today, I want to know this woman’s story, because, in a very real way, she’s the reason that we tell the Avengers’ story at all.

“When I first started to think about—about making sure that people saw the Avengers the way I saw them, I went to a friend. No, it’s not important who it was. I told her I thought it was time to make sure that New York elected the Avengers as their heroes. Do you know what she told me?”
I tip my head, a silent invitation to continue.

“She told me,” Lewis says, “that they were already heroes. That I just needed to remind people of that.”

The smile is back on her lips. There’s a secret in it, and I don’t really think she’ll tell me any more.

“That’s all,” she says. “That’s it.”

Chapter End Notes

Wow. The story is done.

I'm really not sure what to say. I sort of suspect that part of the reason this chapter took so long, other than life issues, is that writing SBMWPS has been such an amazing, positive experience for me, and I'm sad that it's over. The Avengers fandom is seriously the most wonderful, welcoming fandom that I've ever been a part of, and I've had an amazing time talking to you all in the comments and over on Tumblr. I don't think I can offer enough thanks to the various people who have commented, or kudos'd, or bookmarked the story; y'all have seriously made my year.

That isn't to say this will be the last project I work on for Avengers fandom, or the last time I write about Darcy. I have some other stories already in the works, and if you're interested in hearing about them as I write them, you can find me on Tumblr.

I hope you've all had at least half as much fun reading this as I've had writing it, and I want to thank you (again) for your patience in sticking with the story in spite of how long it took me to finish.

Big thanks also go out to JaeFire for editing this ridiculously long final chapter. It wouldn't have been the same, or half as good, without her.

Works inspired by this one Blinded Me With Political Science: Podfic by litrapod (litra)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!