I'm Gonna Be A Part Of It (Whether I Want To Or Not)

by fringedweller

Summary

Relocated against her will to New York, Darcy Lewis has to juggle working as an admin monkey for SHIELD, covertly finishing her degree and falling in love. Only one of these things is easy, and it's not the one that she thinks it will be.

Author: fringedweller
Fandom: Marvel Cinematic Universe
Pairings: Darcy Lewis/Bruce Banner, Jane Foster/Thor, Tony Stark/Pepper Potts
Rating: Mature
Beta: seren_ccd
Notes: Any slips in Americanisms are totally my fault, and not that of my wonderful beta. I made up just about everything to do with Columbia University, so for any Columbia graduates out there, I apologise for mangling your university experience!

Thank you so much to red_b_rackham for making the brilliant art work, found here.

This is a Darcy/Bruce fic, but it's probably more accurate to say that it's primarily it's a 'Darcy gets her life together' story. Bruce does appear, you just have to wait for him to show up, just like Darcy has to!
You're A Giant Bunch Of iPod Stealing Dicks

Darcy picked up her mail from the box in the entrance to her hall, and sighed. She knew what the white envelope with the blue logo meant.

She’d had a lot of those recently. Fucking student loans.

She scanned the contents of the letter before screwing it up into a ball and throwing it at the recycle bin the Stanford Eco Group had placed prominently at the side of the mailboxes, for just such occasions. Loan season always meant they filled up fast.

She shouldn’t have bothered reading the letter. She had known what it would say before she even opened the envelope, because it would be the same as the last four letters she had screwed into balls and recycled with extreme prejudice.

“Dear Miss Lewis,” Darcy muttered as she started the long trek down the busy corridors to where her room was tucked away. “Time has come to repay the cost of your superior education, which is now the equivalent to the GDP of a small African nation. If you do not commit yourself to a punishing repayment schedule, we will be forced to send Johnny and the boys around to start breaking bones.”

A very tanned, very tall, very blonde freshman gave her a strange look as Darcy stomped by her. Darcy hissed. The Barbie-clone jumped like a startled fawn, and moved quickly away from her.

Slightly cheered, Darcy continued to her room. Technically, an upperclassman like herself shouldn’t have to suffer the indignity of a roommate, but Darcy’s accommodation was paid for by scholarship (five thousand words on the importance of responsibility and personal growth - too, too easy for a bullshitter of Darcy’s calibre) and therefore she was at the mercy of the Student Housing Office and their reign of psychological terror.

Arriving at the door, she gave it the agreed-upon three thuds with her fist. She listened carefully, but couldn’t hear her roommate yelling at her to get lost, so she went inside.

Thankfully, this year’s Crazy Roommate was out. Darcy had no idea where, and frankly, she didn’t care. She had thought that her freshman year of living with the die-hard cheerleader was the worst (how many fucking pom-poms can one girl need, anyway?) although she had then gone on to share with a performance artist who regularly set fire to things and a girl who had cracked under the pressure of college life, thought she was Bella Swan and had boosted a motorcycle from the parking lot. She had screamed “Save me, Edward!” as she careened through a party being held in the quad for distinguished and wealthy alumni. Apparently she crashed into the side of the buffet table and had achieved some serious height before crashing back to earth, and a one-way ticket back home.

(She was fine, a few fractured ribs and a busted ankle. Weirdly enough, she had landed on a dude called Edward. Go figure.)

Still, this year’s Crazy Roommate took the prize for Most Batshit Insane Person Darcy Ever Lived With, and she had once spent the night in the same building as a guy who claimed to be the Norse god of thunder. Sure, she looked like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth, but underneath her cute button nose and flippy auburn curls, the woman was a monster. It was like living with Martha Stewart, if Martha Stewart had been the result of a secret government experiment melding Nazi fanaticism with an interest in home design.
Although, knowing what she knew now about secret government agencies, she wasn’t entirely sure if that wasn’t the truth.

Darcy couldn’t just open the door and come in, in case her roommate was redecorating her side of the room again and there was another unfortunate accident with the door, the ladder, and a brand-new track lighting system that had proved to be unable to support the weight of Crazy Roommate.

Luckily though, she was out. Darcy bypassed the immaculately tidy half of the room, complete with floral arrangements and new pastel drapes complete with carefully-folded swag, and flopped onto her bed. Out of protest about the enforced air of gentility, she never made her bed, deliberately chose clashing bed linen and insisted on putting up posters for bands whose names couldn’t be read out on the radio due to profanity laws.

She pulled a pillow down onto her face and screamed her frustration out into it.

It wasn’t fair! She was just starting her final year at college, after all the hassle of getting there to begin with, and all the drama of what should have been her second year but turned out not to be because of her mother’s breast cancer, and they were hitting her up for loan repayments a year early. She had begged and pleaded for an extension, but the hard hearted bastards at the loan company hadn’t seen a year’s deferral of college to care for a sick mother as a reason to extend the time on her loans.

Some quick mental calculations drove home the reality of her situation. She had enough to cover this semester’s tuition, but that was it. As soon as she started her loan repayments, she wouldn’t be able to afford to do anything else. Her two part time jobs would barely cover the repayments, let alone pay for anything else. Her parents were in no position to help, as their diner back home wobbled between ‘covering expenses’ and ‘running at a slight loss’ from month to month.

She was broke, three semesters away from a degree she had worked her ass off to get, and she currently lived with a woman who refused to let her touch any of her belongings at all in case she moved them from ‘optimum placement’ or spilled coffee on them.

(It had been one time, and if she had known the book had been signed by St Martha of the Cupcakes herself, she would never have touched it to begin with.)

Tears burned at the corner of her eyes, and she furiously scrubbed them away. She would think of something. She always did.

Noise in the corridor permeated her foul mood. Multiple feet were running up and down the hallway, and people were banging on doors and shouting. Somebody clearly not aware of the knock three times rule threw Darcy’s door open. She vaguely recognised him from the cafeteria line.

“Turn your TV on,” he said breathlessly. “New York is getting invaded by, like, space aliens!”

“As opposed to the illegal kind?” Darcy grumbled, pulling herself off the bed, but he had gone, off to gleefully spread the word of devastation and chaos a thousand miles away. Part of her sparked with hope for a moment; in her mind, the word alien was synonymous with Asgard and Thor, and maybe the invasion that the guy had gabbled about wasn’t an invasion but Thor coming back. Maybe Jane had pulled off the impossible after all.

That would explain why she hadn’t been answering her phone or replying to emails.

Darcy had given up trying to contact her after a few months. She hadn’t wanted to leave Jane, especially with Erik being called off to do some top secret thing in the middle of nowhere, but the
summer had ended and she still had a year to go on her degree. She knew that she couldn’t have helped Jane with the actual science stuff, but she could have helped, you know, organise stuff. And collate things. And make sure that Jane remembered to eat every few days, and to take a nap that didn’t involve passing out with exhaustion over her laptop. She hoped that her replacement person was doing all that, but she wasn’t sure that was happening, not with all the missed calls and emails. They should have been on top of that shit at least.

It was probably a SHIELD thing, Darcy decided. They probably had her locked up in a secret lab somewhere and weren’t letting her contact any non-SHIELD people. Filthy iPod stealers couldn’t be trusted with anything, especially crazy science ladies that had been her only friend all summer. The only reason she had been allowed back to college at all was that she had signed about fifty bajillion pages of non-disclosure forms and agreed to have her communications monitored for a year. She had the feeling that if she hadn’t agreed to the monitoring, they would have done it anyway.

Darcy eyed her roommate’s TV, but decided that with her current streak of misfortune, she’d probably end up breaking it. People were crowding into the dorm’s TV lounge, so she followed the excited stream of people and stared hard at a freshman until they vacated a chair for her. Seniors had to have some kind of perks, after all.

Somebody yelled for quiet as the large plasma screen on the wall blinked into life, and the excited hum of the crowd dropped away into silent disbelief as they witnessed the giant hole in the sky, and the wave after wave of ugly-ass metal aliens that flew out of it. They watched in horror as buildings crumbled and collapsed, and scared New Yorkers streamed out of buildings as they tried to escape the destruction.

“Why is it always New York?” the girl next to Darcy asked, seemingly unaware that she had spoken.

Nobody answered her. Nobody could.

The TV footage was coming from a news helicopter that was staying as far away as possible from the freaky looking aliens, but that only lasted for about ten minutes. There was a huge blast of green light and some frantic swearing from the camera operator and then the screen went black, before cutting back to a horrified anchor who had to break the news of the death of the cameraman and helicopter crew to the nation.

Someone started surfing channels, trying to find new footage, and they found a news channel that had people filming on the ground. A reporter dodged falling masonry as she shrieked her report back to the people at home.

“Where are the police?” somebody asked.

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Like the police can do anything against that,” she said with feeling, remembering the giant Asgardian robot and the way it had ripped Puente Antigua apart. The giant metal space slug thing on screen took out half a building, and everybody gasped.

They gasped a lot louder when a huge green man appeared in the shot and started to systematically dismantle it.

“What the hell is that?” demanded the dorm’s RA.

“Is it one of them?” asked the girl next to Darcy.

“I think he’s one of them,” Darcy said, pointing at the screen. A familiar shock of blonde hair, big
grin and scarlet cape flashed by the camera and Darcy had to stop herself from throwing her arms in
the air and cheering for Thor. Tony Stark’s Iron Man suit was zipping through the air and somebody
was wearing an incredibly realistic Captain America costume and throwing a shield around with
amazing precision.

Everyone in the TV lounge stayed glued to the screen for the next few hours as they tried to catch
every single piece of footage available from New York. Darcy had seen Thor three more times,
swinging Mew-Mew around and doing some serious damage to the alien ground troops with some
kick-ass lightning bolts. Discussions about who he was and how he was flying abounded; the
common consensus was that he was using some kind of Stark Industries tech, like the Iron Man suit.
Never had Darcy regretted signing those damn confidentiality forms so much as then. She could
have been Queen of the Room with her knowledge of Thor and Asgard.

She was more interested in the giant green guy. He had to be at least twelve feet tall, and she and the
rest of the room had seen him take down one of those giant space slug things singlehandedly.
Muscles bulged from places where she had no idea muscles existed. He threw himself through the
air as if he didn’t care where he landed, or if he landed at all.

It seemed to stop suddenly; after hours of terror, the remaining aliens and giant metal slug things just
dropped from the sky, stone dead. The big hole in the sky closed, and everyone in the room watched
in horror as the Iron Man suit fell, not flew, through the sky.

“Shit, is he dead?” someone called from the back of the room.

Darcy hoped not. She only knew what the rest of the world knew about Tony Stark – the money, the
women, the superhero fetish – but you couldn’t help but like somebody who obviously didn’t give a
fuck, about anything, as much as he did.

Then out of nowhere the green guy appeared. The blur of movement was too quick for the shaky
camera footage they were watching, but one minute Tony Stark was going to be the richest
pavement pancake in the world, and the next he was cradled in the arms of the Jolly Green Giant.

Darcy hadn’t realised that she had been holding her breath, but when Thor and the guy in the
Captain America outfit pulled Tony to his feet, she felt a tightness in her chest ease. A pair of black-
leather clad people emerged from the ruined buildings and joined the group, and with a few shrugs of
shoulders, they all turned and started to pick their way back through the rubble out of shot.

Now that the big show was over, some of the crowd dispersed, but most of them stayed to listen to
the analysis of events from different news channels. One enterprising person called out for pizza,
somebody else donated a few six packs. Now that the immediate danger seemed to be over,
everyone relaxed slightly. Darcy was two slices down and in the middle of a discussion concerning
the legality of the government enforcing a country-wide public smoking ban when there was a squeal
from some of the girls close to the TV.

“That blond guy’s on TV! Turn it up!”

Sure enough, Thor was there, in all his warrior glory, standing next to a battered-looking Tony Stark.
“Tell me, friend, what is this device?” Thor boomed, striding straight at the no doubt terrified camera
operator. He peered straight into the camera lens, giving the world a perfect view of something green
that had got stuck in his perfectly white, straight teeth. “Why do these little people point it at me? Is it
a weapon?”

“No,” Tony Stark said hurriedly. “It’s not a weapon, big guy. It’s a TV camera.”
He tugged Thor back, and the camera refocused onto Thor’s face. It had the same adorably confused look he had sported in New Mexico, and Darcy could have cried, it was so good to see him again.

Stark sighed, and wiped his face with his hands. Darcy could empathise. She had tried to explain the concept of Facebook to Thor and had ended up with much the same look.

“It’s…a magic box,” he said, wincing at the inaccuracy. “It lets people all over the world see and hear you.”

“Jane!” Thor bellowed immediately. “I demand that your magic box show my image to my beloved Jane!”

There was some shuffling behind the camera, and then an enterprising camera assistant stepped out into shot. She was holding a microphone, but she didn’t really need it. Thor was loud enough for the camera to pick up unaided.

“If she’s watching TV right now sir, she’ll be able to see you,” the woman assured him. Thor looked pleased at this, and grinned at the camera.

“So, uh, who are you?” the woman asked. “And what were all those…creatures that came through the hole in the sky?”

“I am Thor, Prince of Asgard,” Thor said proudly. The woman looked nonplussed.

“That would have had more impact about a thousand years ago, buddy,” Stark chimed in.

“Those creatures were of a race called the Chitauri,” Thor continued. “They were summoned here to wreak great havoc on Midgard, but have no fear, mortals. You are under the protection of Thor and the mighty hammer Mjolnir.”

Here he brandished Mjolnir proudly.

Darcy tried her hardest not to laugh. Agent iPod Stealer would be having a giant shit fit right about now. Tony Stark seemed to think along the same lines, because he was grinning in a way that could only be called evil. If his douchetasche was any longer, he’d be twirling it.

“Tell them about Jane,” he urged Thor.

“Jane!” Darcy wasn’t sure, but she thought that there were little hearts in Thor’s eyes with the mention of Jane’s name.

“Yes, who is this Jane you mentioned, uh, Prince Thor?” extemporised the interviewer who had clearly realised that she was carving out a career for herself in broadcast journalism by being the first person to interview one of the heroes of the alien battle.

“Her name is Jane Foster, and she is a doctor of your physics,” Thor said urgently. “She is the cleverest mortal in all of Midgard, of that I will swear. It was she that first found me when I was exiled here to Midgard, and she that is trying to repair the bifrost that links the Nine Realms.”

“Right,” blinked the interviewer. “Er, is she your girlfriend?”

Thor blinked and turned to Tony to translate.

“Your, er, special lady?” Tony ventured. “Lover? Betrothed?”

Thor’s faced cleared into comprehension, and the big goof actually blushed a little.
“She has captured my heart,” he said sincerely. “Truly, I am at her mercy.”

The wannabe reported visibly melted under Thor’s love-sick look.

“And where is this Dr Jane Foster?” she pressed. “Why aren’t you with her now?”

Thor’s face darkened slightly.

“She was taken to a place called Tromso by friends of mine, to protect her. I fear that my duties will prevent me from reaching her before I must return to Asgard, but…”

At this Thor turned away from the reporter and looked squarely at the camera again.

“Lady Jane, know that you have been always in my thoughts. Heimdall has reported on your efforts to reach me, and your dedication and genius are sung mightily in the halls of Asgard. Now that the tesseract is secure and Loki has been contained, I will petition the All-Father to send me back to Midgard, so that I may be with you for truly, there is no place in all of the Nine Realms that I would rather be, than by your side.”

“Wow,” breathed the girls in front of the TV.

“Wow,” said the reporter, fanning herself a little.

“Wow, are you whipped,” Tony Stark muttered, then blanched. He waved shyly to camera and said “Hi Pepper. Answer your damn phone, will you?”

“Will other people see this?” Thor asked the reporter. “Other than my beloved Jane?”

“I think I can honestly say that everyone around the world is watching this right now,” the reporter said solemnly.

“Then I wish to say hello to more of my friends!” Thor said cheerfully. “Erik, the lover of the boilermaker! Truly, it is good to know that Loki’s spell has not harmed you. We will meet again before long, and you can teach me more about how mortals on Midgard drink!”

“Who’s Erik?” asked the reporter, determined to make the most of her fifteen minutes of fame. “And how do you know him?”

“Erik Selvig is a doctor of physics, like my Jane,” said Thor proudly. “And he was one of the kind people that hit me with a truck when I was first banished to Midgard by the All Father as punishment for my hot headed ways.”

The reporter clearly didn’t know what to handle first; Midgard, the All Father or Thor being hit by a truck, when Thor interrupted her.

“And Lady Darcy!” Thor continued. “She of the lightning strike!”

Darcy choked on her beer. A few people eyed her carefully. She and her taser were well-known on campus after the attempted invasion of their dorm by drunken frat pledges that had to be dragged out after Darcy had dealt with them in her own inimitable way.

“Lady Darcy was the assistant to my beloved Jane, and was kind enough to record my image on the book of faces!” Thor said, beaming. “That was after she hit me with her vehicle and harnessed the power of lightning to incapacitate me. For such a tiny woman, she is truly mighty.”

Darcy preened a little. She was mighty, damn it.
“Hey, isn’t your name Darcy?” said one of the girls who was ogling Thor.

“Yeah,” Darcy said, beginning to sweat a little. “But it’s a really common name. Totally run of the mill.”

“And you’re the girl who tased the frat pledges in the nads, right?” said another.

“I was studying for a test!” Darcy said defensively.

“And you’re not that tall,” a guy chimed in.

“Watch it,” Darcy threatened. “I still have that taser, and it’s charged.”

“You were in my science class last year,” a guy from the back of the room called. “What did you do for your long term study, again?”

“Moss,” Darcy lied. “I was in Oregon, studying lichens with an eighty year old professor. And his dog. Really boring stuff.”

“So that’s Dr Jane Foster, Dr Erik Selvig, and Dr Darcy…,” prompted the reporter.

“Oh, Darcy is not a doctor,” Thor corrected her kindly. “She is a student of another science.” He wracked his brains. “Political science,” he said, after a moment’s thought. “She was merely assisting my beloved Jane because her masters at the university required her to.”

Thor’s handsome face brightened.

“Darcy Lewis,” he said decidedly, and then he waved at the camera. “Greetings, Darcy! I hope this day finds you in good health, and that your lightning device is as mighty as it ever was.”

Darcy decided a hasty retreat was in order.

“Totally not me,” she gabbled, brushing pizza crumbs from her jeans and standing up abruptly. “Must be some other Darcy Lewis. Really common name. Like Jane Smith.”

The room looked unconvinced. Several people were already on their phones, either snapping pictures or frantically typing.

“Got to go, essay to write,” Darcy said hastily, and then elbowed her way through the crowd until she got to the doorway and escaped, Thor’s voice still audible as she ran down the hall to her room.

SHIELD had given her a contact number to call if there were any emergencies of an extra-terrestrial nature, and she had saved it in her contacts under “End Of The World”. She wasn’t surprised to find that she had three missed calls from that number already. She intercepted a fourth just as she locked her door firmly behind her.

“Miss Lewis?” said a utterly unremarkable and unmemorable voice from the phone. “Your security phrase, please.”

“You’re a giant bunch of iPod stealing dicks,” Darcy told him.

There was a slight pause before the voice returned again.

“Security phrase matched and verified. Miss Lewis, please hold in your current location for an extraction team.”
“Extraction team? What the hell?” Darcy demanded. “This is totally not my fault! I haven’t said a word about anything, and then tall, blond and mouthy goes on what I am sure is international television and I’m the one that has to be extracted?”

“The team will be with you within the hour, Miss Lewis,” the voice continued, completely unruffled by her freak-out. “Are you in a safe location?”

“Oh I’m perfectly safe,” Darcy said bitterly. “I wield lightning and run over alien gods with trucks, remember? The whole world knows that. I’m just peachy.”

“Please update us if your status changes,” the voice said, just before hanging up.

“Coward,” Darcy told the phone, and then collapsed backwards onto her bed.

And she thought she was fucked before. The loan people demanding repayment, no way of covering repayments and tuition costs all paled into insignificance when you’ve beenouted on TV as having intimate knowledge of an alien. Now SHIELD was going to demand that she move and probably change her name. With her luck she was going to be stuck in a bunker in Area 51 for the rest of her life, with a stupid ass name like Doris Jones, and she’d still be three semesters short of her degree.

Damn it, and now the tears were back.

It wasn’t as if having a college degree made you smart or anything; you only had to look at some of the meatheads floating around campuses all over the country, there on athletic scholarships, to know that you could end up with a degree and still be dumb as a rock. Darcy’s stepdad was one of the smartest, most level-headed and practical people she knew, and he had his high school diploma and some state health board certifications to his name. Going to college did not automatically give you a free pass into a better life, she knew that. You only had to see how many people with degrees were claiming unemployment to squash that idea flat.

But Darcy wanted that degree, damn it. She’d worked hard for it, and not just in the library and lecture theatre.

Getting her acceptance letter for Stanford should have been the happiest day of her life, and it would have been, if the other letter hadn’t arrived on the same day. She’d been flinging herself at her stepdad for a hug (Dad gave the best hugs, omg) when her mother had sat down suddenly, going pale. Darcy slipped the letter she had been holding out of her mother’s loose grip, and blanched when she read it.

“Why didn’t you guys tell me you’d remortgaged the house?” she’d demanded. “And why didn’t you tell me that you were defaulting on the loans?”

“It’s not your problem, baby,” her dad had said firmly, taking the letter from the bank away from her. “Let us worry about it.”

“Great,” Darcy said sarcastically. “And when were you planning on telling me that you’d been made homeless? When I got back for the Christmas break and found myself living in a cardboard box?”

Her mother let out a small sob, and her father glared at her. Darcy immediately felt guilty.

“Sorry mom,” she said awkwardly, giving her a hug. “Me and my big fucking mouth.”

“Language!” both parents said automatically, and the room lapsed into silence.

“How much?” Darcy asked eventually.
Her father sighed. “For the remortgage?” he asked, running his fingers through his thinning hair. “Or to cover the losses on the diner that forced us to take the damn thing out to begin with?”

“All of it,” Darcy said firmly.

He named the total. Darcy winced.

“Shit,” she said eventually, and so serious was the situation that neither parent told her to watch her language.

“You know, you have that money,” Darcy said eventually, with one eye on her Stanford letter.

“No sweetheart, we don’t,” her mother said firmly.

“You do,” Darcy said, ploughing onwards despite her mother’s frantically shaking head. “My college fund….”

“Darcy Evangeline Lewis, you just stop right there,” her mother warned, but Darcy just raised her voice over her mother’s.

“My college fund would cover the remortgage and get rid of most of the diner’s debts,” Darcy said, and the room fell silent.

“That money is for you,” her father told her. “Every spare dollar we had, all the tips from the diner for the last fifteen years, all of it went into your college fund. When I first met your mother on the day she started waitressing, she told me all of her tips went into her baby’s college fund. There’s no way that either of us will take that money from you.”

“And there’s no way that I’m going to let you lose this house or the diner because of my education,” Darcy replied, equally as firmly. “We’re a team, you always said that, and if you think I’m going to live it up at Stanford while you two lose everything you’ve ever worked for then you’re just dumb, Dad. And we all know you’re the smartest person in this room.”

Her parents had stood firm; the money in Darcy’s college fund was to be used for education and her education only. They were not going to steal her money and her future.

Darcy argued and argued, but they wouldn’t back down, so Darcy did what she had to do and transferred the money from the college account back to the bank to repay the mortgage in full. It hurt, she wouldn’t lie; there was enough in there to pay for four years at Stanford and cover everything. She wouldn’t have had to worry about a thing.

Giving the money to the bank was the first truly adult decision she’d ever made, and she didn’t regret it at all, not during the furious argument with her parents, not when she called the admissions office at Stanford and told them that she’d be deferring entry for a year.

While other eighteen year olds used their deferment time to travel the world and experience new cultures, Darcy worked her ass off. Literally. She was on the go so much that she went down two sizes and actually lost her ass.

She kept her shifts at her parents’ diner, but argued them into adding another shift and opening later, catering to the young crowd that were pouring out of clubs and late-night movies and wanted a snack. They were fairly close to a state college campus, and had more than a few students wander in during the new late shift. Inspired, Darcy hit the internet and scoped out dates for mid terms and finals. Using a fake student ID she’d swapped an entire lemon meringue pie for at the diner, she gained access to the campus and sold brownies, cookies and slices of pie door to door in the dorms.
Stressed students cleaned her out, and she often made four or five trips every evening during exam season. She made money hand over fist.

That didn’t give her enough money, though, so after she finished cleaning the diner at 4am, she’d head off to the main office of a cleaning company and get assigned to an office building that needed her tender touch. She vacuumed, dusted, emptied waste baskets and cleaned toilets until the building opened, when she would drag herself home, shower and fall into bed. In the hours between waking and starting the night shift at the diner, she’d research scholarships and practice writing essays on all kinds of deliberately vague subjects. Apparently rich old people liked leaving money in their wills to scholarship funds that went to the person who could best bullshit about a nebulous topic.

Darcy was born to fleece those suckers.

The practice paid off; pretty soon she had moved up from receiving “sorry you were not successful” letters to “you were really, really close, here, have a $50 iTunes card as a commiseration prize” letters. They at least kept her in tunes as she hawked baked goods and cleaned call centre cubicles. By the time a year had passed, she had enough money from various bequests and funds to keep her for her first year without having to take on a part-time job. (She would do that though, if she could find one; she wasn’t stupid, having more than enough money was always preferable to enough money. Duh.)

It was then she hit the motherload, and won the Francesca Goring-Taylforth Memorial Scholarship award that guaranteed her four years of college accommodation at the institution of her choice. She’d have to take out a loan for tuition, she knew, but Darcy was confident that she would blast her way through college and find a job that would let her start repaying them as soon as she graduated. The economy sucked, but it was bound to be better in four years, right?

Ah, the naivety of youth.

Now she was five years into a four year course, everyone was even more broke than before, her loans were due and it looked like, thanks to Thor’s mouth and the inability of Tony Stark to play chaperone, that she would be leaving college without the degree that she knew she was capable of getting. And those fuckers had kept her iPod.

Her blood boiled.

Going to extract her, were they? Well, not before Darcy extracted a little something from them first.

Energised, Darcy started throwing her clothes into a suitcase. She hoped and prayed that Agent iPod Stealer himself was going to come knocking on her door, because she had a list of demands formulating in her head, and she wasn’t going to back down until she got everything on her list.

Including her damned iPod.
It wasn’t the iPod stealer. That, somehow, made Darcy even more angry. Her whole life was about to be turned upside down, and they didn’t even have the decency to send one of the head honchos.

Instead the guy that knocked on her door was barely older than she was, clearly nervous and trying to hide it with what he clearly thought was a pair of professional looking sunglasses. She had to look straight up to see his face – the guy was well over six feet, and from what she could see behind the obligatory black suit, looked pretty solidly muscled.

He was quite pretty, she mused, and wondered if they had sent Mr October here to extract her because they thought she would be blinded by his good looks.

She wouldn’t put it past them, and mentally, anyway, cracked her knuckles. She was going to look forward to this.

“You’re Darcy Lewis,” he told her importantly when she opened the door. Behind him a gaggle of interested people from the TV lounge peered at her and whispered.

“And you’re wearing sunglasses indoors, Man In Black,” she returned. “Guess that makes you the cool one in this partnership, huh?”

She stared him right in the Aviators until he backed down and took them off. He made to enter the room, but she blocked him.

“No until I see some ID,” she said sweetly.

The Man In Black frowned.

“Ma’am, we don’t carry identification,” he began, but was interrupted by the sparks from Darcy’s taser.

“Wrong answer,” she informed him pleasantly. “I don’t let just any strange man enter my room, you know. You never know who’s wandering these halls. Psychos. Perverts. Aliens from another realm…”

There was another stare-off, but Darcy was pissed so the fresh meat never stood a chance. Sighing, he dug around in his wallet until he picked out an official-looking identification card.

“Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement and Logistics Division,” Darcy read aloud.

She wasn’t entirely sure that she wasn’t about to get a needle to the neck and disappear forever, so she wanted one of the gawking crowd to get the name of the man that was potentially about to kill her. Or worse, send her somewhere like Kansas.

“Agent Norris, Charles,” she continued. She scrutinised the picture carefully. “I guess that’s you,” she allowed. “Come in, Agent Norris, Charles.”

She opened the door and he stepped gratefully inside.

“Hey!” she said gleefully, as the door shut. “Can I call you Chuck?”

His left eyelid twitched. Darcy grinned. This was going to be so easy.
Agent Chuck Norris looked about the room, noting the difference in décor with the barest raise of an eyebrow. He nodded towards the two heavy suitcases on Darcy’s bed.

“It’s good that you’ve packed,” he said in a manner that was clearly aiming towards friendly. “I’ll just take these to the car for you.”

“Hold on there a minute, Texas Ranger,” Darcy told him. She pulled her desk chair out and sat on it backwards, because she thought it would annoy him.

The left eyelid twitched again.

Score!

“We haven’t discussed the details of my extraction,” Darcy said sweetly. “I have a list of requirements.”

“You’ll be able to discuss the terms of your extraction with the re-housing team once we’ve landed,” he tried, making a feint for the suitcases. Darcy sparked the taser again to get his attention.

“I’ll be discussing those terms right now, Chuck,” she said sweetly. “Or there’s no way in hell you’ll get me on a plane.”

Agent Norris watched the way she tossed the taser casually from hand to hand, like the way a mouse watches a prowling cat.

“SHIELD protocol demands…” he began, but Darcy shook her head.

“Chuck, Chuck, Chuck,” she said sadly. “That’s not what I wanted to hear. And, incidentally, how weird is it that SHIELD has protocols for this situation? How many college students does your shadowy organisation scoop up and hide every year?”

“Well,” the hapless agent began. “We, that is, the agency…the protocols say…”

Darcy held a hand up. “Enough,” she said kindly. “Let me tell you how this is going to go. Before I go with anywhere with you, I need some guarantees. Get the other agent on the phone.”

“What other agent?”

“Which other agent,” Darcy sighed. “Your grammar is for shit, Chuck. The head agent, the preternaturally calm one with the receding hairline?”

They really needed to teach the junior agents the trick the other guy had with not showing emotion. This one was so easy to read he may as well have been a copy of *Horton Hears A Who*.

“Agent Coulson is…not available at this time, ma’am,” the agent said stiffly. “I was sent in his place.”

“So you’re the lead agent then?”

“That’s right, ma’am.”

Oh, bless. His chest actually puffed a little with pride.

“You’ve got the authority to negotiate with me?” Darcy asked slyly. “Just like Agent Coulson?”

“Yes. That is, I think…”
Darcy cut him off with a happy clap of her hands.

“Excellent,” she said, breaking out her best Monty Burns impersonation, which seemed to be lost on Chuck Norris. “Now, you might want to write this down. Let’s start with my student loans.”

“What about them?” asked the befuddled agent.

“They need to disappear. Like, forever,” Darcy stressed. “I’m guessing that you’re not going to let me transfer to another school, right? That’s not part of the great ‘Fuck With Darcy’s Life Plan’ that you and your re-housing team have got set up?”

“That’s been thought of,” the agent admitted. “You’re to be offered work with SHIELD. We can’t let you join another work or school environment in case there’s another security breach.”

“Do I get a gun?” Darcy demanded.

“You get a basic level security clearance and a position in the administration department,” the agent offered.

“I am not going to be a secretary,” Darcy warned. “I swear too fucking much and spend all day on Facebook.”

Chuck Norris looked pained.

“It’s the only position available for applicants without a college degree,” he said apologetically.

“A degree that I would be able to get if you jackbooted thugs weren’t snatching me out of school right now,” Darcy pointed out, not unreasonably. “So I don’t think that requiring my college loans to be paid off is too much of a stretch, do you?”

“I guess not,” he admitted.

“Great,” Darcy said, pleased to have won that concession. Now she was on a roll. “Let’s talk about salary and living stipends. Washington is an expensive city, you know.”

“You won’t be living in D.C, ma’am,” Agent Norris said triumphantly, glad to gain a point over Darcy in something. “SHIELD headquarters are in New York.”

He bit his lip.

“Was that bit of information top secret?” Darcy enquired innocently. “Never mind. I would have found out when we got there. I’ve never been there before,” she went on conversationally, “but I hear there are one or two landmarks that give it away.”

God, Chuck Norris squirming was adorable. If she went for the big and built types, she’d certainly be encouraging him to loosen his tie a little more, but being five feet three and a half inches tall meant that she needed to date people who were closer to her own eye level. She’d gone out with a guy who was six foot two inches tall and ended up straining the muscles in her neck. Never again.

“So, New York,” Darcy went on, shaking her head. “Probably even more expensive than DC, right?”

“Yeah,” admitted Chuck Norris. “It’s insane.”

“So I need a salary bump,” Darcy told him. “I need to make at least three times the basic salary that the lowest peon in the administration department makes.”
“I can’t authorise that!” Chuck Norris exclaimed.

“Sorry, not moving,” Darcy said promptly. “I guess I’ll have to stay here and answer all those annoying questions about Thor and Asgard and the bifrost…”

She left her sentence hanging to see which way tall, dark and panicked would swing. His training took over, which, in retrospect, was clearly a mistake he’d have trouble explaining to bosses later.

“Ma’am, any breach of security by you would result in immediate transportation to and detention in one of our secure facilities,” he told her, his voice full of quiet menace. “You really wouldn’t like that,” he said, unnecessarily.

“Chuck, if I don’t send a coded message to three people in a period of time that I don’t think I’ll be too particular in telling you about, a video will be posted on the internet telling the entire world everything I know. Everything,” Darcy stressed. “Kidnap and detain me illegally, and the world will find out about Puente Antigua, Loki, the giant killer robot that levelled the town…everything. Or did you think that I wouldn’t have recorded every damn thing I saw last summer?”

They were back to staring at each other.

“You’re bluffing,” the agent said, beads of sweat now visible in his hairline.

“I’m not,” Darcy assured him, lying through her teeth. “But it’s on your head if this story gets any bigger than the media clusterfuck that it already is. Your people should have been on that, by the way,” she added, as an afterthought. “Seriously? Letting Thor and Tony Stark near a TV camera without a chaperone is a pretty stupid thing to do.”

“I believe that there are some emails on that subject in existence, ma’am,” Chuck Norris sighed. “Look, I can’t allow three times the basic salary. I just can’t. I can offer double, though.”

Darcy frowned.

“Double the basic salary, and a one-off payment to cover moving expenses, furnishing an apartment, work clothes, shit like that.”

“Done,” Chuck said immediately.

“I wasn’t finished,” Darcy cautioned. “I want guaranteed hours of work.”

“I don’t know if you fully understand the role that SHIELD plays in defending this country,” Chuck began, but Darcy waved his argument off.

“I get it, the agents like you have to be on call twenty four/seven. Evil never sleeps, and all that. But you can’t tell me that the grunts like me, filing expense reports and filling in vacation request forms, are expected to suit up at three o’clock in the morning.”

Norris shrugged.

“I’ll work six am until 2pm, five days a week,” Darcy told him. “That’s it. Not a minute before, and not a minute later. Some weeks I may have to switch up a work day for Saturday.”

“Why?” Norris asked, puzzled. “Most of the office staff do the usual nine till five.”

“I’m an early riser, and I like my afternoons free,” Darcy shrugged. “Biorhythms, and all that shit.”

She had thought that SHIELD would be based in Washington DC, which meant finagling her way
into Georgetown or George Washington. But now that she’d be living in New York, she had her sights set on Columbia.

SHIELD may be dragging her away from Stanford, but they were not going to rob her of the opportunity to finish her degree. If she turned up and did her hours for them, it was none of their god damned business what she did in her own time. She only had three more semesters left. As long as she could get a transfer, she was pretty sure she could pick up enough classes that were held out of her working hours to fill her credit requirements, and with SHIELD paying off her current loans, there shouldn’t be any problem in taking out another one, just for a year.

She was going to get a fucking bachelor’s degree in political science, and she didn’t care how many hoops she had to jump through to get it.

“So, double the wages of the rest of the admin staff of that grade, set working times with a limited flexibility, a one-off payment to cover moving and settling expenses and your student loans cleared. Anything else?” Agent Norris asked, sarcasm now evident in his tone.

“I suppose a company credit card would be too much to ask for?” Darcy asked, scratching her chin thoughtfully.

“Get in the car,” Norris said, in a tone of voice that reminded Darcy that the bear she had been poking for the last half hour was actually trained to kill her with nothing but a paperclip.

“So rude. You need to work on your people skills, Chuck,” she advised him as she grabbed the sports bag crammed with the essentials she might need if separated from her suitcases, and a laptop bag crammed with the secret stash of imported candy bars that her roommate thought Darcy knew nothing about.

He left first, carrying her life in two old battered suitcases. Behind him, Darcy took one last look at the last dorm room she’d ever live in, and shut the door on her old life.
Darcy spent most of the aeroplane ride from California to New York trying to figure out what the hell she would tell her parents about her “decision” to give up Stanford and move across the country. They knew how much she loved college; there was no way they were going to buy any lie about hating it and wanting to leave. They also knew that picking up and moving completely across country was out of character for her. Home was San Francisco, and she had been considering applying to Berkeley before her stepdad had sat her down and gently encouraged her to fly a little further from the nest. Stanford was in the same state, at least. Her time in New Mexico during the summer had been the longest she had ever been out of state.

Now here she was, travelling two and half thousand miles away from familiarity, and she was terrified. Internally, anyway. No way that she was going to let any of the SHIELD agents on board their small private jet know that. She’d harassed Agent Norris about wanting packets of peanuts and tiny cans of Diet Coke until he gave up and moved farther back down the plane, leaving her to think and panic in peace. Most of the imported candy bar stash stolen from her Psycho (Ex) Roommate was sacrificed to her sense of mental calm during the plane ride.

She’d have to tell them the truth, she decided eventually. Or, at least, the modified version of the truth that she was allowed to tell them. The student loan company wouldn’t accept her request for a year’s deferral, and she had to leave school temporarily. (True). She’d been offered a job working for the scientist she’d interned for over the summer break. (False.) The money was really good, and she was taking the opportunity to see New York, or what was left of it. (True, although she wished she wasn’t thousands of miles away from her mom.) She was really excited about the opportunity. (False, oh so very, very false.) She hadn’t told them before because everything happened incredibly quickly. (Truest thing ever.)

The conversation happened later that night. The plane had landed at what had to be a private airstrip, but Darcy hadn’t had the chance to see much as she was whisked from the plane to a black SUV that was so plain and unmarked that it practically screamed ‘secret government organisation’. It was odd trying to calculate the time difference for the call as she’d never been in a different time zone from her parents before, but she managed. She’d been taken to a nondescript apartment block and deposited in a suite of rooms that she was assured were safe, as they were SHIELD special housing. That explained the phenomenally well-armed custodial staff she’d seen in the hallways, and both the retinal and fingerprint scan that had been required for her to open the door. It probably also meant that the room was bugged and that there were secret spy cameras in the light fittings, but Darcy was exhausted and didn’t feel up to Veronica Mars-ing the place.

The call was long, and unpleasant. Her mother had cried, blaming herself for Darcy’s second deferral year, the one that screwed up her loans. Darcy had spent a lot of time trying to console her, and she wished that she had been able to have this conversation in person. Fuck SHIELD and their protocols, nobody needed to hear their in-remission mother sob, blaming their cancer for ruining their only child’s life.

Darcy really hoped that whoever was snooping on the call was feeling really shitty about themselves right now.

When the call ended, Darcy had enough energy to force herself into the shower and then fall into bed. She was too tired to even cry herself to sleep, but that was okay, because she spent most of the next morning in a giant weepy mess on the couch.

Agent Norris turned up at around lunchtime with a couple of bags of groceries. Because Darcy was
feeling particularly spiteful, she sent him back to the store to buy her tampons. Watching him
gingerly place the brown bagged package on the coffee table when he returned cheered her up a
little. And a girl did have to be prepared for all eventualities, after all.

Darcy had grown up around food and kitchens, and so spent some time poking at the gadgets in the
small kitchen attached to the apartment. There was a Panini press that looked like it was straight out
of the box, so she sent Chuck Norris back out to pick up some rolls. His irritation at being turned into
her own personal delivery boy melted away when he’d wolfed down half of her improvised chicken
saltimbocca sandwich, and she made him a second without needing to be asked.

“If you get me a few more ingredients,” she told him as he all but licked the crumbs from his plate, “I
can make dessert.”

Three of her chocolate-mint cupcakes later, Chuck Norris was eating out of her hand. He even
promised to find her iPod from SHIELD storage.

Darcy had to spend five days in the SHIELD safehouse. Thank god for the apartment’s wireless
connection, otherwise she’d have gone crazy. There was only so much daytime TV she could take.
Agent Norris came every day, and he brought more agents with him each time, all of them looking at
the kitchen expectantly. Apparently talk of her culinary prowess was spreading amongst the junior
SHIELD agents. Darcy didn’t mind. She had been practically raised in the diner, and had learned to
read from her dad’s recipe books. There was always an agent willing to hunt down ingredients, and
as Darcy cooked in what could only be described as industrial-sized quantities, there was always
plenty to go around.

When the agents weren’t hanging around her living room, sharing tips on cheap local bars and where
you got the best pizza, Darcy haunted the Columbia website, making lists of people she needed to
talk to and classes that she wanted to take. She downloaded another tuition loan application, and
began the laborious process of filling it in. She taped the letter from the loan agency, detailing the full
repayment of her previous loan, to the wall by the side of her bed. Every day mail addressed to her
was delivered by a SHIELD agent, and on the third day the rest of her stuff from her dorm room at
Stanford arrived, all neatly packed up.

On day six, Agent Norris arrived at seven am, and told her that her SHIELD induction started later
that day. Muttering under her breath about lack of notice, Darcy hurriedly showered and gulped
down a cup of coffee and put on her most professional-looking outfit. At Agent Norris’ wince, she
glowered.

“Until five days ago I lived in jeans and a selection of t shirts with amusing slogans,” she reminded
him. “Somebody promised me a stipend to buy clothes. This is actually a Halloween costume.”

“Later,” Norris said, shaking his head at what had been her Sarah Palin outfit. “I promise someone
will take you shopping later. Just try and get something…”

He made a vague gesture towards her breasts.

“Something that doesn’t highlight the girls quite so much?” Darcy said, peering into the mirror
mounted on the back of the door. “Sorry, Chuck. No can do. There is no blouse in this world that
can contain these babies.”

Norris looked faintly embarrassed. Darcy shrugged. It wasn’t her fault that her skirt and blouse
combo highlighted her hourglass figure. Genes had given her big boobs and generous hips, and there
was nothing she could do about it. And if her heels gave her an extra wiggle to her walk, well then,
she’d wiggle. It was either the heels, one of her several pairs of battered Converse or a pair of gold
sandals more at home at the beach. Her shoe budget wasn’t huge.

They left, Norris muttering about his job description, and took yet another plain black SUV into the city. Darcy tried not to press her nose up against the window, but she couldn’t help but feel a frisson of excitement as she recognised iconic building after iconic building. She expected SHIELD headquarters to be in some big skyscraper, but the SUV pulled up at the kerb and deposited both her and Norris in Times Square.

“Are we sightseeing?” Darcy asked, confused. “Because I’ve got to tell you, I’m more of a MOMA girl.”

“We’re not sightseeing,” Norris replied, taking her arm and walking her purposefully along the sidewalk. He said nothing else, but instead merely guided her through the throngs of people already crowding the area.

“Oh my God, is that the Naked Cowboy?” Darcy said, craning her neck. “Stop, I want to talk to him about his presidential campaign.”

“Later,” Norris said firmly, and tugged her away.

He negotiated their way through the crowd quickly, and Darcy had to work hard at not stumbling in her heels as she tried to keep up with his longer legs. He stopped at the entrance to a hotel, and looked at her intently.

“This is a civilian operation,” he told her. “The people that work and stay here have no clue that SHIELD have a base underneath them. Try not to out us as we walk through the lobby, okay?”

Darcy rolled her eyes, which Norris took as a sign of agreement. They walked quickly through the lobby, ignoring tourists milling about and busy bellboys transporting luggage in large carts. They reached a bank of elevators, and waited until the middle car was free. Once the doors were shut, Norris ran a blank plastic card along the edge on the panel containing the controls. He then tapped a complicated sequence into the control panels, and advised Darcy to hold onto the handrail.

“Why?” Darcy asked, puzzled, before the elevator plunged downwards at an impossible speed and she screamed in surprise.

The doors pinged open after the most terrifying elevator ride of Darcy’s life. Norris strode out confidently, Darcy wobbled after him, sure that she had left her stomach behind up in the hotel lobby.

Actually, this place looked like a hotel lobby, Darcy reflected. Marble floors, large reception desk with the requisite perky staff behind. She watched one of the woman lean down to pick something up from behind the desk and caught sight of the small armoury that she had strapped under her jacket. Ah, Maybe not like the hotel upstairs. Norris began to talk to the other female agent behind the desk, who glanced over at Darcy and nodded thoughtfully.

Around her men and women walked confidently, tapping away at tablets and speaking to each other in what had to be top-secret government code. They were dressed either like Norris and the receptionist – plain, simple suits, designed to blend in and be unremarkable, or in head to toe black leather, with the women sporting catsuits that were intensely unforgiving.

She snorted as she realised that they looked more like Halloween costumes than hers did. And hers never ran the risk of giving her a camel-toe, either.

Darcy, 1, SHIELD, 0, Darcy decided.
“We’ve got to get you through security checks,” Norris said cheerfully. “Agent Rodriguez here will escort you into the examination suite.”

The woman came out from behind the desk, smiled at Darcy and said “Would you like to come this way, ma’am?”


“Full body cavity search is required for all personnel on first entering SHIELD headquarters,” shrugged Norris, not looking nearly as apologetic as Darcy thought he should. “Standard procedure. I’ll meet you afterwards.”

“This way, ma’am,” Agent Rodriguez repeated, a little more steel than sugar in her voice this time.

Darcy frowned, but followed after her.

“I hope your hands are warm,” she grumbled to the silent agent.

“Ma’am, after the decontamination shower, you’ll think they’re warm as toast,” she said, not unkindly.

Darcy 1, SHIELD 500, Darcy decided miserably.
“I feel violated, Chuck,” Darcy said later, when Agent Rodriguez had deemed her not to be a threat to S.H.I.E.L.D. security, and allowed her to dress again. “And not in a good way.”

“We all have to go through it,” he said apologetically. “Consider it a rite of passage.”

Darcy was about to tell him where he could shove his rite of passage, when she was distracted by a familiar shiny blue object.

“My iPod!” she said, delighted. “Chuck! You found it!”

“It was in the archives,” he told her, blushing a little as she kissed him on the cheek. He scrubbed at the scarlet stain her “I need confidence” red lipstick had left. “It wasn’t too hard to locate.”

“It even has power!” Darcy said scrolling through her playlists.

“I charged it for you,” he offered shyly. “Nice collection.”

“Nineties Brit pop is totally undervalued in the modern music consciousness,” Darcy said firmly. “Elastica were awesome.”

Before Chuck could weigh in on the discussion, the air in the corridor changed and became more tense. Passing agents seemed to suddenly straighten and become even more poker faced, and Chuck changed from approachable-face-of-a-secret-government-agency to Agent Norris in the blink of an eye.

A tall, solidly built black man walked down the hall towards them, the centre of everybody’s attention. Darcy could practically hear Chuck’s vertebrae popping as his back went ramrod-straight. She stared in fascination at the eye-patch he was wearing.

“Pirate, or unfortunate office supplies accident?” she asked Chuck as the man passed by.

Chuck looked suddenly, uncharacteristically, terrified.

The man turned around and stared at Darcy. The entire corridor seemed to quieten to a deathly hush.

“Do I look like the sort of person that can’t handle a pencil, Miss Lewis?” he demanded.

“No,” Darcy said slowly, taking in the three visible weapons the man had on him. “But then, you haven’t got a parrot on your shoulder either, so it’s hard to tell. And how do you know my name? Who are you?”

If possible, the quiet got even quieter as the man looked her up and down with his one remaining eye. Chuck seemed to be on the verge of hyperventilating.

“Nick Fury, S.H.I.E.L.D. director and your new boss, Miss Lewis,” he told her. “And there’s no limit to what I know about you.”

“Oh really?” Darcy said, her voice only showing the slightest tremor. “Like what?”


“Holy shit,” Darcy breathed. “They said that they destroyed the report!”
Fury actually smiled as he walked away, although the smile had disappeared by the time he got to the elevator at the end of the hall. When the doors closed behind him it was as if the whole hallway started talking again.

“How the hell did he know what I did in Sea World when I was ten?” Darcy demanded.

“What did you do in Sea World?” Norris asked, amused.

“I’m not allowed to talk about it,” Darcy sniffed.

“Director Fury is in charge of SHIELD, and everything that SHIELD does,” Norris told her as he lead her down the corridor. “Nothing gets by him, and everybody’s terrified of him.”

He shook his head in wonder.

“I don’t think anybody’s ever had the courage to ask him about the eye patch before,” he said, running his access card along the side of another door lock, that lead to a different corridor staffed with more suited people. “You’re something else, Miss Lewis.”

“Don’t go falling in love with me, Chuck,” Darcy warned him as she stared avidly at everything around her. “I’ll break your heart.”

“I’ll bear that in mind,” Chuck said, giving her a real smile. “Come on. It’s time to get you up to speed on SHIELD security protocols.”

“Tell me that’s not as boring as it sounds,” Darcy begged.

Chuck winced. “There might be a slight element of tedium,” he allowed. “But you have to pay attention to this stuff,” he warned her, seriously. “If you key in the wrong passcode then we’ll assume that you’re a hostile, and you’ll be treated accordingly.”


He led her into a small room pretty much identical to ones that Darcy had taken classes in at college. Chuck made her watch several short films about the history of SHIELD, which had her inner poli-sci student interested and taking notes. She wasn’t allowed to take any actual notes, which was a bummer, but she had a pretty good memory, and Chuck told her these information and training videos were stored on the internal servers and that she could watch them again if she wanted to.

She had to sign a bunch of papers before they showed her the really interesting stuff, including a non-disclosure contract that pretty much defined the term ‘iron-clad’. One word from her to anybody without classified clearance and she’d be spending time in a SHIELD-operated ‘detention facility’. Darcy was pretty sure that it would make Guantanamo look like a holiday resort, so decided to abide by the rules, on this at least.

She was issued with her own security card, her photograph being one that Agent Rodriguez had taken before she had been hosed down in the decontamination shower. She looked vaguely startled in it, and not at all sexy. It was printed with the SHIELD logo, bore her name, the name of the Administration department and the phrase “Level One Epsilon”, which clearly meant something that she didn’t yet understand.

Once she had finished signing her life away, Chuck led her down another maze of corridors to what turned out to be a large, busy room. Windowless, naturally, it was lit by banks of strong lights that were set into the ceiling. The walls were a drab grey, and the only splashes of colour in the room came from the many computer screens. Men and women were seated at desks, typing into ultra-
modern keyboards and taking to invisible people on headsets. An extremely large computer screen dominated the far wall. It was currently displaying a map of the world, and had ominous red dots flashing over several countries that Darcy knew the president didn’t send a Christmas card to.

Chuck headed towards a middle aged woman, sitting slightly apart from the crowd of desks. She was clearly some kind of supervisor, as workers flitted to and from her desk, bearing tablets that she frowned over, flicked with a stylus and handed back.

“Mrs Johnson,” he said when he got near the woman. “I’ve brought you your new recruit. Miss Lewis, this is Mrs Johnson, the head of the Administration Support facility for SHIELD. Mrs Johnson, this is Darcy Lewis.”

Cool grey eyes flicked over Darcy’s red lips and too-tight blouse.

“The dress code is in the employee handbook, Ms Lewis,” she began severely. “I suggest you make yourself aware of it before you present yourself for work tomorrow.”

Darcy looked furiously at Chuck. Handbook? What handbook?

“I haven’t been given time to find appropriate work clothes, ma’am,” Darcy began, not wanting to start on the wrong foot with this woman. “As soon as Agent Norris sorts out my living stipend and lets me out of my apartment, I’ll get myself something suitable to wear.”

“Living stipend, living stipend,” Mrs Johnson muttered as she scrolled through pages on a tablet. Darcy caught sight of her own name and the particularly unflattering picture of her that the DMV insisted be on her driver’s license. “Ah,” she continued. “Here we are.”

She raised one eyebrow in surprise at the figure on her screen. Darcy wished that she could do that, and vowed to practice as much as possible. That was cool.

A few flicks with the stylus, and Mrs Johnson nodded, satisfied with what she saw.

“Your living stipend has been deposited into your account,” she told a surprised Darcy. “Don’t waste it on designer labels,” she cautioned. “Plain, serviceable clothing is all that’s required.

Darcy tried not to laugh. She wouldn’t know a designer label if it bit her in the behind, except from the price tag.

“I can wear something other than monochrome, right?” she said, glancing around the room at the workers who may as well have been wearing a uniform. A boring uniform. “There’s nothing in the handbook about having to wear black and white clothes?”

“No, but don’t stand out,” cautioned Mrs Johnson. “You need to blend with the business crowds you’ll be commuting with.”

“No neons, check,” Darcy said. “I’ll be totally nondescript.”

Chuck made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a snort, but she ignored him, because that’s what kick-ass SHIELD administrative operatives did, even if they were wearing old Halloween costumes to work.

Mrs Johnson beckoned towards the bank of workers on her right, and a tall, fashionably slim young woman hurried over.

“Alison, this is our new assistant, Darcy Lewis,” Mrs Johnson told the woman. “She’s replacing you
as our Level One Epsilon clearance.”

Alison looked incredibly pleased at this news. She looked even happier when Mrs Johnson informed her that her own clearance level had been raised to Level One Delta.

“Miss Lewis’ training is your responsibility,” the supervisor went on. “Get her up to speed on the Vault for now. You can focus on the correct procedure for the paperwork next week.”

Alison nodded, clearly happy at the thought of having a trainee.

“Does my file mention my, uh, other requirements?” Darcy asked awkwardly.

Mrs Johnson nodded, a clipped motion that failed to shake any of the steel-grey curls that were piled on her head.

“As you’ll be in training for the remainder of this week, you’ll do the same hours as the rest of the staff but as of Monday, your requested working hours come into effect. Your salary is effective immediately, paid on the twenty-eighth of every month.”

Alison’s eyes darted quickly between Darcy and Mrs Johnson, but she remained silent.

“Thanks,” Darcy said. “So, what’s the Vault?”

Mrs Johnson smiled grimly.

“It’s where all our new recruits begin their training,” she said. “Mastering the subtleties of the Vault is necessary for you to move higher in this organisation, Miss Lewis. And I suggest that there is no time like the present. Alison?”

Darcy managed a swift goodbye to Chuck before being whisked away by Alison’s calm efficiency, through a door in the side of the wall and down yet another long, dark corridor.

“You people should really look into getting some art on these down here,” Darcy said as she passed yet another bland, beige wall. “Even some of those cheesy motivational posters with people climbing mountains. Anything to break up all this blah.”

“The state of the walls is the least of your worries,” Alison said dryly as she ushered Darcy into yet another elevator. “Wait until you get a look at the Vault.”

There were the beginnings of a smug smile on Alison’s face, and Darcy began to worry, just a little, at what was ahead of her.

The Vault turned out to be, well, a vault, albeit the biggest one Darcy had ever seen in her life.

It was guarded by two armed guards, and to get in Darcy had to swipe her access card along the side of the computer manned by one of them.

“This is Darcy Lewis,” Alison told them. “She’s training with me to take over the Vault.”

One of the men nodded at her. The other ignored her, and continued to stare in the middle distance. If she wanted an effusive welcome, Darcy decided, she should have been kidnapped by Disney, not a shadowy international military operation.

Alison pointed to a large storage locker behind the desk.

“You’re not allowed to take anything in with you when you work in the Vault,” she told Darcy. “So
if you have a purse, you can leave it here.”

“I have my iPod,” Darcy offered, handing it over to the guard. He took it from her, examining it closely, before nodding again and placing it in the locker.

The taciturn guard emerged from behind the desk and ran a paddle over Alison’s front, then back. He did the same to Darcy, then returned to his post, seemingly happy with the results.

The one that nodded to her pushed a few buttons on his control pad and the huge, silver door behind him swung slowly open. Alison headed in, and Darcy followed her.

It wasn’t a vault, Darcy decided, as she followed Alison meekly through the rows and rows of industrial-grade shelving, all containing big, brown cardboard packing boxes that were stamped ‘Top Secret’. It was more like a warehouse. A warehouse full of mysterious boxes, huge filing cabinets and a sea of grey, brown and beige. The only noise came from big air filters and cooling units set into the ceiling.

“Alright, you can tell me,” Darcy said eventually. “You’ve got the Ark of the Covenant down here, right?”

“Sure,” deadpanned Alison. “We keep it next to the stuff that was really in Capone’s vault.”

Alison, Darcy decided, was okay.

“Seriously, what the hell is in this place?” Darcy asked.

“Everything,” Alison answered, this time her tone deadly serious. “Any document regarding any SHIELD mission, no matter how small or tangentially related is correlated, filed and stored down here. Any object brought back by an agent from a mission is examined by our scientists and then stored here when it’s no longer any use to us. When an agent…leaves the organisation,” she said carefully, “their personal documents and belongings are stored here.”

“What about their families?” Darcy said, shocked. “Don’t they get a bit surprised when Dad retires and then somebody turns up with a moving van and steals their couch?”

Alison looked at her pityingly.

“SHIELD agents don’t retire, Darcy,” she said kindly. “They die in service.”

“What, all of them?” Darcy asked in disbelief.

Alison shrugged. “It’s the drawback to the job they do,” she said. “They’re in constant danger, from anything as normal as a bullet from a representative of an unfriendly government to a megalomaniac alien, as Agent Coulson just found out.”

“Coulson’s dead?” Darcy said, stunned.

“Well, not yet,” Alison allowed, leading Darcy through the last of the maze-like sections of the Vault and ending up at a small desk, complete with hi-tech computer. “But it’s pretty much certain he’s going to die. Loki speared him through the chest on the helicarrier. They managed to get him into surgery, but he was pretty much shredded.”

She pointed to a large number of boxes stacked neatly to one side of the desk.

“They’ve gathered up his stuff already. SHIELD is nothing but efficient.”
Darcy’s tentative liking of Alison died right there at the sound of smugness in her voice.

Alison frowned. “Hey, how did you know Coulson, anyway?”

“We met in New Mexico,” Darcy said stiffly. “It’s kind of why I’m here.”

And alright, yes, Coulson had been an ass. He’d stolen all of Jane’s research and confiscated her iPod. Darcy had spent most of the last few months imagining horrible things happening to him, and she could be really inventive when her mind was properly focused.

But…she’d seen what Loki could do, and he hadn’t even been on Earth when he’d sent the killer robot to Puente Antigua. It had just taken Thor, Iron Man, a big giant green monster dude and someone she was beginning to suspect was actually Captain America’s grandson to stop him and the alien army from overrunning New York, and then the whole world.

And Agent iPod Stealer…Coulson, she corrected herself, Agent Coulson, had taken Loki on. Alone, by the sound of it.

And survived.

And now SHIELD was repaying him by taking his stuff and waiting for him to clock out for the final time?

Utter bastards.

Not for the first time, Darcy wondered just who the hell she was working for.

Numbly, she watched as Alison led her through the process of logging items into the Vault, and how to deal with requests for items to be brought up from it. Everything was assigned an identification number, and placed in an archive box. Archive boxes were stored on the shelves, in chronological order. Personal items had their own archive. Getting to grips with the archive system wasn’t going to be a problem, Darcy decided. Actually finding anything on the shelves was going to be the bigger issue – there were no helpful aisle numbers, like in Ikea, or colour-codes, or anything. Darcy wasn’t even sure that she could find the way back to the entrance again.

She helped Alison tag and label Agent Coulson’s belongings, including a set of vintage Captain America trading cards that were horribly blood-splattered. The older agent showed her how to pack the various items in acid-free tissue paper and left it to Darcy to heave the boxes up and down ladders as everything was packed away neatly on the shelves.

You can learn a lot about a person by studying their belongings, Darcy decided. Coulson didn’t have much in the way of a book collection, but what there was seemed to focus on the Second World War, which was understandable when you considered the man had a huge collection of Captain America memorabilia, including some first editions of the comic books. His CDs were the ubiquitous sort of middle-aged man rock – Springsteen and The Moody Blues, a little Creedence and one or two Eagles collections. There was a single photograph album, with a good half of the leaves blank and unused.

That, more than anything else, made her sad. The guy came from a generation that still routinely used photograph albums, and all he had were a few shots of some people that had to be his parents, and some very old pics of a goofy looking dog. He should have had more, she thought, tears beginning to well in her eyes. Yes, he was a dirty, rotten iPod thief, but he had taken on a fucking Norse god singlehandedly, and his life deserved to be more than a couple of T-shirts and a copy of the greatest hits of Boston, for fuck’s sake.
“You okay?” Alison asked her suspiciously.

“Yeah,” Darcy said, shutting the lid on the last box of Coulson’s belongings with a thump. “Dust got in my eye. I thought that there’d be a better filtration system down here.”

“Just wait until summer,” Alison replied, with just a touch more glee than Darcy thought the situation warranted. “The AC crashes all the time. This place turns into a sweatbox.”

“Great,” Darcy sighed, climbing back down the ladder. “Just what I need.”

Alison finished showing Darcy the rest of the computer system and then supervised as Darcy processed a bunch of forms that came whizzing down an old-fashioned tube system, all rolled up in what looked like a plastic egg.

“I would have thought that this place would have gone digital by now,” Darcy remarked, squinting at the truly awful handwriting on the page. “What’s with the hardcopy?”

“Can’t be hacked,” Alison said simply. “All files demanding a security clearance of Level Two Delta and higher are hardcopy. When they’ve been reviewed and processed, they’re filed down here.”

“But I only have Level One Epsilon clearance,” Darcy pointed out. “I’m supposed to file top secret documents that I don’t have the clearance to read? How does that work?”

Alison looked confused.

“You don’t read them,” she stressed. “There’s a précis on the front cover that gives you the very basic information for processing purposes. You use that.”

“So you’ve been handling incredibly hush-hush, top secret files for….” Darcy paused.

“Three years,” Alison said proudly.

“And you’ve never peeked at any? Not once?” Darcy went on.

“No,” Alison said virtuously. “Never.”

Darcy peered suspiciously around the room.

“I get it,” she said eventually. “The room’s under surveillance, right? Secret cameras, monitoring our every move?”

“No,” Alison said, as if speaking to a particularly mentally deficient child. “There’s no need. You can’t smuggle anything in or out, and this place is a giant maze. There’s no way to avoid blind spots in a security system in a place this large. What’s the use of installing and monitoring a security system that’s bound to be inefficient?”

“Point,” Darcy allowed. “So, you just…filed, for three years? Never read any of the reports?”

“That’s right,” Alison said. “And now, after three years of loyal service, they’re promoting me out of here.”

“Three years,” Darcy said slowly, looking carefully around the giant, silent room. “Three years alone, down here?”

“Well, when it gets busy I get reallocated up to the administration centre,” Alison said defensively. “And departments are always requesting files and objects, so I’m always around and about the
Darcy wondered if there was a reason that it had taken Alison three years to get promoted out of the Vault That Time Forgot, but was distracted by her stomach emitting a particularly loud rumble.

“Sorry,” she apologised, embarrassed. “There wasn’t a lot of time for breakfast this morning.”

“There’s a cafeteria a few levels down,” Alison said. “They do a good lasagne. And if you get there quickly enough, there’s garlic bread.”

“Just point me towards the door,” Darcy said, peering at the identical shelving units surrounding her. “No, seriously,” she went on, “I have no idea where the door is.”

“You’ll learn,” Alison said kindly. “It’s four rights, two lefts and another right to get out of here.”

With the promise of garlic bread on the horizon, Darcy quickly navigated her way through the labyrinth and back out to the relative freedom of the guarded corridor.

The cafeteria food was kind of blah, but it was plentiful and, Darcy was pleased to discover, free. Free food was by definition always good food, especially for a girl on a budget.

She’d done some research into New York rents while stuck in the safe house, and the results had been pretty grim. Despite being on double the salary that she should have been entitled to, and having that one-off living stipend, Darcy’s options when it came to housing were pretty limited.

Living outside of Manhattan itself wasn’t practical, she had decided glumly. It would have been cheaper, rent-wise, but the longer commute from the other boroughs would have made her life harder. Finding a room in a shared apartment would have lowered the cost, but she’d suffered through four years of roommates, and she was ready to try living independently. Plus there was that pesky “I’m working for a fairly-secret government agency” problem. She was pretty sure that she’d have to lie about what she did, and that would just cause problems in the long run.

(And she’d seen New Girl. If she ended up living with a manic pixie dream girl, she’d probably end up killing her.)

No, living solo was the only way forward, no matter how limited that made her options.

So, providing that she managed to pull off the nearly-impossible and transfer from Stanford to Columbia, and find classes that she could take in the afternoons and evenings, she’d have to try and find somewhere affordable in Harlem, or Morningside Heights. That at least had the advantage of being close to Columbia.

Darcy sighed, and crunched the last of her garlic bread. This was all up in the air anyway. There was no point trying to find an apartment until she knew one way or another about Columbia. Monday, she decided. She’d spend the weekend getting her shit together, and start contacting Columbia on Monday. Monday was a day of new starts and organisation. Today was Thursday, and Thursdays were more along the line of getting through the day without fucking things up too badly.

Alison went with her back down to the Vault, where Darcy went through the whole swipe-card, security-paddle process again with the silent security guards. One day, she vowed, she’d get them to talk.

There were more strange plastic egg things with files to process, so Darcy went through the procedure again, with Alison watching her like a hawk to make sure that she followed all the protocols. Finding the correct filing cabinet was the hardest part of the whole procedure, as they were
frustratingly identical and unmarked.

“It gets easier with time,” Alison said sympathetically. “It took me eighteen months to get my rhythm here.”

*If I’m in here for eighteen days, Darcy thought flatly, I’m going to murder someone with a filing cabinet.*

A request for some files from way back in the sixties came in an hour later, so Alison showed her what happened when the files were taken out of the Vault. First Alison logged the request on the computer, and signed a physical log noting the file name, date of request and name of the person requiring the file. Then she put it on a cute little cart, which she took to the silent guards who checked the file details against the computer log that Alison had registered. They then put the file inside a clear plastic box and sealed it using a complicated-looking machine. Alison then put the box containing the file back on the cart and pushed it to the elevator, somehow choosing the correct floor from one of the selection of unlabeled buttons on the control panel.

Clearly, you had to be part psychic to work here, Darcy joked. Alison didn’t seem to find it funny.

“Where are we going, anyway?” Darcy asked as they exited the elevator.

“Nineteenth sub-level,” Alison replied, not really helping Darcy out much. “Medical research and development,” she clarified.

The corridor was as beige and unmarked as all the others had been, but this one smelled of the ubiquitous antiseptic that pervaded all hospitals and gave Darcy an immediate flashback to her mom, lying small and weak on a bed in the oncology ward at San Francisco General. The need to vomit was immediate, but Darcy fought the urge to bolt from the small office that Alison had led her into. She watched the hand-off procedure for the file, and rolled her eyes when Alison stayed to flirt with the researcher who had sent the request.

“I’m just going to go and…check out the corridor,” Darcy said as Alison flipped her hair for the third time. “I can do that, right?”

“Sure,” Alison replied, distracted. “Your security card won’t let you go into any areas above your clearance level.”

“Okay, see you in five,” Darcy said, backing out of the door.

Neither Alison or the hunky researcher looked up.

There was a set of glass doors with an ominous looking security lock, but Darcy’s card swiped through it without any alarms going off, so she continued down the corridor. The doors were labelled as laboratories, but these weren’t anything like Jane’s lab. In Jane’s lab there had been machines held together with duct tape and a near-naked fire-fighter calendar pinned up over the coffee machine. These labs gleamed, and everything looked incredibly expensive. The scientists in them wore pristine white lab coats and little paper bootees over their shoes. Jane used to wear the same pair of jeans for three weeks in a row and t-shirts that Darcy knew for a fact came from the kid’s section at Target.

Darcy had a pang of nostalgia for her time in New Mexico, and the crazy astrophysicist she had left there. Then she remembered the giant killer robot, and decided to move on, both metaphorically and literally.

Past the labs were a series of offices and a small break room, and then through another set of glass doors there was a corridor with big windows set into the walls. The windows revealed empty
hospital rooms, with beds made up ready for whatever poor souls would end up there. The only room in the corridor that was occupied was at the far end of the corridor, and through the window Darcy could see the pale form of Agent Coulson lying prone in the bed. He was hooked up to a variety of machines, including one that seemed to be breathing for him.

His chest was swaddled with bandages. She watched quietly as a nurse entered the room through another door, watched the machines for a while, made a few notations on a tablet and left again.

There were no flowers on the bedside table, she noted quietly. No get well soon cards from friends or family. No balloons or stuffed animals or baskets of fruit.

Just a man, alone in a bed, while people around him waited for him to die.

Tears started to blur her vision, so she backed away from the window. She’d had enough to deal with today without this too.

Chuck arrived at the Vault at a little before four o’clock, and rescued her from another battle with the filing cabinets.

“You need to go shopping,” he reminded Darcy. “Mrs Jackson said to read over the pages in the handbook before you buy anything.”

There wasn’t an actual physical copy of the handbook for Darcy to study. Chuck had a tablet with him, and she used that. The handbook laid down lists of dos and don’ts for SHIELD employees, but she flicked straight to the pages about clothing. She browsed it carefully.

“Chuck,” she said carefully, after a few moments. “Am I reading this page right?”

She handed the tablet back to him. He scanned it, frowned and nodded.

“You mean that they’re seriously telling me that I can’t wear a heel higher than an inch because, and I quote, ‘health and safety guidelines require employees of SHIELD to be able to evacuate the building quickly in the event of enemy incursion’?”

“You don’t want to trip on the stairs,” Chuck pointed out.

“I don’t want to face an enemy incursion!” Darcy shouted. “Shit Chuck, what’s the point of all this cloak and dagger, hidden headquarters, highly armed security clearance bullshit if they think that we’re going to be attacked by…attacked by….”

She stopped for a moment.

“Who could attack us, Chuck?” she asked, seriously. “Are we talking Al Qaeda or space aliens or what?”

Chuck stuck his hand out and wobbled it slightly from side to side. “A little from column A, a little from Column B,” he said, wincing at the positively arctic look Darcy gave him. “Look Darcy, we get the weird shit, okay?” he went on. “The FBI get the every day average terrorists, the CIA poke their noses into international issues, and SHIELD deal with the Chitauri invasion and the Hulk and whatever the hell Magneto is doing today.”

Darcy looked at him blankly.

“You’re only Level One Epsilon, right?” he sighed, rubbing at the bridge of his nose in the way that a lot of her teachers had back in junior high, when she had gone through what even her loving
parents happily described as her ‘incredibly annoying’ phase.

“Yeah,” said Darcy, waving her ID card at him.

“Then forget what I said about Magneto,” Chuck sighed, guiding her towards an elevator. “And probably the Hulk, too.”

“Sure,” Darcy lied. “Not a problem. Forgetting it as we speak.”

“Great,” Chuck sighed again. “Let’s go and buy you some clothes.”

The first thing Darcy bought, like any woman with an unexpected windfall and a generous bosom, was new, supportive underwear.

“You may scoff, Chuck,” Darcy opined as she browsed the racks at Macy’s. “But diamonds are not a girl’s best friend. A good underwire is.”

Chuck said nothing, held the bras she piled in his arms, and turned a fetching shade of pink.

After splurging on decent lingerie, Darcy was far more cautious with her money when it came to buying clothes for her new job. No skirts, she decided, as there seemed to be an awful lot of teetering up and down ladders in her future. Simple black pants and plenty of brightly coloured v-necked tops. No prints or slogans, just block colour that made her look like every other office grunt in the city. Boring, but nothing that would draw attention to her.

Finding shoes that fit both her aesthetic sensibilities and the draconian SHIELD footwear requirements took rather longer. Chuck, trained to withstand torture methods that made Torquemada look like kindergarten teachers, had to demand a break in the shopping for a meal and the chance to formulate an escape plan.

It took hours, but by eight pm Darcy had hit up The Gap, J C Penney’s, Old Navy and every other mid-range clothing store and shoe store she could find. Both she and Chuck Norris were laden with bags, but she was pretty sure that she’d be able to pass as a SHIELD admin worker.

Chuck pressed a button on his cell phone and thirty seconds later one of the unmarked SUVs pulled up at the kerb and they piled in. Darcy was deposited back in her safe house half an hour later and spent the rest of the evening hanging up her new clothes and calling her mom, trying to sound delighted with her new job and all the new, imaginary friends she was making.

Try as hard as she could, though, Darcy just couldn’t shift the picture of Coulson, deathly pale and preternaturally still, from her thoughts.
Dressed in plain black trousers and a deep maroon v-necked top that complimented her dark hair and creamy skin tone, Darcy looked more like the thousands of office workers that crowded the streets as she and Chuck navigated their way through the crowds towards Times Square and the hotel that covered the one entrance to SHIELD HQ that she knew about.

This time she didn’t scream as the elevator plunged dramatically downwards, and she was allowed through the security check by Agent Rodriguez without suffering the indignities of the day before. Alison was there to meet her, and she coached Darcy through the use of the baffling, unmarked elevator.

There were a ton of files waiting to be processed at the small desk inside the Vault, and Alison watched carefully as Darcy demonstrated that she hadn’t forgotten how to do her new job, then left her to finish the pile as Alison dealt with a shipment of personal belongings that had belonged to another unlucky agent. Alison wrapped them as Darcy logged them into the system, and together they boxed them up and filed the boxes on one of the interminably long shelving systems.

“This is kinda depressing,” Darcy noted as they hefted the last box into place.

“Yeah,” Alison admitted. “It’s not the best part of the job. But it’s important, you know? Most of the time when we interact with agents, they can be kind of…”

She paused as she tried out a variety of adjectives in her head.

“Pushy,” she decided on at last. “Whatever it is they’re working on, it’s urgent and time sensitive. If it’s got SHIELD’s attention, then it’s probably mega-serious. If they need something from the Vault, they need it pretty much straight away and they’re not always nice about how they ask for it. They don’t always have time for nice. It’s easy to see them as just rude, or mean. It’s not until you realise that they could end up dead because of what they do that you understand that they’re not mean. They’re just trying to stop people like you and me ending up dead too.”

The image of Coulson flashed back into Darcy’s mind, and wouldn’t shift.

The computer chimed, and caught their attention.

It was a request for the delivery of a set of files from the archives for the weapons research department, along with some artefacts that one of the chemical labs wanted.

“I’ll take them this time,” Alison said. “You can get the next ones, okay?”

“Okay,” Darcy told her. “That guy from medical still has the file from yesterday. Maybe you should stop by and see if he’s finished with it.”

Alison perked up at the thought of more flirting with the good looking guy from yesterday.

“That’s a really good idea, Darcy!” she said, pleased.

They both assembled the requested items, and Darcy watched Alison push her little cart off through the Vault. As soon as Darcy heard the large doors swing open and shut, she pushed aside the stack of files she was supposed to be archiving and took a good look at the computer screen.

She was already logged in, so she decided to poke around and see what her security code would let
her access. Not a huge amount was the sad answer, but she was able to get a peak at a very redacted report on Agent Coulson’s medical condition. There were a lot of heavy medical terms that she didn’t fully understand, but she had watched enough E.R growing up to know what ‘tension pneumothorax’ meant. Loki hadn’t got Coulson in the heart when he stabbed him, but he had got his lung. The medical team that had responded to him had stuck a needle in his side to relieve the pressure building up in his chest, but not before Coulson’s heart had stopped beating.

They’d got his heart started again, but he hadn’t regained consciousness since, and the longer he was out, the worse his chances of waking up were.

The report recommended allowing his next of kin to visit, more for their own sense of psychological comfort than any real help to Coulson. A few more minutes poking around the file revealed that he had no next of kin listed.

Something inside Darcy snapped. Her access was limited, but it did let her do a few things. She altered Coulson’s file, adding herself as a niece. She then pulled her own file up, and changed it to reflect the alterations she had made to Coulson’s. Before she could change her mind, she made her way through the shelves to the door, only taking a wrong turn twice. She reclaimed her iPod from the guards on duty and hit the button for the nineteenth floor in the elevator.

The medical ward was as quiet as it had been yesterday. Nobody stopped her when she entered Coulson’s room, and pulled up a chair to sit next to him. The monitors recording his heart rate continued their steady beat, and the ventilator that breathed for him provided a counterpoint wheeze.

“Well,” Darcy said at last. “I don’t blame you for staying asleep. This place is fucking boring.”

As to be expected, nobody replied.

“I guess you’re surprised to see me here,” Darcy went on. “Or at least, you would be surprised to see me if you were awake. The last time I saw you I was yelling some pretty rude stuff.”

She watched his bandaged ribs rise and fall.

“You totally deserved that, by the way,” she told him archly. “I get it now, why you took Jane’s stuff, although it was totally a dick move. If you’d have asked nicely, she would have shared. But taking my iPod? Not fucking necessary man. I didn’t have secret astrophysics stuff on it, only my brand new downloads and all of my personalised playlists.”

She sat back in her seat, and let out a sigh.

“But what you did? Fighting off Loki mano a mano? Or godo, whatever? That was pretty badass. And you deserve better than to die by yourself in here.”

Rising from the chair, she fished her iPod from the pocket of her trousers.

“So, you get me,” she said, as cheerfully as possible. “If anybody asks, you’re my stepfather’s adopted brother, and I’m your favourite niece. I don’t really have your kind of music on here yet,” she went on, putting the earbuds carefully in Coulson’s ears, “but I’ll do some downloading tonight. The best I can do is just put the whole library on shuffle, and hope that it doesn’t make you want to hold your breath in self defence.”

She selected the ‘play entire library’ option, and put it on repeat.

“I’ll be by later to check in on you,” she told him. “and to get my iPod back. This is a loan,” she said sternly. “You’re not keeping it, not just after I got it back, you hear me?”
“He might hear you, you know,” a voice from behind her said.

Darcy whipped around, her hand going reflexively to the laminated security card that hung from a lanyard around her neck.

“Current studies show that patients in comas do respond to auditory stimuli,” the nurse said, coming up to the machines and checking the readings carefully. She was the same one as yesterday, and she was holding a similar tablet that she tapped quickly and precisely. “Hearing is the last sense to go and the first one to come back.”

“He’s my uncle,” Darcy said defensively. “I’m his next of kin.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” the nurse said, eying her ID badge and security clearance level. “I don’t like it when they don’t have any visitors. Useful, that you and your…uncle work for the same agency.”

“Nepotism at its finest,” Darcy agreed. “So it’s cool if I come and visit him?”

“Come as often as you like,” the nurse said kindly.

“I’ll be back later, before I leave for the night,” Darcy said. She turned to leave, but paused and turned back to face the nurse.

“Is it true? Could hearing music that he likes actually help him wake up?”

She paused before speaking, and wrinkled her nose in thought.

“Well, there’s no magic button to press in cases like this. People either wake up, or they don’t,” she said, as kindly as possible. “Hearing his favourite music might stimulate him to wake up a little faster.”

Darcy eyed the iPod.

“What if he hates the music?” she blurted out, feeling a little stupid. It wasn’t like a little bit of Blur was going to kill him. Was it?

The nurse smiled. “Knowing what I do about the people that work in this building, ma’am, it just might wake him up even faster, just so he could switch it off.”

“I’ll be back later,” Darcy repeated, a little relieved.

“I’ll let the shift change know you’re coming,” the nurse said, before smoothing down the unruffled covers of the bed and leaving the room.

She was back in the Vault before Alison returned from delivering the artefacts and files. By the end of the day, Darcy was pretty sure she had the Vault part of the job down.

“Next week we’ll cover the paperwork side of the job,” Alison told her as they headed up in the elevator so Darcy could meet Chuck Norris to be taken back to the safe house. “It’s all pretty routine HR stuff, nothing too out of the ordinary.”

“Just boring?” Darcy asked.

“Incredibly so,” Alison confirmed.

“Great,” Darcy sighed.
She stayed on the elevator when it got back to the main reception level.

“You’re not getting off?” Alison asked.

“I forgot to get my iPod,” Darcy told her. “I’ll be back in five minutes. You can keep Chuck company for me.”

“Who’s Chuck?” Alison asked, and Darcy pointed to Agent Norris, standing tall and lean in the corner of the foyer, checking his watch.

“His real name is Charles,” Darcy explained. “But I feel like Marcy if I call him that, so I call him Chuck. The fact that his last name is Norris is just a massive bonus.”

“I can certainly keep him company,” Alison breathed, fluffing her hair.

“Go get him, tiger,” Darcy said cheerfully. “Back in five. Or ten, or whatever.”

The last thing she saw before the doors shut was a predatory look spread itself over Alison’s pretty face, and Chuck swallowing heavily. She hit the button for the nineteenth sub-level, and congratulated herself for kick-starting a SHIELD office romance.

Taking the iPod back from the unconscious Coulson took a matter of seconds, but Darcy stopped to chat to him about her day, the state of the Vault and Alison. He remained cooperatively silent as she explained her plan to get her shit together over the weekend about Columbia. He offered no advice as she pondered her living situation, and couldn’t help her decide how best to ask Chuck if she could start getting to work on her own as of Monday.

“I’m a big girl, you know?” she told him. “I don’t need an escort.”

As he had no wise words to offer her, Darcy decided that visiting time was over.

“I’m going to update this with some of your stuff,” she told him, as a goodbye. “Although you can consider this afternoon a learning experience. I’m not sure you listen to anything made past 1977.”

She picked up Chuck Norris in the lobby, who looked disappointed at having to say goodbye to Alison.

“You should ask her out,” Darcy opined in the car back to the safe house. “You’re totally in with a shot there.”

She eyed him carefully.

“Unless there’s some kind of policy forbidding dating amongst the ranks?” she asked.

“No,” he said hurriedly. “No, not any more. There was,” he continued, after a pointed look from Darcy, “but as everyone just kept breaking it all the time, Director Fury scrapped it.”

“Score one for the eyepatch,” Darcy said approvingly.

“Please don’t say that in the building,” Chuck begged. “He will hear you.”

“For you Chuck, and only for you,” Darcy said magnanimously. “Hey, I’ve got another question,”
she said, as the SUV pulled up at yet another red light. “How long do I get the fancy apartment and rides in the spymobile for? I’m thinking that SHIELD probably has better things to do than babysit me.”

Chuck squirmed a little.

“It was raised in a meeting,” he told her. “Er. We’re not serving you with an eviction notice or anything…”

“But you need the apartment for super scientists fleeing North Korea with state secrets?” Darcy asked.

“Not quite that,” Chuck replied, then paused, looked up, did some mental manoeuvring and added, “Well, a bit like that, but you’re not supposed to know about the North Korea thing. So don’t say anything to anyone.”

“Who would I tell?” Darcy said, aiming for a cheerful tone. A slight note of despondency crept in around the edges, but she beat it back as best she could. “Apart from you and Alison, I don’t know anybody here in the city.”

Chuck didn’t say anything in reply to that, and Darcy spent the rest of the ride home staring out of the window and trying not to think about anything at all.

She failed.
“So,” Darcy said to Coulson. “It’s my first day of my first working week, and so far I’m doing okay. At least, I haven’t forgotten any secret codes and I haven’t set any alarms off, so I think I’m doing okay. This is for you,” she told him, fishing her iPod out of the pocket of her trousers. “I did some downloading over the weekend. I had to branch out a little, but I figured you’d like some of the guys that I put on here for you. I asked my Dad – your stepbrother, don’t forget the cover story, Uncle Phil – and he said you might like Eric Clapton. Except he doesn’t know you exist, obviously, and probably thinks I’ve got a forty something sugar daddy.”

She sat back in her chair and sipped thoughtfully at the can of Diet Coke she had brought with her from the cafeteria.

“I wouldn’t mind one of those, actually,” she said. “Not that I’m looking for someone to pick up my bills,” she told him archly. “I’m not a big fan of Destiny’s Child, but they had it right. It ain’t easy being independent,” she sang at him.

“Nothing?” she asked, as the machines kept on their steady beep. “Oh well. Where was I? Oh, yeah, sugar daddies. I don’t need someone to give me an allowance and one of those stupid little yappy dogs, but I wouldn’t mind dating an older guy. I’m so done with guys my age. If they’re not too hipster it hurts, they’re still living in their mom’s basement. Any decent ones are already snapped up, or, you know, not impressed by the girls.”

She peered down at her boobs, adjusted the fit of her new bra, and continued.

“So I thought I may try somebody a bit older this time,” she said, in a confidential tone. “Not too old, obviously. I don’t want to give the dude a heart attack every time I give him a…good time,” she said, changing her words at the last second. “But mature. Thoughtful. Not scared of the word ‘relationship’, or ‘laundry’.”

She paused to remember some of the utter failures she had dated in college. She shuddered.

“So yeah, once I get myself settled in, I’m going on the hunt for an older guy, see if they’re any better than the young ones. Don’t worry, you’re safe from me,” she went on, patting him on the arm. “You’re my uncle, remember?”

She winked saucily at him.
“Well, got to go,” she said airily. “It’s eleven am, and my lunch hour is up. Chuck Norris totally
caved and gave me whatever working hours I wanted, so I get to clock out at two. I’ve got a meeting
with the Admissions Officer at Columbia at three thirty. Wish me luck!”

She popped the earbuds in Coulson’s ears, and selected the *Best of Eric Clapton* CD that she had
downloaded the previous evening. Putting the album on repeat, she left.

The ECG blipped momentarily, causing a jagged spike in the steady up and down recorded rhythm,
but the glass doors had already shut behind Darcy and there was nobody else to notice.

She spent the rest of the day learning how to deal with the insane amount of paperwork that the
SHIELD organisation generated on a daily basis. There were forms for *everything*, Darcy was
horrified to discover.

“What,” she said, peering at the latest round of paperwork that had descended from the chute, “is a
form ALD-24E, and why do I have to be the one that files it?”

“It’s Alien Lifeform Detection,” Alison said patiently. “Code 24 means that there was a suspected
sighting of a previously unknown alien race on Earth. E stands for Europe.”

“We have guys in Europe running around hunting for aliens?” Darcy squealed, jumping up and
down. “Why can’t I have that job?”

“It’s not as glamorous as it sounds,” Alison told her. “Read the file, and see if you still want to do it.
Go on, it’s Level One Epsilon cleared.”

“Urgh,” Darcy said after a minute. “Sewers? Really?”

“Most sightings of aliens are just drunks or people high on something confusing something
completely natural for something weird.”

Alison took the file from her and scanned through it.
“See?” she said, pointing to the relevant section. “The ‘aliens’ hiding in the sewer tunnels turned out to be maintenance workers doing overtime. The old man that saw them hadn’t taken his meds for a few days and got a bit addled.”

“Huh,” Darcy said, disappointed. She began to log the file into the system, and then turned back to Alison.

“You said most of the sightings of aliens were people getting it wrong,” she accused. “What about the rest?”

“They would be dealt with on the ALD-25 series of forms,” Alison told her. “They’re Level Three Epsilon and above, so I wouldn’t know about those.”

“Right,” Darcy sighed, going back to the computer. “All those details laid out there on pieces of paper, and you haven’t peeked because you haven’t got the right clearance.”

“It’s not the SHIELD way,” Alison said virtuously.

It was totally the Darcy Lewis way, but it was two in the afternoon, and time for her to make the journey from midtown to Morningside Heights and her meeting with the Admissions Officer. Peeking into top secret government files was going to have to wait until tomorrow.

Getting the appointment had been surprisingly easy. To be frank, Darcy had expected a lot more hassle in arranging to speak to the woman in charge of Admissions, and she mentioned that to her as she was ushered into the plush office.

“Ordinarily, you’d be right,” the woman told her as she gathered papers together in front of her. “Transferring here is not an easy prospect, and that’s considering that most people do that at the start of the academic year.”

She pulled down the strange half-glasses she wore and peered at Darcy.

“I take it that there’s a good reason for you to leave Stanford half way through your last year, Miss Lewis? You were only twenty credits away from receiving your degree there.”
Darcy sighed.

“Trust me, Ms Powell, moving across country in my senior year wasn’t my idea. I’ve worked really hard to get my degree, and I was looking forward to graduating from Stanford. But life sometimes throws you a curve ball,” she said, shrugging. “And I’m not giving up on my plans, no matter how weird my life has gotten since aliens started showing up, so here I am.”

“Aliens?”

The admissions officer looked at her strangely. Darcy pulled a face, and sighed.

“I signed a big bunch of papers that say that I can’t talk about a lot of the reasons why I left California, but I think it’s safe to say that the big ugly aliens that started tearing up New York were a factor in why I had to leave California. I’m sorry that I can’t say any more, I really am. But, um, classified. Sorry.”

Darcy gave the other woman her best “I’m completely adorable” grin. It had previously warmed the hearts of poor tippers in the diner and uncompromising sports teachers that had wanted her to participate in the ritual humiliation that had been high school gym class.

The woman scowled at Darcy.

“Damned creatures,” she muttered, yanking open a desk drawer and pulling out a pad of pre-printed forms. “They caused more trouble than just property damage, let me tell you.”

“Really?” Darcy asked politely, not really caring about the answer but able to spot a chance to ingratiate herself at fifty paces.

“They’re the reason that you even got a chance for an interview here today,” Ms Powell went on, hunting about her desk for a pen that worked. “Columbia has the reputation of creating the finest minds of a generation, Miss Lewis. It’s not entirely surprising that these intelligent people, using the fine critical thinking skills they learned here, decide to abandon their studies and find a university that isn’t under attack from rampaging space monsters.”
Darcy blinked.

“Your transcript looks fine,” Ms Powell went on, scanning the sheets in front of her. “You took a year out? After already deferring entry for a year?”

Darcy sighed and explained her mother’s illness as briefly as she could. It wasn’t a year of her life that she cared to think much about. Ms Powell’s eyes softened, and she nodded when Darcy was finished.

“Admirable, Miss Lewis,” she said softly, and angled a look at a framed photograph on her desk. She was sitting next to an older woman, clearly her mother, as both shared the same tilted-tip nose and wide, amber eyes.

Darcy shrugged her shoulders again. “It was what I had to do,” she said simply.

Ms Powell started filling in boxes on the form in front of her, and then returned her attention to Darcy.

“How will you be funding your studies with us, Miss Lewis?” she asked. “Student loan?”

“Yes,” Darcy told her. “I already have the application all filled out. I just need the confirmation letter from you to make it official.”

“Well,” the older woman went on, “I don’t see any reason why your application to transfer should be denied. Your academic record is excellent. I wish that your reasons for transferring here were a little more transparent, but I suppose we’ll have to take your word for it that they have to stay somewhat opaque.”

“I promise that I would tell you if I could,” Darcy told her, doing her best Disney princess eyes.

“All you have to do is select sixty credits worth of courses from our comprehensive selection, and you’ll be able to graduate from Columbia,” Ms Powell said, smiling. Clearly she was imagining Darcy using up one of the many empty spaces in their lecture halls.
“Sixty credits?” Darcy said, confused. “But I only need twenty to graduate!”

“You needed twenty credits to graduate from Stanford,” Ms Powell corrected her. “You need to take sixty credits to earn a degree from Columbia.”

“But…I can’t afford that!” Darcy said desperately. “I can only manage one year. I can’t complete sixty credits in a year!”

It was Ms Powell’s turn to shrug. “I’m afraid that sixty credits is the minimum amount required by the university to accredit you with a degree,” she said as nicely as she could.

Darcy slumped back in her chair, defeated.

“Then it’s over,” she said quietly. “That’s it. No degree for Darcy.”

“There are other universities in New York,” Ms Powell said kindly. “Perhaps their entrance requirements are less stringent.”

Darcy exchanged a wordless look with her. If the look had been able to speak, it would have said something like ‘Please, I didn’t bust my ass to get into fucking Stanford to transfer to the New York version of Greendale Community College.’

“Thank you for your time,” Darcy said politely, and rose to shake Ms Powell’s hand.

“If you can organise funding, we’d snap you up in a second, Miss Lewis,” she said sympathetically.

“Story of my life, Ms Powell,” Darcy replied, and decided to leave before she did something stupid, like drop to her knees and beg the older woman to admit her.

She was three steps down the corridor when she started to feel her eyes burn, seven steps when the first tear started to roll down her face and twelve steps when she gave up and just started to sob. There was a door to her left, and she blindly groped for the handle. It turned, and she stumbled through the door and pushed it shut behind her. She slid to the floor and bawled, letting all the anger and all the frustration just wash its way out of her in big, hot waves. She drummed her feet against
the floor and howled in frustration and grief, mourning the death of her dreams before they even got a chance to exist.

“I’m going to be a fucking file clerk for ever!” she moaned, wiping away the long streaks of mascara from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

“Nothing is forever,” a kind voice said, from somewhere to her right. “Not even death, if you’re a Buddhist. Here, have a tissue.”

Darcy looked up to see a kind-looking man in a grey suit hold out a box of tissues. She grabbed one and scrubbed her face with it.

“Well, I’m not a Buddhist,” she said flatly. “And holy fuck, this is your office, isn’t it?”

“It is,” said the kind man. “Would you like a glass of water?”

“I’d prefer a vodka,” Darcy said honestly. “But I guess water would be good too.”

There was the sound of a drawer opening, and the clank of bottles.

“No vodka,” said the man. “But I have scotch.”

“Dude, you’re my hero,” Darcy sighed. “Hit me.”

He chuckled, and she heard the reassuring sound of liquid hitting glass.

“Come and have a seat by the window,” he urged. “Far more comfortable than the floor.”

Darcy pulled herself up from the floor and sat on the small sofa by the window. Leather, she noticed. The glass she held in her hand was lead crystal. The office was large, and although she was no fashionista, she could tell that they guy’s suit was an expensive one.
A glance at the desk confirmed her suspicions. The nameplate was the ultimate give-away.

“Oh shit,” she groaned. “I’ve gatecrashed the Dean’s office. I’m sorry,” she said, fumbling to find a table to put her drink down on. “I’ll go and you can get back to whatever you were doing before I came crashing through your door.”

“Stay,” he urged.

His eyes were kind, and they were under giant grey eyebrows that looked like caterpillars.

“You’re obviously upset about something,” he went on. “And I don’t think you should be wandering about town until you’ve calmed down a little.”

“Okay,” she said, a little shaken. “Thanks.”

She sipped carefully at the scotch. It burned a little as it went down, but not in the scorch-your-throat way that her last experiment with scotch had produced.

“This is good stuff,” she said, taking another small sip. “Thanks.”

“What’s the point of sneaking a bottle past your wife and your secretary if you can’t have the good stuff?” he said affably.

“They don’t like you drinking?” Darcy asked, frowning a little.

“Oh, it’s nothing serious,” the Dean said, waving his hand in the air. “The doctor said to cut back on red meat, alcohol and cigars. Penalty of getting old.”

“All the good stuff, bummer,” Darcy sympathised.

“I now have four vegetarian meals out of seven,” the Dean said gloomily. “So I consider sneaking a bottle of Laphroaig single malt into the office my little bit of payback.”
Three more sips and Darcy was feeling calmer and slightly fuzzy about the edges.

“I’m really sorry for just bursting into your office like this,” Darcy said, gesturing with her nearly-empty glass. “I had no idea where the door led. I don’t want you to think I was being rude. I was just really upset.”

“Apology accepted,” the Dean said affably. “Not a problem, Miss…”

He paused expectantly.

“Darcy Lewis,” Darcy offered. She extended her free hand, and the Dean shook it.

“Owen Taylor,” he said. “Top up?”

“Why not?” she said, extending her glass. “It’s not like I want to face the rest of the day completely sober.”

“Can I ask what made you so upset?” the Dean asked as he poured another small measure into her glass.

“I just came from a meeting with the Admissions Officer,” Darcy told him. “She was really lovely, but she told me that I couldn’t transfer here from Stanford unless I took sixty credits worth of courses. I was only twenty credits short of my degree,” she added ruefully. “And I can’t afford to take more than a year to finish.”

Darcy sipped the warm liquid again, and sighed.

“So, that’s the end of that,” she said quietly. “I guess I could find another university to transfer to, but I wanted to come here.”

“Why?” the Dean asked, looking at her carefully.
“Because I’m the daughter of a waitress who scrimped and saved to give me a college fund, and a man who put all the profits of his small business into supporting the child of another man,” Darcy said. “My parents aren’t rich, Mr Taylor. They’re not educated, although I dare you to find a smarter man than my dad. I call him dad,” she clarified, “because he’s been more of a father to me than the guy that knocked my mom up and took off in the middle of the night when she told him she was pregnant.”

“Good man,” the Dean said, topping up his glass.

“The best,” Darcy stressed, extending her glass for another splash of scotch. “And he always told me I was smart enough to do whatever I wanted, and I wanted to study political science at one of the best schools in the country, so I did. I worked my ass off, literally, I, like, dropped two whole dress sizes working to get the money together for school. I won scholarships. I had loans, but I figured, hey, doesn’t everyone? And then bang, my mom gets cancer.”

“I’m sorry,” the Dean said, frowning.

“She’s okay, it’s in remission now,” Darcy assured him. “But I took a year out because hey, it’s my freaking mom, okay? No college degree is worth more than her. But it screwed up my loans, and I was going to have to drop out. Then some weird shit happened, and I got yanked across country to New York and I thought, hey, at least I can finish my degree now.”

Darcy drained her glass, and put it down onto a glass end table with a clink.

“But even after my financial situation changing, I still can’t afford more than a year’s study. And I couldn’t manage sixty credits in a year, even if I wasn’t working full time for SHIELD.”

Darcy threw her hand across her mouth in panic.

“Whoops,” she said. “Pretend I didn’t say that.”

The Dean frowned, and put his glass down.

“SHIELD?” he said, looking at her questioningly. “That’s the government agency that’s been in the press recently, isn’t it?”
There had been media fallout after the Chitauri invasion, and the existence of SHIELD had been reported on news programmes and in newspapers across the world. Much of the organisation remained covert, though.

“Yeah,” Darcy said. “I saw some stuff, last year. And I was totally keeping my mouth shut about it, until Thor was on TV without a chaperone and he outed me.”

The Dean’s face cleared.

“You’re the Darcy Lewis that hit him with a vehicle!” he said.

“You saw that, huh?” Darcy grimaced. “Well, long story short, SHIELD brought me under their wing. But being degreeless means that I get a really shitty job. So not only do they drag me thousands of miles away from my family, I get to work in what has to be the worst place in the building because of my low security clearance. Seriously, there are lunch ladies who are higher up the scale than me.”

“But you were going to try and finish your degree?” the Dean asked thoughtfully.

Darcy shrugged. “I want it,” she said simply. “I know I can do it. You can look at my transcripts, I’m damn good at it. And Columbia’s the best school in New York. But money’s got in the way, again. I just can’t seem to catch a break, you know?”

She smoothed down her wrinkled blouse, dabbed once again at her eyes with a tissue, and stood.

“Thanks for being so cool about me blundering into your office,” she said, extending her hand. “I’m sorry that I’ve wasted your time. And your scotch.”

“I have a daughter,” the Dean said abruptly, standing up from the couch and heading for his desk, bypassing Darcy’s outstretched hand. “Beth. She’s a good girl, maybe a few years younger than you. She works part time at a restaurant to earn some money while she’s studying, even though her mother and I have a pretty hefty trust fund set up for her.”

He sat down at his desk and gestured for Darcy to sit in the chair opposite him. Not knowing what else to do, Darcy sat down.
“I didn’t like it,” the Dean went on, tapping at his computer. “But she insisted, said it made her feel more like her friends who weren’t as lucky as she is. Anyway, she was working the afternoon shift when those alien…things attacked.”

“Is she…alright?” Darcy asked hesitantly. He hadn’t used the past tense, but grief did weird things to people.

“Thanks to Captain America, yes she is,” the Dean said, reaching out to touch a picture of a pretty blonde girl that was sitting on his desk. “He saved her life, and the lives of hundreds of other people that day. The media has been suspiciously silent about him, but I did read something about him being linked to SHIELD, him and Tony Stark and…”

He hesitated.

“Is the big blond man really the Norse god of thunder?” he asked.

“He’s the guy the Vikings worshipped at the god of thunder,” Darcy said carefully, mindful of the briefing videos she had sat through, and what she was allowed to say to non-SHIELD personnel. “Although whether you would call him a god is up to you and your own belief system, I guess.”

“Amazing,” the Dean said, in an almost wistful tone. “I used to teach comparative theology,” he explained to Darcy. “The chance to speak to an actual god…” he breathed, and then sighed.

“But this isn’t getting anything done,” he said briskly. “What was I saying?”

“Uh…Captain America saved your daughter’s life?” Darcy said, trying to remember her way through this bizarre conversation. It would have been tricky enough without having the scotch blurring the edges of her mind.

“Yes!” said the Dean triumphantly. “And I would love to be able to show my gratitude to him in some way. But as I can’t, I suppose the next best thing is to show it to you!”

“Right…” Darcy said slowly, trying to follow the Dean’s logic. “Because…”
“Because he has something to do with SHIELD, and you work for them, and you were pretty much screwed over and because your parents worked damned hard to give you a good education. Do you need another reason, Miss Lewis?”

“Nope,” Darcy said, a little taken aback. “That works for me.”

“Good,” said the Dean, pecking at his keyboard. “You were only twenty credits short from Stanford?”

“Yes,” Darcy said. “Not the poli-sci stuff, I got all my credits in that. Just the required courses in math, science and the humanities.”

“Right,” said the Dean, pecking again at the computer. “And you say you’re working full time?”

“Six am to two pm,” Darcy said quickly. “I left my afternoons and evenings free so I could pick up courses then.”

“Smart,” the Dean said approvingly. “Well, here’s the bottom line, Miss Lewis. Columbia University is proud to offer you a place to complete the twenty credits necessary to earn your degree.”

“Seriously?” Darcy asked, tears beginning to form again in her eyes.

“Seriously,” the Dean replied, smiling. “The School of Continuing Education is just right for you. It’s designed to offer courses to students returning to study from employment, but it also offers classes outside of normal working hours in order to allow people to juggle both work and college. All you have to do is take the twenty credits that all Columbia first years have to complete, and you have your degree.”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this for me,” Darcy said, the tears now running freely down her face.

“I’d like to do more,” the Dean admitted. “But my hands are tied on the fees front.”

“I’ve got that covered,” Darcy said firmly. “I can go for one more year of loans.”
“And accommodation?” the Dean frowned. “It’s late in the year, but I might be able to find you somewhere on campus.”

Darcy shuddered. “Thanks,” she said gratefully. “But I’ve had more psycho roommates than a girl can stand. I’ll find my own apartment.”

“The offer still stands,” the Dean insisted, but then he relaxed into a smile. “But I understand about the psycho roommate issue,” he confided. “I once roomed with a boy whose hobby was taxidermy.”

“Gross,” Darcy said in revulsion.

“All those little eyes...” the Dean said, shivering as her brought himself out of his reverie. He sent some files to the printer, and then retrieved them. “Sign here,” he said cheerfully. “And you’re on your way being a Columbia graduate.”

Darcy couldn’t sign quickly enough.
Darcy celebrated her new status as a Columbia student with another glass of the Dean’s excellent scotch, and then wobbled off to find a bathroom to repair her make-up, which had run all over her face.

She arrived back at the hotel lobby that hid the entrance to SHIELD headquarters to meet Chuck half-drunk and grinning. She was clutching her acceptance letter to Columbia in one hand and a copy of the *New York Post* in another.

“Chuck!” she yelled, launching herself at the agent and catching him in a sloppy hug. “I’m moving out!”

“Woah,” Chuck said, catching her as she tripped and fell face first into his broad chest. “What brewery did you fall into today?”

“I have been drinking scotch with the Dean of Admissions at Columbia University,” Darcy said importantly, and then spoiled her imperiousness by hiccupping loudly. “And I’ve got in.”

“Oh-huh,” Chuck said, deftly manhandling her until she was standing upright again. “So you’re moving into campus accommodation?”

Darcy blew an eloquent raspberry of disgust and waved her newspaper in his face.

“I’ll be going solo, Texas Ranger,” she announced. “Somewhere in here is Darcy’s Dream Home. No more psychos for Darcy.”

“Really?” Chuck asked, an unmistakable grin on his face as he got Darcy walking in a mostly straight line towards their pick-up point. “You mean the only psycho in your apartment is going to be you?”

“Exactly!” Darcy said cheerfully, and it only took a few moments for the part of her brain that wasn’t swimming in scotch to process the friendly insult. She poked Chuck Norris in the chest with a finger
as a punishment.

“I’ve got to start apartment hunting,” Darcy announced as they got into the SUV. She fumbled for the newspaper, but Chuck, who was no fool, confiscated it.

“You can look at home,” he said firmly.

Darcy tried her best pout, but it had no effect.

“You know that living in the city is really expensive,” he said after a while. “Have you thought about how you’re going to be able to afford to live alone?”

“I have a plan,” Darcy announced.

Chuck waited.

“And can I hear this plan?” he asked, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

“Harlem,” Darcy told him. She waited for a reaction. When none was forthcoming, she added a “Tah-dah!” and waved her hands in the air.

Chuck frowned.

“That’s not a good area,” he began, but Darcy leaned forward, grabbed his lips between her thumb and forefinger and squeezed them shut.

“You’re not going to get all racist on me, are you Chuck?” she demanded. “Crime in Harlem has gone down in the last five years. I have statistics…statistics…figures,” she finished. “There are some parts that are just as safe as anywhere else. And I’m pretty sure that I can get mugged in downtown Manhattan just as easily as Harlem.”

Sighing, Chuck gently removed Darcy’s fingers from his lips.
“Racism has nothing to do with it,” he said firmly. “And I know Harlem now isn’t Harlem thirty years ago. But there are still some bad areas, Darcy. You need to be careful.”

“Careful is my middle name,” Darcy told him smugly, then belched.

“Sure it’s not ‘Classy’?” Chuck asked dryly, pulling a bottle of water from the arm of his seat, cracking open the lid and handing it to her.

“Actually, it’s ‘Awesome’,” Darcy said, sipping her water with one hand and flipping him off with the other.

“Look at that,” Chuck sighed. “You’re a New Yorker now.”

Because Chuck was a good person as well as a good agent, he stood and watched Darcy drink her body weight in water before making sure she had more water, aspirin and a hastily-emptied fruit bowl by the side of her bed.

“I wanted to start apartment hunting,” Darcy said darkly as Chuck held up the corner of her duvet for her to climb in.

“Plenty of time for that tomorrow,” Chuck said firmly. “Those apartments aren’t going anywhere. Do you want the TV on?”

“Yes,” Darcy said, grumpily. “But no sports.”

Chuck clicked through the channels until Darcy grabbed at his hand.

“West Wing re-run,” she announced. “And it’s just starting.”

“You like this?” Chuck said after a while.

“Don’t tell anyone,” Darcy said, her eyes glued to the screen, “but it’s what made me choose polisci.”
She patted the side of the bed.

“Sit,” she commanded. “Watch.”

“I don’t know who any of these people are,” Chuck protested as he did exactly what he was told.

“See that guy sitting behind the big desk in the funny shaped room?” Darcy said, a little snark sneaking through the scotch. “He’s the president.”

“Hysterical,” Chuck deadpanned.

They watched in silence for ten minutes, then he nudged her arm with his.

“So are the blonde woman and the guy with crazy hair doing it, or what?”

“Not for another five seasons,” Darcy mourned. “Josh and Donna have the most U of all the UST. That means,” she began, but Chuck waved her into silence.

“I know what it means,” he said. “I’m not a complete noob.”

They watched for a few more minutes, then he nudged her arm again.

“Are you feeling sick, or do you want me to send out for pizza?”

“You’re a good man, Charlie Brown,” Darcy said, not taking her eyes off the screen. “No olives.”

“Pause that,” Chuck Norris ordered, scrolling through the phone for the number for the pizza place. “I have to go and pick this up and I want to know what happens with Sam and Ainsley Hayes.”
“Dude, we all wanted to know what happens with Sam and Ainsley Hayes,” Darcy said, obediently pausing the playback.

Darcy fell asleep after two slices of pizza, but Chuck waited until the end of the episode before he cleared up the mess and left to add the first few seasons to his Netflix queue.

It was during the car ride the next day, feeling hung-over and slightly queasy, that Darcy realised that Chuck, who had stayed up to mainline most of the first season and had the manic glow of the newly converted, had somehow gone from “reluctant babysitter” to “new friend”, and that she had Aaron Sorkin to thank for it.

She spent her lunch hour, which, due to her odd working hours, was more like ten o’clock in the morning, sitting in Coulson’s hospital room with a new copy of the *New York Post* and a marker pen. Today’s musical selection was a compilation of the best of The Who, and Darcy absently tapped her foot to Pinball Wizard as she scanned the property section.

“I’d be happier doing this online,” she told his unconscious form, “but there are some pretty heavy restrictions on internet use in this place. I can understand why you wouldn’t be too keen on Twitter or Facebook, but I can’t even get Google. Google? What is this place, China?”

Coulson remained unimpressed by Darcy’s annoyance with SHIELD’s IT restrictions.

She looked around at the beeping equipment and frowned.

“I’m not going to kill you if I use my cell, am I?” she asked, phone in hand.

“Well, you’re no help,” she sighed, when he remained steadily unconscious. “I’ll ask your nurse. Her name’s Rachel, by the way, and she’s really nice. You might want to think about taking her out for dinner when you wake up, to say thank you for all the sponge baths you’ve been getting. Hey, Rachel?”

Her shout brought the other woman out from her small office. Darcy waved her phone at her.

“Am I going to kill Uncle Phil if I make some calls?”
Rachel smiled.

“You need to take it out past the security doors,” she said firmly. “We use a wireless network to monitor the machines, and your cell phone could scramble the data.”

“Oh, okay,” Darcy said, putting her phone back into her bag. “Is it okay if I leave my iPod plugged into these speakers, or do you want me to put the earbuds in Uncle Phil?”

“You can leave it playing,” Rachel said. “I like The Who.”

“Yeah?” Darcy said, picking up her newspaper. “Any recs for new music for Uncle Phil? I’m not exactly up on his favourites.”

Rachel shrugged. “Have you tried Cream?”

Darcy looked at her blankly. Rachel sighed.

“I’ve got some CDs he might like,” she told Darcy. “I’ll bring them in tomorrow. His vitals have been getting stronger since you’ve been visiting, you know.”

“Yeah?” Darcy said, oddly touched. “Really?”

Rachel nodded. “You’re doing a good job,” she said. “Don’t give up on him. And don’t use your phone around the equipment,” she added, before turning away and going back to her office.

Darcy watched the attractive older woman walk away. She looked down at Coulson, tugged the blanket that had gone askew when she had put her feet up on the bed, and whispered, “You know, she’s not wearing a wedding ring. Just saying, Uncle Phil,” before heading back out towards the security doors.

“How’s the apartment hunt going?” Chuck asked her the next day. He had taken to six am starts with the bare minimum of complaining, which Darcy appreciated. He was also of the opinion that CJ and
Toby should hook up, which made him a pain in the ass, because CJ and Danny had an epic love of all time, and he should acknowledge that.

It was nice to have a friend to argue about The West Wing with. Jane had never been able to sit through an entire episode without doodling equations on scraps of paper, even in the episode with the super colliding super conductor.

“Not brilliantly,” Darcy acknowledged. She’d found seven potential apartments in the paper yesterday, but by half ten in the morning they had all been taken by people who were either psychic or had contacts in the New York Post’s property section.

“You know, plenty of SHIELD people share apartments,” Chuck offered. “I’m sure that there’s somebody that needs a roommate.”

Darcy shook her head stubbornly. “No roommates,” she said firmly. “I told you about this Chuck, it’s independence or nothing.”

Chuck sighed and handed her the morning edition of the paper. “Have you thought about signing up with a letting agency?” he asked. “They’ll do all the hard work for you.”

Darcy waved her phone at him.

“First thing I did, Chuck. I’m on the books of ten different agencies, and not one of them has managed to find me anything in my price range.”

She opened the paper and began to read the property listings again.

It became a pattern over the next week; check in with the letting agencies, scan the paper, ring the number beside the adverts, hang up in despair. SHIELD were being very nice about not throwing her out onto her ass into the street, but Chuck’s enquiries about her search for a home were getting more and more pointed.

Frustrated, Darcy took to the streets to try and find herself a place to live. She started in Morningside Heights, figuring that landlords would be keen to rent to students living off-campus, but had to
expand her search into Harlem when it became obvious that she couldn’t afford a one bedroom walk-up near Columbia. The disappointment continued into the better areas of Harlem. There were plenty of people looking for a roommate, but she stubbornly stuck to her guns. The more she travelled the streets of Harlem, the more she noticed damaged buildings and contractors shoring up broken up masonry.

She stopped for a coffee in a small diner and asked the waitress about it.

“I didn’t think the aliens got this far,” Darcy said, gesturing at the building across the street.

The woman snorted in disgust.

“That all happened long before those damn aliens came,” she told Darcy, wiping ferociously at the table around Darcy’s open newspaper.

“They’re not aliens,” Darcy shot back. “That’s what the hell happened.”

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“They’re not aliens,” Darcy shot back. “That’s what the hell happened.”

She blanched and jerked backwards as the waitress whipped the cleaning cloth down on the table.

“What kind of dumb ass question is that? How many big green monsters you think New York’s got?”

“Well, at least two, by your count,” Darcy shot back.
The woman gazed at her for a moment, then plonked down, unbidden, in the seat opposite Darcy’s.

“Fair point,” she acknowledged. “The green guy that caught Tony Stark was here, ripping up Harlem, but he wasn’t as bad as the other one. The other one looked like a lizard, only huge, and on steroids.”

“Have they been back?” Darcy asked.

The woman shrugged. “Haven’t seen either of them until the green guy stopped that metal slug thing.”

“So if I was thinking of moving here, I wouldn’t be squashed flat by big green monsters?”

The waitress shrugged expressively.

“No more so than anywhere else in the city.”

She looked at Darcy’s paper, which had twelve properties circled and twelve big, red lines drawn through them.

“You looking for a place to stay?” she asked.

“Looking,” Darcy said, sipping her coffee. “But not finding. By the time I find anything in my price range, it’s gone already.”

“You fussy about your address?”

Darcy laughed. “If it’s got four walls, a roof and no roommate, I’ll take anything.”

The woman sized her up, then took her order pad out of her pocket and scribbled an address down.
“The building looks like shit,” she said bluntly, “and it’s not much better on the inside. But it’s cheap. Most of the tenants are old folks, on a fixed income. There’s a couple of single moms. Not the best of people, but not the worse, either.”

“Cheap is the magic word,” Darcy said brightly. “Thanks.”

The woman held out the paper to Darcy, but pulled it back slightly before she could take it.

“The apartment next to my mom’s is empty. The previous tenant died. A couple of crack heads wanted the room, but I kicked up enough of a stink that the building manager turned them down. Crack heads! Next to my mother!”

She gauged Darcy’s reaction to her displeasure.

“I wouldn’t let that happen either,” Darcy assured her, and her serious tone must have convinced the waitress.

“He said I had a week to fill the room or he’d take the next person who wanted it.”

The waitress gave her an assessing look.

“You don’t look like a crack head to me. You do any other drugs?”

“None!” Darcy said, her hand on her heart. “I don’t even smoke.”

“Loud music? Parties?” the woman went on suspiciously.

“No way,” Darcy swore. “I’ve got a job, and I’m studying in the evenings. I’ll be there to sleep and shower, and that’s all.”

The assessing look continued. Darcy tried the Disney Princess eyes, but they were about as much use on the waitress as they were on her mother.
“Alright,” the waitress sniffed, handing her the paper. “You want to see it now?”

“Definitely,” Darcy assured her.

“Bill!” the waitress yelled. “I’m taking my lunch break now.”

There was some muttering from the kitchen, and the waitress got her coat.

“I’m Estelle,” she said to Darcy as they left the diner.

“Darcy,” said Darcy, and stuck out her hand. The other woman shook it, and they continued on down the road, past boarded-up shops and more construction sites.

The apartment building was a few blocks from the diner, but a bus stop sat right outside it.

“Would that get me to midtown?” Darcy asked, pointing at the bus stop.

“If you sat on it long enough,” Estelle said. “Where do you work?”

“I’m an admin assistant for big company,” Darcy hedged. “Lots of copying and filing. Pretty boring, but it pays the bills.”

She looked nervously at a small gang of young men who were sitting just down from the entrance to the building.

“Pay them no mind,” Estelle instructed. “They just hang around and try and look tough because there’s nothing else for them to do.”

Darcy’s hand closed around her taser in her pocket as she nodded at Estelle.
She followed the other woman up the stairs to the door to the building, which had peeling brown paint and a big heavy lock on it. The lock made her feel better, but she could have lived without the graffiti that had been spray painted on it.

Estelle pressed a button next to the name “Williams” written in shaky block capitals.

“Mom? It’s Estelle. Open up, I think I’ve got somebody for the apartment next to yours.”

She let go of the button and waited.

“Mom’s not too quick on her feet any more,” she told Darcy. “Arthritis.”

Eventually the door buzzed open, and Darcy and Estelle went inside. The foyer smelled of boiled cabbage, and was painted the most doleful shade of brown she had ever seen. Boxes for mail sat on one wall. The carpet was faded and had been repaired at intervals with duct tape. Drips from a pipe fell into a bucket put there specifically to catch them, but somebody had clearly mistaken it for a urinal at some point as there was a foul smell that cut right through the cabbage. An elevator sat opposite the mail boxes, but it was covered in more duct tape and had big ‘Do Not Use’ signs plastered all over it.

“The building manager lives down there,” Estelle said, pointing to a door down a small corridor. Her face curled into a scowl. “Although he just sits on his ass all day watching TV instead of fixing anything.”

They started up the stairs. The apartment turned out to be on the seventh floor, and Darcy was gasping by the time they came onto the landing. That would be enough to keep her fit, she thought, as she put her hand on her knees and pulled air into her lungs.

Estelle knocked on a door almost at the end of the corridor, and eventually it was opened by an older woman, her hands swollen with what had to be incredibly painful arthritis.

“Hey Mom,” Estelle said, bending to kiss her mother on the cheek. “This is Darcy. She’s here to check out the apartment next door.”

“Hi Mrs Williams,” Darcy said brightly. She didn’t want to shake the older woman’s hand as it looked painful, so she waved instead.
“You work?” the older woman said suspiciously.

“Mom,” Estelle said, exasperated by her mother’s less than friendly greeting.

“Six am to two pm at a big office in midtown. I’m an admin assistant. I’m also a student at Columbia, so I’ll be there during the afternoons and evenings. I don’t do drugs and I don’t play my music loud.”

Darcy smiled at the older woman again, but clearly the Disney Princess eyes had no effect on any of the Williams women. If it wasn’t for the fact that the Williams were African-American and her own mother was of a mixed European background, she might almost suspect that they were related.

“Give her the key,” Mrs Williams said, after looking Darcy up and down. “See what she thinks.”

“How come you have the key?” Darcy asked Estelle, who was scrabbling about in her handbag.

“Part of my deal with the building manager. I didn’t trust him not to rent out the apartment behind my back, so I held onto the key. He’s got a master, but he doesn’t have a spare.”

“That’s clever,” Darcy said appreciatively.

“He’s a worm,” Estelle said bluntly. “You’ve got to be smarter than him.”

She found the correct key, put it in the lock, and turned it.

“Of course,” she continued, shrugging, “that isn’t difficult, considering that there are dust bunnies out there smarter than him.”

The apartment wasn’t big – in fact, the word small could be used quite honestly – but it had something that Darcy had never had before, and that was privacy, and a bathroom that she didn’t have to share.
She had a window, caked in grime, which led to a fire escape, which looked as if it was being held together by the rust. She had a small kitchenette that was caked in both grease and grime. Her bathroom was beyond small and verging on minute territory, but it had a toilet and a shower even though they were both grubby and had an unpleasant odour. The living area doubled as a bedroom and it was very clear that the carpet hadn’t been cleaned in months, if not years. The wallpaper was the same dour brown as the foyer and the hall outside the door. A lone bluebottle buzzed despondently around the room, knocking into the light fitting that was lacking a light shade.

“So? What do you think?” Estelle asked, a little impatiently.

“The previous tenant…he didn’t die here, did he?” Darcy asked suspiciously.

“No!” Estelle said brightly, and kept up her grin as Darcy stared at her.

Darcy had a good stare. She had practiced on the big ginger tom cat that used to come to her garden when she was a kid. She had refined her technique on her goldfish.

“Well, he had his heart attack here, but he was pronounced dead at the hospital,” Estelle relented. “But even if he had given up the ghost right here, would that stop you taking the apartment? It’s dirt cheap, and it’s not like you’re going to find anything better.”

“You’re right,” Darcy said, after a moment. “And I guess it won’t be so bad after I clean it up.”

And shampoo the carpet, she told herself, and set off a few insect bombs. And repaint the walls. And scrub the window…

“That’s the spirit!” Estelle said jovially. “Come and meet the building manager. Just don’t shake his hand,” she warned. “God only knows what you’ll catch.”

The building manager looked like he came out of The Big Book Of Creeps, Perverts and Weirdos, Urban Edition. Something about him screamed “axe murderer”, while something else oozed from his scalp. He also seemed to be the source of the boiled cabbage smell that pervaded the building.

“All on your own, are you?” he leered, as Darcy scanned the tenancy agreement before signing it.
Without looking at him, Darcy pulled her taser from her pocket and sparked it up a few times.

“Just me and Sparky McGee,” she said.

She heard him back up suddenly, crashing into a table as he got away from the dangerous weapon.

“You’re not allowed any pets,” he said sullenly.

“Fine,” Darcy said, reading the small print carefully. “Hey, what’s this clause about you being able to enter the apartment whenever you want?”

He smiled at her, and she had to fight not to curl her lip at his browning teeth.

“I have to be able to have access to fix any problems you may have.”

Estelle fixed him with a narrow gaze.

“I don’t see you using that power to fix any of things wrong with my mom’s apartment!”

Darcy kept reading the tenancy agreement as Estelle ripped pieces from the disgusting building manager. He could have his right to enter all he wanted, there was nothing in the agreement about her not being able to add extra locks to her door. Given the state of the building and the general area, that would probably be a good thing.

“I want a copy of this,” she told the man, interrupting Estelle in mid flow. “I’m going to go and get you the first and last month’s rent, and the security deposit. While I’m gone, you can go up and check that all the plumbing is working right. I’m not paying anything until everything’s working.”

“I’ll go with him,” Estelle said, staring at him. “While he’s got his tool bag out, he can go to my Mom’s apartment and fix the pipe under the sink like he’s been promising to do for the last three months.”

“But of course,” the greasy man said with a flourish, and slouched off into the bowels of his
apartment to gather his tools.

“He’s a toad,” Darcy said as they went back out into the foyer.

“Big enough shovel, you can squash a toad flat,” Estelle said absently. “Where’d you get that taser?”

“Present from my dad,” Darcy said, handing it over for Estelle to look at. “Not exactly street-legal, but when push comes to shove…”

“Electrocute the bastards,” finished Estelle. “Nice. I think I’m going to look into getting one of those.”

“I took out a huge guy with it once,” Darcy said, trying not to flashback to meeting Thor, and failing. “He went down like a tree.”

They were interrupted by the building manager rudely pushing his way between them.

“Nearest Bank of America?” Darcy asked.

“Six blocks that way,” Estelle pointed.

By the time Darcy had withdrawn her money and returned to the apartment building, Estelle had opened the window in her new apartment and was vacuuming the carpet thoroughly. It wasn’t doing a lot of good, but it was a thoughtful act.

“The toilet flushes and the shower works,” Estelle reported. “Of course, you’re at the mercy of the hot water in the building like the rest of the tenants.”

“Thanks,” Darcy said gratefully. “You didn’t have to do this. I really appreciate it.”

“I get a nice girl living next to my mom, I’m happy,” Estelle said dismissively. “The basement has washers and dryers, and there’s a bodega across the street that doesn’t gouge you too much on their prices.”
“Where’s the nearest hardware store?” Darcy asked, peering out of the window at her rusty fire escape. “I want to add another lock on the door and pick up a few gallons of paint.”

“My brother works in a store. I’ll give him a call and tell him you’ll be coming by.”

Estelle wrote the address down on the order pad she had used before.

“I’d better be getting back. This is the longest lunch hour I’ve ever taken.”

“I’m sorry if I’ve gotten you in trouble,” Darcy started, but Estelle waved her off dismissively.

“Bill won’t care, the times I’ve gone past my hours for him in the past. When are you moving in?”

Darcy took a good look at the state of the apartment.

“Probably not for another week,” she said. “That’ll give me time to get this place cleaned up.”

Estelle nodded briskly. “Well, stop by at the diner and let me know how you’re getting on. And not too much noise late at night,” she warned Darcy. “Mom needs her sleep.”


“You’re welcome,” the older woman replied. “Bye, Darcy.”

Not long after she went, the building manager reappeared with the tenancy agreement and the copy Darcy had requested. She signed her name on the dotted line, handed over her first month, last month and security deposit and kicked the man out as soon as he had pocketed her cash.

Then she sat on the floor in the middle of her new apartment, and started to plan.
It had taken nearly three weeks, but Darcy was finally able to move out of the luxurious SHIELD protective housing and into her new craphole of an apartment, about an hour and a half away from her work place.

Chuck Norris had looked displeased when she told him she had finally found an apartment, annoyed when she told him what street it was on and actually angry when she had taken him to see it.

“It needs a little work,” she allowed.

“It needs tearing down,” he replied. “Darcy, are you insane?”

“No Chuck, just a girl on a budget,” she replied, frostily. “And right now, this is all my budget can stretch to. So do you think you can be a little less disapproving and help me fit some more locks on my door?”

He blinked at her, surprised.

“I’m stubborn, not stupid,” Darcy pointed out. “I know this isn’t a great area, Chuck. But I’ve signed the agreement, so be a good friend and go to the hardware store for me? The son of the lady next door has put some locks aside for me, the same ones he put on his mom’s door.”

Chuck was a good friend, and more than that, he was a good friend with the SHIELD SUV which meant that while he was there he also picked up the paint that Darcy had ordered as well as lunch.

When they peeled back the carpet from the wall to protect it during painting, they discovered a pretty nice wooden floor. After checking with Mrs Williams next door for acceptable noise levels, Chuck hauled a rented sanding machine up seven flights of stairs and they stripped off years of dirty floor polish.

The wallpaper was pretty decent, just painted a god-awful colour, so they painted over the brown with a soft blue, slapped a few coats of white on the ceiling and then painted the skirting boards white. The kitchen responded well to the hours of elbow grease that Darcy spent bringing the old appliances up to a shine. The window had gleamed clear and bright until a rainstorm dirtied it again, but Darcy had tried. There wasn’t much to be done to the bathroom other than clean the hell out of it.
Darcy used every trick in the book and then some to get rid of the troubling smell and clean what must have been years of crusty limescale from the shower. The pipes banged and made ominous noises, and the hot water was at best intermittent, but the tiles on the wall were now a gleaming white and not one speck of mould had survived her intensive bleaching regimen. A brand new shower curtain helped brighten the small room.

Once she had re-sanded the floor to clear it of stray drops of paint that had made it through the dustsheets, Darcy spent hours carefully applying a new layer of varnish to the floorboards. When she was done, the apartment looked totally different. Still tiny, still in a pretty bad section of town, but brighter, cleaner and smelling of lemon cleaner, new paint and floor polish.

When the floor was dry, Darcy took Chuck and his SUV to Ikea. This tested the limits of their new friendship to the extreme, but Darcy emerged with a futon, bookcases, bedroom furniture for the bedroom she didn’t actually possess and hundreds of smelly candles, as she loved the red berry ones. Buoyed by a visit to Estelle’s diner for food, Chuck even stayed around to help assemble the larger pieces of furniture before bowing out for his date with Alison. Darcy had packed her cases and brought the last of her stuff from the SHIELD safehouse that morning, and stayed up until the early hours of the morning putting away her clothes and shelving the books she had brought with her from California.

“Extension cables,” she muttered to herself as she fell asleep for the first time in her new apartment. “Rugs. Teaspoons. A TV.”

Lists dancing in her head, she fell asleep.

Life fell into a routine for Darcy. She got up early enough to take a tepid shower in her tiny bathroom, threw on some of her professional-looking clothes and got on the bus that conveniently stopped just down from her building. If she was up early enough she’d make up a travel thermos of coffee to sip while staring out of the windows of the bus, but if she’d slept through her alarm she had to make do with her ‘Wake Up’ playlist on her iPod. She got into work about fifteen minutes before her shift started down in the Vault, so that gave her enough time to grab breakfast from the cafeteria and power up on caffeine. She spent from 6am to 2pm sorting, filing and delivering items all over the building. Chuck stopped by every so often, and Darcy looked in on Coulson during one of her breaks.

School didn’t start for a few weeks, so Darcy used the time to pour over the brochures that were delivered to her new apartment and pick her courses. Telling her parents over the phone that she had got a transfer to Columbia for her senior year was well worth the cost of a long distance call. They were so proud of her, it almost made her want to cry.

She had to pick twenty credits’ worth of courses from at least four of the university faculties. She
decided on English Literature, because she’d always been good at that in high school, and History of Art, because she’d never had the chance to study that before and New York had some seriously good museums she wanted to visit. Math was out – Darcy was no lover of numbers, so that meant taking a class in the Physical Education Faculty. She liked getting sweaty about as much as she liked trigonometry (i.e., not at all), but there was an archery class. As far as she could tell, you stood still and pulled a string back on a bow. That didn’t sound too energetic, so she signed up for that. Plus the class was a pass/fail based on attendance only. Darcy didn’t have to even hit the target with an arrow for her four credits, so that was a definite must. She decided to use up the rest of her credits in the Science Faculty. There were some beginner classes in physics, and given that Darcy had helped Jane so much, she figured that some of Jane’s genius must have rubbed off.

The subject of Jane was still a sore one for Darcy. They hadn’t been best buddies or anything, but during their time in New Mexico they had formed some kind of understanding based on proximity. You got to know someone when they shared their emergency tampons with you.

Finding (and running down) Thor, witnessing the big scary robot from Asgard, waiting for Thor to come back; all of these things had made Darcy think that her relationship to Jane went beyond that of lab-monkey and graph-girl. Jane’s refusal to respond to any of Darcy’s emails or texts after the first few weeks of Darcy’s return to college hurt Darcy, a lot more than she liked to admit to herself. It was like now Jane had her big hunky alien boyfriend to think about, she didn’t need Darcy anymore.

And yes, if this reminded Darcy of her best friend Molly’s treatment of her, aged thirteen, well then screw it. Childhood traumas weren’t any less traumatic just because they happened to you when you were a kid.

So Darcy signed up for the science courses, took some books out of Columbia’s library and tried not to think of Jane as she tried to get some background reading done. The ‘no outside objects in the Vault’ rule was annoying because that was quality reading time that was being wasted, but so far the silent and glare-y guards on the door remained unwilling to budge on the subject.

After work she’d stop by Coulson to speak to him and to Rachel, and to swap out the CDs that Rachel swore were improving Coulson’s vital signs by the day. He still showed no signs of waking up, but the ECG was regularly recording increased brain activity and his blood pressure was returning to something approaching normal.

Sometimes when work was over she’d hang out with Alison, who was trying to get back into Darcy’s good books because of Chuck and Alison’s burgeoning relationship. Other times they’d have ‘West Wing and Pizza’ night because the love for Sorkin wasn’t going away, and Alison was in love with Rob Lowe and was happy for Darcy to join them. No matter how welcoming Alison and Chuck were, she still felt like a third wheel when she hung out with them. They were so clearly in the first flush of attraction that Darcy often felt pushed to the side by the amount of pheromones flying around the room.
She had to have sex soon. It had been months, and she was beginning to feel the lack.

Darcy’s life had settled down into a rhythm, when a massive explosion rocked both her own personal world and the building she was working in. She was pushing her delivery trolley down a corridor that held the highest security labs when it happened. One minute she was handing the sealed box containing files over to the guard at the door, the next minute the whole corridor vibrated and the security doors flew open revealing a large cloud of black smoke and three distinctly singed looking figures.

One of them looked incredibly familiar.

“Jane?” Darcy said over the noise of fire extinguishers, alarms and the general localised swearing that this sort of incident usually provoked.

“Darcy?” Jane staggered a little, and Darcy shot out a hand to grab hold of her before she fell over.

“I thought you were in college,” Jane said, puzzled. “In California.”

“And I thought you were…well, actually, I didn’t know where you were because nobody would tell me,” Darcy said, bitterness bleeding into her voice. “And you stopped answering your emails.”

“I have email?” Jane said, frowning.

“Oh God, you’re totally useless,” Darcy sighed.

“Normally one of my assistants handles all that for me,” Jane said, trying to wipe smoke smudges off her face, seemingly unaware that her hands were adding more. “They didn’t say I had any emails from you.”

Darcy turned to look at the two white-coated, coughing lab assistants that had made it out. Around them SHIELD personnel buzzed about. A loud “What the *fuck* has happened down here?” alerted Darcy to Director Fury’s presence somewhere further back along the corridor.

“Why didn’t you tell Jane that I’d been in touch with her?” she demanded of one of the white coats.
He looked her up and down, and sniffed.

“Doctor Foster doesn’t have the time to answer unimportant emails from unqualified hangers-on,” he replied, and ruined his snotty tone by coughing loudly at the end of his pronouncement of Darcy’s lack of importance.

“Doctor Foster can make up her own mind about things,” Darcy said sharply. “There’s a reason why she’s a fricking genius, you know. Although,” she said, turning to Jane, who was looking a little sheepish, “sometimes she does forget to do things like eat, and sleep for appropriate amounts of time.”

Darcy frowned at Jane.

“This is an awful lot like the time you left the coffee pot on the burner and the kitchen exploded,” Darcy said. “When was the last time you ate anything?”

“Uh,” said Jane, patting down her pockets. “I had a candy bar. Uh. Yesterday, I think? Day before, at the latest.”

She produced the wrapper in triumph. Darcy rolled her eyes.

“For a genius, you’re the dumbest person I know,” she lectured. “Your body needs proper nutrition, Jane, and sleep that wasn’t conducted slumped over your desk in twenty minute intervals. That’s how explosions happen.”

“Yes, Darcy,” Jane said automatically. She had been on the receiving end of this lecture before, and knew all the words.

“I don’t know who you think you are…” one of the white coats began, but Darcy cut him off with an upheld palm.

“Who I am? Who I am? It doesn’t matter who the hell I am, Jim-Bob, I’m not the one that let a genius astrophysicist blow up half of SHIELD headquarters! How many degrees do you have?” she snapped at him.
“I’ve got a PhD in theoretical physics,” the man said testily, pulling himself up to his full height, “and my name isn’t Jim-Bob.”

“We’ll I’ve got three quarters of a degree in Political Science, and even I can tell that letting Jane futz around with things that can explode when she hasn’t eaten or slept is a pretty fucking stupid idea!” Darcy yelled. “Until you can work that one out, your name is Jim-Bob!”

“His name will be fucking mud if he’s still standing here by the time I finish this sentence,” came a very pissed-off voice from behind her.

“But she didn’t get to name the other one,” came a very familiar drawl. Darcy whipped around to find Director Fury, Tony Stark and another guy standing in the corridor. Tony Stark wandered up to Darcy, and looked her up and down, and then because he was Tony Stark, down again.

“How about Cletus?” he offered, as he shook her hand. “I think he has the look of a Cletus.”

“Cletus could work,” Darcy said, her mouth now running on autopilot. “But we could go with a Bob theme. Bobby-Ray?”

“I like you,” Stark told her, grinning wolfishly. “You can stay.”

“Nobody’s staying,” barked Fury. “Lewis, get Dr Foster up to medical. Stark, you and Banner get in there and figure out what the hell happened. Jim-Bob and Cletus or whatever the hell your name is, just get the fuck out.”

“Excuse me,” said the man that had accompanied the director and Tony Stark down the corridor. Stark had already accelerated down the corridor, and Darcy was standing in the other man’s way.

Adorable, was the first word that came into Darcy’s mind. His hair was just a smidge too long, and was starting to curl. He had glasses that framed big brown eyes, and the look of a man who hadn’t had a good meal in a long time. He wasn’t overly tall, barely an inch or so taller than Tony Stark had been (and no wonder he’d built a flying metal suit, dude had some serious lack of height to make up for), but Darcy appreciated not having to crane her neck like she did when she spoke to Chuck. His body had a pleasing sense of solidity to it, and the rolled-up sleeves of his shirt revealed a dusting of dark hair.
Darcy’s secret kink was body hair, although she’d go to her death denying it. A muscular body was very nice, but in her mind, real men had hair.

He even smelled good, like citrus and woodsmoke and something else.

She was fighting the urge to fling her nose into his neck and take a really big sniff.

“Miss? Excuse me?”

Oh yeah, hot older science dude (must be a science dude to be hanging out with Tony Stark and be allowed to wander around SHIELD science corridors unsupervised) needed to get past her, and she was standing there blocking his way and debating the merits of climbing him like a tree and sniffing him. Nice one, Darcy.

“Oh sure,” she said clumsily, backing out of his way and grabbing hold of Jane. “Come on, genius lady. Let’s make sure you haven’t knocked some of those brain cells loose.”

“Don’t touch my equipment!” Jane yelled, tugging at Darcy’s grip. “I made most of it myself!”

“It shows,” said Tony’s echoing voice. “Good god, did you use actual baling wire?”

“Come on,” Darcy said firmly. “Nurse Rachel, then the cafeteria, then you can come and learn to share your toys with the boys.”

She heaved Jane past Fury, who was staring at her with his one good eye, a thoughtful expression on his face.

*What the hell, thought Darcy. I read my contract. They can’t fire me and I can’t quit, not for two years.*

“If you’ve got nothing else to do,” Darcy called back over her shoulder. “That file needs to be delivered to Dr Yi on the next level down. The cart’s wheel sticks a bit.”
She picked up her pace as she rounded the corner, both not wanting to see the look on Fury’s face and yet desperate to see it at the same time.

“I don’t think that was very clever, Darcy,” Jane said with a frown.

“And how many labs have I blown up today?” Darcy asked her. “None. So don’t talk to me about clever.”

Jane shut up, and leant against Darcy in the elevator. Reminding herself that she was actually really mad at Jane for not getting her emails herself and delegating the job to Jim-Bob, Darcy grudgingly put her arm around her ex-boss’ worrying thin shoulders.

Nurse Rachel gave her a basic check-up, pronounced her filthy but unharmed, and dispatched her into a shower room that Darcy didn’t know the medical suite had. Once Jane was clean and dressed in a set of clothes that Rachel managed to pull out of thin air, Darcy took her down to the cafeteria. When left to fend for herself, Jane tended to revert to high-sugar snacks washed down with cold coffee. When Darcy had been around, she’d kept her more or less fed and watered on a regular schedule. Jane was always going to be one of those annoyingly tiny women with the metabolism of a weight lifter, but Darcy could see that she’d lost weight that she couldn’t afford from her skinny frame since the last time they’d seen each other.

“Eat,” Darcy ordered as she put a bowl of tomato soup in front of her. She added some rolls slathered in thick butter, and watched with a frown until Jane obediently spooned some soup into her mouth. After three or four mouthfuls her body clearly recognised food with actual vitamins in it, and she finished both the bowl and the rolls in record time.

“Is there more?” she asked, looking around at the room as if she was seeing it for the first time.

“Wait here,” Darcy said, and returned with a large baked potato and a heap of salad.

“Carbohydrates and protein,” Darcy told her. “They are your friends.”

“Coffee is my friend too,” Jane said slyly.
Darcy pushed a mug across to her. “De-caf,” she said. “Don’t bitch about it,” she warned, as soon as Jane opened her mouth. “Rachel says she wants you back up there for some sleep, and you won’t do it high on caffeine.”

Grumbling, Jane sipped at the mug.

“So,” she said, when Jane had polished off her meal and some much needed colour had come back into her cheeks. “What the hell, Jane?”

“In my defence, I’ve been busy,” Jane said, nervously playing around with the cutlery on her plate.

“Too busy to read your own emails?” Darcy said pointedly. “You never made me do that when I was your lab monkey. I’m almost feeling sorry for Jim-Bob and Cletus.”

“Dr Hansen and Dr Young are both very well respected scientists,” Jane said, sounding as tired as she looked. “You can’t blame them for not thinking that your emails would be something that I needed to look at.”

“Right,” said Darcy shortly. “I get it. No PhD, no need to return an email. Or a phone call.”

“I didn’t mean that,” Jane said, although it was clear by the guilty look in her eyes that it was pretty much exactly what she meant, but she had the grace to feel bad about it. “If I had known that you were here in New York, I would have called you.”

“Yeah,” Darcy said, trying not to sound bitter. “I guess.”

“Not long after you went back to Stanford, and it was clear that Thor wasn’t coming back, SHIELD offered me lab space here. Then they started shipping me all over the world – Australia, South Africa, even Norway – anywhere they thought they had the right people or equipment to help me open an Einstein-Rosen bridge and get Thor back.”

“You did it,” Darcy said, playing with one of the packets of artificial sweetener that were stacked in small pots on all the tables. “I saw him, on the TV.” She grimaced. “That little episode is
why I’m here.”

Jane frowned and shook her head. “That wasn’t me. He got here by some other means and had to go before…well. Before I could get back from Norway.”

She looked so heartbroken that Darcy almost shifted around the table to give her a hug. Almost.

“I thought you’d finished your degree,” Jane continued, looking puzzled.

Darcy shook her head, exasperated at Jane’s lack of involvement with anything so pedestrian as calendars.

“I was twenty credits short when SHIELD yanked me from Stanford and brought me here.”

Jane extended a hand and squeezed one of Darcy’s.

“In the big scheme of things, a degree doesn’t matter, Darcy,” she said kindly. “You’re in SHIELD now. That’s better training than any International Politics degree.”

“Political Science,” Darcy said, annoyance that Jane hadn’t remembered her degree biting at her. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell Jane that she’d transferred to Columbia and that when classes started up for the new semester, she’d be graduating as soon as she had those last few credits in the bag.

Something made her hold back; maybe it was because she wasn’t advertising her choice to keep studying to anybody but Chuck, maybe it was because moving to New York had kick-started her feelings of maturity and she no longer felt the urge to broadcast her every decision over Twitter. Maybe it was because Jane was demonstrating the smug ‘actual science is better than political science’ look that she got whenever they had argued about Darcy’s future degree and Darcy was just that petty. Who knew?

“If you’re done eating, you should be going back to medical to rest,” Darcy said abruptly. “I’ll take you.”
“Okay,” Jane said, sounding a little confused.

Darcy scraped her chair back with just a little more force than necessary and bussed the table for the member of the cafeteria staff who was heading over. Darcy’s early diner training always ensured she made life just that little bit easier for people who served her food. She knew from first hand experience just what somebody could do to your meal if they took a dislike to you.

She had just handed Jane off to Rachel the nurse when a harassed member of the admin staff caught up with them.

“You’re wanted in Director Fury’s office,” she said, a little breathlessly.

Well, shit. That wasn’t good, and by the looks on the faces of Rachel and the admin assistant, they both knew it. Jane had started to snore as soon as her face had touched the highly-starched pillow of her hospital bed.

“I’ll be back to say hi to Uncle Phil later,” Darcy said to Rachel. “Assuming that Director Fury lets me escape his office with my life.”

The other woman nodded, and Darcy went to find an elevator that would take her to the level that housed Fury’s office, deep below them in the bowels of the building. She was waved right through by Fury’s personal assistant, a woman only slightly less feared in the building than the man himself. That also wasn’t a good sign, because it meant that Darcy was currently more important than anything else the man had to deal with, and that just couldn’t be good news.

Fury’s office only had one seat in it, and it was behind his desk; rumour had it, it was to discourage people from wanting to linger there and annoy him, although there were other rumours that he had destroyed his other chairs in a fit of temper when funding from the Heli-Carrier had been blocked and now his personal assistant wouldn’t allow him any replacements. Jury was out on which rumour was true, but after having met the imposing woman, Darcy’s money was on her.

When Darcy entered the room, it was full of testosterone. Fury could pack a room with it all on his own, but Tony Stark was there, playing with what Darcy vaguely recognised as part of one of Jane’s machines and the other guy, the sexy scientist with the arm hair and glasses.

“Miss Lewis,” Fury began, “as of half an hour ago, your security clearance has been raised to Level Three-Al.”
“Holy shit,” Darcy blurted. Several weeks doing the filing had given her a better idea about how the security clearance system worked. She had essentially leapfrogged over people who had been working for SHIELD for twenty years, and had the same sort of access that senior agents had.

“That is because circumstances now require you to become cognisant of the Avengers Initiative,” Fury went on, pretending that she hadn’t spoken, a technique that both parents and teachers had used with her, with varying levels of success.

Darcy frowned. “You mean the secret team of super-powered individuals, SHIELD agents and, ah, Mr Stark? The ones that kicked the alien’s ugly metal asses back through the big hole in the sky?”

“That’s us,” Stark said cheerfully. “We’re having jackets made. And you can call me Tony.”

“We are not having jackets,” the sexy science guy sighed.

“Don’t worry, yours will be XXXXXXXXX-L,” Tony teased.

Well, that made no sense, Darcy thought. Sexy science guy was barely an L. More likely an M.

Fury seemed to be appealing to a higher power for the ability not to punch Tony Stark in the face.

“And how exactly do you know what the Avengers Initiative is?” Fury asked, through clenched teeth. “What with being Level One Epsilon status until this morning?”

Darcy looked at him suspiciously. “Am I going to get in trouble if I tell you?”

Stark smirked. Sexy science guy took off his glasses to clean the lenses, but he was clearly doing it to hide the small smile on his face. He shouldn’t hide it, Darcy decided. It was a good smile. Sexy science guy had plump, kissable lips.

“No,” Fury said. “Enlighten me. Your computer skills are negligible. There’s no way you could have hacked your way into the system.”
“I didn’t need to,” Darcy explained patiently. “All the reports are hand written to prevent hacking, but anybody who works in the Vault is essentially on the honour system not to peek in them.”

“And you peeked?” Stark guessed. Darcy shrugged.

“Wouldn’t you?” she bantered, and he grinned again.

“Oh, definitely,” he assured her. “Banner too, isn’t that right, Bruce?”

*Bruce Banner,* thought Darcy appreciatively. *That’s nicely alliterative. I approve.*

“Am I going to get in trouble if I say yes too?” he joked.

“So you know about the Avengers,” Fury sighed.

“Not all about them,” Darcy said hurriedly. “Just what was mentioned in passing in other reports. I don’t know who they all are, or anything.”

“Well, you’re going to,” Fury said flatly. “After today’s little incident in the labs, Dr Banner and Mr Stark have requested that Dr Foster work with them at their labs in Stark Tower.”

“Avengers Tower,” corrected Stark. “We all hang out there. It’s like the coolest treehouse ever.”

Fury was probably the only person alive who could roll his eyes with just one of them, but he managed.

“She’ll be working *away from here,*” Fury went on, glaring at Stark.

“She’s a genius,” Dr Banner said, turning to Darcy. “Her work on creating and maintaining an Einstein-Rosen bridge…it’s phenomenal.”
“And when you consider what she’s been using to get her results, it’s even more unbelievable,” Stark said, staring in disbelief at the parts he had in his hand. “She’ll get her results much better working with us when I build her something that Noah didn’t give himself a hernia dragging onto the ark.”

“And I think my understanding of gamma radiation may help her refine her theory a little further,” Dr Banner said, regaining Darcy’s attention.

Darcy shrugged. “Okay,” she said to Fury. “I get it. Jane’ll get more work done if she’s working with people as smart as she is. I get that. And you get a workplace that has exactly 100% less unexpected explosions. I see why you want to bounce her out somewhere else. I just don’t get why I’m here.”

“You’re here to provide assistance and support to Dr Foster and act as a SHIELD liaison while she’s working in the tower,” Fury told her bluntly. “I saw what happened this morning when she was left without intervention from somebody more grounded in reality. You handled her well. You’ve worked together previously. You know what it takes to get her to produce her best work.”

“Does this mean I won’t have to work in the Vault anymore?” Darcy asked cautiously.

Fury nodded. “When you have to spend time here, you’ll have a desk in the main administration office. But you’ll spend most of your time monitoring Dr Foster.”

Darcy nodded, trying to take in all the sudden changes around her.

“I have specific working hours,” she told Fury. “I can be a little flexible, but I have commitments that I can’t break.”

Fury looked at her.

“Does it look like I care when you clock in and out, Lewis? Get the job done and sort out your own damn schedule.”

“Pay raise?” Darcy tried.
Fury stared at her levelly. Darcy shrugged. It had been worth a try.

“Report to Mrs Johnson in administration to get your debrief and new clearance cards,” Fury said dismissively. “When Foster wakes up, get her packed up and moved to the tower.”

“It might actually be easier to do that when she’s asleep,” Darcy told him. “She gets annoyed when other people touch her stuff.”

“Whatever,” Fury said, waving her away. “Get out.”

“When you get over to the tower tell Jarvis I’ve sent you. He’ll get you sorted out with access codes and all that stuff,” Tony Stark told her. “He’ll organise rooms for Dr Foster.”

“Okay,” Darcy said, wondering how her life somehow involved interacting with world-famous billionaires and their flunkies.

“Goodbye, Miss Lewis,” said sexy science guy, who apparently was the only person in the room with manners.

“Goodbye, Dr Banner,” Darcy replied politely. Manners didn’t cost anything, after all, and chances were he had a few PhDs tucked up those delicious half-rolled sleeves.

When motivated, Darcy could work fast, and the chance to see inside the just-finished, just-destroyed, just-renovated Stark Tower was real motivation. While Jane slept the sleep of the mentally and physically exhausted, Darcy used her newfound status to find out where SHIELD had Jane living. It turned out that she had refused an apartment in the building where Darcy had been located, and was instead living in a set of hastily converted storage rooms in the SHIELD building.

“Great for commuting,” Darcy muttered to herself as she packed up Jane’s clothes and other belongings, “but lousy for windows.”

Darcy’s apartment, tiny and shabby though it was, boasted its own set of windows. Jane lived under
institutional strip lights.

Jane’s lab was a total shambles, but Darcy rescued as much of the machinery that had made it through the explosion as she possibly could. Cletus and Jim-Bob returned, in new, clean white coats, and grudgingly helped her secure the machines in special packing crates and gather up hardcopies of Jane’s notes as well as electronic copies kept on SHIELD’s mainframe. Darcy’s new status allowed her to request some muscle, so she supervised as a squad of SHIELD moving men loaded all of Jane’s stuff into a plain, unmarked truck at the loading bay at the back of the hotel above headquarters.

They remained silent as the van drove towards Stark Tower, looming above Manhattan with all the subtlety that Tony Stark was capable of. Darcy peered at the monolith. Why was there a huge gap in the side of it when the rest of the building looked brand-new? Her question was answered when an honest-to-God jet plane flew out of it, circled around the building and took off towards the Atlantic.

“Don’t most billionaires keep their private jets in airports?” Darcy wondered aloud.

“Mr Stark isn’t like most billionaires,” one of the surly men broke the ranks of silence to tell her. “And that was a SHIELD jet, not one of Stark’s.”

“Right, because he had two different types of jet in his building,” Darcy said, trying not to let her laughter stray from ‘satiric’ and into ‘hysterical’. “I guess that’s fair. I have two different types of handsoap.”

The men ignored her. Darcy tried to shut up.

The van deposited her outside the imposing main foyer of the building, and pulled off to God-knew-where with Jane’s stuff. The woman behind the desk was wearing a suit that was clearly from somewhere more impressive than Darcy’s current Macy’s ensemble, and looked her up and down with a disinterested eye.

“Mr Stark said that I was to speak to a Mr Jarvis?” Darcy said to the receptionist. “It’s regarding Dr Jane Foster.”

The woman’s haughty air disappeared immediately.
She ushered Darcy towards the back of the foyer, past a bank of elevators that people in similarly fancy suits were using, towards a lone silver door. Next to it was a panel that contained both a retinal and fingerprint scanner that Darcy recognised as being similar to those at SHIELD.

“Let Jarvis take your readings, like this,” the woman encouraged, leading Darcy up to the plate. A warm buzz passed over her thumb and a bright blue light flashed in her eye, and the door to the elevator opened.

“Will this take me to Mr Jarvis?” Darcy asked, unsure.

“Miss Lewis, a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” a disembodied English voice said. “Please enter the elevator.”

The receptionist smiled and left her, so Darcy walked warily into the elevator. It was lovely, she had to admit; plush carpeting, sympathetic lighting and a very smooth ride.

“Are you in your office somewhere, Mr Jarvis?” Darcy asked, looking around the elevator for speakers.

The English voice sighed.

“I’m afraid that Mr Stark has failed to adequately explain my presence in Stark Tower, ma’am. I am a fully functioning artificial intelligence, built by Mr Stark and modelled upon his one-time butler, the actual Mr Jarvis.”

Darcy boggled.

“Seriously? You’re an AI? That’s so cool!”

“I like to think so, ma’am,” Jarvis replied, sounding a little smug.
“So you know about Jane coming to live here?”

“Mr Stark informed me, ma’am. There is ample room for Dr Foster in the tower’s accommodation areas. There are many empty guest suites. Would she have a preference in location?”

Darcy laughed. “Jane wouldn’t notice if you stuck her in a broom closet, Jarvis, as long as she had access to her lab.”

“I think we can do a little better than that,” Jarvis replied, sounding a little put out.

The elevator came to a gentle stop, and the door opened.

“One hundred and fifteenth floor, guest accommodations,” Jarvis intoned.

Darcy walked out into opulence, and that was only the corridor.

“Jarvis, tell me that’s not a real Picasso that’s hanging on the wall,” Darcy said suspiciously, going up to the picture.

“Miss Lewis, that’s not a real Picasso hanging on the wall,” Jarvis said, in a bored tone of voice.

“Are you trying to joke with me, Jarvis?” she asked, extending a finger gingerly and stroking the brushwork.

“Never, Miss Lewis,” the voice said dryly. “And please don’t touch the painting, if you don’t mind. It’s worth over seven million dollars.”

Darcy leapt back from the painting immediately.

“Holy fuck,” she breathed.

“Well, it probably suits Jane’s mood at the moment,” Darcy sighed. She looked up and down the corridor. There were two doors, one on either side of the hall.

“Which of these is Jane’s?” Darcy asked.

“Your choice, Miss Lewis,” deferred the AI.

“Okay,” Darcy shrugged, “the right one, then.”

The door on the right hand side of the corridor clicked open. Darcy pushed it, and stepped into glorious, golden sunlight. Huge windows were dressed in pretty pale blue curtains that matched the plush carpeting. A small, fully functioning kitchen was tucked into one corner of the room. The main floor space was taken up by a comfy-looking corner group of couches and chairs, and a huge flat screen television that was hung opposite them. Bookcases in light, honeyed oak sat along the walls. A door led to a bedroom that was actually bigger than the living area, dominated by a bed that had to be Emperor-sized, or possibly planetary-dictator sized. The same pale blue and honeyed oak followed through into the bedroom. Trying not to feel jealous, Darcy explored the bathroom, which was large enough to swallow both her own apartment and that of Mrs Williams next door. There was a tub you could swim in, a shower enclosure that looked like it could happily take six people and, yes, a balcony that contained a hot tub, just in case you wanted to soak tired muscles one hundred and fifteen storeys above ground level.

“Is this suite suitable, Miss Lewis?” Jarvis asked, after she had conducted another tour of the facilities and poked about in the kitchen cupboards.

“This suite is amazing Jarvis,” Darcy said truthfully. “Jane will love it, when she takes the time to notice anything other than her work.”

“Dr Foster’s belongings will be sent up immediately,” Jarvis told her.

“She’ll need a lab,” Darcy told thin air. “I know that Mr Stark and Dr Banner will want to work with her, but she’ll need some private space to work in too. Something with a balcony, if you have it? She used to go up on the roof all the time in New Mexico.”
“That can be arranged,” Jarvis informed her. “Will you be unpacking Dr Foster’s belongings, or do you require assistance?”

“No, I’ll do it,” Darcy said. “The lab equipment can go straight to her lab. Jane’ll want to unpack them herself. I’ll handle her clothes.”

“Very good, Miss Lewis,” Jarvis said serenely, and just before Darcy ferreted out the remote controls for the TV from a drawer in a side table, there was a quiet knock at the door and some burly men who had “security” stamped all over them delivered Jane’s bags.

There hadn’t been much for Darcy to pack; a few changes of clothes, some books, some toiletries and a few knick-knacks. The room looked almost as bare after she had unpacked as when she had begun. Her phone rang then, and it was Rachel, to tell her that Jane was awake, aware that Darcy had removed her belongings from SHIELD headquarters, and was demanding to know what was going on.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Darcy promised. “Fifteen minutes, tops.”

It took her twenty minutes, but only because she ran into Chuck in the lobby of SHIELD headquarters and bounced up and down as she told him her news. Alison was scheduled for a training exercise later that night, so Darcy promised to meet Chuck for a drink after she finished moving Jane into Stark Tower and tell him all about it.

“You don’t need to look so grumpy,” Darcy told Jane as they sat in the back of a SHIELD SUV to take them the five blocks from Times Square to Grand Central Station, which was the major New York landmark that Tony Stark had chosen to build his giant penis-tower on top of. “I made sure the moving guys didn’t touch your stuff, and I handled your clothes myself. Nobody was perving on your panties, although Tony Stark was getting a bit frisky with one of the doohickeys from your lab.”

“That’s worse than my panties,” sulked Jane, and Darcy rolled her eyes.

“You’re getting a rent-free deluxe suite in one of the most expensive buildings in New York, all the lab space you can eat and a bone fide superhero genius billionaire willing to give your crappy lab equipment go-faster stripes,” she said shortly. “Suck it up.”
“I miss Thor,” Jane said abruptly, and leaned her head against the window of the SUV.

_You knew him for two days_, Darcy thought uncharitably. Then a stray thought of tired brown eyes in tanned, olive skin jumped into her brain from nowhere, and disappeared just as quickly.

“I miss the big goofball too,” Darcy said, rubbing Jane gently on the arm. “But you know he loves you, right? He told the whole world, just before he gave a shout-out to me and Erik.”

“Yeah,” Jane said, rubbing her eyes. “It’s just hard. Whenever I think I’m getting close to finding a way of getting the bridge open, it all goes wrong.”

“Maybe now you’re having some real help, it won’t take you so long,” Darcy said reasonably.

“Maybe,” Jane said doubtfully.

They pulled up outside Stark Tower, and Darcy escorted Jane inside and into the private elevator. She introduced Jarvis to Jane, and then because she was well mannered, Jane to Jarvis. She could almost hear her mother’s voice saying “Just because a body hasn’t got a body it doesn’t mean you can be rude…”

Darcy got a sudden deep pang of homesickness, and vowed that she would phone her mom and dad that evening, preferably from SHIELD headquarters because long-distance calls were expensive.

Jane wandered around her room in bewilderment.

“All this for me?” she asked, touching the bed reverently.

“Go and see your hot tub,” Darcy encouraged her. “It’s insane.”

They were interrupted before Jane’s hot-tub adventures could begin. Tony Stark strolled into the room as if he owned it, which, to be fair, Darcy allowed, he did.

“Happy?” he enquired. At Jane’s nod and eloquent wave of hands that equated to “I’ve never lived
“anywhere as nice as this”, he clapped his hands.

“Excellent!” he declared. “Now ditch this boring place and come and see where the magic happens.”

He couldn’t seem to help the lascivious waggling of his eyebrows.

“You are talking about the labs, right?” Darcy asked suspiciously.

“Oh he is,” said a tall, elegant woman who breezed into the room wearing the most awesome shoes that Darcy had ever seen in her life.

“Light of my life,” Tony said, taking her hand and kissing the palm, “apple of my eye, brightest jewel in my crown…”

“CEO of your company,” finished the woman, who Darcy now knew to be Virginia Potts, Tony Stark’s replacement as CEO of Stark Industries. Darcy had a very professional girl-crush on Virginia Potts, cultivated after she gave an inspiring lecture to the business education students at Stanford that Darcy had snuck into.

“Hi, I’m Pepper,” she said to Darcy, holding out her hand.

“Darcy Lewis,” Darcy said, hoping that her hands weren’t clammy with excitement. That would be both gross and embarrassing.

“And Dr Foster, a pleasure to have you here,” Pepper went on, shaking Jane’s hand. “There’s far too much testosterone in the building. Now Natasha and I will have reinforcements.”

“You two don’t need reinforcements,” Tony said darkly. “You’re three days from world domination as it is.”

“Two,” said Pepper, without missing a beat. “You missed a day while you were playing with Bruce at SHIELD.”
At the mention of the handsome scientist’s name, Darcy’s ears pricked up.

“Does Dr Banner live here too?” she asked innocently.

“All the Avengers do,” Tony said, heading out of the room and forcing the others to troop after him to keep up with his side of the conversation. They all piled into the lift.

“Hawkeye’s got the top floor, because he’s good with heights,” Tony said, providing a steady arm for Pepper to lean on as she reached down to take off her shoes.

“Underneath him is Natasha,” Tony began, and then looked sideways at Pepper, who frowned and shook her head. He sighed glumly, and said “And clearly that statement is made purely in the geographical sense, because if the Black Widow heard me commenting on her potential sex life, she’d kill me.”

“And she’d have every right to,” Pepper said severely, handing her shoes, which Darcy could now see were Louboutins, to Tony to hold. He took them without question.

“We’re on the floor below that, and Steve is below us. Hulk is below Steve.”

“Bruce is below Steve,” corrected Pepper.

“Steve?” Darcy said, confused. “The guy in the Captain America suit?”

“He is Captain America,” Pepper said kindly. “I’m sure SHIELD will be briefing you on all this soon.”

“He looked pretty good for a guy that had to be at least ninety years old,” Darcy protested.

“He looks amazing for a guy that’s ninety years old,” stressed Pepper, and then kissed Tony on the cheek in apology when he looked wounded.

The elevator came to a stop and deposited them into a corridor that looked much like the lab section
of SHIELD, except this corridor had more scorch marks and cool looking robots trundling down the shiny white flooring.

“What’s a Hulk?” Jane asked, peering in at the plexiglass window of one of the labs.

“Is he the big green dude that caught you when you fell?” Darcy asked. “How come Bruce has to share a floor with him?”

Tony and Pepper look at each other warily.

“Fury didn’t give you much time to catch up with Avengers, did he?” Tony said eventually.

“I’ve got a briefing tomorrow,” Darcy shrugged.

“Fore-warned is fore-armed,” Tony said, leading the way down the corridor. “Fill her in, Pep. You’re down here, Doc,” he called behind him.

Jane pushed past Darcy, eager to see her lab.

“What should I know?” Darcy asked Pepper.

“If you’re going to working around Tony, probably the location of the fire extinguishers and the vodka, in that order,” Pepper said, smiling.

“Tell me about the Hulk,” Darcy asked, using the Disney Princess eyes.

Pepper stared at her in admiration.

“Do they actually work?” she asked. “I felt myself caving.”

“I’ve a hundred percent success rate on men,” Darcy said. “My mom and other awesome women
“Poor guy,” Darcy said eventually. “That really sucks.”

Pepper, who had been watching Darcy carefully, looked relieved at her reaction.

“Bruce has insisted on all sorts of security measures to limit interaction with him when he’s… transformed,” Pepper told her.

“Oh, we don’t eat together,” Pepper said. “Everybody pretty much does their own thing.”

Darcy blinked. “That’s weird,” she said, without waiting for her brain to catch up with her mouth. “Given that you all live in the same place.”

Pepper shrugged. “Everybody’s busy doing their own thing,” she explained. “And it’s not like any of us can cook worth a damn anyway.”
A muffled explosion sounded from further off down the corridor. A small robot with an extendable arm rushed past Darcy’s ankles, brandishing a fire extinguisher.

“Make sure you get it all this time, Dummy,” called Pepper. The robot squawked in response as it disappeared around the corner.

“Shouldn’t we…” Darcy began, gesturing helplessly at the robot.

“If you’re going to be here, you’ll get used to them,” she advised. “It’s doing wonders for Bruce’s control. He hardly ever Hulks out in the labs now. Jarvis, was anybody hurt?” Pepper asked.

“No casualties, Miss Potts, but Dr Foster and Mr Stark do seem to be having a…heated argument about whose fault the explosion was.”

“Who’s winning?”

“Dr Foster, Miss Potts.”

“Excellent,” Pepper said happily.

They eventually found Jane and Tony grumpily going over schematics of Jane’s machines, surrounded by the charred and blackened remains of one of them.

“Do you need anything else for today, Jane?” Darcy asked, checking her watch.

“No, I’m good,” she replied absently, staring at the three-d images whirling around her head.

She hadn’t even turned around to acknowledge Darcy in person.

“Right, I’ll see you tomorrow morning then,” Darcy told her back. “Please sleep tonight, Jane. In your bed, not in here.”
“I will remind her, Miss Lewis.”

“Thank you, Jarvis,” Darcy said to the ceiling. “I appreciate it.”

“Before you go,” Pepper said apologetically. “If you’re going to have access to Stark Tower…”

“Avengers Tower!” called Tony, smacking Jane’s hand out of the way as she changed something on their display.

“I’ll call my twelve percent of it what I want, Tony!” Pepper called back, before continuing as if she hadn’t been interrupted.

“You’re going to have to sign some non-disclosure agreements,” she said apologetically.

Darcy pulled a pen out of her purse and clicked it open.

“Hit me,” she said agreeably. “I’ve got really good at signing these.”

Together she and Pepper left the room. Jane and Tony didn’t notice they had left.

“So you actually got to go up into the private part of Stark Tower?”

“I did,” Darcy said, draining her glass. “Although I had to sign about eleventy billion different non-disclosure forms, so there’s not much I can say except everything’s huge and expensive.”

“So, no more Vault for you,” Chuck said, grinning. “Alison’s going to be furious. It took her three years to get out of there, and it took you less than three weeks.”
“I was in the right place at the right time,” Darcy shrugged. “Or the right place at the wrong time, however you want to look at it. If Jane hadn’t blown up the lab, I would never have known that she was in New York at all.”

That thought made Darcy wince, and she gestured to the bartender for another drink.

“When does school start?” Chuck asked, sensing a need to change the subject.

“Next week,” Darcy said, cheering up. “I have a History of Art class twice a week, and a Physics for Poets class once a week.”

“Are you a poet?” Chuck asked, amused.

“I think it’s their way of saying ‘Science For Dummies’, ” Darcy said, smiling wryly. “But it sounds cool. I have a mountain of books to buy.” She screwed up her nose in disgust. “College is expensive, Chuck. Professors should be banned from making their own books required reading.”

“Alison and her friends were talking about some kind of second hand book market that runs on the weekend,” Chuck said. “You could go with them, see if you can find anything on your reading list.”

“Make sure you check with Alison that it’s alright that I go,” Darcy fretted. “I don’t want her to think that I’m muscling in on her life.”

“I will ask her tonight,” Chuck promised. “Drink up. I’m meeting her after her training seminar ends. I’ll walk you to the bus stop.”

“You’re a prince,” Darcy told him, and drank her drink. Straight lemonade, and even that was expensive in a Manhattan bar, even one as pleasantly dive-y as this one. Alcohol was on a growing list of luxuries that Darcy couldn’t afford anymore. The living stipend had helped cushion her moving expenses, but she’d tried to take out as small a loan as she possibly could and make her salary stretch. Even at double the basic joining wage, money was really tight. Darcy was painfully aware that one unexpected bill would land her in real trouble.

Chuck stubbornly waited with her at the bus stop until her bus arrived, despite being told several times that she was fine on her own. She was fine, she knew, but part of her was grateful for Chuck being there anyway. Not for the security side of things, but because standing next to Chuck
obviously made some of the people waiting for her bus think that they were there together, not just together. And yes, that was just dumb in so many ways that Darcy wanted to slap herself, but she was living alone in a strange city and hadn’t had a boyfriend since a few months before New Mexico.

Sitting on the bus as it trundled along the streets of Manhattan, her mind drifted back to Bruce Banner, sexy science guy and secret twelve foot green monster. He was too old to be considered as a potential boyfriend – Darcy felt gauche thinking about him in that way, like he was the sort of guy that she usually dated, pizza and beers and crappy movies and sex on the couch. He’d be more refined than that, she thought. He’d be red wine and French cuisine and opera – no, not opera, jazz, she thought. Smoky jazz bars seemed his natural habitat, and leggy intellectual women who spoke three languages and understood gamma radiation as well as he did. Not small, curvy college students who were graduating by the skin of their teeth, lived in crappy apartments and listened to British bands from the nineties that nobody bothered with anymore.

She spent so long glumly cataloguing the reasons why sexy science guy wouldn’t want anything to do with her that she missed her stop on the bus and had to get off a few blocks away. By now night had definitely fallen and the wind had picked up a little. She pulled the collar of her coat more firmly around her neck and wished she had spent more time in her new neighbourhood so she could be sure that she was heading in the right direction. As she had promised Estelle, she pretty much went home to shower in tepid water and sleep, and this was before her college courses kicked in.

She was wondering whether it would be cheaper to rent a room in one of those budget tourist hotels, for all the time that she spent in her own apartment, when a noise from the alley on her left made Darcy pause, her hand automatically sneaking into her coat pocket for her taser. Standing stock still by the opening of a dark alley in this area of town was a bad idea, but she couldn’t ignore the whimpering noise she heard from behind one of the dumpsters. What if it was a person? Shit, what if it was a baby?

Clicking free the release on her taser and holding it warily in front of her, she took a few steps into the darkness.

“Who’s there?” she said, with a hell of a lot more confidence than she felt. “Come out so I can see you.”

*Please don’t,* she thought desperately. *Please let me have been hearing things,*

There was a sudden round of ferocious barking, followed by a massive dog, part Rottweiler and part hell-hound, suddenly jumping out from behind the dumpster. Darcy drew a breath to scream in alarm, but was cut off by the dog doing it for her. It made another loud whimper, and then accelerated off into the alley.
“Okay,” Darcy said slowly, feeling her heart pound in her chest. “What the hell would make a dog like Fluffy run away?”

She took a few steps backwards, prepared to run at a moment’s notice. There was a rustling noise from behind the dumpster, the sound of claws clacking on the dirty pavement and then….

Nothing.

Darcy blinked, expecting a dog the size of a small horse.

An impatient bark directed her attention down to the floor.

“You’ve got to be shitting me!” she said in surprise. “Seriously?”

The tiny dog in front of her, more rat than Chihuahua, barked once in affirmation.

It trotted forward, and she could immediately see that the battle with the larger animal had taken its toll, despite the smaller dog’s ferocity. It’s ear was bleeding, and it had a decided limp.

Part of Darcy, the part that bought half-dead Christmas trees because they looked sad, and adopted one-eyed cats because nobody else at the shelter would, melted at the limp.

She knelt down and extended her hand carefully towards the little dog.

“Hey there buddy,” she said softly. “You want to come home with me? Get you cleaned up?”

And then I’ll call an animal shelter, she told herself. I’ll get him patched up and then I’ll take him to a shelter where he’ll get adopted by some twenty seven pound socialite. Or a little girl that dresses like a ballerina all the time.

The dog took a few wary steps forward and sniffed Darcy’s outstretched hand. He seemed to take a
moment to decide whether she was friend or foe, but he must have smelled the chicken sandwich that she had grabbed from the cafeteria at SHIELD, because he started to lick her fingers.

“Poor baby, you’re probably hungry,” Darcy said, reaching carefully into her messenger bag. She still had half the sandwich in its wrapper, so she picked out the meat and put it down in front of the tiny dog. It wolfed the food down, and begged her for more with eyes so wide and brown that her heart just melted.

Careless of her coat on the dirty ground, she hunkered down and started to offer the dog food from her fingers. He happily took it and head-butted her hand when she ran out.

“Sorry dog,” she said, shaking the wrapper. “All that’s left is the bread, and that’s not good for you.”

The tiny animal let out a piteous noise, and any lingering thoughts about taking him right to the pound went right out of her head.

“Tell you what,” she told the dog, picking it up and tucking it into the crook of her arm. “I’ll take you home with me, and get you fed and patched up. You can spend tonight in the warm, and tomorrow we’ll see about getting you a new family. How about that?”

The dog whuffled and burrowed into Darcy’s coat. Satisfied that she was doing the right thing, and positive that she wasn’t going to end up with a pet that her tenancy agreement banned her from keeping, she headed out of the alley and towards a bodega on the opposite side of the street.

She was in and out before the bored teenager behind the register could notice that she had a dog with her. She bought some antiseptic lotion to treat the dog’s ear, and some flea spray on the off chance that the little dog’s life on the street had provided him with some guests. Her apartment was crappy, but it didn’t have bugs of any kind, and she was determined to keep it that way. She got lucky in the refrigerated section, and scored some packets of cooked chicken that were reduced to practically nothing because of the expiration date.

She apologised to the dog just before she entered her building, and tucked him into her messenger bag. If any of her neighbours spotted him they could rat her out to Dickface the building manager, and he’d be only too pleased to throw her out on her ear.

“It’s not fair that he lets the crackheads in the building and not you,” she complained as she panted her way up to the seventh floor. The dog, having already ripped open one of the packages of
chicken, was too busy eating to pay any attention to her.

It took the dog a very short amount of time to sniff his way around the apartment before he decided to plop himself down in the middle of the room, apparently satisfied with his new surroundings. He complained a little when Darcy cleaned the wound on his ear with the antiseptic solution, but he didn’t snap at her, which she took to be a good sign. The washing up bowl in the sink was just the right size for him to fit into, and apparently the moon was in the right house because the hot water was working. She used a little of the gorgeous smelling handsoap she had treated herself to in the water, and pretty soon the little guy was being thoroughly washed. He was filthy, and Darcy shampooed him twice before she was satisfied that she had removed all the street dirt from him. A careful examination didn’t reveal any fleas, but she squirted him thoroughly with the flea spray anyway.

Soaking wet he looked more like a rat than ever, and she couldn’t help but snap a few photos with her phone. She then toweled him dry, careful of his bad hind leg, and used the lowest setting on her hairdryer to finish him off.

Now he was clean, Darcy could see that he was a beautiful caramel brown, with a big bushy tail that betrayed another breed somewhere in his history.

Clean, dry and warm, his next priority was clearly food, and he began nosing impatiently at the bag that contained the rest of the chicken. Darcy couldn’t help but laugh at the annoyed noises he was making.

“Allright, no need to make a fuss,” she scolded. “I’m on it, dude.”

The previous tenant had left behind some mismatched crockery, and she found an orphaned mustard-yellow saucer that would serve as a dog dish. She shredded some chicken onto the saucer and watched in amazement as the dog emptied it three times before it sat back on its haunches, looking pleased with itself.

“You’d better not throw all that back up,” she warned the dog as she settled both of them onto the futon. “I didn’t sign on for dog vomit.”

Darcy laid back, tired from her day at work, and watched as the dog sniffed his way around the futon and ended up boldly clambering up onto her stomach. She laughed as he circled three times before settling down, nose tucked under his paws.
She smoothed his now sweet-smelling coat, and thought darkly about the people that had obviously cared for this dog at some point in its life. Although he had been aggressive with the much larger dog, he hadn’t so much as snapped at her, even when she had cleaned out the wound on his ear. He must have been used to people at some point, but where were they now? The dog wasn’t wearing a collar or tag, and she doubted that he had been micro-chipped.

“What happened, buddy?” she asked softly. “Pee on the wrong pair of shoes?”

Sparing a few evil thoughts for those fuckers too lazy to give their dog to a shelter, Darcy felt the little dog’s heartbeat flutter under her hand, and counted the protruding ribs poking through his coat. Her conscience gave a painful twang. She tried to ignore it.

“I’m not keeping you,” she warned him as she made a little bed for him out of a couple of sweaters next to the futon. “Don’t get attached to me, dude.”

When she woke up the next morning to discover that he had clambered onto her bed in the middle of the night and curled himself into her chest, she knew that she had been adopted, whether she liked it or not.
Three Scientists In A Lab, To Say Nothing Of The Dog

“I’m going have to find you a name,” Darcy told the dog as they walked to the bus stop the next morning.

Well, Darcy walked. The dog had limped pitifully around the apartment, so Darcy had taken pity on him and scooped him up into her messenger bag. She was against toting dogs around as if they were toys, but since her tenancy agreement didn’t allow pets she had to smuggle him in and out of the building anyway.

The dog whuffed in agreement, peering nosily from the bag at the scene around him.

“I’ll need to get you a collar, a leash, and you probably need vaccinations,” Darcy said, sighing. That would eat into her monthly budget pretty heavily. Plus there was the problem of what to do with him during the day. She couldn’t leave him alone in the apartment, that was just cruel. And she couldn’t ask Mrs Williams to dogsit, because if she was discovered that would mean that she risked being kicked out too.

The good thing about New York was that everything was open, every hour of the day, and by the time she arrived in midtown at six am, she was able to find a pet store that carried collars small enough for the dog.

“Oh isn’t he a cutie!” gushed the assistant. The dog, who had been sitting on the counter while Darcy fixed the royal-blue leather collar she’d selected from the sale section, suddenly jumped up and pranced up and down the counter top. Darcy watched him suspiciously as he performed for the delighted assistant, who cooed and scratched him behind the ears. The limp had disappeared as he performed, and he scooted along the counter quick enough when assistant broke out the dog treats.

“You conniving little bastard,” Darcy said admiringly. “You put on the limp.”

As soon as she clipped the matching lead to the collar and placed him on the floor, he started to limp again.

“You’re not fooling me,” she told him. “You can’t play a player, dog.”

“Are you going to put his name on a little tag?” the assistant asked as he rang up Darcy’s purchase.
“You can get your phone number and address put on the back.”

“I haven’t decided on a name yet,” Darcy told him. “Although it might be Bill, like in Clinton. Or George, as in Bush. Either of them. Or Benedict Arnold.”

Clearly the assistant saw a lot of strange things in the shop, as it didn’t give him a moment’s pause.

“Well, when you decide, come back and have the tag engraved here,” he told her, giving her a leaflet. “50% off when you bring the leaflet with you.”

Darcy thanked the man, and tugged at the leash.

“Come on, dog,” she said. “Time to go to work.”

The dog plopped his backside down on the floor and refused to budge.

“Come on,” Darcy said, exasperated. “I know that you’re faking the limp.”

The dog whined piteously.

“I’m not falling for that,” she said crossly. “Stop trying to manipulate me into carrying you, it’s not going to work.”

The dog laid down on the floor and put his paws over his nose. The assistant nearly died from the cute. Darcy groaned.

“Cut it out,” she said firmly. She’d seen The Dog Whisperer, she knew about being a pack leader. She grabbed a packet of dog treats from the stand by the register, paid for it, and waved it at the dog, who peered upwards at it with interest.

“You get one of these if you get up off the floor right now,” she told it, opening the bag and holding out the treat. “And another if you walk out of here without the phony limp.”
The dog got up, and when she tugged at the leash, walked with her to the door.

“Excellent,” Darcy said, feeding him the promised treats. “I can see that we’ll have a long and happy future together, dog.”

Her parents had used bribery to motivate her. It seemed the natural thing to do with the dog.

Darcy did carry the dog across the crossings, although that’s because its stumpy little legs just couldn’t keep up with the insanely quick timings of the traffic lights. She decided on Stark Tower before SHIELD headquarters. Her new job was to look after Jane, and that came before briefings and debriefings and other quasi-military shit, and Jane needed breakfast if she was going to get through the day without killing one of the world’s richest men. The receptionist on duty in Stark Tower gave Darcy an odd look when she strode in with the dog, but said nothing when she headed straight for the private elevator at the back of the lobby. Given the stories about Tony Stark, a young woman in a cut-price business suit with a mixed breed Chihuahua didn’t even qualify for a raised eyebrow.

“Good morning Miss Lewis,” Jarvis said as she entered the elevator. “You have a canine with you.”

He sounded vaguely displeased.

“He’s not going to pee on anything, Jarvis,” Darcy promised. “He got all of that out of his system earlier.”

He had, as well. She had woken to him whining softly and scratching the door, and it hadn’t taken a genius to figure out what he needed. Luckily she had remembered to grab some plastic bags from her groceries to take with her, and she added real poop bags to her ever-growing list of things to buy for the dog.

“You won’t even know that he’s here,” Darcy went on, leaning down to scratch behind his ears.

The AI remained silent, but she could tell he was displeased by the dog’s presence.

“Is Jane awake?” she asked.
“No,” Jarvis replied. “After some prompting, she went to her suite at one am, and she is still asleep.”

“Right, I won’t wake her then,” Darcy said, thinking. “Is there a kitchen someplace where I can make her breakfast? I don’t want to use hers in case it disturbs her.”

“Communal living area, level one hundred and thirty,” Jarvis said smoothly, and the elevator doors opened into a giant room. It held a full kitchen, complete with gadgets that would make her professional cook father break down and weep. Darcy recognised the makes from the magazines that her dad would pour over. The open-plan kitchen led to a big dining table, capable of sitting up to twenty. The same thick wood that formed the kitchen work surfaces had been used to make the table and chairs. It looked deceptively simple and plain in design, and therefore must have cost thousands of dollars. There was another seating area, full of soft couches and large armchairs, centred around the largest television that Darcy had ever seen. All sorts of boxes surrounded the TV, sitting in individual pigeon holes. She recognised a couple of games consoles and a Blu-Ray player, but the rest were a mystery.

Large windows revealed a gorgeous cityscape, and a long wrap-around balcony with outdoor seating and another big table. Darcy cracked the sliding door to slip out onto it, but kept a firm grip on the dog’s lead in case he developed sudden suicidal tendencies. It was an amazing view, and the thought that Jane could have this, every day, while she lived in such a grotty little shoe box gave her a sudden flash of jealousy that she tried her best to ignore. It wasn’t Jane’s fault that she was here, living in the lap of luxury. Until yesterday, she’d been happily living in what Darcy was sure was a converted supply closet, and she hadn’t asked to be moved five bocks down and one hundred and fifteen storeys up.

Sighing, Darcy went back into the main room. Moping never helped anybody, she told herself briskly. She looked at her watch. Half past six. Jane had been sleeping for about five hours, and she wouldn’t be up yet. There wasn’t much point going down to the lab without Jane being there to explain whatever it was that she was doing.

Darcy eyed the kitchen. She couldn’t help it, she was always drawn to them. It came from practically growing up in one as a child, and then serving as an emergency cook when her dad got slammed during rush periods.

She poked around in cupboards, noting the expensive saucepans and frying pans. She eyed the impressive eight burner hob, and the multiple ovens. She actually found herself stroking the immaculately clean chrome KitchenAid stand mixer. In fact, she realised as she took in the professional-grade Japanese cooks’ knives and the suspiciously pristine butchers’ block cutting boards, it seemed that this whole kitchen was virgin. The only thing that looked as if it got any use at all was the enormous coffee machine that could probably double as an engine for some caffeine-
fuelled sports car.

Unfazed, Darcy started a pot of coffee using some ridiculously expensive beans that she found in a cupboard. She knew they were expensive because they came in a tiny package, and were the sort that had been passed through the gullet of a civet cat before reaching New York. As she waited for the coffee to brew, she investigated the massive refrigerator and the pantry cupboards. It was, she concluded, as if somebody had put in an order to a gourmet store and told them to send them the most expensive versions of everything.

Still, she thought blissfully as she sipped her coffee, she wasn’t about to complain.

She let the still un-named dog off the leash and let it sniff around the large room as she took in the contents of the refrigerator. She could whip up some pancakes, she thought, taking in the contents. They could be kept warm, or Jane could just roll them up and eat them cold when she got up. She was debating whether to make them sweet, or cut up some of the fresh vegetables and make them savoury and give Jane one of her five-a-day portions of vegetables when she heard a delicate clicking across the tiled floor.

“Darcy,” Pepper said warmly. “Good to see you again. Is that coffee?”

“I hope you don’t mind,” Darcy said, blushing. How Pepper could look so awake and put together at this unearthly time of the morning?

“I never mind when people make me coffee,” Pepper said, pulling a mug down from a cabinet. Darcy took it from her and took a guess, leaving it without cream but adding two hefty spoons of vanilla sugar.

“Perfect,” Pepper sighed, after her first sip. “How did you know how I took my coffee?”

Darcy shrugged. “I worked in my dad’s diner since I was tall enough to see over the counter. I can tell how people like their coffee, it’s a like a mutant superpower.”

The refrigerator beeped impatiently, letting her know that she had left the door open.

“I was going to make Jane some pancakes for when she wakes up,” Darcy said shyly. “Can I get you anything?”
“You don’t have to cook for me,” Pepper said, eying the refrigerator.

“It’s no trouble,” Darcy assured her, pulling a box of organic eggs out and snagging a bottle of milk. She checked the date on both packages, and was happy with them.

“It’s been ages since I had breakfast made for me,” Pepper confided as she sat on a stool on the opposite side of the worktop. “Tony tries, but…well, let’s just say that cooking isn’t one of his skills. Can I help?”

Darcy eyed Pepper’s eye-wateringly expensive suit.

“Just sit back and enjoy,” she said, poking through the cupboards until she found imported Italian flour and what had to be vegetable oil squeezed from endangered organic vegetables grown in a secret plateau in the Himalayas. Or something.

She added the vanilla sugar to the batter, and a splash of what she knew to be an incredibly expensive vanilla extract. Giving in to temptation she splashed some cream into the KitchenAid and whipped it until it was thick and creamy, and put a small scoop on the side of the plate, along with a selection of berries from the refrigerator.

“No strawberries,” cautioned Pepper, who leaned over the counter to snaffle a few raspberries from the plate. “I’m allergic.”

“Gotcha,” Darcy said, frowning as she ladled pancake batter into the large non-stick pan she had pulled from a cupboard. She produced a stack of golden brown pancakes with a practiced hand.

“Do you want a raspberry sauce?” she asked Pepper, who nodded eagerly. Darcy threw the rest of the punnet of raspberries into the blender, added some powdered sugar, squeezed some fresh lemon juice and hit pulse.

“And there you go, pancakes a la Darcy,” she said plating up the pancakes, dotting more berries around and drizzling the raspberry sauce across the top.

“Oh my God,” Pepper said reverently. She took a bite and let out a food-porn moan. For a slender
woman, she sure could pack away her food. When Darcy offered seconds, she stuck out her plate eagerly.

As Darcy turned away to re-grease the pan, she heard the dog’s claws click across the tiles. Pepper let out a little squeal that turned into a coo.

“You brought your dog! And he’s adorable!”

“Yeah,” said Darcy, apologetically. “Sorry about that, but I only found him last night and I didn’t really know that I’d be keeping him. I’m still figuring some things out.”

“You found him?” Pepper asked, horrified. “Somebody abandoned him?”

Darcy related the story as Pepper fussed the dog, scooping him up in her arms, mindless of the hairs that the dog was depositing all over her blouse.

“I was kind of hoping that Jane would look after him when I have to go to SHIELD headquarters,” Darcy admitted. “He doesn’t take up much space, and he’s very well behaved,” she added, as the dog did a better version of the Disney princess eyes that Darcy did herself. It even added a little whine.

Pepper caved immediately.

“He can stay here whenever he needs to, yes you can,” she told the dog, “because you’re adorable, aren’t you? Aren’t you?”

The dog delicately licked the tip of Pepper’s nose, and she smiled in delight.

Darcy had to admire the dog’s style.

When Pepper found out that he wasn’t named, she immediately started offering suggestions. They were discussing the merits of “Butch” over “Fang”, when the single most attractive man Darcy had ever seen paused in the doorway.
“I smelled the coffee,” he said politely. “But I didn’t mean to interrupt you.”

“Steve!” called Pepper. “Come and meet Dr Foster’s assistant, Darcy Lewis.”

“Darcy,” Pepper continued, “this is Captain Steve Rogers.”

“The Captain Rogers,” Darcy asked suspiciously. “Or his spookily-similar looking grandson?”

“Just me, ma’am,” Steve said politely, as Darcy scrutinised him.

“Darcy,” she corrected. “No way I’m old enough to be a ma’am. You hungry, Steve?”

“I can always eat,” he admitted. “But I don’t want to put you to any trouble.”

“It’s no trouble,” Darcy told him, gathering together her pancake ingredients. “I was making some for Jane when she wakes up, so making more is no bother. Have a seat. Coffee? Very milky? One sugar?”

Steve was the best sort of eater there was; appreciative of your effort, and hungry. Very hungry. Darcy filled his plate three times, and he still sent a sideways look at a packet of Canadian bacon in the fridge.

Pepper had to leave for work just as Darcy started some bacon and sausages sizzling in the pan, but she told Darcy that she had her permission to let the dog have the freedom of the Tower. Jarvis would ensure that he didn’t wander anywhere where he might be in danger.

The smell of the bacon brought another man into the kitchen. He was shorter than Steve, but then, who wasn’t. He had a pugilist’s face, squashed and compact, but his t-shirt clung to some admirable biceps.

“Where did the rat come from?” he asked, stopping in the middle of the room to stare at the dog, who was now slurping water from a porcelain cereal bowl that probably cost $200.
“The rat’s mine,” Darcy said, flipping bacon from the pan to plate, and adding a generous portion of scrambled eggs. “I’m Darcy. Jane Foster’s assistant. You want breakfast?”

“It’s really good,” Steve encouraged, taking the plate and starting to shovel in the eggs. The toaster pinged, and by the time Darcy had turned to grab the toast the new man was sitting on Pepper’s discarded stool, cutlery in his hands.

“The coffee smells good too,” he said, winking at her.

Darcy stared at him, and narrowed her eyes. “You like to tell everybody you take it black, but secretly you like cream and three sugars.”

His eyes widened slightly. “How’d you know that?”

“Too many years in a diner,” Darcy told him, pouring the coffee.

“Darcy, this is Clint Barton,” Steve said, after Clint made no move to introduce himself and instead jumped headfirst into his meal. “He’s a SHIELD agent and an excellent marksman.”

“Yo,” said Clint, before slurping his coffee.

Both men had second helpings of breakfast, and refills of their coffee. Darcy was pressing Steve for the story of his time in the army, so she could check the facts of a paper she’d written in her second year at Stanford, when Tony and Bruce came in.

“When did I open a diner?” he asked Bruce.

“You could,” Darcy told him, bustling around the kitchen area. “This kitchen is amazing. Coffee?”

“Always,” Tony said, hopping up onto another stool. “You know,” he went on, looking at the scene behind the counter, “I don’t think anyone’s ever used it before.”
“It’s a crime,” Darcy scolded, flipping pancakes onto a plate and sliding it down to Steve before snagging the coffee pot and filling his mug. Black, she guessed, although by the way that Dr Banner looked at the pot, she guessed that coffee wasn’t his, ahem, cup of tea.

“And how about you, Doc?” she asked. “I saw some fruit teas in the cupboard, or an English breakfast blend.”

“Bruce only drinks bits of grass that have been stuck through a blender and drowned in hot water,” Tony complained.

Bruce sighed, good-naturedly.

“What he means is, I prefer chamomile to the tar that he regularly poisons his body with, but I’ll have whatever’s easiest, Miss Lewis.”

“Darcy,” she corrected, fishing in the cupboard. “Oh look, here’s the world’s most expensive chamomile tea. I wonder what bits of blended grass are doing in this suspiciously well-stocked pantry?”

“Jarvis does the ordering,” Tony said, with what would have been a slight tinge of embarrassment on a lesser mortal. “I don’t know what he buys.”

Chamomile wasn’t on the order board back home, but it wasn’t a complicated drink to make. Find designer porcelain cup and saucer, fill with hot water and adorable little tea bag with dunking string and serve to sexy scientist, so he can dunk it in and out of the water in an adorable way.

There was a whuffling noise, and a yelp.

“What the hell is that?” Tony said, almost jumping into Clint’s lap in shock.

“It’s my dog,” Darcy said, at the same time that both Clint and Steve said, “It’s a rat.”

She glared at them and shook her spatula.
“Just because he’s little, it doesn’t mean you get to insult him,” she warned them. “I saw him chase off a dog like, eight times his size last night.”

Tony eyed the dog warily as Darcy gave them the edited highlights of her meeting with the dog.

“So you’re keeping him?” Bruce said, gingerly extending his hand for the dog to sniff.

“I wasn’t going to,” Darcy said, going back to her pancake batter. “But I woke up this morning and he’d crawled into bed with me, and he just looked so adorable I couldn’t help but want to keep him.”

“Is that what it takes to get adopted by you?” Tony said, leering at what could have been her breasts, but given that she had the pan raised in order to flip the pancakes out, was probably his oncoming breakfast instead. “Just hop into bed, and you’re golden?”

Clint laughed. Steve blushed and hissed “Tony!” in a scandalised tone. Darcy hit him over the knuckles with the spatula, hard. Tony opened his mouth to keep going, clearly pleased by the ruckus his joke had created, but then Bruce put his tea cup down with a decided porcelain *click*, and the mood in the room suddenly changed.

“Be quiet, Tony,” he said, his voice full of menace.

Darcy looked back and forth from each of the men. Steve’s shoulders had tensed, Clint’s hand had drifted down towards his leg, where she could see that he had a thigh holster strapped. Tony’s whole demeanour changed. He deliberately dropped his shoulders and held up his hands in the traditional ‘surrender’ position.

“Quiet, sure, I can do quiet. I guess the Hulk’s not a morning person, hey?”

“Eat your pancakes,” Darcy told him, piling his plate high with whipped cream, golden, fluffy pancakes and half a small jug of maple syrup that would probably cost her a month’s salary to buy. There was no point putting fruit on his plate. From her best guess, vitamins probably shrivelled up and died when confronted with Tony Stark.

The mood changed, and the kitchen returned to its less tense atmosphere.
“What can I get you, Doc?” she asked. “Are you veggie?”

“I am, actually,” he said in surprise. “How did you know?”

“Somebody must be,” she told him, her upper body in the fridge. “Jarvis ordered a buttload of meat-free sausages and other veggie stuff. And then there’s the tea.”

“Everybody who drinks chamomile is a vegetarian?” he asked, clearly amused. His brown eyes held a sparkle that made his face go from ‘interesting’ to ‘handsome’ in the blink of an eye. Darcy was glad she was standing next to the fridge, because she could feel the heat in her cheeks start to flare up.

“It was a hypothesis,” she said archly. “One that has been tested and found to be true. Eggs okay?”

“Sure,” he said affably. “But this is a pretty small sample. How can you be sure that your theory would hold true without more extensive testing?”

“Cheese?” Darcy asked, holding up a package. “It’s veggie-friendly,” she assured him, checking the packaging.

“Lots of it,” Bruce said, eying the sweetcorn she was adding to the cracked eggs and nodding when she held up scallions and red pepper. Darcy started chopping them briskly.

“I suppose I’d have to make breakfast for a larger number of people,” Darcy said thoughtfully, adding some of the meat-substitute sausages to a new pan, before tipping in her omelette mixture. “Add more data to my sample.”

“No you can’t,” Tony said with his mouth full of pancake. “You’re not allowed to cook for anybody except me.”

Clint nudged him with his arm.
“Us,” Tony amended.

“I was supposed to be cooking for Jane,” Darcy reminded him, checking the bottom of the omelette and turning the sausages. “You were just benefiting from my boss being asleep.”

She knew this was a show-off thing to do, but she flipped the omelette with a confident turn of her wrist. Four sets of eyes watched it move through the air, and four identical beaming smiles broke out when she caught it deftly. A quick burst of heat on the bottom, a heavy scattering of cheese and a quick hold under the grill to set the cheese to bubble and turn a pretty gold, and sexy scientist’s breakfast was ready. A few red onion and rosemary sausages added to the plate, along with a side of toast, made the meal.

“I want one of those tomorrow,” Tony told her. “Any more pancakes?” he asked, holding out her plate.

And that’s how Darcy added ‘Personal Chef To The Avengers Initiative’ to her resume.

Her life slipped agreeably into a new pattern. Get up, sneak the dog out for him to visit the spot behind the dumpster that he considered his territory, go to Stark Tower, cook breakfast for Pepper, Jane and any of the Avengers that happened to be around. The Black Widow preferred an expensive granola blend to Darcy’s cooked extravaganzas, but sometimes she stuck around for another cup of coffee, or a round of toast with a thin scraping of apricot preserves. As time went by, meeting for breakfast became a habit only interrupted by individual missions or an incredibly late night in the lab.

Darcy left the dog with Jane while she went across to SHIELD headquarters, visited Coulson and typed up a report on what Jane had done the day before. Then she headed back to Stark Tower to hang around the lab and try to make sense of what Jane, now part of what Darcy liked to call The Scientists Three, was doing. Mostly what she did was argue with Tony and Bruce, as Jane’s innovative style clashed with Bruce’s more careful one. Tony just wanted to build a wormhole machine, and egged on whomever he thought was closer to letting him do it on that particular day.

When all three of them descended into silence, staring glumly at lines of impenetrable equations floating like magic in the air, Darcy would make them sandwiches. After a week, Tony ceded control of the Tower’s food budget to her, with “Go nuts,” his only words of advice.

She did, and in doing so managed to cut her own food bill nearly in half. Between eating at SHIELD and eating at the Tower, all she had to do were have a few basics stashed in her fridge to tide her over in the evenings. That made paying for the dog vaccinations a little easier.
Hanging out in the lab with The Scientists Three allowed Darcy to keep an eye on Jane, laugh at Tony’s jokes and surreptitiously ogle Bruce at the same time, meaning that Darcy rocked multitasking. Under the cover of ‘writing a report for SHIELD’ she even managed to get some of her assignments done, which was great because that freed up time when she eventually got home to fall on her futon, exhausted. When the new school semester started Darcy usually left Stark Tower at around three in order to get up to Columbia and attend her lectures and seminars, or study in the library.

She was slowly making herself indispensible in the tower, although that hadn’t been her plan. She was just there, and things needed to be done, so she did them. Like the cooking, or introducing Steve to modern culture. He had official SHIELD tutors with actual degrees in education for things like history and politics, but he was left alone to wade through pop culture. Although he did his best to hide it, Darcy could always tell how annoyed he was when he just didn’t get a casual reference that rest of the team took for granted, even Natasha, who despite being born and raised in Russia, could swap American cultural references with everybody else. So one day Darcy took him to one side and offered to give him as basic primer.

“You know,” she said, as he helped her unload the dishwasher. “Famous movies that everybody knows. Books that were really important. Songs that everybody knows the words to, even if they don’t remember learning them.”

“You don’t have to go to all that trouble for me, Darcy,” he said, effortlessly opening a cupboard that Darcy would have had to stand on a chair to reach.

His eyes, though, always so expressive, had brightened at her offer.

How could any straight woman, even one crushing on a cute forty something scientist, resist an earnest and slightly blushing Captain America?

So she took it decade by decade. They had a book club, and were discussing Orwell’s 1984. It was fun talking about the politics behind the book, as well as getting Steve’s take on the dystopian future of the book compared to the future he found himself in. They had reached the fifties in movies, and Darcy had just introduced him to Marilyn Monroe, as it seemed woefully unfair that every other man of his generation had experienced the wonder of Monroe, and not him. Steve was that absolute rarity, a straight guy that liked musicals, so he and Darcy were in absolute heaven as they ate up Gentlemen Prefer Blondes and other fifties extravaganzas, How To Marry A Millionaire and Some Like It Hot followed, and it was great to see a guy normally so serious weak with laughter at the antics of Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon.
Other Avengers wandered in and out of their movies; Natasha couldn’t stand musicals, but liked Katherine Hepburn. “It’s the hair,” Steve told her, grinning. “You red heads have to stick together.”

Apparently even top secret super spy assassins blushed when faced with a beaming Steve Rogers. That was interesting information to have. At Steve’s insistence, they had a Katherine Hepburn season. Natasha didn’t miss a single one, which was impressive because Steve and Darcy didn’t prearrange a time for their movies and they happened pretty spontaneously when he wasn’t in the gym or a meeting at SHIELD and Darcy wasn’t in the lab or in college.

Clint liked Hitchcock. Tony couldn’t sit still all the way through a movie, and so was banned after he twitched and squirmed and talked all the way through. Bruce liked comedies, which was pretty weird for Darcy to get her head around at first. But then, she supposed, when your life was doom and gloom and a constant battle against your destructive inner sense, it sort of made sense that you’d like a laugh or two now and again. Darcy always got Jarvis to inform Bruce when they were watching a comedy, and most of the time he’d show up, smile, and sit apart from the others in one of the big armchairs.

Darcy firmly squashed her disappointment when he deliberately sat away from her. He deliberately sat away from Steve too. It wasn’t a big deal, she told herself firmly. It was just another one of his understandable issues about contact with other people.

Darcy was working on those issues.

She knew that she’d never fully understand the burden that Bruce felt. Nobody could. Being the only thing that stopped the Hulk emerging and potentially endangering everybody was a huge amount of stress. No wonder he preferred his privacy, and his yoga and all the other de-stressing things he did and ate and listened to.

But the fact that Bruce was letting the Hulk affect every part of his life annoyed Darcy. She had listened avidly as Tony tried to engage Bruce on the subject, but every time Bruce just shut Tony down. After a little while, Darcy felt a little bit sorry for the Hulk, too. Yes, he was a giant ball of rage, but it wasn’t as if he’d ever had the chance to be anything else. From looking at the files that Darcy had requisitioned from SHIELD, every time Bruce had transformed into the Hulk, he’d immediately been thrown into a situation where there had been guns and bombs and explosions. No wonder he’d been so destructive. He was probably scared as well as angry, which was never a good combination.

“So who do you think would win in a fight between the Hulk and Superman?”
Tony grinned at Bruce, knowing full well that the other scientist was on the verge of banging his head against the wall. This was the seventeenth hypothetical Hulk question on the day, and it was only half past one in the afternoon. Jane, lost in equations and a tension headache, ignored them.

“Given that Superman is a fictional character,” Bruce said heavily, “I’d say that was a stupid question.”

Tony waved his hands dismissively. “Imagine he’s real,” he pressed. “Kal-El of Krypton is right there in front of the Hulk, he’s got the Earth’s yellow sun making him super-strong…”

“I can’t even begin to tell you how stupid the science is there,” muttered Bruce.

“He can fly, he can leap tall buildings in a single bound…but the Hulk floored a god.”

“Two gods,” piped up Darcy, from her corner of the lab.

At Tony’s enquiring look, Darcy rolled her eyes. “He pretty much kicked the snot out of Thor before he squashed Loki. So, two gods. If you believe in them as gods, and not just super-powered aliens, like Superman.”

“How do you know that?” Tony asked, frowning.

“Level Three Alpha security clearance, baby,” Darcy crowed. “I get to watch all the security footage from the heli-carrier and trust me, if the Hulk hadn’t got distracted by some idiot in a jump-jet, he would have made Thor very thore indeed.”

Tony high-fived her for the god-awful pun. Bruce shook his head. Jane hadn’t heard a word she said.

“You shouldn’t be talking about the other guy as if he’s something to be proud of,” Bruce said tightly. “He’s a monster.”
“Shut the fuck up!” Darcy said indignantly.

Bruce gaped at her. Tony raised his eyebrows and smiled in gleeful anticipation. Jane continued to rub her head and stare at her computer screen.

“I’m sorry,” Bruce began, but Darcy cut him off.

“You have got to stop talking about the Hulk as if he’s some kind of monster,” Darcy said, pulling the drawers of her desk out roughly, hunting through them then slamming them shut again. “Monsters are evil. Monsters maim and kill and destroy for the sake of just that. The Hulk doesn’t smash things because he thinks it’s a great idea. He smashes things because he’s got no other way to process the world.”

“I’m not sure you really understand what the Hulk is,” Bruce said, taking off his glasses and rubbing his forehead.

“Do you?” Darcy demanded, pulling a small bottle out of the desk drawer and slamming it shut. “Or are the files that you wrote correct, and you don’t actually remember anything that happens after a transformation is triggered.”

“Well,” Bruce began defensively, but Darcy stared him down. “I suppose that there is some truth to that statement,” he allowed.

“I get that the Hulk is full of rage,” Darcy said, a little more gently. “I just don’t think that he’s ever been given the chance to be in the world when there hasn’t been anything traumatic happening. The last time he was here, the giant helicopter he was on was under attack, explosions were going off everywhere and he was plummeting towards the ground. How can he have a chance not to smash up the place when he’s got to deal with all of that? You’ve guessed that his mental processes aren’t exactly up to your standard. How do you think anybody with a limited intelligence is going to react to that sort of situation, let alone somebody with the rage that he’s carrying with him?”

As Bruce processed that, Darcy turned to Jane.

“Take two aspirin,” she commanded. “Top drawer, right hand side. Use the bottled water I put on your desk an hour ago.”
Jane obediently swallowed the tablets. “Do I get a head rub?” she asked hopefully.

Darcy waved the small bottle in her hand at her.

“This is the third bottle of peppermint oil I’ve had to buy,” Darcy told her. “These headaches have to stop, Jane. Step away from the screens occasionally, would you?”

Jane sat down on her desk chair and closed her eyes in anticipation. Darcy dabbed some of the oil on her fingertips and started to massage her boss’ forehead gently.

“You know, there is something in what she said,” Tony said thoughtfully. “Maybe the Hulk would be a little more chilled if he got more time in the open. You did say that you remembered more about the battle than you have about other times the Hulk’s made an appearance. Maybe that’s because you let down the barriers voluntarily, rather than him having to push through.”

“Awfully dangerous to experiment with though,” Bruce said with heavy finality. He looked down at his desk, then peeked back up to watch Darcy gently rub Jane’s temples. Darcy caught his glance and kept it until he coughed and looked away, pulling his hand through his hair.

A heavy silence fell on the room. Jane sighed as Darcy’s fingers released some of the tension in her forehead. Tony tinkered with the latest version of the Einstein-Rosen Bridge Machine. Bruce shuffled some papers around on his desk, clearly not reading them.

Luckily, that’s when the machine blew up, so they had smoke and fire and a singed billionaire to distract them.

The dog, now after a heated debate one morning over several pans of Darcy’s Breakfast Strata, named Butch because of the incongruity of the name versus his size, became an issue not long after she started studying again. While Pepper adored him and allowed him the run of the Tower, Columbia professors were less keen on Butch showing up along with Darcy. They were even less keen when he jumped out of her messenger bag mid-lecture and began to snarl at anybody who tried to scoop him up and return him to his owner.
She was served with a quick and decisive notice; the only animals allowed into the hallowed halls of the university were service animals or dissected ones. The message was clear; if Butch showed up on campus again, he’d better be one, or he’d be the other. She was still keeping her studies a secret, although she was hard-pressed to explain to herself why. Maybe it was because just about everybody around her was super-genius or an expert at something. Trying to sound proud about switching universities mid-year wasn’t exactly easy; it wasn’t an achievement, just a necessity.

Darcy sighed glumly as she tossed a big bowl of salad as an accompaniment to lunch, which she was cooking to prove to Tony that you could actually eat both fruit and vegetables and not die of toxic shock.

“Is there anything the matter?” a quiet voice from the doorway asked.

Darcy nearly dropped the bowl in surprise.

“You are surprisingly light on your feet for a man that turns into a twelve-foot…strongman,” she said, avoiding the word ‘monster’.

“Survival instinct,” Bruce said, coming into the kitchen and sitting on what was now considered his stool at the breakfast bar. “And you can say it, you know.”

“It?” asked Darcy.

“Monster,” Bruce said, bitterness dancing across his features.

“Shut your mouth,” Darcy told him, pointing a pair of salad tongs at him. “Don’t say the m-word.”

“He is what he is, Darcy,” Bruce sighed. This was not exactly a new argument, but not one that Darcy would let drop.

“So you think,” Darcy said archly. “But monsters tend to be indiscriminate in their smashing. I seem to remember…the other guy being quite particular about who he smashed the last time he was around.”
She stared at him pointedly. “Puny god,” she said, deepening her voice in an awful interpretation of the Hulk’s rumbling mega-baritone.

The footage of his fight with Loki had been gleefully shown by Tony on the big screen one morning. Bruce blushed an adorable shade of red when Darcy had squealed and bussed him on the cheek with her lips in congratulation for having such a kick-ass alter-ego. She had particularly enjoyed Loki’s wheezy attempts at breathing in the small crater the Hulk had created in the floor.

“He still hit Thor,” Bruce pointed out.

Darcy shrugged.

“Thor’s a very big boy. He can take it. And that was probably Thor’s fault,” she said viciously.

“How do you figure that?” Bruce asked, slyly sneaking a strip of carrot from the bowl of shredded vegetables.

“He found a way to come back to Earth once with the Bifrost broken, but he can’t do it twice? His dad’s the king of fucking Asgard, he should be able to whizz Thor about wherever he wants to go. Jane’s heart is breaking, and Thor’s probably sunning it up on a beach somewhere. Did you know that in the Norse myths, he had a chariot that was pulled by magically re-incarnating goats?”

“I did,” said Bruce warily.

“So where’s the chariot?” Darcy demanded. “Where are the goats? Where’s Thor?”

Darcy took her aggression out on the salad, which was now about as mixed as it was going to get before the individual vegetables broke down and combined to form one sludgy super-vegetable.

“I get the feeling that you and Jane weren’t exactly best buddies,” Bruce said as tactfully as possible as he rescued the innocent salad from Darcy.

Darcy turned to the chopping board and started slicing up some red onions and apples.
“It’s a bit complicated,” Darcy hedged. “Although I am generally pro-Jane.”

“I’m good with complicated,” Bruce said, in the understatement of a lifetime.

Darcy chopped thoughtfully for a while, and tried to explain her feelings regarding Jane without coming off as a brat. “I get that she’s all about finding Thor,” she finished. “Hell, if I had someone crazy about me, I’d move heaven and earth for him too,” she said, shrugging. “But whether she meant it to or not, Jane’s quest for an Einstein-Rosen bridge and her studly boyfriend has completely shaken up my life, and I don’t think she understands just how much I’ve had to give up because if it.”

She added a thin drizzle of olive oil to a very large frying pan and added, quietly, “I really miss my mom and dad.”

Bruce didn’t say anything, but allowed her to pretend that the onions were the reason that she was crying.

“But,” she said, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand. “I talk to them all the time. And we Skype, although I’m not sure that my mom realises that I can see when she’s reading her knitting patterns when I’m talking to her.”

“She knits?” Bruce asked, clearly glad to change the subject.

Darcy rolled her eyes. “For everybody. And everything. I have more handknit sweaters than any sane person can wear in a lifetime. Ditto hats, scarves and mittens. She even knit a sweater for the dog, although I refuse to put it on him. Butch has got enough problems without losing his dignity too.”

“Is he sick?” Bruce asked, concerned. He turned to look at the dog, who was sitting in a custom-made dog bed, one of six or seven that Pepper had dotted around the Tower. Nobody said anything about it, but everybody knew Natasha had one in her room for the dog, who had a slavish devotion to her. Whenever she walked into the room he’d scrabble over to her as fast as his tiny legs could go, and throw himself at her feet, belly-up. He’d then follow her about the Tower and watch as she worked out, watched TV or just hung out with whoever was in the communal room. Natasha had taken his adoration in her stride. Clint joked that she was used to it, but Darcy hadn’t ignored the heat in his eyes that flared whenever the petite redhead entered the room. If they weren’t doing it already, Darcy concluded, they totally should be. And Clint was totally jealous of the dog.
“He’s not sick, just in big trouble,” Darcy said, watching the onions and apples turn golden brown before splashing vegetable stock into the pan.

She eyed Bruce carefully, and then shrugged. Maybe it was the honking great crush that she still had on the reserved man, or maybe it was because she liked his calm and deliberate nature. Either way, she felt that she could trust him.

“This isn’t something that’s public knowledge, but I’m taking classes at Columbia,” she said, watching the stock boil before lowering it to a simmer. “I managed to switch mid-year, and take the twenty credits necessary to finish up my degree.”

“That couldn’t have been easy,” Bruce said. “They’re notoriously picky about who they take.”

That sounded a little bitter.

“Get rejected, Doc?” she teased.

“Culver was always my first choice,” he said with dignity. “Go on. Why haven’t you told anybody about transferring?”

Darcy shrugged self-consciously. “I don’t really know,” she said honestly. “But I think it’s because it’s something that belongs to me, you know? Moving to New York, working for SHIELD, ending up here with the Avengers, that’s all stuff that’s happened to me, not anything that I chose to do for myself.”

Bruce nodded. “You wanted your own agency,” he said, and grimaced, “which is a phrase I can’t stand. I get it,” he reassured her. “You’re calling the shots on your own education. That’s good, Darcy. Keeping it a secret is your way of protecting it.”

“That’s mostly it,” Darcy admitted, leaving out her feelings of educational inadequacy. “My deal with SHIELD is that I finish work at about two pm, which gives me time to get up to school, get some studying done, go to class, all that shit. But ever since Butch here came along, I’ve had to sneak him into class with me, and yesterday he decided to escape from my bag mid-lecture. Professor Donaldson was not a happy bunny, let me tell you.”
“So you need a safe place to stash Butch,” Bruce concluded.

“I’d leave him here, but that means coming back to pick him up, and some of my classes don’t finish until eight. Factor in commuting time, and it just gets silly,” Darcy said glumly, adding thinly pounded pork steaks, pre-fried and dusted with Chinese five-spice powder to the pan. She repeated the movements with some textured vegetable protein in a separate pan, which also had apples, onions and stock simmering away.

“So, that’s where you’ve been running off to,” he said eventually. “The working theory in the lab is that you’ve got a boyfriend.”

Darcy rolled her eyes.

“Sure. I fit in dating him during my bus rides up and down Manhattan.”

“Jane said she saw you with a handsome young man one morning in SHIELD headquarters,” Bruce went on suspiciously. “She said you looked friendly.”

Darcy rolled her eyes as she pulled plates from the warming oven.

“That’s because he’s my friend. Chuck was the agent assigned to oversee my removal to New York. We’re buddies now.”

“Friends,” Bruce said resignedly. “Sure.”

“Hey, doubter,” Darcy said indignantly, throwing the dish towel that was laying on the counter at him. “Totally true. I set him up with his girlfriend, and set him on the path to worshipping Aaron Sorkin. I am a true friend.”

“Ah,” said Bruce, pulling the towel from his shoulder, where it had landed. “Sorry to have doubted you. Who’s Aaron Sorkin?” he added, as an afterthought.

“Who’s…” Darcy said, astonished. “Bruce, I thought you were the brains of this outfit,” she went on, shaking her head.
“I’ve been a little busy,” Bruce reminded her, and she totally felt like a heel when she remembered how he’d been living from hand to mouth on the streets of foreign countries while she’d been living it up in college.

“It’s okay,” he said gently, reading the mortified look on her face correctly. “Please, Darcy, don’t worry about it.”

“It’s not okay,” she said stubbornly. “When I think about what you went through…God,” she blurted, tearing off a piece of kitchen towel to swipe at her eyes. “I’m such a fucking idiot at times, I’m sorry.”

Being accidentally insensitive to Bruce wouldn’t have usually made her cry, although it would have made her feel awful. But add that to her unresolved feelings about Jane, and the stress of juggling college with her day job, the general anxiety she felt about her financial situation, the depression about her living conditions, the situation with Butch and yes, a good dollop of pre-menstrual hormones, she couldn’t help but break down.

“Hey, hey,” Bruce said, jumping up from his stool but clearly unsure as to what to do to comfort her. “Don’t cry Darcy, please.”

“I’m…not…crying…” she sniffed, wiping fruitlessly at her eyes with the sodden tissue. “Onions.”

“Right,” said Bruce slowly. “Onions. Totally understandable thing to, ah, leak water from the eyes for.”

He came around the corner of the kitchen counter, encroaching on what had been established quite clearly as Darcy’s territory. Even Butch got off his cushion to pad over and whine at her, as if he could sense her distress. Darcy turned away from Bruce in embarrassment, but he edged closer and gently turned her body into his. He kept his arms at his sides, not wanting to crowd her.

Bruce still had an odd time with body contact, although he was getting slightly better at letting other people get near him. He had quite a large bubble of personal space, and when the Avengers gathered in front of the big TV for some sports-related bonding time, Darcy noted how he always chose a chair, rather than the sofa where he might encounter one of Steve’s exuberant ‘my-team-won’ slaps on the back, or Natasha’s feet as she slunk them into Clint’s lap so he could gently stroke the soles of her feet.
And now, here he was, offering her the Bruce Banner equivalent of a bear-hug.

It had been a long time since anybody had offered her a hug, and that realisation just made her cry harder. She turned into Bruce’s chest, laid her head on his rather firm pectoral muscle and sobbed. His hands came up carefully to her shoulders, where he tentatively rubbed them. His hands were strong, but deliberately gentle. He held Darcy as if she were like Pepper, made of fine glass, rather than a bundle of fleshy curves and attitude. She let her arms wind around his waist. She felt, rather than heard, his sudden inhale of breath and for a moment she wondered if he’d gently push her away. But Bruce was brave, and stuck it out. His hands moved slowly down through her hair and to the small of her back, and she didn’t imagine the gentle sigh he let out as they stood there, in the kitchen, hugging each other.

“Darcy,” he said eventually, “not that I want you to think that I don’t want to hug you anymore, but I think the food is burning.”

“Shit,” Darcy cursed, springing from his arms and towards the burners.

It was a little dark around the edges, she thought, prodding the food carefully with a knife, but not inedible.

“Jarvis, can you tell everyone that lunch is ready for anybody who wants it?” Bruce said, helping her transfer the food onto the warmed plates. Within minutes, all of the rest of the Avengers and Jane had appeared at the table.

“That smells delicious,” enthused Steve, who went second only to Bruce on Darcy’s Most Adorable Avenger List.

“It’s got fruit in it,” Tony said, prodding it with his fork. “In fact, fruit is a main ingredient.”

“Pork and apples are a traditional combination,” Natasha told him severely. “Eat the food that Darcy has taken the time to make you.”

Ah. Apparently Darcy had been adopted by Natasha, as well as her dog. Good to know.
Tony took a careful bite of the pork, and chewed it carefully, before grudgingly admitting that it
tasted good. The others enthusiastically dug into theirs, and before long both Clint and
Steve went back to the pan keeping warm on the burner for second helpings.

Conversation revolved around team training, that Steve thought was important, and Tony didn’t, and
general progress on the Einstein-Rosen bridge, or as Tony had taken to calling it, The Booty-Call
Bridge.

Luckily, Jane had quickly learned how to deal with Tony.

“Jarvis, please send a recording of this conversation to Pepper,” she said pleasantly, dabbing at her
lips with her napkin.

“No Jarvis, don’t do that,” Tony said quickly.

“Too late, Mr Stark,” Jarvis told him, sounding very pleased with himself. “Miss Potts has received
the audio.”

“Well, I’m a dead man,” Tony said philosophically. “For when she asks, Jane, I apologise
unreservedly for my rude language.”

“Apolo...
“Urk,” said Clint.


“Sorry,” Darcy said, setting her own plate aside. “I’ve got to go back to SHIELD headquarters.”

“You can’t have a report to write,” Tony said, frowning. “We haven’t done anything since your last one except have a peanut-catching competition.”

“No,” Darcy allowed, gathering up the empty plates to put in the dishwasher, “but I visit Agent Coulson every day to change his music.”

She continued to pick up the dirty dishes from the table, but became aware that everybody had stopped talking and were staring at her.

“Ah, Darcy,” Bruce began, “there isn’t any chance that you’re referring to a plant, or something, is there?”

“No,” Darcy said slowly. “Agent Coulson is a man. In fact, he’s the guy that shut down Jane’s research in New Mexico and stole my iPod.”

Darcy frowned. “Hey, you guys should know him, he was on the heli-carrier when things went… weird,” she finished lamely, wincing at the shuttered look on Clint’s face. Ooops. One of the many things that Were Not Talked About in the tower was Clint’s temporary possession by Loki. “He got stabbed.”

“Darcy,” Steve said gently, “Agent Coulson was killed by Loki.”

“No he wasn’t,” Darcy said firmly.

“Ah, yes he was,” Tony cut in. “Fury told us so.”

“Well I hate to tell you this, but old eye patch got it wrong!” Darcy said, putting down her stack of
dishes. “I’ve been visiting Coulson ever since I started working for SHIELD. He’s unconscious, in some kind of coma, but he’s alive.”

She was taken aback by the way all of the Avengers scraped their chairs back from the table and rushed for the door.

“Something I said?” she asked Butch, who just barked at her in confusion.

Bruce jogged back into the room and caught Darcy by the hand. “Come on,” he said. “We need you.”

“Okay,” said Darcy, trying not to let her insides melt at Bruce’s earnest tone. She grabbed her bag and Butch and left with Bruce to join the rest of the impatient Avengers in the elevator.

“I’ll just... put these in the dishwasher then,” said Jane, to the empty room.
There actually wasn’t enough room for everyone to crowd around Coulson’s bedside, so Darcy found herself standing in the corridor outside his room, watching through the window.

Clint and Natasha looked the most shell-shocked, although Darcy supposed that they had known him the longest. Neither of them touched the unconscious man, but they drank him in with their eyes. Bruce had taken the chart at the end of the bed and was reading through the notes and graphs with an experienced eye. Tony and Steve were both flushed with anger. Darcy moved closer to the open door to hear their conversation.

“Son of a fucking bitch,” Tony hissed.

“I don’t understand why Fury would lie to us like that,” Steve said, anger flushing his cheeks red.

“It was necessary, from an operational point of view,” Natasha said calmly. “We needed an emotional nexus. Coulson’s death served as that.”

“That doesn’t make it right, Tash,” Clint said darkly.

“I never said it was right,” Natasha spat back, and Darcy could see, beneath the layer of reserve and poise that was Natasha, she was absolutely furious.

“He’s getting stronger,” Bruce said, looking up from the records. “The charts show that he’s healed up well from the physical injury after a nasty infection crept in, probably due to the fact that they had to do field surgery on him on the floor of Loki’s cell.”

“So why isn’t he awake?” Tony said brusquely. “It’s been weeks. Months, even.”

“He went into cardiac arrest three times during the procedure to drain his chest,” Bruce noted. “That takes it out of you. And every coma patient is different,” Bruce told him, replacing the charts. “Nobody can accurately predict when someone in a coma is going to wake up. But he’s been getting better in the last few weeks. His O² sats are better, his ECGs are showing greater brain activity, his BP is heading towards the normal range, which is amazing, considering how close he was to dying. He’s off the ventilator and breathing on his own. Pretty much the only thing left for him to do is to wake up.”
Tony leant over Coulson and poked him in the stomach.

“Wake up,” he told Coulson loudly.

Steve frowned at him. Natasha, intuiting the wishes of the others, slapped him on the back of the head.

Clint looked around at the stuff surrounding Coulson’s bed.

“Who got him all of this?” he demanded.

“I did,” Darcy said, from the doorway. “A lot of it is his, from down in the Vault. The pictures, and most of the CDs, although Rachel the nurse brings in some of hers and I’ve downloaded some stuff on my iPod for him to listen to when I’m working downstairs. I bought the cactus, though. It kinda reminded me of New Mexico.”

“That’s an awful lot of trouble to go to for a man you barely met,” Bruce said, his eyes asking the questions that his words only hinted at. Darcy shrugged, a little embarrassed at being the centre of so much rapt attention.

“My first job down in the Vault was to catalogue his belongings,” she said. “Someone told me what had happened to him, and how nobody expected him to last very long. I was storing his stuff and it just hit me, for a man that was going to die because he faced a Norse god in a completely unfair fight, he was getting a really rough deal. It made me upset. So later on, when I was sent up here to deliver some files, and I found him, I thought that somebody should keep him company until he passed.”

“The get well soon card?” Clint asked, picking it up from the bedside table where Darcy had also bought a pile of grapes, because that’s what you bought sick people when they were in hospital, and she liked grapes, and she ate them while she visited.

“Dude didn’t die,” Darcy shrugged. “And since I had altered SHIELD files to say that he’s the adopted brother of my stepfather, it would be a little weird if I didn’t get him a card.”

“I told my mom that I was volunteering at a hospital and that there was a guy in a coma who didn’t have any family. She sent the mittens the next day. Lift up the sheet at the bottom of the bed.”

Tony dived forward and got there first. The Avengers took a minute to register what they were seeing.

“Those are some truly funky bed socks,” Tony said, after a while. “The pom-poms are what really make them.”

“My mom knits,” Darcy said, tugging the sheet back. “She started it when the chemo put her in bed all day. It would take her forever just to do a row. Some days she could barely pick up her needles. Now she’s got her strength back, she knits like the devil’s after her.”

Clint poked around in the drawer in Coulson’s bedside table.

“There are more in here,” he noted.

“Hey, he’s her husband’s fake adopted brother,” Darcy joked feebly. “Who else is going to knit for him?”

“Can I have these?” Clint asked, pulling out a fetching purple pair.

“No you can’t,” Darcy said firmly. “They’re for Uncle Phil. If you like, I’ll tell her to make you your own pair.”

Inordinately pleased with himself, Clint returned the purple socks to the drawer.

“Trouble,” Natasha said, her body tensing and her hand flying to her thigh. Somehow, between leaving the tower, driving at ridiculous speeds through afternoon traffic and barging their way past security, she had managed to strap a pair of pistols onto the skin-tight black leggings she wore.
Natasha, Darcy decided, was who she wanted to be when she grew up, when she wasn’t busy being Pepper Potts.

Everybody turned to face the doorway. Bruce pulled Darcy firmly behind him until she was tucked into a corner of the room. Darcy’s inner feminist felt a little annoyed at the gesture, but her inner survivalist was quite happy at having several large and well-armed people between her and any potential trouble. Plus, this meant Bruce was standing very close to her for the second time of the day, and that was a citrus and wood-smoke-scented Good Thing.

Director Fury was well-named.

“What the fuck are you all doing here?” he bellowed. “This is a top secret part of SHIELD headquarters that I know that at least three of you aren’t allowed to be in! And what the fuck is that rat doing in here?”

“What the fuck is he doing here?” yelled Tony, pointing at Coulson. “You told us he was dead, you arrogant, Machiavellian, one-eyed fuck! And the rat’s name is Butch, and he’s staying!”

And after that, it went pretty much as you’d expect it to. Every Avenger had taken offence at being lied to and manipulated by Fury, even those who could understand his tactical reasons for doing so. Every Avenger felt the need to express their emotions to Fury, loudly, at length, and in the most case, with a great deal of what Darcy’s mother would call foul language, and what Darcy would call emphasis. Butch danced around Natasha’s feet, barking and growling.

Only Bruce kept his voice even, although his anger was palpable. He turned his back on Fury and leant his hands against the wall, breathing deeply.

“You okay?” Darcy whispered, sidling closer towards him. She carefully laid a hand on Bruce’s arm, which was poking out of his rolled-up sleeve. She gently stroked it, letting the soft hair on his arm tickle her fingers. His skin was burning up.

“If you need to get out of here, I know a place that we can go,” Darcy told him.

“I think…I think that would be a good idea,” he said, his voice rasping heavily. Little hints of green flecked in his eyes.
“Okay, let’s get you sorted,” Darcy said, completely terrified of the Hulk making a sudden appearance and yet, at the same time, completely calm because Bruce was the one that needed her help. “Put your arm over my shoulder. Lean on me. I know I’m not very tall, but I’m built for comfort, not for speed. I can take a bit of your weight.”

Together they shuffled around and headed for the door.

“Banner,” Fury began, but Bruce just growled at him, which did very pleasant things to Darcy’s lady-areas.

“Not now, Director,” Darcy said firmly and, oh God, elbowed the director of a mostly top-secret government organisation out of the way of the door. Well, that was it. They couldn’t fire her, but they could probably stick her back in the Vault for the rest of eternity. Or send her to be Doris Jones in Kansas.

The noise from the small room immediately started back up again as Darcy half walked, half-dragged Bruce down the corridor, through another small private room and into a bathroom. She put the lid of the toilet down and urged Bruce to sit on it. She turned to grab a wash cloth from the sink, but he caught hold of her hand. In the overhead light he already looked less green, but he didn’t have his usual olive skin tone yet.

“Don’t go,” he said, panicked, and Darcy’s heart just melted.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she reassured him.

He held her very loosely by one arm as she splashed cool water onto the washcloth, wrung it out, and gestured to Bruce.

“Close your eyes,” she told him. “Do some of that yoga breathing Tony’s always mocking you for. I’m going to put this on your forehead, cool you down some, you’re burning up.”

He did as he was told, and she carefully wiped his forehead. He was burning hot, as if he was running a fever. She had to keep wetting the cloth as he kept his eyes shut and breathed deeply.

“That was a remarkably stupid thing for you to do, Darcy,” he said weakly after a while. “If I ever do that again, you have to run, you hear me? Run as fast as you can in the other direction.”
“If I thought you were going to lose control, I would,” Darcy told him, perching on the side of the bathtub.

“I was going to lose control,” Bruce pointed out.

“No you weren’t,” Darcy said knowledgably. “You were barely green at all. More seasickness than full-on Kermit the Frog. All you needed was to get away from all the yelling.”

“It’s still so dangerous,” Bruce insisted, pulling away from her a little, retreating into his personal space bubble again.

“No way, buddy,” Darcy said firmly, grabbing his hand. “Don’t to go all noble sacrifice on me. Ever think that the Hul…the other guy gets so angry because you isolate yourself so much?”

“I have to isolate myself,” Bruce said, sighing, but not pulling away from her. “If he hurts an innocent person, I’m the one that has to live with the guilt.”

“Maybe this isn’t the right time to talk about this, Darcy said, not letting the fact stop her, “but do you think – and speaking logically now, not with your gut emotional reaction – there might be something to Tony’s theory that the other guy might be more…approachable if he had more experience being in the world when there weren’t sirens blaring and guns firing at him?”

“Darcy,” warned Bruce, but Darcy ploughed on regardless.

“I mean, yes, guy has anger problems. That’s a no-brainer. But whenever he’s able to interact with the world, it’s a stressful situation. What if you kitted out a room somewhere that was Hulk-proof?”

“And let him do what?” Bruce asked, exasperated. “Finger paint? Play with stuffed animals?”

“If you like,” Darcy said doubtfully, “But I thought, maybe he could smash stuff? He seemed to like doing that.”
“Let the Hulk out to destroy things…on purpose?”

“Yeah,” Darcy said, warming to the idea. “Tony thinks he can learn. Steve said that he knew how to function with the team during the battle and afterwards, give or take a few punches at Thor. What if he got allowed to smash things, encouraged to smash things, and then, after a while, he got reintroduced to the team? Get him used to the idea of smashing things with them around.”

“Darcy, there are so many things that can go wrong,” Bruce said, shaking his head. “People can get hurt.”

“Think of it as an experiment,” she urged. “You are a scientist, aren’t you? You must want to know more about the Hulk. What his limits are, how strong he actually is, how much he can understand, how much he can learn.”

Bruce sighed deeply, and looked down at the floor, running his hands through his hair. When he looked up, it was adorably tousled. Darcy’s fingers were itching to run through it.

“I do want to know more about him,” he admitted eventually. “I can feel him, at the base of my brain, just waiting for a chance to break out of my hold on him. It would be good to lower those walls for a bit.”

“You can totally take your time with this,” Darcy told him eagerly. “Work things out.”

“We’d need a sedative strong enough to take him down if it went wrong,” Bruce said, staring into the middle distance thoughtfully.


“And I have just the place!” said a voice from outside the door.

Both Darcy and Bruce jumped at the sound of Tony’s voice.

“Is it safe to come in?” he teased. “You two aren’t up to anything… naked in there, are you?”
“No Tony,” yelled Darcy. Bruce held his head in his hands, murmuring apologies. “There’s not enough room!” she finished, clearly catching both men by surprise, if Bruce’s amazed stare and Tony’s sudden bark of laughter were anything to go by.

“Never change, kid,” Tony told her as he swung open the door.

“One of these days you’re going to go too far,” Bruce warned him as he pushed past Tony and Darcy and into the corridor.

“Never happened yet,” Tony said cheerfully.

Suddenly there were shouts of alarm from Coulson’s room, followed by machines beeping frenetically. Darcy got there to see nurse Rachel and Bruce push the others out of the way.

“He moved!” yelled Clint.

“His finger twitched,” Natasha verified.

“ECG is reading a higher rate of activity,” Rachel reported. She took her penlight from the pocket of her uniform, pulled up Coulson’s eyelids and flicked the light back and forth. “Good pupil response.”

“Agent Coulson?” Bruce asked calmly. “Agent Coulson, can you hear me? Try and show me that you can hear me. Open your eyes for me.”

The injured man breathed deeply, and, miraculously, opened his eyes.

“Oh thank God,” Darcy said, and was echoed by, of all people, Director Fury.

Bruce began a calm repetition of the facts surrounding Coulson’s injury. By the time he had finished, Coulson was nodding, showing his understanding.
His throat was parched; the nurse brought him some cold water with a straw, and Bruce deftly manoeuvred the bed so that he was in more of a sitting position. After a few sips of water to calm his throat, he turned his gaze directly to Darcy and croaked, “Tell your mother…thank you for the socks.”

Then his eyes closed again. The rest of the team lurched forwards, but Bruce held up a warning hand.

“It’s fine,” he said. “It’s completely normal. His body and brain have been working really hard to repair themselves, and he’s exhausted. Don’t worry, this isn’t a coma, just normal sleep.”

“Well,” said Director Fury, for once speaking for them all. “Thank fuck for that.”
One of the strangest things to emerge from the fall-out of the discovery of Agent Coulson still being alive and his subsequent return to consciousness, was that Butch was promoted to the rank of service animal.

Darcy still didn’t quite understand how it had happened. They had returned to the tower after nurse Rachel had politely kicked them out of Coulson’s room. All the Avengers had gone their separate ways when they got home, and Darcy gravitated towards the kitchen. Jane had started to clear up, but had abandoned it half way through. Probably inspiration striking, Darcy thought as she finished loading up the dishwasher and putting leftover food in plastic tubs in the fridge for people to finish off later in the day.

A quick glance at her watch had revealed that she absolutely had to catch her bus in the next ten minutes, or she’d be late for her Physics For Poets class.

“Come on, Butch,” she said, sighing. “Just be a good boy and stay in the bag for one hour, okay?”

“You can leave him here,” a voice from the doorway said.

Darcy jumped. It was Bruce, leaning against the doorframe and pulling a hand through his hair.

“I’ll look after him,” he went on. “He can stay in the Tower over night, and you can pick him up tomorrow morning.”

“Are you sure?” Darcy asked. “I don’t want to impose. He’s my responsibility.”

“He can hang out with me in the lab,” Bruce said, pulling a packet of Butch’s favourite treats from his pocket. “Although he’ll probably spend the night sleeping in Natasha’s room.”

Butch, alert to the sound of the rustle of a treat bag, scurried over to Bruce and sat expectantly at his feet.

“You’re a lifesaver,” Darcy said gratefully, trying not to read anything into the fact that Bruce had
purposefully gone out to buy her dog his favourite brand of treats. “Just…” she paused, fiddling with the strap of her bag. “If anybody asks why he’s here when I’m not…”

“Your secret is safe with me,” he said gravely. “Don’t worry.”

“Worry is not the emotion you inspire in me,” Darcy said, speaking without thinking.

Bruce went pink. It was, predictably, adorable.

“I’ve got to go,” she said, alarmed at what she’d just let happen. “So. Bye.”

And she fled. She caught the bus, barely, and arrived at campus just in time for the start of the lecture, which she completely failed to take in because all she could think was “Holy shit, Bruce Banner is my dogsitter.”

It was odd not having to think about Butch as she went home, about having to sneak him past the building manager who she was positive was suspicious of her, and about what to feed him. She missed his little face and ridiculously oversized tail, and she missed the way he would walk all over body as she laid exhausted on the futon until he found the spot that he wanted to sleep on.

“Get a grip,” she told herself as she put one of her West Wing DVDs into her laptop. “He’s gone for one night. You can cope with being separated for one night.”

She went to sleep cuddling a pillow, pretending it was Butch, and promised herself that she’d never admit the fact to anyone.

When she got to the tower the next day, Butch was overjoyed to see her, and made a big point of hanging by her ankles as she got breakfast muffins started. The third time Darcy nearly fell over him, she picked him up and put him in his dog bed.

“I love you too, and I missed you like crazy,” she told him, giving his ears a scratch. “But you can’t be underfoot in the kitchen, dude. It’s not safe.”

“He was only doing his job,” Bruce told her.
“Shit!” Darcy swore, jumping at the sound of his voice and toppling out of her crouch. “And what job is that?” she asked, as Bruce came into view. She extended her hand to him so he could help her up. He hesitated only for a second, then took it and gently pulled her to her feet.

“He’s a service animal,” Bruce told her solemnly. “He was trying to be of service to you.”

“He’s not a…” Darcy began, then stopped as Brice handed her a suspiciously official-looking certificate, a license and a blue coat for Butch that was labelled ‘service animal’.


“After the discovery that Director Fury had lied to us, it was commonly felt that he owed us one. Or two. So when I mentioned your need to reclassify Butch – and don’t worry, I said it was so he could be let into the SHIELD building - he had his assistant go up to Albany and have the paperwork sorted out.”

“Look at the tiny little coat!” Darcy cooed, holding it up.

It was tiny. In fact, it was so small that it had to be specially made for Butch. Service dogs were usually one of the bigger breeds.

“Butch and his tiny little coat can now go into any building in the state of New York,” Bruce told her. “Including restaurants, apartment buildings and university lecture halls.”

“You are the best,” Darcy said vehemently, catching him in a huge hug. Bruce put his arms carefully around her and squeezed gently.

“Well, you’re not that bad yourself,” he told the top of her head. “Common consensus around here is that we’re all really grateful for what you did for Coulson. Especially Clint and Natasha. If you ever need any spy work done, or anybody shot with an arrow, you now have two people to call on.”

“Good to know,” Darcy said, thinking absently of her proposed archery class.
Darcy was happy to stay wrapped up in Bruce’s arms all day, but it was getting close to seven am, and Pepper would be here soon for her breakfast.

“I have to make breakfast muffins,” she said, leaning back in his embrace to catch his eye. “Want to help?”

“I’m not a very good cook,” he warned her, releasing her with what Darcy happily took to be a certain amount of reluctance.

“And it turns out that I’m not a very good physicist,” she said, stepping away from him and walking into what was now indisputably her kitchen. “At least, that’s what my last test score is telling me,” she added, wrinkling her nose in distaste. “But I’m trying it anyway because trust me, it’s not like I’m going to get any worse.”

“I’ll need an apron,” Bruce said, his tone laden with resignation. “And a look at your last physics test,” he added, as Darcy passed him a navy blue chef’s apron from a kitchen drawer.

“It’s in my bag,” Darcy said, handing him a chopping board. “But that’s later. For now, wash your hands and then start slicing this red onion. We need them small, okay?”

Bruce frowned in concentration and Darcy left him to it as she preheated the oven and collected bowls, spatulas and muffin moulds.

“Wow,” she said, peering at the tiny flecks on onion of the chopping board. “Well, that’s small, alright.”

“You said you needed them small,” Bruce said, frowning at his efforts. “Isn’t this right?”

“They’re perfect,” Darcy said loyally. “Very, ah, precise.”

Bruce’s lips twitched. “You don’t have to patronise me, you know” he told her, his smile cutting through his words. “I’m a big boy. I can take it.”

“I wasn’t patronising, I was encouraging,” Darcy protested, idly wondering how big a boy he
“Here, take the cheese. I need you to cut it into cubes about this big,” she demonstrated with her fingers.

“Okay,” Bruce said, looking determined. “I can do this.”

His precision cost him time, as he looked for the meniscus of the milk he measured into a jug and he scorned Darcy’s inaccurate cup method of measuring flour and butter and weighed the ingredients out instead. It was worth the extra time to see the look of pride on his face when he pulled the first tray of muffins out of the oven and turned them out of their silicone holders.

“Cook gets the first one,” she told him, while popping the others in the warming oven to keep while she made the rest of the breakfast.

He cut it in half (precisely, naturally) and extended half to her.

“Really good,” Darcy said, through a mouthful of muffin. “I think making sure each piece of onion was exactly the same size really helps.”

Bruce couldn’t reply, as his mouth was full and he had manners, but the look he shot her spoke volumes.

“Right, out of my kitchen,” Darcy demanded, shooing him back out over the imaginary line that separated her area from the main room. “Let the genius get to work. My notes are in a folder in my bag. We’re about to start studying the concept of time, and I’m just not understanding any of the background reading.”

He pulled the folder from the bag, and winced at the images on the front.

“Very mature,” he said dryly, putting on his glasses as he flicked through the course outline and reading list that Darcy had dutifully stuck at the front.

“Don’t judge what you don’t understand,” Darcy told him haughtily. “You know I’ve been educating Steve in areas that his SHIELD tutors thought were unimportant.”
“But, The Muppets?” Bruce said in disbelief.

“Hey,” Darcy said seriously, warning in her voice. “Do not diss The Muppets. They are about love and friendship and acceptance, which are pretty important things in life. And when your SHIELD tutors are trying to explain to you about Vietnam and Al Queda and why we can send people to the fucking moon but not make sure that there’s pay equality between genders and races in the workplace, you need the Muppets to remind you that not everything in life is completely fucked.”

“I…never thought about it in that way before,” Bruce said thoughtfully. “I take your point.”

He was quiet as Darcy went to work assembling breakfast for the rest of the team. Just as Pepper came into the kitchen, already hard at work on her phone, he let out a little giggle.

Both women stopped what they were doing to stare at him. Giggling was not something Bruce Banner did.

“Sorry,” he said, brandishing the folder. “But I just had this image of Steve as Kermit, trying to get us all organised and working as a team, with his arms flailing all over the place…”

Pepper grinned. Darcy snorted with laughter.

“I hope you’re not casting Natasha as Miss Piggy,” Pepper warned as Darcy poured her a cup of coffee.

Darcy had seen the certificates and awards in his SHIELD file, but the moment that she knew that Bruce Banner was a genius was when he paused long enough for Pepper to take her first sip before saying dryly, “Actually, I was picturing Tony in that role.”

Darcy was impressed by the distance that Pepper managed with her spray of coffee, and got busy with the kitchen towel to mop it up.

“That image will never leave my head,” Pepper gasped. “With the gloves! And the shoes!”

And then they both descended into laughter.
“An argument could be made for a comparison between Mr Stark and Dr Bunsen Honeydew,” Jarvis ventured.

“That makes you Beeker!” Darcy told Bruce.

Pepper did a creditable impersonation of Beeker’s worried squeaks.

“You could say that the lab becomes a bit like Muppet Labs sometimes,” Bruce said ruefully.

“I smell bacon,” Clint said accurately as he entered the room. “And has anybody claimed Gonzo yet?”

“How did you…never mind,” Darcy said firmly. “Have a breakfast muffin to keep you going, Gonzo, and holy fuck, does that make Natasha Camilla the Chicken?”

Clint chewed his muffin thoughtfully. “Camilla was pretty bad-ass,” was his verdict.

Tactfully, nobody mentioned Gonzo’s canonical love of Camilla.

When Steve appeared, he took his Kermit designation in good humour.

“I suppose,” he said after completing his third plate of breakfast, “that makes Director Fury Sam the Eagle?”

After that, there was nothing to be done but ask Jarvis to play some classic Muppets episodes on the massive TV and eat breakfast in front of that. Pepper even rearranged some meetings so she could stay and join in the fun.

“Some of America’s mightiest heroes,” Tony said upon finding them an hour later, “and their assorted camp followers, and you’re watching a kid’s TV show. Lame.”
“Not lame,” Darcy said firmly. “Awesome. You want breakfast?”

She peered at Tony, who was rocking his ‘mad scientist’ look – hair twisted into funky points where he’d been tugging at it all night, unwashed clothes with coffee stains, manic gleam in his eyes.

“You want dinner from last night, and breakfast?” she amended.

“I have been busy creating a Hulk-proof smash zone,” he announced. “Jarvis, bring up the specs.”

Everyone in the room stared at the 3D image that projected out of the television.

“It’s like a kid’s soft play centre,” Tony said, excitedly, “only for a twelve foot rage monster.”

“Not a monster,” Darcy said quickly. “We’ve been over this.”

“A twelve foot rage puppy then,” Tony said, rolling his eyes. “Look, see how high the ceiling is? Big guy like to jump, so he’s got plenty of room to swing around.”

“What’s stopping him punching his way out of the walls?” Bruce asked.

Another image was projected, a cross-section of the composition of the wall. Darcy didn’t understand all of the polysyllabic words the two men were throwing each other, but Pepper translated for her.

“Stark Industries has a patent on a new, virtually indestructible form of concrete,” she told Darcy. “I think Tony’s been playing with the formula to make it even stronger.”

“Why haven’t you been marketing it?” Darcy wanted to know.

Pepper sighed. “It’s a case of the developers doing their jobs too well. What happens if you build something out of this, and then need to demolish it?”
“Ah,” said Darcy. “It doesn’t demolish?”

“I saw the test footage, the stuff stood up to missile strikes and the suit,” Pepper said. “They’ve been looking for a way to make it slightly weaker.”

“Is it Hulk-proof?” Darcy asked.

“Only one way to find out!” Tony said, excitedly. “Pepper, what land have we got big enough for the HulkZone?”

“That’s what you’re calling it?” Bruce asked in dismay.

“No,” said Pepper firmly. “That can’t be the name listed on the plans and Tony, I believe Stark Industries owns some land upstate that’s not being used for much at the moment. I’ll get my assistant to send the details to Jarvis.”

And thus the HulkZone was born. It took a few weeks to build, as both Tony and Bruce refined and changed the plans to add for new features. It was designed to function as a training centre for all of the Avengers, not just the Hulk, although that’s who would be using it first. The Avengers Initiative Training Centre was decked out with the latest Stark Industries tech, including 3-D holographic emitters that would, in theory, allow them to train as a team against a whole host of computer generated enemies under the control of Jarvis.

As that was going on, Jane kept plugging away at the Einstein-Rosen bridge, accepting help from Tony and Bruce whenever she needed it. She was close; the last few times she had tried to open the bridge, a rainbow of solid light had begun to form in the lab before it fizzled out as the machines Tony had designed and built were being pushed past their limits.

As if Bruce hadn’t enough to do, he had started tutoring Darcy too. He had approached her with the offer, which had made her squeal with excitement and throw her arms around him. Still unsure about being touched by others, Darcy was slowly but surely wearing down his defences. Whenever she touched him – a pat on the shoulder to tell him that coffee was by his elbow, a brush of fingers when he took a plate from her – he smiled, a little secret smile to himself that she was pretty sure he didn’t know she could see.

Darcy had to have some firm words with herself before their first tutoring session. Yes, Bruce was
sexy. He was so dryly amusing and so damn intelligent, and so different from anybody she’d had the hots for before. But then, on the other hand, nobody she’d ever been with ever turned into a twelve-foot green bundle of anger if their pulse rate got too high, either. If she was going to be serious about this crush, try to move it forward, then she was going to have to accept that Bruce was not going to be easy. All of her moves, such as they were, were not going to be effective on him. She was going to have to alter her style. She was going to have to accept the fact that he wasn’t going to take one look at the girls and swoon backwards onto a comfortably flat surface. She was going to have to impress him with her maturity.

She took a look at herself in the mirror. It was a Saturday, and therefore not technically a day when she had to be in the tower, so SHIELD acceptable business clothing wasn’t necessary. Then again, she was trying to impress, so ratty jeans and a retro t-shirt, her usual weekend clothing of choice, probably wasn’t the best either. There had been some serious wardrobe-searching going on before she settled on short denim skirt, long boots and a pretty plum top that she’d originally bought for wok but vetoed because the v-neck dipped a little too low. The ensemble said young, but classy, she thought, turning so she could see the back of the outfit. Totally acceptable to wear when a sexy older scientist is trying to explain the nature of the universe. And if she was wearing fishnets with the boots? Well, she was twenty fucking three. If you couldn’t wear them then, when could you?

She found him in the communal kitchen, sitting with a pad of paper and a selection of pens.

“Hi,” he said, after a blink-and-you-miss-it double take at the fishnets.

“Hey,” she said cheerfully, bending over to let Butch off his lead to roam around the building and sniff out Natasha. “We doing it here?”

“Um,” he said, eyes widening a little. “The tutoring? Sure, I mean…if you like.”

Alright, maybe bending over was a little bit provocative, Darcy chided herself. But it seemed to be having the desired effect.

“Actually, I was hoping that we could go somewhere a little more private?” Darcy asked, toying with the ends of her hair. “It’s just that someone could walk in and ask why you’re trying to explain the concept of time to me and why I have textbooks, and…”

She paused, and he nodded.
“I understand,” he said, gathering up his things. “There’s bound to be a conference room available on one of the lower floors…”

“Actually,” Darcy said, pushing on in what she hoped wasn’t a suicidal run at Bruce’s defences, “I thought maybe we could go and find something to eat somewhere. Food is an intrinsic part of my learning process.”

Bruce blinked.

“You want to go and have something to eat…with me?”

Darcy nodded. “I get to pick those big brains of yours and cram myself full of pizza at the same time. Totally a win-win situation.”

Bruce looked down at his jeans and light-blue button-down shirt.

“I’m not really dressed for going out,” he hedged.

“Come on, Bruce, we’re not going to the Four Seasons,” Darcy said, using the Disney Princess eyes. “My friend Chuck told me about a pizza place he knew. It sounded cool. When was the last time you went out of the tower, anyway? Other than to SHIELD?”

Bruce fidgeted.

“If you get freaked out, we can come back,” Darcy said gently. “I just think that there’s a whole world out there that you saved, and you’re missing out on it.”

“An hour,” he said finally. “No longer. I said I’d go over the plans for the training centre with Tony for the last time before the build starts on Monday.”

“Sweet!” Darcy said, picking up her bag. “Come on Bruce, time’s a-wasting.”

“Interesting you should say that,” Bruce replied, his smile reaching his eyes. “How much do you
know about time, Darcy?"

“I know that there’s never enough of it,” Darcy grumbled.

“Every society there has ever been has tried to find a way to explain what time is and how it worked,” Bruce explained as they made their way down to the main lobby. “I guess the most famous ones are the Maya.”

“They’re the ones that built the pyramids in Mexico?” Darcy said, guiding Bruce out of the building. “Come on, this way, we can walk through the park.”

“They did,” Bruce said. “Everything they did revolved around the concept of time, even their architecture. There’s a temple at Chichen Itza, the Temple of Kukulkan. It has four sides, each with ninety one steps, and there’s one more step at the top.”

He looked at her expectantly.

“That’s…three hundred and sixty five,” she said, doing some quick mental math. “That can’t be an accident.”

“It’s most definitely not,” he told her. “The Maya would sacrifice humans and animals in order to feed the sun as it went through the sky. They thought that if they didn’t, time would stop.”

“Gross,” Darcy said, wrinkling her nose. “I’m glad I wasn’t born then.”

They entered the park, and although the noise of the city didn’t fade away to nothing, it was decidedly quieter. Joggers puffed and panted by them, and families out with their strollers walked at a more sedate pace.

“They didn’t have the technology to build clocks,” marvelled Bruce, “yet they were able to accurately chart the heavens and record the passage of time.”

“Maybe aliens came and helped them,” Darcy teased.
“Up until a few months ago I’d have given you a lecture on respecting the ingenuity of the human race, but then I met the Norse god of thunder, so I’m not so quick to judge any more,” Bruce said sheepishly. “I’d like to think that they did it on their own, though.”

“Well, if they did have help, it wasn’t from Thor,” Darcy told him. “Dude can swing a hammer, but I don’t think he’s really down with revealing the inner secrets of the universe.”

That brought a small chuckle from Bruce, which made Darcy smile.

They paused by a sundial in the park. “Next question,” Bruce said, gesturing at the sundial. “How did people measure the passing of time before the development of the clock?”

“You’re giving away too many clues,” Darcy scolded. “They looked up. They watched the sun and the moon and they measured the passage of time by how long it took the sun or the moon to rotate. And later, they figured out it was us moving, not the sun. Hence the sundial.”

“Correct,” Bruce said. “But did you know that four the last four billion years, the speed that the Earth is revolving has been slowing down?”

“What the hell?” said Darcy. “You mean, like, a day now, is longer than a day four billion years ago?”

“That’s right,” Bruce said. “And it’s all the moon’s fault.”

“Alright,” said Darcy, frowning. “You’re going to have to run that one past me again.”

“Okay,” said Bruce. “You know that the moon pulls on the water on the Earth, right?”

“Yeah,” Darcy replied, thinking hard. “That’s the tide, right?”

“That’s right. The moon pulls at the water, causing it to bulge. The Earth spins, and the friction between the bulge of water and the Earth’s surface slows the rate of spin.”
Bruce rocked back on his heels, feeling pretty proud of himself.

“Huh,” Darcy said, processing that nugget of information.

“Six hundred million years ago, the length of a day was twenty two hours,” Bruce went on. “But it gets a bit funny now, because although we assume that one day is twenty four hours, not every day is twenty four hours long.”

“Shut up,” Darcy said frankly.

“I’m telling the truth!” Bruce protested. “There’s a guy working in an observatory outside of Boston measuring light coming from galaxies…”

“Far, far away?” Darcy grinned.

“Actually, yes,” Bruce said. “The brightest light in space comes from quasars, which are the nuclei of galaxies. They spit out radio waves, and we use those radio waves to tell the time here on Earth.”

Darcy held up a hand. “You’re going to have to put food in me before I can process anything else,” she said seriously. “And we’d better do it soon, because some scientist told me that the day isn’t as long as I think it is.”

Bruce laughed. “After you,” he said, gallantly waving her forward. “Because I haven’t a clue where I’m going.”

Where they were going was a tiny Italian restaurant tucked down a small street that Darcy would never have thought of going down if one of Chuck’s friends hadn’t raved about the food, and the prices. It was mid-afternoon by the time Darcy and Bruce arrived, so there were only a few people sitting at the tables. There was a booth free by the window, so they sat there.

“Alright,” Darcy said determinedly, unwrapping a bread stick. “Hit me with your radio waves.”
“It’s pretty simple,” Bruce said, pulling out a pen and grabbing a napkin from the stack on the table. “The Earth spins, right?”

“Right,” Darcy said, craning her neck to see Bruce’s diagram of the Earth.

“We have two radio telescopes at different parts of the planet, he said, marking them on the diagram. “When the quasar that emits the radio waves is directly overhead, the telescopes both record the waves hitting the Earth at the same moment. But when the Earth rotates, the telescopes start getting the waves at different times. When the Earth does a full rotation, both telescopes get the waves at the same time again, and that’s how we measure how long it takes for the Earth to make a full rotation.”

“And that’s not precisely twenty four hours, right?” said Darcy.

“Sometimes the radio waves get here before the clock counting out the seconds makes it to twenty four hours, sometimes they arrive afterwards,” Bruce said, helping himself to a breadstick. “The rate the Earth spins isn’t constant.”

“But we’re not talking, like, hours, are we?” Darcy said dubiously.

“Not even seconds,” Bruce assured her. “Milli-seconds. But it does mean that any system that uses the sun as the basis of telling the time won’t be entirely accurate.”

“Okay, okay, let me get this down,” Darcy said, scribbling furiously in her Muppets folder. “You’re making far more sense than my professor does, by the way. So, mega thanks for that.”

A waiter arrived as Darcy was scribbling, so she just looked up and told Bruce that she’d have whatever he wanted to have. Shrugging his shoulders, Bruce ordered a large vegetarian pizza.

“Wine?” he asked.

“Sure,” Darcy shrugged. “But I’ve got to tell you, my palate is distinctly unrefined. It still thinks I’m in college.”

“You still are,” Bruce said, and asked the waiter for the house red.
“So,” Darcy said, reviewing her notes. “Every society since people fell out of the trees has found a way of recording time, until recently we’ve been looking at the sun for that, but that’s not a good idea because the Earth doesn’t spin at a steady rate, but wobbles a bit, causing tiny but important fluctuations in the length of a day.”

“That’s right,” Bruce said, accepting the bottle of wine and two glasses from their waiter. He poured them each half a glass.

“So, how do we tell the time accurately then?” Darcy asked, sipping at her wine. It was rich and fruity, and knocked the boxes of wine she used to drink with Jane on the roof in New Mexico right out of the water.

“With atoms,” Bruce said gleefully.

“Tiny little building blocks? The things that make up…everything?” Darcy said, taking another sip of her wine.

“To tell the time accurately, you need something that you can count on repeating with great regularity,” Bruce explained. “You can’t use just any atom. Atomic clocks, like the one in Washington, use caesium.”

“So how do they use caesium atoms to tell the time?” Darcy asked.

Bruce drew another little diagram. “Every atom, in its nucleus, has electrons,” he said. “They’re spaced at certain points around the nucleus. They can jump up and down, but they can’t move from side to side. When they’re made by the people that run the atomic clocks to jump up and down, they emit light. The light peaks about nine billion times a second, producing nine billion ‘ticks’ for each atomic second. This number never changes or alters, and that’s why it’s used in the clock, because it’s so accurate.”

“Okay,” Darcy said slowly. “I think I get that. Atoms are more accurate than the sun, because their behaviour doesn’t change.”

“Right,” said Bruce, settling back with another breadstick. “Atomic time is used all over the world to make sure that aeroplanes fly at the right time and computers can talk to each other.”
“Right,” Darcy echoed, making more notes in her folder. “So, that’s time, right.”


“Kind of?” Darcy said, taking another sip of wine.

“Well, all the words we have for time are sort of irrelevant,” Bruce said. “I mean, it’s 2012, right?”

“Right,” said Darcy.

“Except it’s only 2012 because a pope declared it would be about 500 years ago,” Bruce said, tracking the progress of their waiter as he arrived with the mother of all pizzas, plates and cutlery.

“Go on,” Darcy said suspiciously.

“If you’re a Muslim, it’s 1433 until November, when it’s 1434. If you’re Jewish, it’s 5773 until September. Why do we call October, October?”

“Because it’s the eighth month of the…wait,” said Darcy, using the pizza wheel to slice herself a large piece. “Well, shit, why do we call October, October?”

“The Romans,” Bruce said succinctly.

“Well, what have they ever done for us?” Darcy asked, eyes sparkling.

Bruce clinked his wine glass against hers in salute, and Darcy made a mental note to add Monty Python to the list of films that Steve needed to see.

“They used to have a ten month calendar, but Julius Caeser added two months at the beginning of the year. It made more sense than their previous calendar, but it threw out the names of their other months.”
They threw themselves energetically into their pizza.

“So,” Darcy said, after devouring two slices of pizza and topping up her wine glass. “What’s so complicated about time?”

“You have the past, the present, and the future, right?” Bruce said, rescuing the bottle and topping up his own glass.

“Right,” Darcy said.

“And right now, in the present, you are sitting here in a restaurant, having lunch, yes?”

“Yes,” Darcy said.

“But you perceive the present as what you see happening around you,” Bruce said. “You used the light from the sun to see that the level of wine in your glass was too low.”

“And?” Darcy said, a little exasperated. “How else am I supposed to do it?”

“You can’t do it any other way,” Bruce said kindly. “But the light from the sun that you used to see the bottle took over eight minutes to travel here from the sun, which is ninety three million miles away. How can this be the present when we’re using light from the past to see it?”

Darcy chewed a new slice of pizza contemplatively.

“I think you broke my brain,” she announced.

He laughed. “It can feel like that sometimes,” he said, as she scribbled a few things down. “Ready to really break your brain into tiny pieces?”

“Go on,” she said, sipping her wine. “Do your worst.”
“We can’t ever say accurately what time it is unless you go back to when time started,” he told her.

“The Big Bang? The beginning of everything?”

“Yes,” Bruce said. “Although don’t you think that’s a strange concept? That the very first day the universe had, didn’t have a yesterday?”

“Tiny little pieces,” Darcy sighed.

“There was nothing, absolutely nothing in the entire universe, and then there was a big explosion and then time suddenly appeared.”

“How come the nothing exploded?” Darcy asked. “How can nothing explode?”

“Now you’re thinking like a physicist,” Bruce said approvingly. “But to answer that needs significantly more wine.”

“Okay, forget that for now. We’ll come back to the creation of the universe,” Darcy said. “Go back to time. So are you saying that, time existed before the universe did?”

“The orthodox way of looking at the subject is to say that time started with the Big Bang, which was thirteen point seven billion years ago, plus or minus. But there are physicists out there who think differently; they say that there could have been something existing before the explosion that triggered our universe. Our universe could be only a very small little section of something much, much bigger. And that bigger thing could be time.”

“Go on,” Darcy said, intrigued. “But feel free to dumb it down and use generalisations.”

“Okay,” he said, laughing. “The simplest way to put it is, if you think that something caused the Big Bang, then there has to be something before it.”

“And that would have to be time,” Darcy said excitedly.
“Right!” Bruce said, cutting her another slice of pizza. “There’s a guy in Cambridge who’s been using string theory – don’t ask,” he warned, “just accept – and his idea is something like this.”

He picked up another napkin and sketched out a rectangle. “You’ve got to pretend this is in 3-D,” he told her.

“Okay,” Darcy said, concentrating.

“So the physicist in Cambridge, he thinks that all of our universe, the Earth and everything on it, our solar system, the galaxy, all the galaxies in the universe, our universe itself, is on one of these, which he calls a membrane. And he thinks that there are many membranes, separated from our membrane by a fourth dimension of space.”

He drew another rectangle on the napkin.

“You following this?” he asked.

“Barely,” Darcy said. “Hang on, I’ll drink more wine.”

“It’ll probably help,” Bruce said, smiling. “Now, these membranes are separated from us, but not by much. He thinks that thirteen point seven billion years ago, when what we call the Big Bang started, another membrane banged into ours.”

“Hmm,” said Darcy into her glass.

“Now this is a pretty controversial theory,” Bruce said.

“I’m still hung up on a dimension I can’t see,” Darcy protested.

“Yeah that’s one of the main criticisms,” Bruce said. “But if he’s right, then it means that time has always existed, long before what we understand as the universe came into being.”
“And it’ll still keep going, long after we’re not here any more,” Darcy said. “Wow,” she breathed, after a moment. “That’s my brain broken into lots of little pieces, Bruce, well done.”

“But that’s not the end of it,” Bruce went on. “Have you ever wondered why we have to move on, into the future?”

“Every Sunday evening before I go to bed,” Darcy answered promptly.

“Why can’t we move forwards or backwards in time?” Bruce asked. “Why can’t you capture a single moment, and exist purely in that?”

“That’s all very well if you’ve got a good moment,” Darcy pointed out. “But what if you’ve got a bad moment? You need to move on past those.”

“I’m beginning to see that,” Bruce said softly, peeking at her before looking down at his wine.

Wow, Darcy thought, pleased. That was actually a real moment there. She felt an urge to stay in it.

“Einstein was one of the first people to really challenge our perception of what time is, and how we move through it,” Bruce said, pulling a hand through his hair. “His idea was that time exists in the way that space does; and in the same way that we can move through the space dimension, we can also move through the time dimension.”

“Right,” Darcy said, adding to her notes. “Einstein. Time and space.”

“He thought that even though we could be sitting down and not moving through space, we would still be moving through time,” Bruce went on.

“Okay,” said Darcy. “I’m with him so far. Otherwise we’d never have TV programmes. Unless you moved in time, you’d never know when it was right to move in space to pick up the remote and change channel.”

Bruce looked at her, open-mouthed. “Sure,” he said slowly. “You can use that analogy, if you like.”

“You’re not an idiot,” Bruce said, with some heat. “You shouldn’t call yourself that.”

“I know I’m not,” Darcy said. “But hard science isn’t my strong point. I don’t mind admitting that. Go on with the Einstein,” she added, slicing what was left of the pizza up into equal shares.

“Well, Einstein said that we travel through time at the speed of light,” Bruce said, picking up one of the slices.

“We can’t do that,” Darcy objected. “That’s why warp engines are fictional.”

“We can’t move through space at the speed of light,” Bruce corrected her. “You can, and do, move through time at the speed of light, and it’s this that gives us the sense of moving into the future.”

“Okay, I think I’m with you,” Darcy said.

“Einstein went on with his theory, and said that the dimensions of space and time were inextricably woven together, into one big fabric, called spacetime.”

“I think I’m still with you,” Darcy said, writing her notes.

“Einstein said that although we’re all moving through time at the speed of light, we’re not all moving through the same parts of time. When the dimensions of time and space got all mixed up into spacetime, we all experience time differently. It’s like we’ve all got our own personal metronomes, but instead of them ticking together, they all tick at different rates.”

“Oh!” said Darcy, flicking through her notes. “I read something about this. Didn’t he say something about two people only ever agreeing on the rate time passes if they’re standing next to each other?”

“He did,” Bruce said. “And that leads us down the road to relativity, which I don’t think we need to travel down today. But basically, he said that the faster a person is moving through space, the slower
we will look to them. And the closer you are to a large object, the slower your time will run. That
doesn’t really affect us here on Earth, but out there in the universe, where there are massive, dense
stars, time runs really slowly. There was a big experiment in the sixties that proved it.”

“Huh,” said Darcy.

“Go on,” Bruce said eagerly. “I know you’ve got the question. I can see it forming.”

“Well,” said Darcy, “if something like the sun, or other stars, can slow time down, then is there
anywhere that time gets so slow, that it just stops?”

Bruce grinned. “Definitely not an idiot,” he said pouring the rest of the wine into their glasses. “The
closer you get to a black hole, in relation to somewhere else, the slower time gets. Say I throw Tony
into a black hole.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow. “Not that you’ve fantasised about doing that at all,” she said, winking.

“Never,” Bruce said, drinking his wine and smiling. “But from my position, the closer Tony gets to
the black hole, the slower time gets. In fact, when he gets right up into it, to me, it would look like his
watch had stopped completely because time for him would be so slow.”

“And for him, you, so far away from the black hole, would look like you’re going in fast forward!”
Darcy said.

“Exactly!” said Bruce. “That’s Einstein’s theory of spacetime and relativity proved.”

“You are so good at this, Bruce,” Darcy said, shaking her head. “Thank you so much for this.”

“I should be the one thanking you,” Bruce said. “I cannot honestly remember the last time I had a
relaxed lunch in a restaurant with a beautiful woman.”

Darcy could feel a blush starting, and was relieved to see one forming on Bruce, too.
“Thank you,” she said simply. “But maybe that’s because you’ve moved so far away, relative from society, that time is moving slowly for you. Maybe if you moved a little closer, time would seem to speed up.”

“Nice,” Bruce acknowledged, smiling. “I don’t think Einstein would approve of you using the theory of relativity as a come on, though.”

He paled slightly. “Oh God, that was a come-on, wasn’t it? Please don’t tell me I’ve insulted you,” he said, panicked.

“From what I’ve read about him, he’d be thrilled that someone used it as a come-on,” Darcy teased. “And yes, that was me risking what I think is a pretty decent friendship for the chance of something better.”

Bruce looked at her outstretched hand for a long moment before slowly closing his hand around it.

“This could be a complete disaster,” he said quietly. “You’ve read my file. You know what happened before. With Betty. I don’t want to hurt you like I hurt her.”

“I know what happened before,” Darcy said. “And that sucks. All of it. But however you want to define time, you have to see that you and Betty were the past. You’ve moved on past that moment. She’s moved on. You have your future ahead of you and, complicated as that no doubt will be, I’m interested in moving through spacetime next to you.”

“We’ll be travelling at the same speed,” he said, rubbing her thumb with his.

“And it may look incredibly slow to some people, and fast to others, but that’s just because they’re not standing next to us and don’t understand Einstein,” Darcy said, smiling.

“Slow,” Bruce said, in warning. “Our speed will be slow. I have to be careful about my pulse rate.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Darcy mused.

“That sounds…deliciously ominous,” Bruce said.
“I was wondering about whether letting the other guy out more often would have an effect on the level of effort you need to keep him in,” Darcy explained.

“Huh,” Bruce said intelligently.

“Maybe if he knew that he’d be out more, he wouldn’t fight you so much, so you wouldn’t have to struggle to keep your heart rate down. Which means,” Darcy added, smiling wickedly, “I could try to up it a little.”

“You’ve been doing that since the first day I met you,” Bruce said honestly.

“Flatterer,” Darcy said, delighted.

The waiter came over to clear the table.

“Can I have the bill please?” she asked, but when it arrived, Bruce stole it away from her.

“I may not have dated in a while,” he said over her protests, “but I do remember that it’s traditional for the man to pay on a first date. And all of them after that.”

“Maybe,” Darcy said, leaning over the table and shamelessly using her boobs to distract Bruce and grab the slip from his hand. “But I asked you here as a study date, not a date-date. That doesn’t count. I’m picking your brains, the least I can do is pay for lunch.”

“It’s turned into a date-date,” Bruce said, swiping it back from her. “So I’m paying. You don’t want my pulse rate to go up, do you?”


The patient waiter finally got a card to put into his machine. Darcy couldn’t help but recognise the smirking face on the front of it.
“Tony got personalised credit cards made with his own face on them,” she said flatly. “I should have expected that, and yet I’m still surprised.”

“He gave it to me on my second day in the tower,” Bruce explained. “He said my yellow shirt hurt his eyes and it was my responsibility to dress in a way that didn’t make him want to blind himself.”

“He can be deceptively nice at times, can’t he?” Darcy said.

“Pepper did the actual shopping,” Bruce admitted. “I was there to try things on and hold the bags.”

“Well, she had excellent taste,” Darcy said. “I’m torn between wanting to be her or Natasha when I’m grown up.”

Bruce flinched. It was a tiny one, but Darcy saw it.

“Okay,” she sighed. “This is about the age thing, isn’t it?”

“You have to admit, I am significantly older than you.”

“You’re twenty years older than me,” Darcy said. “There, it’s out in the open.”

“It makes me look like a cradle snatcher,” he muttered.

“It makes you look like the sort of hot older guy that can attract pretty younger women like me,” Darcy corrected him. “And trust me, when you’ve seen the available guys my age?” She shuddered. “Going older is the definitely the right choice.”

“I’m old,” he said, siding out of the booth.

“You’re retro,” she corrected, getting out of her side.
Three weeks later, they were in the back of a limo and being driven to the location of the newly-built training centre. They’d managed a few more “study” dates, but hadn’t progressed beyond hand holding and flirting. Darcy didn’t want him to know where she lived; she was scared that he’d see the bad neighbourhood, the young men that hung around outside her building that still scared her when she saw them, the tiny room that was her kitchen, living room and bedroom, and judge. Not in a bad way, because Bruce wasn’t like that, but he’d criticise her choice of living arrangement, and she didn’t want that criticism. She didn’t want him to think badly of her. Between his odd hours with Jane and Tony, her job and her school work, they didn’t have a lot of time together, especially as they were trying to be as subtle as they could.
“I’m not sure that it’s a good idea that you’re here,” Bruce grumbled.

“Jane’s here, and where Jane goes, so goes my nation,” Darcy replied, staring at the TV screen in the back of the limo.

“I’m not sure what Jane’s doing here,” Bruce went on.

“Field trip,” Darcy shrugged. “Has Tony got any snacks in this thing?”

“Try the fridge,” Bruce sighed.

“Hey, he’s got the good stuff!” Darcy crowed, pushing past the bottles of alcohol stacked neatly in the limo’s refrigerator. “Godiva! You want some?”

“No,” Bruce replied shortly.

Darcy peeled the wrapper off a bar, took a bite of the chocolate, and moaned. Bruce’s eyes flicked over towards her, then quickly looked away again.

“This is so good,” Darcy sighed, polishing off the rest of the bar in four bites. “Billionaires don’t know how lucky they are.”

“It’s just a candy bar,” Bruce pointed out.

“It’s an expensive candy bar,” Darcy corrected him. “And my budget kind of stalls at Hershey’s.”

A frown came over Bruce’s face.

“I’ve never asked you about how you’re coping with living in New York,” he said. “It’s ridiculously expensive.”
“I get by,” Darcy shrugged, picking up another chocolate bar and sliding her finger down the wrapper, getting pleasure from hearing the expensive, heavy paper tear.

“But how are you managing rent and tuition?” he asked.

“By living in a shoebox, and taking out loans,” Darcy said dismissively. “Chill, Bruce. I’m doing fine.”

Bruce didn’t look convinced, but let the subject drop.

“Oh look, we’re here!” Darcy said brightly as the limo stopped at a security station.

‘Here’ was an enormous concrete building, standing alone in a giant field. There were a few small windows dotted about the very top of the building, but the vast majority of it was huge, thick walls.

“It’s not very pretty,” Darcy mused. “But then I suppose it doesn’t have to be.”

She got out of the car, Bruce in reluctant tow, and met with the rest of the team. Pepper wasn’t there because she had to be in Germany for a meeting she couldn’t dodge, but Tony, Steve, Clint and Natasha were there. Jane had tagged along because her research had stalled and her two science buddies were busy at the HulkZone.

They were shown into the massive building by Tony, who led them into a giant space, packed full of wrecked cars, half-built walls and huge piles of scrap metal.

“This is where Hulk gets to play,” Tony explained. “Think of it as a big pre-school for our jolly green giant.”

“He’s sure got a lot of space,” Darcy said, tilting her head back and staring up into the vaulted ceiling.

“We’re hoping that he won’t feel too fenced in,” Bruce said, following her look.
“Containment?” asked Natasha.

“As well as Tony’s unbreakable concrete, there’s tranquiliser gas that can be pumped into the room if you think that he’s going to break loose,” Bruce said. “It’s my own personal formula, so it should be effective.”

“And that’s controlled from where?” Clint asked.

“Control room, which is up here,” Tony replied, leading them across the floor towards a silver door set into the back wall. Jarvis had been installed in the building, and he greeted them as the door opened to reveal an elevator.

The elevator doors opened into a room that held a bank of screens showing every angle of the room downstairs, and the controls for the holo-emitters, which were installed in the walls.

“Watch!” Tony said gleefully, and the room downstairs turned into Times Square, then a pier sticking out into the ocean, and then the Las Vegas Strip.

“It’s all totally immersive,” Tony said gleefully. “I’ve put all sorts of goodies in the walls and the floor to make you feel the rumble of the traffic or the spray of the ocean.”

“You should totally market this as a video game experience,” Darcy said, peering out of the window down onto the empty space below her. “I bet tons of people would pay top dollar to live out their video games.”

Tony’s brow furrowed as he stared at Darcy, then he crossed the room in three strides and flung his arms around her and kissed her smack on the lips.

“Brilliant!” he said, still hugging her. “All I could think of were government contracts and military training centres! I didn’t think about the nerds!”

“Dude, never forget the nerds,” Darcy advised.
She caught a glimpse of the rest of the team over Tony’s shoulder. They all had variations of their “Oh God, Tony, control yourself” looks, apart from Bruce, who was staring daggers into Tony’s back.

“The very first million that Stark Industries makes on Nerdvana shall be yours,” Tony declared dramatically.

“Jarvis, please tell me you recorded that,” Darcy asked the AI. “And Tony, you’ve got to let me go now.”

“Why?” Tony teased. “Pepper’s in Germany.”

“Because you spent all night tinkering with the programming of the holo-emitters, and you’re not exactly fresh,” Darcy said, pushing him away. She wasn’t lying, he did have a manly funk about him, but mainly it was because Bruce looked like he was jealous of Tony grabbing her. Ordinarily, Darcy would have encouraged that, but with Bruce, it was probably better to keep him on as even a keel as possible.

Tony grumbled, but let go of her and wandered off, sniffing his armpits and recoiling a little.

“You okay about this?” Darcy said to Bruce, who had joined her at the window.

“I’m not exactly sanguine,” he admitted. “What if the walls don’t hold?”

“Both you and Tony tweaked the formula,” Darcy said solemnly. “I have complete faith that the walls will remain standing.”

“What if the other guy doesn’t like being here?”

“What’s not to like?” Darcy demanded. “Plenty of room to jump around, lots of things to smash. It’ll be like a vacation.”

“Tony could get hurt,” Bruce fretted.
Tony’s plan for the day was to let the Hulk get used to his surroundings, and then put on the suit and join him in the smashing of things. His suit would give him more protection than anybody else, but Darcy noticed that Steve had brought his shield and Clint had his bow and quiver with him, just in case they had to get involved.

“Tony hurts himself on a daily basis on Jane’s equipment,” Darcy reminded him. “And he’s just grown his eyebrows back. He’s used to it. Plus, there’s the knockout gas. Chill, Bruce. Okay?”

Without really thinking about it, she slid her hand into his.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” she told him, sternly, squeezing his hand.

“I really, really, hope so,” Bruce said, looking at their entwined fingers.

They stood quietly for a minute, holding each other’s hand, before Bruce reluctantly disengaged it.

“Look after these for me?” he asked, handing her his glasses.

She nodded, slipping them into the pocket of her blouse. Bruce’s eyes followed the glasses as they rested just above the swell of her breasts. Darcy coloured a little at the hungry look in his eyes, but refused to look away.

“Okay, I’m ready,” he told her, and then stepped back into the main knot of Avengers.

“Let’s get this over with,” he said, and they wished him luck as he stepped back into the elevator and rode down to the main floor.

Darcy watched him from the window as he walked to the centre of the room, gave a half-hearted wave and then disappear as his gigantic alter-ego roared forth, with a bellow that reverberated around the empty space.

Darcy stayed glued to the spot as she watched the Hulk charge around the floor, angry and confused.
He side-swiped some of the broken-down cars and she gasped as they went flying along the ground as if they were childrens’ toys. Huge chunks of masonry went flying across the room as he discovered the partly-built buildings. There were angry shrieks as he flung scrap metal against the walls. He spent some time trying to punch his way through the walls, but the concrete stayed firm. Confused, the Hulk retreated upwards, towards the roof and tried to bring it down.

“Reinforced roof,” Tony said aloud to the silent room full of watchers. “He won’t bring it down.”

Natasha had a laptop with her, and with one eye on the computer screens, started to type a report on the experiment for SHIELD.

Hulk sat up on one of the reinforced roof beams, and, for want of a better word, sulked.

“Oh poor baby,” Darcy said to herself with a smile. “It’s just not fair, is it?”

Faced with an un-smashable wall and ceiling, the Hulk returned to the floor and started to smash what he could down there. They watched, rapt, as he systematically took apart any remaining buildings on the floor. Finished with that, he looked at his handiwork and smiled.

“HULK SMASH!” he announced to the world, and nodded, pleased. His attention turned to some of the cars that were dotted around the room. He pushed one, and it skidded forward forty or fifty feet. Intrigued, the Hulk went after the car and pushed it again, a little harder. It went a lot further down the empty space. The Hulk grinned, and as carefully as a twelve foot ragemonster could, climbed onto the back of the car. He pushed off with one foot and went sailing down the inside of the building, roaring his approval.

“Huh,” Tony said, peering at the screen. “I didn’t think he’d do that.”

“Dude likes car-surfing.” Clint said, grinning.

“He’s playing!” Darcy said, clapping her hands. Beneath her, the Hulk experimented with taking his hands off the car and waving them in the air. The car spun out of control and flipped, landing on top of him.

“HULK SMASH STUPID CAR!” he announced, and proceed to do so.
“Now, now, temper, temper,” chided Darcy, from the window. “That was your own fault, dude.”

Once the poor car was reduced to smithereens, the Hulk found another one to play with and was soon zooming up and down the building again.

“Time for a play-date,” Tony announced, opening up the briefcase that carried his suit.

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Natasha asked, pausing in her typing.

“Sooner or later, he’s going to get bored down there,” Tony said as his suit clamped around him. “I think that a bored Hulk is a cranky Hulk.”

He took the elevator, which was a pretty surreal sight in and of itself, and emerged from it onto the floor and flew into the centre of the room and hovered there. The Hulk saw him immediately, and bellowed a challenge. He swung his way over to Tony, got within a few feet of him and roared in his face. Tony, predictably, roared back. He must have got Jarvis to amplify it, because the look of surprise on Hulk’s face was something to behold.

“You remember me?” Tony asked, his voice surprisingly gentle. “You caught me when I fell from the sky. You saved my life.”

Everyone waited with baited breath for the green man’s response.

“METAL MAN,” he boomed. “METAL MAN NOT DIE.”

“That’s right, buddy,” Tony agreed affably. “And I’m really grateful. So I built you this,” he gestured around him. “To smash things in.”

“HULK SMASH!” the Hulk said proudly, and picked up an old truck and pulled it into several pieces.

“IRON MAN SMASH!” Tony yelled, and picked up another old junker, flew up thirty feet and dropped it onto the ground.
“HULK SMASH MORE THAN IRON MAN!” the Hulk challenged, and the game was on.

Pieces of scrap metal, old masonry and car parts went flying through the air.

“They’re like children,” Natasha sighed, typing her report.

“Kinda looks like fun,” Steve said wistfully.

“Only Stark was scheduled to be introduced today,” Natasha said severely. “We don’t want to over-task him.”

The game of ‘smash everything in sight’ continued for another hour.

“HULK SMASH EVERYTHING,” he announced, sitting down on a pile of rubble.

“You did, at that,” Tony admitted, pulling up his face plate and sitting next to the Hulk. Hulk peered at him.

“METAL MAN’S FACE IS NOT METAL,” he said in confusion.

“It’s a mask,” Tony said, helpfully pulling the faceplate up and down. “See? I’m not strong like you without my metal.”

The Hulk peered at Tony carefully. “METAL MAN PUNY…WHEN NOT METAL?” he asked.

“Yes,” Tony said. “Although I would like to say to anybody listening, that I am definitely not puny in many, many areas. Especially the important ones.”

The Hulk sat on his pile of smashed things, clearly thinking hard.
“OTHERS,” he said eventually. “NOT HAVE METAL FACES.”

“You remember other people?” Tony asked carefully, trying not to let excitement colour his voice. One of Bruce’s big questions was how much information the Hulk could retain, and what his cognitive functions were.

“BLUE MAN,” rumbled the Hulk. “HAMMER MAN.”

“That’s the Captain,” Tony said encouragingly. “And Thor.”

The Hulk grunted. “BLUE MAN LIKE HULK SMASH BUG MEN,” he told Tony.

“We all liked that,” Tony assured him.

“HAMMER MAN TRY TO SMASH HULK,” Hulk told Tony. “HAMMER MAN SMASH BUG MEN.”

“He didn’t want to hurt you,” Tony tried. The Hulk harrumphed in exactly the way Darcy’s maternal grandmother did, only about forty thousand times louder.

“Okay, maybe he did,” Tony allowed. “But you weren’t calm then like you are now. You might have hurt people if you weren’t calm.”

There was a pause while the Hulk processed this. “HULK NO SMASH PEOPLE,” he said eventually.

“Good,” Tony said, encouragingly. “You definitely shouldn’t smash your team.”

“TEAM?”

“Me, and the Captain – the Blue Man, and some other people,” Tony explained. “We’re your friends. We like you, and the way you smash things.”
“HAMMER MAN?” the Hulk asked suspiciously.

“He’s not around right now,” Tony said. “Do you remember anybody else?”

The Hulk rubbed his forehead. This was high-level thinking for him, clearly.

“RED WOMAN,” he said, troubled. “HULK SMASH?”

“No, you didn’t smash her,” Tony reassured him. “But that was why Hammer Man – he’s called Thor, by the way – that’s why he attacked you. Because he thought you’d kill the Red Woman. Natasha.”

The Hulk was quiet again. “LITTLE MAN,” he rumbled, after a while. “METAL MAN, BLUE MAN, HAMMER MAN, RED WOMAN, LITTLE MAN.”

Everyone in the control room fought to keep a straight face, and lost.

“I am not little!” Clint said indignantly.

“You’re the same height as Bruce,” Darcy offered. “And I think you’re a bit taller than Tony.”

“LITTLE MAN, METAL MAN, BLUE MAN, HAMMER MAN, RED WOMAN, HULK. TEAM.”

“That’s right, buddy,” Tony said in delight. “We’re a team. We smash bad guys.”

Hulk grinned. “HULK LIKE SMASHING BAD GUYS,” he said, then jumped off his pile of smashed stuff and peered around. “WHERE IS TEAM?”

“You want to meet them?” Tony asked, surprised.
“TEAM SMASH,” the Hulk said eloquently, a sweep of his arm indicating the room.

“Guys, you up for it?” Tony asked, looking up at the small window.

“It wasn’t part of the plan,” Natasha reminded them.

“Since when do our plans ever go right first time?” shrugged Clint, pulling on his quiver. “You do remember Sydney, don’t you?”

“I prefer to remember London,” Natasha said, shooting him a smouldering look. “Alright, let’s go. Dr Foster? If things start to look like they’re going wrong down there, the release for the tranquiliser gas is here,” she said, pointing to the correct button on a panel.

She, Clint and Steve got into the elevator and were soon walking across the floor towards Tony and the Hulk.

Darcy watched the bank of monitors carefully. Tony handled the introductions, a tell-tale smirk in his voice as he called Clint ‘Little Man’.

“Now what?” Natasha asked.

“TEAM SMASH!” the Hulk said, leaping from his pile of smashed rubble to another part of the room. Tony gleefully followed him, and they got to work on a building. Steve happily threw his shield towards a large stack of sheet metal that crumpled obligingly for him. Clint sent an explosive arrow into an old car and blew it sky high. The Hulk roared, caught by surprise, but he continued to smash his building. Natasha, visibly sighing and wearing her ‘men are idiots’ look, picked up a chunk of wood and set about smashing whatever glass she could find.

“Aw,” said Darcy happily to Jane. “The family that smashes together, stays together.”

They smashed up the place together for another hour or so, before coming to rest in the centre of the floor. The Hulk looked relaxed, or at least, as relaxed as he got. Something seemed to be troubling him though.
“METAL MAN,” he said pointing each one of the Avengers out as he went through the roll call. “BLUE MAN. RED WOMAN. LITTLE MAN. HAMMER MAN NOT HERE.”

“That’s right, he’s away right now,” Tony said, soothingly. “We’re trying to get him back.”

“DARCY NOT HERE,” Hulk said.

“What the fuck?” said Darcy, looking up from the report she was typing for Natasha.

That was the general consensus on the ground, too.

“You’ve never met Darcy,” Natasha said carefully. “How do you know her?”

That question was clearly a hard one for the Hulk.

“SMALL ROOM,” he said eventually. “HULK IN SMALL ROOM WITH DARCY. DARCY MAKE HULK’S HEAD COLD.”

The Avengers looked at each other, mystified.

“Ah, Darcy? Want to explain this one?” Tony asked over his private com link to the control room.

“I swear to God, Bruce has never Hulked out around me,” Darcy said, confused. “He’s always been mega-careful not to get stressed out.”

That got her to thinking.

“Coulson!” she said, jumping out of her seat. “When you were all yelling at Director Fury, Bruce thought he was going to change. I got him into a bathroom. He was a bit green around the edges, but he didn’t change.”
“Hulk must have become aware of who you were then,” Tony mused. “Make sure you make a note of it for Banner, he’ll want to know this.”

“HULK WANT DARCY,” he interrupted.

“I’m coming!” Darcy called, thrusting the laptop into Jane’s hands.

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea,” Steve began, but by that time Darcy was walking across the floor towards the group. Natasha immediately stood next to her, with Clint flanking her on the other side. Tony circled around behind them, hovering in the air. Steve stayed next to the Hulk, eyeing him warily.

“Hi!” said Darcy cheerfully. “Nice to meet you.”

“DARCY,” said the Hulk, then stopped.

“That’s me,” Darcy agreed. She looked around at the piles of rubbish strewn across the floor. “You look like you had a good time today,” she observed.

“HULK SMASH!” Hulk said proudly.

“You sure can,” Darcy said admiringly. “You’re the best at smashing. Can I come and sit with you?”

“I really don’t think…” Steve began, touching Darcy on the shoulder.

The Hulk growled. It echoed through the rafters of the building.

“Cut that out!” Darcy said sharply, in the tone of voice she used for Butch when he tried the limping trick. “He’s only being a gentleman and helping me up, aren’t you, Steve?” she said, turning to him and staring at him. “There’s no need for that tone of voice,” she warned the Hulk.
“Darcy,” Steve said urgently, but Darcy ignored him and headed for the pile of rubbish the Hulk as sitting on.

“Boost me up,” she commanded, but the Hulk got there first.

“HULK HELP DARCY,” the Hulk said, leaning down. Before Darcy could blink, a big green hand had wrapped itself around her waist and she was pulled through the air. The Hulk set her down with as much delicacy as he could manage, which still made for an abrupt ending.

“Oof,” she said, rubbing her back. “A little more gently, dude. I break easily.”

“HULK SMASH DARCY?” the Hulk asked, clearly troubled.

“No,” she said quickly, leaning over to rub his big green forearm. “I’m not hurt. You just have to be very careful around people like me. Very gentle, you understand?”

“HULK UNDERSTAND,” he said, watching her hand move in fascination.

“Do you like that?” Darcy asked, watching him watching her.

“HULK LIKES DARCY TOUCHING HULK,” Hulk said after a while. “BANNER LIKES DARCY TOUCHING BANNER.”

Darcy tried to ignore the stares of the Avengers, who were watching her with baited breath.

“You know what he likes?” she said, shifting closer to the Hulk. She lifted his big hand up and started massaging his fingers with both her hands. The Hulk made a sound of contentment, like the world’s largest cat purring.

“HULK FEELS WHAT BANNER FEELS,” he said eventually.

“That’s interesting,” Darcy said neutrally, switching her attention to the muscles in his forearm. “Dude, you’re like a big bag of tension. No wonder you’re angry all the time.”
“HULK NOT ANGRY WITH DARCY,” he said, hurt.

“No, you’re a big sweetie,” Darcy told him with a grin.

The Hulk basked in her attention. He shut his eyes and gave out a big huff as Darcy’s fingers worked their way up his upper arm.

“HULK LIKE DARCY RUB HULK’S HEAD,” he said, opening one eye to look at her.

“Oh really?” Darcy chuckled. “You’d like that, would you?”

“BANNER TOO SCARED TO ASK FOR DARCY TO RUB HEAD,” the Hulk said scornfully as Darcy stood up and picked her way around to the back of the Hulk.

“I don’t think scared is the right word,” Darcy said, letting the Hulk’s suspiciously Bruce-like hair play through her fingers. “I think he was being polite.”

Hulk harrumphed again, but sighed when Darcy started to rub his forehead. He let his head rest against her chest as she got to work on him.

“You should be polite,” chided Darcy, staggering a little under the weight. “People wouldn’t be so scared of you if you were polite to them.”

“DARCY SCARED OF HULK?” he asked suddenly, pulling away from her grip to turn and face her.

“No,” she said firmly. “I’m not scared of you when you’re calm, like this. But if you got angry, then I think I would be scared of you then.”

“HULK NOT ANGRY WITH DARCY,” he said, turning back around so she could finish her scalp massage. “HULK NEVER HURT DARCY.”
“I’m very glad to hear it,” Darcy said.

Silence reigned as she continued to rub his head and play with his hair. After a little while, she began to notice that the pressure on her chest was getting lighter, and the hair was getting lighter in colour. She watched in fascination as his skin changed colour, his muscles shrank and he suddenly became Bruce. Not ready for the change in weight, Darcy stumbled and fell backwards. Bruce slumped back onto her.

“Hi,” she said, cradling his larger body the best she could with her smaller one. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” he said, yawning. “I’m wiped, though.”

“Well, the Hulk was busy smashing the place up,” Darcy said, gesturing with the hand that wasn’t clamped to Bruce’s chest to keep him in place.

“Uh, Darcy,” Bruce said, after a while. “Why are you here?”

“The Hulk wanted me to come out and play,” Darcy said, grinning.

“How does he even know you?” Bruce asked.

“He remembered the almost-change from when Coulson woke up,” Darcy told him. “He said that I made his head cold in a small room.”

“He actually remembered that?” Bruce said, astonished.

“He remembers more than you think he does,” Darcy said slyly, shifting slightly so she could let one hand drift into Bruce’s hair. She leaned forward and whispered in Bruce’s ear.

“He remembers that you were dying to ask me for a head rub that time in the lab. He thinks you were too scared to ask.”

“Hmm,” said Bruce, temporarily blissed out by her gentle rubbing of his scalp. “He may have been
“He likes me touching him,” Darcy said, watching with pleasure as Bruce sighed when her warm breath tickled his neck. “I think you like it too.”

“I do,” he replied lazily, and with a touch of humour in his voice. “But unless you want everybody else to know just how much, you’d better find me some pants to wear.”

“I brought a bag,” Darcy told him. “But I left it in the control room.”

A bag helpfully sailed up from the bottom of the big pile of scrap.

“Put some pants on, Banner,” called Tony, gleefully. “We’ve got hours of footage to review. I think this calls for pizza. Pizza? Anybody? Pizza?”
“Alright, that’s me done,” she said eventually, passing her pizza box to Steve. “I’m going home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

There were a chorus of ‘goodnights’ from the team, and Darcy rounded up Butch from his position at Natasha’s feet and pulled on her coat. Bruce stepped up behind her and helped her straighten her collar.

“You don’t have to go, you know,” he said, a faint trace of worry in his voice. “There are plenty of guest rooms. You could stay the night.”

“It’s a tempting thought,” Darcy said, clipping Butch’s lead to his collar. “But I haven’t got any clean clothes here.”

“Pepper or Jane or Natasha could loan you something,” he protested as she walked to the elevator.

“You’re a sweetheart,” she told him kindly. “But I’m not exactly built along the same lines they are. Their clothes won’t fit me.”

“Then let one of Tony’s drivers take you home,” he pressed. “It’s too late for you to be on the bus.”

“Tony’s drivers aren’t paid to chauffeur me around Manhattan,” Darcy said firmly. “I’ve caught the bus later than this, and I’ve been perfectly safe.”

“Then I’ll come with you,” Bruce said. “Hold on, let me get my wallet…”

“Bruce,” Darcy said firmly. “I appreciate your offer. I really do. But you’re dead on your feet!”
“I’m not!” he protested, and then ruined it by yawning.

“You are,” she said kindly. “You spent most of the day as you worrying, and the rest of the day as the other guy happily tearing things into bits. You’re about to fall asleep. Go to your comfy bed and do that, and I’ll send you a text when I get home.”

“I’m not happy about this,” he said, through another yawn.

“I know, and a mark has been put in the ‘good boyfriend’ column,” Darcy sighed. “I’m going home now. Goodnight.”

She pressed the down button in the elevator, and started her long journey home.

She kept her word and texted Bruce as soon as she got into her own apartment and turned all three locks on her door. His reply didn’t arrive before she went to sleep, and she pushed her nigging doubts about her actions that night to one side. She could have crashed at the tower; Tony would never have known about it unless he asked Jarvis, and she could have made do without clean clothing the next day, or just got up early and gone home to change. She could have let Bruce walk her to the bus stop.

No, she decided. Independence was more than living alone. It was about coping with everything on her own, and if she had decided to stay late for pizza, then it was up to her to make sure she got home safely, even if it meant dodging the wino on the bus and the drug dealers on the corner.

Bruce was just going to have to accept it. After all, she thought darkly, there was a lot about him that she had to adapt to. It had been weeks since their first date, and hand-holding was as far as they had moved. Darcy didn’t mind moving slowly, but their progress was glacial, and her trusty battery operated boyfriend was being used far more often than Darcy thought was appropriate for somebody with an actual boyfriend.

It was an idea that played on her mind all through her bus ride the next morning, and followed her into Stark Tower. Bruce made a habit of getting up earlier now, so they could have half an hour of alone time before Pepper turned up for her coffee and breakfast. As she was still in Germany, they’d have an extra twenty minutes or so before Steve arrived. Darcy was halfway through prepping breakfast when Bruce came into the room, barefoot and in jeans. His t-shirt was short-sleeved and showed off his forearms, which she had an unnatural attraction to and affection for.

“Good morning,” he said, coming behind the counter.
“Morning,” she replied, and opened her arms for her daily hug.

Bruce stepped willingly into them, and sighed.

“Sorry I didn’t reply to your text last night,” he said sheepishly to the top of her head. “But I fell asleep before it arrived.”

“That’s okay,” Darcy told his firm pectoral muscle. “I thought you would be. You must have been exhausted.”

“Yes and no,” Bruce said, in what Darcy had come to think of as his ‘scientist’ voice. “Physically, yes. But normally a day of keeping the other guy at bay exhausts me mentally, too, and I’m not feeling at all stressed.”

“Did you take your blood pressure and resting heart rate?” Darcy asked, snuggling a little closer.

“I did,” Bruce said. “After letting the other guy out, my blood pressure had dropped slightly and I had a lower resting heart rate.”

“Aha!” Darcy said triumphantly.

“One reading does not a theory prove,” Bruce told her. “I have to test that hypothesis.”

“Mmm,” said Darcy, pulling back in his arms to grin at him. “Lucky that you happen to have a secure place to let the other guy out to play, isn’t it?”

“I’m not sure you can call it playing,” Bruce began, indignantly, but Darcy just grinned at him until he relented.

“He did seem to like the cars, didn’t he?” he sighed.
“If he knew how, he’d totally have been making vroom-vroom noises,” Darcy assured him. “It was the sweetest thing ever. Well, that and him finagling a head massage out of me.”

“I may have to change my thoughts about his intelligence,” Bruce said. “Clearly, he’s a genius.”

Darcy pushed up onto her toes and gave him a quick kiss on the lips. They hadn’t done anything past that for fear of Bruce’s heart rate, but seeing how rested and relaxed he was right now, Darcy was all for taking advantage.

“You know,” Bruce said, letting her hair fall through his fingers, “there is an aspect of your theory that perhaps we haven’t considered. If letting the other guy out on a regular basis means my heart rate is slower, then maybe activities that speed it up won’t be out of the question.”

“Speak for yourself,” Darcy told him with a sly smile. “That’s what prompted the theory to begin with.”

Bruce stared at her for the longest time, with what only could be described as rampant lust in his eyes.

“I do not deserve you,” he said finally, before kissing her again.

“Oh you so totally do,” Darcy said, when he released her. She ran a hand through his hair, and smiled when he let out a little moan. “How long do you think before we can test this aspect of the theory?”

“Not yet,” Bruce said, holding her tighter. “I need more data. I can’t risk hurting you.”

“Okay,” Darcy said. “I understand. I guess it’s just me and Bob for a while longer then.”


“It’s not a he, it’s an it,” Darcy said, laughing. “Bob. You know, Battery Operated Boyfriend? Bob?”
“Oh,” Bruce said relieved. “You, uh, have one of those?”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Bruce, until really recently I was a single girl in the big city. I have a whole shoebox of them.”

“Wow,” Bruce said, reeling a little at the thought. Pressed up tight against him, Darcy could feel just how much that thought affected him.

“Actually, I was thinking about that last night,” she said, laying a little kiss as the point where his v-neck shirt met skin.”

“Your…uh, shoebox?” Bruce said, his hands ghosting up and down the curves of her body.

“Masturbation,” Darcy said clearly. “You’ve got to do it, right? Everybody does.”

“I..um…that is…” Bruce said inelegantly.

“I was thinking, that if actual sex with another person was off-limits because of the heart rate issue, did that extend to masturbation as well?” Darcy asked. “Does that raise your heart rate as much as sex?”

“Um…” Bruce hedged.

“You can’t tell me that you’ve never tried,” Darcy said.

“Well, no,” Bruce said, clearly uncomfortable with the topic. “I mean, yes, I’ve…done that. Without the other guy making an appearance.”

“Excellent,” said Darcy, exciting new images flooding her brain. “So maybe, that’s something we could try? Together?”
She peered up at Bruce’s face, and frowned.

“Have I broken your brain?” she asked.

“You…and me…and that…” he said, showing how easily somebody with a genius level IQ can be floored by something as simple as sex.

“It’d be like watching a porn film,” she said, shrugging. “You’ve done that since the other guy, right?”

“I..ah..in my defence…”

“Relax,” Darcy said dismissively. “Every man does it. It’s completely normal.”

“You have some very…modern ideas,” Bruce said, laughing.

“Oh don’t get me wrong, I think it’s completely gross and beyond demeaning for the women in them,” Darcy said, shrugging. “But nobody’s got a gun to their heads, they choose to do it. And part of living in the modern world is accepting that people are going to make decisions you don’t like. You’ve just got to suck it up and get on with it.”

“Is that part of the lessons on modern life you’ve been giving Steve?” he teased.

“Actually, he’s got that part pretty much down already,” she replied. “He’s a seriously good guy. I haven’t talked to him about porn, though,” she said slyly. “Maybe I should start showing him some of the classics.”

“Don’t you dare,” Bruce warned her. “The only person you’ll be talking about sex with is me, thank you very much.”

“Oooh, a possessive man,” Darcy laughed.

“You might decide to leave me for Mr Muscles,” Bruce said, attempting humour. He fell slightly flat,
“No,” Darcy said seriously, leaning back to look him straight in the eyes. “No, not at all. Never. Do you hear me?”

“He’s closer to your own age,” Bruce sighed.

“He’s, like, ninety,” Darcy pointed out.

“Only technically!” Bruce said.

“I don’t want to sleep with Steve!” Darcy said, exasperated. “I want to sleep with you, dumbass!”

“Yeah?” Bruce asked, shyly.

“Yeah,” Darcy said firmly. “So be a good little scientist and go and figure out a way for me to rock your world without the other guy making an appearance, okay? Because I really like him, but I don’t think I like him in that way.”

“Okay,” Bruce said, stepping back to release her from her hug. “But can I have breakfast first?”

“Scrambled eggs, veggie bacon, veggie sausages, fried tomato, mushrooms and some French toast and strawberries?”

“How much do you think I need to eat?” Bruce asked, smiling.

“I want you to be able to go all through the night,” Darcy said wickedly. “Researching, of course,” she added.

“Lots of eggs,” said Bruce, scrambling for a seat at the breakfast bar.
It was kind of frustrating how slowly Bruce moved on the whole researching thing, although Darcy had to just suck it up and acknowledge that he was doing it for her benefit. Her safety was his utmost priority, and it was kind of nice to be somebody’s priority, for a change.

Her semester of physics and Art History ended, with her achieving pretty sweet grades in both of the courses. Steve had wandered around the art galleries of New York with her as she had claimed that it was a way for him to get used to modern society, with its credit cards and cell phones and hot pants. His art skills had been noted in his file, and it made her strangely happy to see the big grin on his face as he wandered through the galleries with her. His commentary on the paintings helped her understand them, and put the information from her textbooks and lectures into perspective. It was also fun to watch him gleefully spend Tony’s money on art books and framed prints from the gift shops.

Physics, despite her initial wobbles, absolutely rocked. Her final grade was based upon a discursive essay that was focused on a particular part of the course; this was, after all, not a physics course for those who were interested in following a degree course in it. Her essay was called “What Time Is It?” and followed humanity’s search for the understanding of time from societies like the Maya up to the present day. She aced it, and got her one and only A in a scientific subject.

Now all she had left to do were her courses in English Literature and Physical Education. The literature classes were a breeze – she was able to do the reading on the bus into and from work, and in the lab, where The Scientists Three were getting closer and closer to forming an Einstein-Rosen bridge. Jane was a little annoyed that Bruce and Tony kept disappearing to the training centre to play with the Hulk, but Darcy was unmoved. Not everything revolved around getting Thor back. Darcy was having her own issues with an unavailable boyfriend, and the research they were doing (which mainly revolved around Hulk and the team destroying computer-generated enemies and playing with wrecked cars) was showing that yes, in fact, letting the Hulk out voluntarily on a regular basis was doing wonders for Bruce’s blood pressure, stress levels and heart rate.

The archery lessons…well, the least said about them the better. Thank god that attendance was the only requirement for a passing grade. There was no way that Darcy was going to let SHIELD and the Avengers get in the way of her graduating, so she made sure that she was present at the archery range for every scheduled lesson. She bugged the instructor so much about whether her attendance was being recorded that he threw his hands in the air and gave the job to Darcy to do. She recorded everybody’s attendance with meticulous care and attention. Who knew, there could well be people in the class like her, dependent on their grade for passing their degree requirements.

It was a shame that she sucked at archery.

She was the last person in the class to master holding the bow in the right position. She was the first
person to hit herself in the face with her bow. By the time everybody else was confidently putting their arrows in the targets, she had just about figured out how to make her arrow go forwards.

Hawkeye clearly had nothing to worry about. She wasn’t going to be taking his job any time soon.

But actual skill wasn’t the point, she kept telling herself as she ignored the pitying glances of the rest of her class, and the disbelieving look on the face of her instructor. All she had to do was keep turning up.

Thor, of course, returned on a Thursday. After all, if a society names a day after you, it would be rude not to use it for your dramatic return to the planet.

His actual arrival blew a massive hole in the side of the tower, nearly drained its arc reactor and set off car and building alarms all over the city, but it was worth it to see him arrive down the shimmering rainbow bridge and throw himself into Jane’s arms.

It was all hugs and uncomfortably long amounts of tongue kissing before Jane broke free and started pounding on his chest with her little fists.

“You came back to Earth and you didn’t come to see me?” she shrieked.

“I had no choice, my love, after breaking the bifrost with Mjolnir, there was no safe way to travel among the realms…” Thor tried to explain.

“You? You’re the reason why the bridge was broken?” Jane yelled, pummelling him again. “I thought it was Loki! You imbecile!”

She continued to rant and rave until she suddenly ran out of steam, and broke down crying.

“Jane,” Thor said, in desperation. “I’m sorry my actions caused you pain…”

“It’s okay, big guy,” Darcy said, rolling her eyes and taking over. All the male Avengers in the room looked decidedly uncomfortable with Jane’s outburst, and Natasha wasn’t exactly the hugging kind. She gathered Jane into her arms.
“She’ll be fine when the shock of you coming back has worn off,” she told him. “She’s spent all of her energy since you left, trying to find a way to bring you back. She’s exhausted. Just...give her a little while.”

She led Jane back to her own room, where she sat her nominal boss on the bed, took off her shoes, and tucked her under the covers. Jane, not really aware of her surroundings, sobbed for a few more minutes, then fell asleep. Not wanting her to wake up alone, Darcy got settled into a chair in the living area, pulled her laptop from out of her bag and began writing up the “Hey Everybody, Thor’s Back!” report for SHIELD.

A few hours later, Pepper knocked quietly at the door.

“I heard that Jane didn’t take Thor’s return that well,” she said, slipping off her shoes and sitting on the couch next to Darcy’s chair.

“Once the shock wore off and she’d given his tonsils a clean bill of health, she went kind of loopy,” Darcy admitted. “I guess it was all the stress of trying to find him, it overwhelmed her when he arrived.”

“He’s definitely a presence in the room,” Pepper said, smiling.

“He’s got a way with him,” Darcy sighed. “Wait until you see him without his shirt on. You totally get why Jane’s so nuts about him.”

“I’m sure there’s more to their relationship than that,” Pepper said, frowning a little.

“What relationship?” Darcy said, pulling a face. “They knew each other for two days. During that time she ran him over with her van twice, she watched him fail to infiltrate a SHIELD base and they spent a night on the roof, just talking. I’m not sure how that constitutes a relationship.”

“You think that Jane’s feelings aren’t real?” Pepper asked.

Darcy sighed. “I don’t know. I’m not the feelings police, if she loves him then she loves him. I just think that they had mega sparkage, and their whole separation thing has blown it up into an epic love
story for both of them. But maybe I’m wrong, and they’ve got the real deal.”

“Why does this bother you so much?” Pepper asked, shrewdly.

“I never said I was bothered,” Darcy said defensively.

“But you are,” Pepper pointed out. “I know I’m not around that much, but even I notice a certain frostiness between you and Jane.”

Darcy ran her fingers through her hair in frustration.

“I don’t blame Jane for anything,” she said eventually. “Not really. We were kind of forced together by circumstances back in New Mexico. She needed an unpaid lackey, and I needed six credits for my science requirement at Stanford. But when the Thor thing happened, I got caught up in it. Maybe not to the extent that she did,” she said wryly, looking over at the door to Jane’s room, which was slightly ajar, “but I was there. Did you know that I was the one that noticed Thor’s arrival in Jane’s data?”

“I didn’t,” Pepper said. “Go on.”

“After Thor left and didn’t come back, Jane turned into a mad woman, even more determined than before. She had a real focus now. I had to leave New Mexico at the start of the new school year, but I was still ready to help Jane. I was going to come down on my breaks and everything. But pretty soon after I got back to Stanford, Jane stopped returning my calls and my emails.”

“That must have hurt.” Pepper looked at Darcy kindly.

Darcy shrugged. “It did, not gonna lie. But I dealt with it. I knew what she was like. As soon as she opened the bridge and got Thor back, she’d remember that she hadn’t seen me for a while. It’d be cool. You kind of have to adjust your take on the social niceties when you’re dealing with genius science types.”

“Well, that’s the truth,” Pepper said heavily.

“But then the Battle of Manhattan happened. And Thor came back, and appeared on TV with Tony, who didn’t do a damn thing to stop him from opening his mouth and ruining my life.”
“Ah, Pepper said. “I can see why that would be a problem.”

“My entire life got turned upside down,” Darcy said bitterly.

“And that’s been a bad thing?” Pepper asked cautiously.

“Well, no,” Darcy said, grudgingly being honest. “I like New York. I would never have dreamed of coming out here on my own. And there’s Bruce.”

“Yes, there is,” Pepper said, her eyes sparkling. “How long until you two lovebirds come out and make it official?”

“We’re taking it slow. Real slow,” Darcy stressed.

“But say, for instance, there was a book on when you’d make the big announcement,” Pepper pressed.

“Then I’d say it would totally depend on how much Tony’s bet and how big a slice of the action would find its way into my pocket,” Darcy replied.

“A truly ridiculous amount by any sane standards, and 50%,” Pepper said eagerly.

“I’ll talk to Bruce about it,” Darcy said, smiling.

“So maybe it’s not all doom and gloom?” Pepper asked.

“No,” Darcy replied. “But a little…I don’t know, appreciation? Maybe? From Jane. An acknowledgement that my life’s got turned upside down, and though maybe it’s not all her fault, it’s because of her.”

“You think she hasn’t been a good friend,” Pepper said decisively.
“No, I don’t,” Darcy said flatly. “And doing this job that I do, which, by the way, I had no say in whether I took or not, it doesn’t make it easy to go out and make more.”

“You’ve got friends here, Darcy,” Pepper pointed out.

“People are friendly,” Darcy said, stressing the word. “But it’s not like I can go and get a manicure, or sit and watch a chick flick marathon, or go and hit the bars with anyone. It’s not that sort of friendship.”

“It could be,” Pepper said evenly. “If you’d be more open with people.”

“Me?” Darcy spluttered. “I’m not the one with the secret superhero identity! I’m open to people! I talk to them all the time!”

“You’re actually not,” Pepper told her. “It’s been, what, six months since SHIELD brought you to New York, and there’s not one person in this building that knows where you live. Don’t you think that’s strange?”

“I’m pretty sure that anybody in this building could find out that information really easily,” Darcy said, feathers ruffled. “Except maybe Steve, and all he has to do is smile at an admin assistant at SHIELD and they’d find it for him in a heartbeat.”

“Not what I mean,” Pepper said, staring narrowly at her. “You’ve been with Bruce for weeks now. You’d think that you’d both want a little privacy, away from the tower, but he’s told me that he’s never been to your place. He doesn’t even know where it is. All he knows is that it’s a long bus ride away.”

“It’s not up to Bruce to decide when he gets to come to my apartment,” Darcy said, standing up and starting to gather her things. This conversation was making her uncomfortable. “And if anybody else wanted to know where I lived, they could have just asked.”

“I’m not done,” Pepper said firmly.

“Yeah?” said Darcy, sliding her feet back into the shoes she’d toed off. “Well I am. I really like you Pepper. I think you’re awesome. But this conversation is ending here.”
“We haven’t talked about where you go when you’re not here,” Pepper went on, ignoring Darcy. “Three days out of five, you barrel out of here at 2pm like you’re on a mission. You don’t tell anybody where you’re going or what you’re doing. You’re never around in the evenings. Recently, you’ve been coming in with bruises all over your arms and hands. One time, you had a black eye. If it wasn’t for the fact that Bruce was as worried as I was about you, I would have thought that he was hurting you.”

“Oh right, like Bruce would ever do that to me, or to anybody else,” Darcy said in disgust. “You should know him better than that, Pepper.”

“I do,” she said forcefully. “I just don’t know you. It doesn’t work both ways, Darcy. You can’t complain about being uprooted and cut off if you don’t make an effort to put yourself out there more.”

“Put myself…” Darcy said, shocked at what she was hearing. “God, Pepper, what the hell gives you the right to lecture me? You have no idea what my life is like, the changes that I’ve been forced to deal with…”

“No, you’re right, I don’t,” Pepper said, her voice tight with emotion. “Because you won’t let anybody in. Not even Bruce, not really.”

“Is this lecture over?” Darcy asked, taking a deep breath.

“It’s not a lecture,” Pepper sighed.

“Well it damn well felt like one,” Darcy snarled, before striding to the door and yanking it open. Thor was standing there, looking contrite, with one hand raised to knock.

“Lady Darcy!” he said, his face breaking out into a broad smile. “It has been a long time since I have had the pleasure of your company!”

“Yeah, and who’s fault is that?” she said rudely, shoving her way past him. She yanked hard on Butch’s lead, and the small animal had to run to keep up with her fast pace as she headed for the elevator.
She heard Pepper’s placating tone soothe Thor’s confusion, then the elevator doors shut and Jarvis’ cool tones asked her where she wanted to go.

Home, was the answer. But not even Jarvis, with his amazing technical abilities, could make the elevator travel to San Francisco, and a small family diner that smelled of French fries and pie and her parents’ love.

“Lobby, please,” she said, emotionally drained.

“Dr Banner is in the communal living area on floor one hundred and thirty,” offered Jarvis. “He seems to be quite concerned. Miss Potts has been in communication with him regarding your recent conversation.”

“Lobby,” Darcy said heavily. “Now.”

She thought she heard Bruce’s voice call out after her as she left the building, but she was in no mood to deal with anybody right then. She snatched Butch up and stuck him under her arm as she strode quickly down the street, barging past tourists and shoppers and those that were just too damn slow for her. She was lucky; a bus that went a few blocks away from her apartment was just about ready to pull away. She hopped on at the last possible second and shoved her MetroCard forcefully into the machine. The driver looked like he was about to give her a lecture on how to use it properly, but one look from Darcy clearly made him think twice about it.

She found a seat at the back of the bus and slumped into it. Butch whined a little, but Darcy hushed him. She was in an absolutely foul mood, and it was all Pepper’s fault. How dare she accuse Darcy of not being open to people? Who was it that was coaching Steve through popular culture? Who had brought all the assorted oddbods and weirdos that made up the Avengers together for long enough to eat meals as a group? Who was it that had convinced Bruce Banner that he could still be loved, despite carrying the Other Guy around? And who was doing all of it despite the fact that being in New York had never been part of her plans?

Her righteous indignation was enough to carry her all the way home. Her phone had alerted her to several text messages from Bruce, two from Pepper and one from Jane, but she was in too bad of a mood to deal with them at the moment. The bus didn’t stop in her street, so she was forced to walk several blocks home. It started to rain, which didn’t help her mood, and her shoes were beginning to rub her heels. She could feel the mother of all blisters starting, and she just knew that there wasn’t enough money in her bank account to cover the price of a new pair, and there wouldn’t be for another few weeks. Her mood darkened considerably.
It wasn’t helped by a run-in with the disgusting building manager in the main hallway where she stopped to pick up her mail. If there was ever need of a care package from her mom, this was it, but all she had was a bank statement, which would hardly be cheerful reading.

“You!” he said, storming over to her. “You’ve put locks on your door!”

He hadn’t been at all happy when Darcy had presented him with a copy of Butch’s license as a service animal. He had pointed out, quite correctly, that she had no need of a service animal, and that Butch, being ridiculously small, would be of no earthly use to anybody. However, a firm stare from Darcy, some pointing at the fine print of the license and a heartfelt lecture on the many and varied illnesses that could require somebody to need a service animal had forced him to back down. Since then, the building manager had taken any opportunity he could get to snap at Darcy.

“That’s right,” she said shortly. “Please get out of my way.”

“You’ve got no right to do that!” he said, looming threateningly over her.

“I’ve got every damn right!” Darcy yelled back, any control over her temper now well and truly gone. “There’s not one word in my tenancy agreement that says I can’t add new locks, I know, because I went over that thing with a fine-toothed comb. And the only reason you have for knowing that I’ve got those locks is that you must have been trying to get access to my apartment!”

“I was trying to do my job,” he asserted, but Darcy was having none of that.

“I haven’t reported anything as broken or requiring maintenance,” she said, her hand going into her pocket for her taser. “So the only reason for you going in there was to snoop around my stuff. My rent is paid up and I’m following the rules of the tenancy agreement, so back the fuck off and let me get to my apartment in piece or so help me, I’ll tase your balls so hard they’ll shrivel up and fall off.”

He backed away from her, his hands in the air.

“I won’t forget this,” he told her angrily, spitting at the floor just in front of her foot.

“Neither will I,” Darcy told him, menacingly. “And since you’ve got the intellectual capacity of a fucking grapefruit, that’s more of a threat.”
He disappeared down off his little passage, muttering to himself.

“That’s an insult to grapefruits everywhere,” Darcy told Butch, and carried him up the stairs where she unlocked the three locks to her front door, noting carefully the scratch marks where the building manager had tried to force his way in.

Forget having no money. She’d have to grab a few more meals at SHIELD this month, and buy another lock for the door, just to send a message. You don’t challenge a centipede to an ass-kicking competition, after all.

Once she got in, and locked all the locks, she burst into tears. Crying was not an activity she enjoyed. Her face got hot, her nose streamed and her eyes swelled up like she had been punched. The tears were caused by a mixture of things; Pepper’s lecture, which she knew deep down had been more of a kindly intervention by a concerned person, was certainly a main cause, but there was a fairly healthy dollop of jealousy going on there regarding Jane. Jane, who sure, had worked really hard, or, as it turned out, watched Fox News. Jane, who lived in the lap of luxury, and who would be happy in a shed. Jane, who had been a friend, and who had turned her back on Darcy. And then, since Darcy was in a thoroughly bad mood, she added in Chuck and Alison, who were so lost in couple-dom these days that it was pretty hard to schedule time with them that didn’t end with Darcy feeling like a third wheel.

And looking around her apartment, the realisation hit her that a shiny floor and some fresh paint just went to prove the old saying that you can’t, in fact, polish a turd. And she was living in turd central. She was paying a ridiculous amount of money (cheap by New York prices, but still ridiculous to anybody not living in Manhattan) to live in a building with a skeezy building manager and a hot water system that barely lived up to its name. She wanted her mom, and she was too broke to fly home to California for a visit.

There were only two good things about her life at the moment. One was her degree, which she was one archery lesson away from completing. The letter about her commencement ceremony, just over a week away now, was stuck to the fridge with a magnet. The other was Bruce.

That thought immediately made her feel guilty. She knew he had chased her out of the building. She knew he would have been kind, and listened to whatever she wanted to say, no matter how angry at Pepper she might have been. She could have vented at him, and let all this emotional poison out, and he would have just hugged her, and played with her hair, and let her cry. Instead, she was home on what was in actuality the world’s most uncomfortable futon, sobbing her eyes out while her dog
whined and head-butted her in the ankle, because she had managed to adopt the most ridiculously tiny animal in the canine world.

She was angry at herself, now. She had trusted Bruce with the secret about Columbia, which was a stupid secret to keep. She should have had more faith in the people she worked with - she hesitated to call them friends, because she was right about that, the Avengers and even Jane weren’t her friends. Not in the way that she knew that friendship was supposed to go.

It was her stupid pride that had been keeping her from letting them in. And when that had been pointed out to her, she had behaved exactly like a child would. She had thrown a tantrum and stomped off to her room.

She wiped her eyes with her sleeve, heedless of her eye make up. Tomorrow, she thought, dreading it. Tomorrow she’d go back to the tower, apologise to Pepper for acting like a brat and apologise to Bruce for ducking him in the lobby. Hopefully they’d both be adult enough to give her a second chance, even if she didn’t exactly deserve it.

A shower would make things better, she decided. A shower in hot water would be even better, but she’d take what she’d get. A shower, a meal from whatever odds and ends were in her fridge, a cuddle with Butch on the futon and some *West Wing*. Maybe the one where Josh and Sam set fire to the White House. Or the one where CJ ripped strips off a three star general.

There was enough hot water for her to wash her hair and scrub her face. As soon as the water began to get colder, she hopped out and pulled on her oldest, comfiest, completely unattractive pair of flannel pyjama pants and a t-shirt that used to be part of her diner uniform. She was just pulling a brush through her hair as the DVD cued up when there was a pounding on her door.

Oh that was *it*. Her temper was well and truly lost.

“If you’re back to cause more trouble, you foul-smelling pervert, I’m going to electrocute your junk until it retreats back up into your *throat!*”

And that was how she answered the door, screaming in anger, with dripping hair, wearing a tight t-shirt and a holding a taser at groin level, already crackling with electricity. It was a pity, really, that instead of the nasty building manager, it was her boyfriend and Tony Stark that greeted her, jaws on the floor and hands arranged protectively over their private parts.
“Hi,” Darcy said awkwardly.

“How did you find me?” she asked. “Did you hack into the SHIELD database?”

“Nothing so crude,” Tony sniffed. “I just used the homing device I planted in your bag.”

“What the hell, Tony?” Darcy yelled.

“Oh relax, all the Avengers have them. Pepper and Jane, too,” he said, taking advantage of her momentary shock to dart past her into her apartment. “All the most important people have them. I even put one in the dog’s collar. God, I have closets bigger than this,” he said in disgust as he looked around the room.

“Oh my God, this is my life,” she muttered, backing away from the door and upending her messenger bag so its messy contents fell over the futon.

“It’s in the lining,” Tony said, peering into her fridge and wincing. “Can you really live on condiments?” he asked, pulling out a bottle of ketchup.

“So, this is your place,” Bruce said quietly, as Tony banged around the kitchen cupboards and took off to inspect the bathroom.

“I said it was a shoebox,” Darcy said defensively, wrapping her arms around her waist.
“You didn’t say it was here,” Bruce said, appalled. “Darcy, did you see those guys on the corner of the street?”

“I see them every day,” Darcy said heavily. “You get used to them after a while.”

“You shouldn’t have to get used to them,” Bruce said, pulling a hand through his hair. “You shouldn’t have to live like this.”

“Hey, hey, hey,” warned Tony, who had emerged from the bathroom. He pointed at Bruce. “You promised that you’d stay calm if I let you come along. No Hulking in Harlem, you know the rules.”

“Do you see me losing my temper?” Bruce asked, deceptively calm.

“Did you know that your fire escape wouldn’t even hold the weight of your delightful little service rat?” Tony said, pulling her cheap Ikea coffee table slash desk across the room to stand on so he could inspect the light fitting. “If you tried to walk out on it while trying to escape the inevitable fire that this ancient wiring will one day cause, you’d plummet to your death. Did you know that?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Bruce said quietly. Darcy could hear the hurt in his voice, and it was like a dagger in her gut.

“Because look at this place!” Darcy said, the tears holding precariously in her eyes. “How could I bring you back here? I didn’t want to see the look on your face that you’ve got right now. That pitying, ‘poor Darcy’ look.”

“But it’s a shithole,” Tony said, still poking at the ceiling.

“And it’s my fucking shithole,” Darcy yelled. “Not all of us are billionaires, Tony. Not all of us live in fucking palaces. Some of us have to make do with what we can afford.”

“Why aren’t you sharing with other people?” Bruce asked. “Surely for the money you’re paying for this place, you could get a nice room in a shared apartment somewhere better…”

“Because I’m sick and fucking tired of having roommates constantly around, making my life just that
little bit more difficult,” Darcy exploded. “Because I was yanked out of my life before I could properly start it, and I just wanted a little bit of control. Because I didn’t want to come home every night to a stranger and make small talk about a job that I’m not allowed to talk about and then argue about who used the last of the milk. And don’t get so fucking highhanded about the area I live in, considering you’re one of the reasons that it still looks like a damn construction site.”

Bruce recoiled, and Darcy immediately felt awful. The Hulk’s destructive tendencies were a vulnerable spot, and she had hit it with deadly accuracy.

“Shit, Bruce, I’m sorry,” she began, but he just put his hand up and walked off out into the corridor.

“That was a low blow,” Tony remarked, as he stepped down off her table.

“I didn’t mean it,” Darcy said, not able to meet his gaze. “It just…came out.”

Tony remained silent for a moment. “Come home with us,” he said. “We’ll wait while you pack a bag.”

“I am home,” Darcy said, looking up to meet him in the eye.

“Don’t be stupid, Darcy, it doesn’t suit you,” Tony told her.

“Get out of my building, Tony,” she sighed.

“Your building smells like rotten cabbage,” he told her.

“That’s the building manager,” she told him.

“The one with the soon-to-be-fried genitals? What did he do, other than offend the olfactory nerves of everybody in the building?”

“Nothing,” Darcy said flatly. “I’m just in a really bad mood tonight.”
“That homing device is also a recorder and transmitter,” Tony said nonchalantly. “I can call up the recording and find out, you know.”

Darcy’s reply was cut off by the unmistakable sound of a shot gun being cocked.

“Uh, ma’am, that really isn’t necessary,” Bruce said nervously from the corridor.

“You’re hassling my neighbour and causing noise at night,” Mrs Williams said, coming into view of the open door. “I think this is damn well necessary. I’m only going to tell you once, boys. Leave. Now.”

The barrel of the shotgun moved with surprising ease and professionalism between Bruce, who had plastered himself to the wall in the hall, and Tony, who was inching towards Darcy.

“You alright, girl?” Mrs Williams asked, peering down the barrel of the gun.

“Fine now that you’re here, Mrs Williams,” Darcy said, stepping away from Tony with a frown. “I think you’d both better leave.”

“We’ll continue this discussion tomorrow,” Bruce told Darcy. “Come on, Tony. She’ll be safe for tonight.”

“I’ve been safe for the last six months,” Darcy called to their retreating backs. When they had started down the stairs, she turned to her neighbour.

“Do you even know how to use this thing?” she asked, coming behind Mrs Williams to take the gun out of her arthritic hands. “Do you have a licence? My god, is it loaded?”

“Not even a thank-you,” grumbled the old woman. “After me coming to save you from thieves and rapists and all.”

Darcy gave her an arm to lean on and escorted her back into her apartment.
“They weren’t thieves and rapists,” she sighed. “One of them was Tony Stark. The other was my boyfriend. At least, I hope he’s still my boyfriend. I kind of owe him an apology.”

“You got a billionaire in your address book, and you go for the other guy?” the old woman said in disbelief. “Girl, you’re ten kinds of stupid.”

“Well, I’ll agree with you on the last one,” Darcy sighed, as she settled the woman in her chair. “But not about Tony Stark. He would be impossible to live with, even if he wasn’t living with one of the best women I know. I need to apologise to her, too.”

She looked at the gun dubiously.

“How do I make this safe?” she asked.

“Give it here,” the old woman demanded, and broke the breech open to extract the cartridges. “It’s as safe as it’s going to get,” she told Darcy, with a smile. “Rock salt. Got the idea from the show with the pretty boys in the fancy car. One of these in your face won’t kill you, but it will make you think twice about doing whatever the hell thing it was you were doing.”

“You can blind people with this!” Darcy said, appalled.

Mrs Williams shrugged, unmoved. “You’re stupid enough to get shot at, you deserve it,” she opined.

“You are a very scary woman,” Darcy told her. “Where do you want me to put your gun?”

“Lean it up against the dresser,” Mrs Williams told her. “Now go home and get some rest. My show is starting.”

“Thank you,” Darcy said, after doing as she was told. “I really appreciate the fact that you were willing to blind the richest man in the country for me.”

“Oh hush,” Mrs Williams said, embarrassed.
Darcy let herself out, leaving Mrs Williams to watch a rerun of *Supernatural*. She had to hand it to the woman. The boys sure were pretty.

Sleep did not come easy to her that night. She managed about two hours in total, and spent the rest of the night tossing and turning. She kept picturing Bruce’s face falling as she hit him with her best cheap shot. No doubt that Tony, at least, would tell anybody within earshot about the state of her apartment and her cattiness towards a man who had done nothing but make her feel special and wanted. God, he was going to break up with her, wasn’t he? Because he was a sensible and rational older man, who expected more from his girlfriends than petty jealousy and childish irrationality. Jane was probably going to request another SHIELD employee be assigned to her. Perhaps Darcy could put in a good word for Alison, if she still had any pull at all in headquarters.

It would be the Vault for her again, Darcy knew. Oh well, at least with her improved security status she’d be able to legitimately read the files that came through her hands instead of abusing the honour system. Or maybe Agent Coulson would hire her as an assistant, now that he was finished with his recuperating and was back at his desk.

Her quarter to five alarm blared, and she slapped it off with a sigh. Time to face the music. If there ever was a day that she was tempted to call in sick, it was today, but she couldn’t do it. It would only be delaying the inevitable.

She arrived at the tower at her usual time, but instead of an empty kitchen, or a kitchen with Bruce in it waiting for her, she found Pepper, Jane and Natasha sitting around the table, all drinking coffee with sombre looks on their faces.

“Hi,” she said nervously, bending down to let an excited Butch off his lead. “Does anybody want breakfast?”

“We thought that it was about time that somebody did that for you,” Jane said, standing up and walking to the counter. She pulled a plate full of charred toast from the warming over. She looked at it and frowned. “Then we realised that there was a reason why you did all the cooking. Maybe it’ll be edible if you put enough jelly on it?”

“I like peanut butter,” Darcy said, unbuttoning her coat. “There’s a jar of it in the cupboard above the kettle.”

“Peanut butter,” Jane said, standing on the tips of her toes to reach the cupboard door. “Right. I
should have remembered. You used to bring me that sometimes, in New Mexico.”

“You didn’t have to remember that,” Darcy said, coming over to relieve Jane from breakfast duty, as she looked completely confused by the jar in her hand.

“I did,” Jane said, looking troubled. “I heard what you and Pepper were talking about yesterday, in my room. You were right. I’ve been a really crappy friend to you Darcy, and I’m sorry.”

Tears, stupid fucking tears, sprang to Darcy’s eyes.

“You don’t have to apologise,” Darcy said, swiping at her eyes. “I haven’t exactly been a good friend either.”

Jane gave Darcy an awkward hug, as she was still holding the plate of cremated toast.

“I’ve been worse,” she said. “I let the Einstein-Rosen bridge completely take over my life. I get…lost in my work, Darcy, I always have done. My father was the same. He had my mother to kick him into touch when he needed it. I need you to do that for me. You can’t let me ignore you, or anybody else,” she begged. “Please. Kick my ass. Yell at me. Just tell me when I need to pay more attention to you.”

Darcy sighed. “I will,” she said, “but only if you promise that you’re going to try and do it yourself. You can’t depend on other people to remind you how to interact with them, Jane. It’s not fair.”

“I promise,” Jane vowed.

They hugged it out a little while longer, then Darcy rescued the toast which was threatening to fall to the floor and shatter into a thousand pieces. She took it to the table and started to gingerly scrape the worst of the blackened bits off and onto the plate.

“I owe you an apology, Pepper,” she said, after a moment. “You were right, yesterday. I took some time to think about it, and, well, I have been keeping people at arm’s length.” She looked up and risked a glance at Pepper’s face. “I’m sorry I acted like a brat and stormed out. You were only trying to help me, and I wasn’t prepared for that.”
“Forgiven, and forgotten,” Pepper said instantly. “I’ve been awake all night kicking myself for just coming out and saying it like that. I wasn’t exactly gentle. I’m used to trying to convince Tony of things. I forget sometimes that other people don’t always need the hard sell.”

“I didn’t need gentle,” Darcy told her, spreading a very thick layer of peanut butter on the toast. “I needed a kick up the ass, and that’s what you gave me.”

Darcy looked at Natasha, who had remained silent during all the emotional chat.

“How come you’re here, Natasha?” she asked. “I didn’t need to apologise to you, did I?”

“Not as such,” Natasha said, setting her cup down delicately. “But I am a little hurt that you don’t consider me as a friend, Darcy.”

Pepper moved awkwardly in her seat.

“It’s not that I don’t like you,” Darcy hurried to tell the other woman. “I think you’re amazing. But it’s not like we have much in common, or do anything together.”

“You prepare food for me,” Natasha said carefully. “And I don’t feel that it’s necessary to check it for poisons or toxins before I eat it. You obviously aren’t aware of the level of trust that I hold you in.”

Darcy blinked. That…was not what she expected Natasha to say.

“I’ve never really thought about it that way before,” she said, the uncensored portions of Natasha’s personnel file leaping out at her. “Uh, thank you, I guess.”

“You’re welcome,” Natasha said, inclining her head. “Also, you allow me access to your pet. I’ve never had a pet before. It has been an unusually rewarding experience.” At her feet, Butch rolled over and showed her his tiny, hairy belly.

“Not even a goldfish?” Darcy blurted.
Natasha smiled. “Not even a fish,” she said, a little sadly.

“We could go to an animal shelter,” Darcy offered shyly. “We could pick you out your own dog.”

“I’d like that,” Natasha said. “But only if you think that Butch would be able to tolerate living with another animal. I understand that they can be very territorial.”

“You wouldn’t have to worry about that,” Darcy said, picking up her toast and looking at it dubiously. “I can keep Butch in the lab with me and Jane when we’re here.”

“Darcy, we want you to move in here,” Pepper said, reaching across the table to take her hand. “You were right, you know, when you said that none of us had exactly been friendly to you. If we had been, we should have said something months ago.”

“You don’t have to do that, Pepper,” Darcy began, only to be shushed by the woman herself.

“I do,” she said, grimacing. “First and foremost, because we all want you to. We had a meeting last night after Tony and Bruce came back from visiting your apartment. It was unanimous.”

“Really?” Darcy asked, feeling like she was about to cry again.

“Really,” Pepper confirmed. “Tony was so angry with himself. I haven’t seen him like this for a long time. He was under the impression that you already lived here. He had no idea that you lived up in Harlem.”

“For a genius, he can be pretty dumb, can’t he,” Darcy observed.

“You have no idea,” Pepper said heavily. “Steve and Clint weren’t very happy when the others described where you were living, either.”

“You must have been cursing my name,” Jane said, shaking her head. “I didn’t even think about where you were living. I just assumed that SHIELD was putting you up somewhere.”

“Bygones,” Darcy said, biting into her toast gingerly. “Forget about it.”

“Please say that you’re moving in here,” Pepper urged.

“As long as it’s not a pity thing,” Darcy said, some stubborn part of her holding out against the gleeful thoughts that were jumping about in her head, yelling “No rent! No utilities! No food bills!”

“It really isn’t,” Pepper said. “It’s a friend thing. That’s what friends do, they help each other out. One of the hardest things you have to do as a friend is to learn to accept that helping hand from time to time.”

“I’ve had a problem with that,” Natasha volunteered. “Clint was the first person to make me understand the concept. It…wasn’t easy,” she said, with no small amount of understatement.

“Alright then,” Darcy said, abandoning her toast for the lost cause it was. “Thank you, Pepper. I’d love to live in the tower.”

“Oh thank God you said that,” Pepper sighed.

“Why?” asked Darcy, suspiciously.

The three other women exchanged looks.

“Tell me what you’re not telling me,” she demanded.

“Tony didn’t think that you’d be amenable to my way of asking you to move in with us,” Pepper said, choosing her words carefully. “Not after yesterday. He had an alternate plan.”
“What is it?” Darcy said, her stomach clenching with tension.

“He bought your apartment building,” Pepper said, grimacing.

“He bought the building,” Darcy repeated in disbelief.

“And most of the block,” Natasha added.

“And he evicted you,” Pepper said, grimace still in place. “If you hadn’t already agreed to move in, you would have returned home to find the locks changed and your belongings already boxed up and moved in here.”

“My stuff…” Darcy echoed in disbelief.

“That’s where everybody else is,” Jane said kindly. “They’re getting your things together.”

“And what did Bruce have to say about this gross invasion of my privacy and the no doubt illegal eviction?” Darcy asked coldly.

The women shared another awkward look.

“He’s the one that suggested that we talk to you here while they go there,” Jane confessed.

“I see,” said Darcy, totally shocked and more than a little betrayed. “Well, this is going to be awkward,” she said tightly.

“What is?” Pepper asked.

“Me living here with him,” Darcy said, shaking her head. “I just can’t do it.”

“Darcy, he was doing it out of love,” Jane tried. “You should have seen him last night, he was so
worried about you. Does your neighbour really have a shotgun?"

“Rock salt,” Darcy said shortly. “Non lethal.”

“But still nasty,” Natasha said, a little impressed.

“You don’t really want to live in an area where your neighbour keeps a shotgun, do you?” Pepper tried.

“Pepper, I bet Natasha’s got at least three weapons on her right now,” Darcy pointed out.

“Five,” Natasha said. “But these jeans are tight. I couldn’t risk any more without there being a visibility issue.”

“Well, the whole issue’s moot,” Pepper said, in her determined CEO voice. “You agreed to move in before you found out about Tony’s Monopoly fantasy.”

“I would have liked a chance to pack my own underwear, Pepper!” Darcy said, frustrated.

“Oh you don’t have to worry about that, we left all that to Bruce,” Tony said, sailing into the kitchen. “After all, he’s seen them already, yes? No? Yes? Or he will on Saturday? Maybe?”

“That’s not polite, Tony,” Steve said, following him in, frowning. “Darcy, I apologise on behalf of him.”

“There’s no need,” Darcy said. “I’d like my eviction papers, please.”

Tony frowned at the breakfast bar, which wasn’t living up to it’s name.

“Where’s all the food?” he complained. “I’ve been promising Thor Darcy’s amazing pancakes, and there are no pancakes.”
“My eviction papers,” Darcy said firmly. “I want them.”

“I don’t feel like giving them to you,” Tony said, defaulting to ‘annoying prick’ mode. “Not until I get some pancakes.”

“Fine,” Darcy said through clenched teeth. “All the ingredients are in the cupboard and the fridge. A genius like you shouldn’t have any problems with putting them together in the right combination. And when you’ve done that, I want my eviction papers, which I believe that you, as my landlord, have a legal right to serve me with.”

She turned away before he could reply, picked up her jacket and bag from the couch where she’d thrown them, and left the room. She needed some space, and although Stark Tower was massive, she couldn’t handle being anywhere near Tony at the moment. Or Bruce. She headed off in the direction of Central Park, but stopped when she realised that her bag must still have the tracking bug that Tony decided that he had the right to tag her with.

It was in the lining, she remembered. She tipped out the contents of her bag onto the floor and felt around the lining of the bag until she felt a small, round object. She ripped the lining open and extracted the device, staring at it carefully. It was marked with the Stark Industries logo, and no doubt it was some type of new tech that Tony had invented while cutting his toenails or doing something equally boring one night. It was probably expensive, too.

Grinding it into components under her heel was awfully tempting, but she had a better idea. Throwing the contents of the bag back in, she hopped on the first bus that stopped at the bus stop across the street. She stayed on it long enough to tuck the homing device into the crack between the seat and the wall of the bus, then got off at the next stop.

There. Have fun tracking that.

She had to walk for a few blocks to find a bus that would take her home, but she got there eventually. She had two pass to men installing a brand new security door at the front of the building. The building itself was buzzing with excitement. Doors were open in all the corridors that Darcy saw from the stairwell, and the tenants were gathered in the hallways, holding pieces of paper and smiling.
On the seventh floor, Mrs Williams was holding court by her door, surrounded by a group of her neighbours. Darcy had seen them a few times, down in the laundry room, but she’d never really spoken to them before.

“Darcy!” Mrs Williams said. “Come and see what your billionaire has done!”

“He’s not my billionaire, Mrs Williams,” Darcy sighed. “I told you that last night.”

“Well, there’s no way in hell a billionaire would be poking about here if it wasn’t for you, so in my mind, that makes him your billionaire,” Mrs Williams said firmly. “Look!”

She thrust the piece of paper she was holding at Darcy, who scanned the contents.

“Tony Stark’s bought the building,” she said flatly. “And he’s renovating it.”

“He’s putting us all up in one of his hotels while the work’s being done, at no charge!” Mrs Williams said, her tone betraying her disbelief at the situation. “He’s ripping out the wiring, putting in new plumbing and heating, giving us all air conditioning and fixing that damn elevator! All new washers and dryers in the laundry room, all the tenants getting their apartments redecorated with the colours and patterns of their choice!” she said, pointing at the relevant paragraph on the paper Darcy was holding. “And he’s dropping the rent!”

“That’s very good of him,” Darcy said, handing back the letter to Mrs Williams, who cradled it carefully with her arthritic fingers.

“There’s more,” Mrs Williams said. “He’s fired the building manager! Sent him packing this morning! Some big blond man with long hair just picked him up and threw him out of the front door!”

“That must have been a sight to see,” Darcy said, not able to resist a smile at Thor throwing the skeezy man out onto the street.

“That’s for damn sure,” Mrs Williams chuckled. “He didn’t even open the door first!”
That was definitely Thor’s style, and explained the new door being put on downstairs.

“You know that I won’t be living here anymore,” Darcy said, her smile faltering. She pointed to her own apartment’s door, which was locked and had a Tony’s idea of a formal notice of eviction posted on it. It was a piece of paper that gave the address of Stark Tower. “Your new landlord kicked me out.”

“He said he was giving you a room in that fancy-pants tower of his,” Mrs Williams said, frowning. “Was he lying?”

“No,” Darcy said, kicking at the shabby carpet with her toe. “But it would have been nice to have been asked if I wanted to move.”

Well, you were, her conscience said, prickling her. Pepper asked you. I suppose this was the Tony Stark equivalent of helping you move.

“Girl, you mind a piece of advice from an old woman?” Mrs Williams asked.

“It seems to be the week for people giving me advice,” Darcy sighed.

Mrs Williams poked her in the chest with a swollen finger.

“Don’t be such a fool. Take what’s good when it’s offered, because it doesn’t come around that often. Life doesn’t always work out the way you thought it would. Suck it up and roll with the punches. You can always punch back later.”

Tears began to form in Darcy’s eyes. “It’s not that easy,” she said, wiping her eyes with her sleeve.

“Girl, you’ve got no place to live, and a rich man is offering you somewhere with no conditions. I asked him about that when he was breaking into your apartment and he was very clear. So go, say thank you, live under his roof and eat his food. If you’re so desperate to be on your own then you can save up to live somewhere nicer than this dump. It’s as easy as that.”

“I suppose,” Darcy said, eventually.
“Go on,” said Mrs Williams, making shooing motions with her hands. “Get on with you. I’ve got packing to organise.”

“Do you need help?” Darcy offered, looking at Mrs Williams’ arthritic fingers.

“No, my boy is downstairs fitting a new door. He’s coming up afterwards to help me get some things together, and my daughter will be along later when Mr Stark sends cars to take us to our hotel.”

Mrs Williams sounded thrilled.

“I guess I’ll leave you to it then,” Darcy said, trying to smile. “I’ll come by once the renovations are done and see your new apartment.”

“You’ll recognise some of it,” Mrs Williams said. “Mr Stark said he was going to knock my wall through and put your space into mine. It’s not much, but it’s big enough for an extra bedroom so Estelle can come and live with me.”

“Then I’ll definitely have to come,” Darcy promised. “Goodbye, Mrs Williams.”

She wandered out through the new security door and onto the street. The obvious place for her to go was back to Stark Tower, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to go there yet. She wandered the few blocks to the diner where Estelle worked, and found the woman just as excited as her mother.

“You!” Estelle said when Darcy came in. “Whatever you want, on the house!”

The other customers in the diner turned around to see who was the benefactor of Estelle’s good will.

“I’m not really hungry,” Darcy said. “But a cup of coffee would be nice.”

Estelle bustled about as Darcy went to sit in the same booth she had before, the first time that they had met.
“I am so grateful to you,” Estelle said, sitting down opposite Darcy. “I don’t even know how to thank you.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Darcy said, sipping her coffee. “Tony Stark did.”

“Only because you know him!” Estelle said. “Now my mom’s life is going to be so much easier. She’s staying in a hotel, you know. I was there this morning when Mr Stark and the rest of the men arrived to get your things.”

Estelle fanned herself.

“You spend all day with men like that? I don’t know how you keep your tongue in your head.”

Darcy shrugged. “Believe it or not, you get used to it.”

“Well,” Estelle said, ignoring Darcy, “I was there when Mr Stark gave the letter to my mother himself, and promised her that he was cleaning up the building, starting with that nasty man downstairs. He made her so happy, I could have cried. And then he noticed her hands, and he turned to me and asked me if I wanted to stay with my mom while she was being re-housed in the hotel!”

“He definitely has a kind side,” Darcy said. “It’s just a pity that it’s so often buried under his total asshole side.”

“I will not hear a bad word said against that man,” Estelle warned her. “Did you know he’s making my mom’s apartment bigger so I can live there too?”

“Yeah,” Darcy said heavily. “By evicting me and knocking down the wall.”

“But you get to go and live in that big swanky tower of his!” Estelle said. “What’s the problem?”

“I just…I’m tired of…I can’t…” Darcy said desperately, completely unable to express herself.
“Well when you can find the words, you come and talk to me about it,” Estelle said, patting her kindly on the shoulder. “Until then, I’ll be making free use of the room service at the hotel I’ll be living at for the next three months.”

“It’s not Tony Stark,” Darcy said, the words blurting out of her. “It’s my boyfriend.”

“The smaller guy with the arms, or one of the two pretty blond boys?” Estelle asked.

“The older guy with the cute hair,” Darcy said, rolling her eyes. “Bruce.”

“Isn’t he a little old for you?” Estelle asked, frowning.

“He’s perfect for me,” Darcy said, frowning back. “Or at least, I thought he was.”

“What did he do?” Estelle asked.

“He went behind my back and arranged for me to move out of my apartment!” Darcy said hotly. “He had no right to do that!”

“That does seem a little high-handed of him,” Estelle remarked. “What made him do that?”

“He was angry that I hadn’t told him about where I was living,” Darcy said, looking down at her half-empty coffee cup. “He thought it was dangerous.”

“It is dangerous,” Estelle said flatly. “He was right.”

“Right to move me out of my own home?” Darcy demanded.

“Right to be worried about where you were living!” Estelle replied. “Leaving at ass o’clock in the morning, not coming back until later at night, it’s dangerous, Darcy. Say some mugger decided that you were easy pickings?”
“I have my taser,” Darcy sulked.

“Yeah, until the guy you don’t see knocks it out of your hand,” Estelle said bluntly. “And then what? Robbed, if you’re lucky. God knows what could happen. And that little dog of yours is hardly going to scare anybody off. No wonder your man got scared.”

“It doesn’t make what he did right,” Darcy pointed out.

“No, but in my book it makes it understandable. You’re right, he owes you an apology. But I don’t think he’s alone in that. You’ve both got some apologising to do.”

“Ugh,” Darcy said in frustration, pillowing her head on her hands.

“I know, I hate apologising,” Estelle commiserated. “But you’ve just to suck it up. Look on the bright side, you’ve got a man who loves you enough to worry about you. That’s a lot more than some people have got.”

“I suppose,” Darcy said, frowning at the table.

She stayed a little longer, because the cook brought out fresh slices of pie from the kitchen and Darcy’s stomach remembered that she hadn’t eaten breakfast that morning. But then the fact that all of her worldly goods were stacked up in a guest room in Stark Tower raised its ugly head, and she bowed to the inevitable, and took a bus back to midtown.

Jarvis directed her to her room; it was a pretty suite, done out in pale, creamy yellow and white. It had the requisite football field of a bed, and swimming pool of a bathtub. It also had all of her belongings packed into boxes, stacked neatly at the foot of the bed.

It was a sobering thought that her stuff fit into so few boxes, she thought. One suitcase and a duffel bag held all her clothes. She pulled out her pyjamas from the night before, asked Jarvis to blast some Shakespeare’s Sister, and went to take a bath. Nothing like some British proto-Goth wailing to set the mood. After an hour, soaking and ruminating on her position, she pulled herself out and towelled off. She investigated the cabinet over the sink, and found it stocked with fancy French face creams, so she tried to moisturise her cares away. One of the cabinets in the kitchen area had a basketful of small Godiva bars. When she turned on the TV, she found that Jarvis had downloaded episodes from her favourite shows, ones that she had missed because of Jane or college work or sheer exhaustion.
She was three Godiva bars down and halfway through an episode of *Downton Abbey* when there was a quiet knock at her door. When she opened it, she found Bruce, holding a plate of pasta.

“Hi,” he said. “I didn’t know if you’d eaten, or not, so I brought you this.”

“Thanks,” she said, taking it from him. “It smells good.”

“I think Steve’s been watching a lot of cooking shows,” Bruce said, hovering on the edge of her door as she walked to the kitchenette and deposited the plate on the counter as she hunted out a knife and fork.

“Come in,” she told him, looking up.

“I wasn’t sure that I’d be welcome,” he said, walking into the room and looking at the boxes.

“I’ve calmed down a little since this morning,” Darcy said, fiddling with the knife and fork in her hand. “But I’ve still got my issues with what you did.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not alone in that,” Bruce said, reaching the counter.

Annoyance stirred in Darcy.

“I didn’t tell you where I lived,” she said. “I understand why you’re angry with me for that. But you marched into my apartment when I wasn’t there and decided to move me somewhere else. You’ve got to see why I’m angry with you.”

“I guess,” Bruce said, not quite meeting her eye. “But you’d already agreed to move in here.”

“You didn’t know that,” Darcy said, gripping her utensils tighter. “I could have told Pepper thanks, but no thanks.”

“But you didn’t!” Bruce said, emotion thick in his voice.
“But I could have!” Darcy yelled. “It’s not up to you where I live, Bruce!”

“Somebody has to look after you!” Bruce threw back.

“I’m not a child, I don’t need looking after!” Darcy told him.

“The only thing keeping you in that lousy apartment was your pride, Darcy. It’s what’s keeping you from telling the others about Columbia. You’re calling it independence, but it’s not, not really. It’s just pride. And pride doesn’t keep you safe, and it doesn’t keep you warm. Leave your pride behind, Darcy,” Bruce begged.

“Right now it feels like my pride is all I have left,” Darcy said, through gritted teeth.

“Well, I guess that there’s not much I can say to that,” Bruce said, after a moment. “Enjoy your meal.”

He turned on his heel and left, leaving her standing over the pasta, completely alone.
Darcy started the search for another apartment the next day, but this time she had Jarvis to scan available adverts for her. She no longer ruled out places that came with roommates; Bruce’s comments about her pride had stuck with her, and she acknowledged that perhaps he was right about that aspect of their argument. She asked Jarvis to not tell anybody about the search unless he was directly asked for the information, which made her feel a little better for appropriating Tony’s AI. She also had Jarvis run background checks on any potential roommates in apartments he flagged as potential homes.

You never knew who you were living with, after all.

She didn’t bother unpacking her stuff. She wanted to be out of the tower as soon as she could. Her argument with Bruce was tearing her up inside. Whenever she saw him across the dining table he’d give her these soulful looks that made her want to throw herself at him and hug him with all her strength. But he hadn’t apologised, a stubborn little voice told her. And neither have you. There could be no hugging, or anything else for that matter, until the air was cleared between them. And as neither of them apparently felt like being the first one to cave and say sorry, there were going to be no apologies.

The others were bending over backwards to be friendly to her, which sort of made the whole thing worse, in a weird kind of way. Steve asked her to take him shopping for clothes, which was kind of like playing dress-up with a really big Ken doll. It was worth it to see shop assistants of both genders fall madly in love with him and accost him with tape measures.

Natasha asked her to go to a shelter and help her pick out a dog. Darcy thought she might end up with a bichon friese, or another or the smaller, cuter breeds, as she had taken to Butch so well. Perversely, Natasha bypassed all of the kennels with the yappy, playful dogs that needed a home and headed towards the back of the shelter.

“These are our sticky dogs,” a volunteer who was trying to tempt a dog into playing with her said. “They stick around the shelter, and never get adopted.”

“Why not?” Natasha asked. “What’s wrong with them?”
“They’re too big, or too old, or the wrong breed. Some of them just prefer to be on their own, and that doesn’t always please adopters who want a more social animal, or a companion for their child. Often these dogs have had hard lives, and been in and out of homes or on the streets. Some of them come from puppy mills, and were abandoned because they have genetic defects from over-breeding of the mother. Some were never socialised properly, and so don’t know how to behave around other dogs, or people. They snap and bark, and that scares people away. Nobody wants them, and they know it. Look, you can see it in their eyes.”

Darcy and Natasha both looked. Darcy’s heart broke for the poor, down-hearted mutts, but she was sure that Natasha would be more logical and cooler-headed.

“How many can I adopt?” Natasha asked

“I beg your pardon?” the volunteer asked.

“How many can I take with me today?” Natasha said again, through gritted teeth, gesturing to the cages.

“We’d have to do a home visit to ensure that you had adequate space,” the woman began, but Natasha turned her back on her and pulled out her phone. After a short conversation, she handed it to the volunteer.

“Speak to her,” Natasha demanded.

Apparently Pepper was on the phone. It turned out that a home visit wouldn’t be necessary after all, especially in light of the large donation that Stark Industries was now making to the shelter.

There were currently four sticky dogs in the shelter. Natasha took two of them home immediately. The others would follow when the first two had settled into their new home. One clearly had a Great Dane somewhere in his lineage. He had huge feet, floppy ears, and the saddest eyes Darcy had ever seen on a dog, that spoke of some great cruelty in his past. The other was some kind of terrier breed, missing half an ear and most of its tail. It was possibly the ugliest dog that had ever existed, with a strange mottled colouring and bald patches where it was growing back hair after an illness.

“What the hell, Tash!” was Clint’s response when she came into the communal area, the dogs skulking by her side. One thing they both had in common was their inability to leave Natasha alone. From the moment she had tempted them out of their kennels, neither dog had left her side, which
made for an odd ride home on the subway.

“This is Prince,” she said, patting the Great Dane on his head. “And this is Beauty,” she added, stroking the dog’s mangled ear.

“It doesn’t look very beautiful to me,” Clint said dubiously, coming across to let the two dogs sniff his hands.

“She doesn’t feel very beautiful either,” Natasha said, continuing to pet the dog. “But if somebody else believes hard enough that she is, one day she will too. Somebody told me that, once. Or something similar.”

“You know this?” Clint asked roughly.

“I do now,” Natasha said, staring at him.

Darcy looked at them both, confused.

“There’s a whole conversation here that I’m not getting, isn’t there?” she sighed.

“Yes,” the two SHIELD agents said in unison.

“Right,” Darcy sighed. “I’ll just go to the pet store and pick up some more dog beds, shall I?”

“Thank you, Darcy,” Natasha said, her eyes never leaving Clint’s.

“Shall I get beds for the other dogs?” Darcy asked, picking up her bag.


Darcy decided to leave the explanations to Natasha, and beat a hasty retreat.
The next day she found Clint, with little Beauty, sitting watching TV.

“I was the one that packed up all your paperwork from college, you know,” he said, not turning his attention away from the screen as he stroked Beauty’s back.

“Thanks,” she said shortly, pulling out the ingredients for toasted ham and cheese sandwiches.

“You should have said that you were taking an archery class,” he said mildly. “I would have helped.”

“That’s kind, but I wouldn’t have wanted to bother you,” Darcy said hastily.

“It wouldn’t have been a bother,” Clint said, frowning. “I wouldn’t have been able to help you with the art stuff like Steve, or the science like Bruce, but I could have helped with that.”

“Steve didn’t know he was helping me with my art. Bruce was sworn to secrecy about the college stuff,” Darcy said, slicing cheese.

“Well, that was dumb. Why didn’t you tell us you were finishing up your degree?”

“It’s stupid,” Darcy sighed. “I see that now. But at the time, I just wanted something that was for me. And being surrounded by superheroes and geniuses all day, graduating from college didn’t seem like much of an achievement.”

“It is to me,” Clint said after a while. His file flashed past her mind – in and out of foster homes, running away with a brother that could no longer be located, joining a travelling circus, of all the things. She supposed that formal education had been pretty low on anybody’s list of priorities for Clint.

“I was stupid,” Darcy said again. “I’m sorry that I didn’t trust you enough to ask for help that I truly, truly needed.”
Clint turned to face her, smirk in place.

“Not so hot at target practice?”

“The class was pass/fail on attendance,” Darcy said, pulling out a pan and setting it to warm on the hob. “If I’d been required to actually hit anything, I’d have failed.”

“That how you blacked your eye?” Clint asked.

“I got tangled, and whacked myself with end of my bow,” Darcy confessed.

“Recurve bows can be tricky for a beginner,” Clint said knowledgably.

“Did you ever give yourself a smack in the eye with yours?” Darcy asked, irritated.

“No,” Clint said, grinning. “Is that sandwich for me?”

“No,” Darcy said, uncharitably. She looked down at her chopping board, and then glanced back up and shrieked. Clint had moved, unbelievably quickly and with no noise whatsoever, to a position at the breakfast bar, directly in front of her. He held Beauty out in front of him.

“Look at that face,” he demanded. “How could you deny that face a sandwich?”

Beauty did her part, and whined on cue.

“Sit down, I’ll bring it over to you,” Darcy said, relenting. “But don’t give any to the dog, they shouldn’t have human food.”

“Okay!” promised Clint, carrying Beauty back to the couch. Darcy prepared three rounds of the toasted sandwiches, and brought them over to Clint.
“Two for you, one for the dog,” Darcy said.

“You said I wasn’t allowed to give any to her,” Clint said, immediately breaking off a chunk and giving it to Beauty.

“Oh like you ever listen to anything I ever say,” Darcy grumbled, and Clint grinned.

Issue dealt with.

Jane was understandably busy having all the sex in the world with Thor, but when she was out of her room long enough to grab a meal or start writing up her notes on the Einstein-Rosen bridge, she’d track Darcy down to talk. She’d obviously meant it when she said that she wanted to be a better friend to Darcy. After an excited phone call one morning from her mother, Darcy tracked Jane down to the lab, where she was typing up her notes, collating her data and singing along to the radio with another of Natasha’s pack of dogs, an elderly bull terrier cross called Star, named by Natasha for the marking on her back. Star had taken a shine to the lab, mainly because the people there were happy to ignore her and let her sleep in her basket. She was a dog that liked her own company. However she did like music, and would howl endearingly along whenever anybody turned on the radio, or when there was music on TV.

“Really?” Darcy said, shaking her head as Jane murdered Summer Of 69. “Bryan Adams?”

“He still tours,” Jane said defensively, over the dog’s enthusiastic rendition.

“Anyway,” Darcy said, when the last strains of the song receded and Star settled back in her bed. “I just came to say thank you.”

“I don’t know why,” Jane said, flushing bright red.

“You are the worst liar in the world,” Darcy told her, giving her a hug. “Thank you for flying my mom and dad out here to see me graduate. They’re ecstatic.”

“Trust me, it was the very least I could do,” Jane said, hugging her back.

“What’s this? Two gorgeous women in a passionate embrace, and I’m not around to witness it? Jarvis, I hope you got this on tape.”
“Hi, Tony,” Jane sighed. “And shut up.”

“Jane, Darcy, mutt,” Tony said, jogging down the stairs. He had taken the news of Natasha’s pack with minimum of teasing, and had opened his home to the animals. Star was his favourite, and the only one he let in the lab.

Star looked up, huffed, and settled down again.

“I’ll go and FedEx the tickets to the ceremony to them,” Darcy said, nodding to Tony. She was still not entirely happy with him, although a quick visit to see Estelle and her mother had shown them to be having a wonderful time in the hotel suite he had provided for them. So she supposed he wasn’t all bad. Just completely insufferable.

“I’ve just come from the kitchen,” Tony announced. “Your boyfriend,” he said, pointing to Darcy, “is trying to teach your boyfriend,” he said, pointing to Jane, “how to use basic kitchen appliances. It’s hysterical. So far we’re down two blenders and a can opener.”

“I’d better go,” Jane said, hurrying off.

“I wouldn’t call him my boyfriend,” Darcy said tightly.

“He would,” Tony told her, leaning against a control panel and looking her straight in the eye. “And he’s utterly miserable. You two need to kiss and make up.”

“You need to keep your big nose out of other people’s business,” Darcy told him, heading for the exit before she really lost her temper.

“You know what they say about men with big noses!” he yelled at her, just as she left the lab.

As she stalked down the corridor, she could hear AC/DC announce that they were Thunderstruck. Both Star and Tony joined in enthusiastically.
Graduation day dawned bright and clear a few days later. She’d met her parents at the airport the day before, in a car that Pepper insisted that she take.

“This is all so nice!” breathed her mother, getting into the car with the help of Happy, the driver.

“There’s a gift basket in the back for you, Mrs Lewis,” he told her.

“Oh you shouldn’t have gone to the trouble,” said her mother to Darcy, blushing.

“I didn’t,” Darcy said, looking at the tag on the basket. “It’s from the man that you knit all the bedsocks for, mom. To say thank you.”

Her mother explored the gift basket, full of expensive hand cream and other little luxuries she would never dream of buying herself.

“Uh, Happy?” Darcy asked, leaning forward to talk to the driver. “How did Coulson know my mother was going to be here?”

Happy’s eyes met hers in the rear view mirror. “SHIELD,” was all he said, shrugging.

He’d dropped them at the hotel Jane had booked for them, and Darcy had gone out to dinner with them. She’d caught them up on as much as her life as she could, and in return eagerly ate up all the news and gossip from home. They were going to make their own way to the ceremony the next day, and she’d join them for a meal afterwards.

She had a new dress to wear underneath her gown and cap, which she’d collect later, and new shoes, which already hurt her feet but looked great with the dress. She didn’t feel like eating anything early in the morning, so she put out a range of cereals, muffins and other food that could be microwaved if anybody else wanted something to eat. She then went back to her room to get ready, and didn’t come out until it was time for her to leave.

“Uh, guys?” she asked, when she stumbled on the Avengers and their assorted partners, looking very glamorous, standing in a group by the elevator. “What are you doing?”
“Getting ready to give the speech of a lifetime,” Tony announced, checking out his reflection in the mirrored doors of the elevator. “Why, where are you going?”

“To graduate,” Darcy said, as they all climbed into the elevator. She tried not to look at Bruce, who was heartbreakingly handsome in his suit. She failed. However, it seemed that all he was doing was looking longingly at her, so that made it fair.

“Looks like we’re going to the same place,” Tony said brightly. “Want a ride?”

“You’re not giving the commencement speech,” Darcy said, horrified. “The Secretary-General of the United Nations is!”

“He pulled out,” Tony said, as they arrived in the lobby and headed briskly through the crowds of people towards the sidewalk, where limos were waiting.

“He did not just pull out!” Darcy argued as the others started getting into the limos.

“He had a scheduling mix-up on his calendar,” Tony said with all sincerity.

“You are impossible,” Darcy told him.

“That’s not news,” Pepper said, taking Darcy by the shoulders and sliding her into one of the cars. “Here. Sit with us girls and have a glass of champagne.”

The car doors closed and they pulled into the busy New York traffic.

“Congratulations!” Jane said, popping the cork on a bottle of vintage champagne.

“Thank you,” Darcy said graciously to Pepper. “I’m sorry that I didn’t invite you all to the ceremony but we’re only allocated two tickets.”

“That’s okay,” Pepper said, handing a glass of champagne to Natasha. “When Tony, ah, kindly offered his services when Columbia discovered they had no speaker, they were more than happy to offer him as many tickets as he wanted.”
“He had Jarvis hack the United Nations, didn’t he?” Darcy said, sighing. “Where does Ban Ki-moon think he’s going instead?”

“Just…don’t ask. And don’t be scared if there are reports of the Security Council in an emergency meeting. None of them are going to know why they’re there.”

“You’re supposed to be a good influence on him,” Darcy scolded her.

“It was her idea,” Natasha said wryly, draining her glass.

Darcy had to leave them as soon as she got out of the limo. She found the staging area, handed in her ticket for her cap and gown, and got in the right line to be seated. The ceremony was being held in the beautiful grounds of the Morningside Campus, and the guests were all sitting on chairs in neat rows, under a large, white canopy. Graduates sat across from them, under no canopy whatsoever, and the large stage was in the centre. Huge screens were placed at right angles to the stage so everybody could get a close-up view, courtesy of the camera crew set up in front of the raised stage.

From her seat Darcy could see the guests mingling before the ceremony starting, and her mother and father being introduced to the Avengers. Her father seemed awfully taken with Natasha, and her mother was being squired around the grounds by Steve, ever the perfect gentleman. Even at this distance, Bruce seemed terribly sad. The little pangs of conscience that Darcy had been suffering from all week suddenly became stabs from a dagger.

The whole argument was ridiculous. As soon as the whole ceremony was over, she was going to apologise for being so stubborn. Hopefully, that would soon be followed by a similar apology from him, and they could get back to what she had been planning on doing.

Everything was going fine. The President of the University gave his speech, followed by Tony, who gave a surprisingly thoughtful and meaningful speech on the topic of change. Darcy clapped loudly when he finished, and rolled her eyes when he sent an exuberant wave in her direction from the stage.

As the rows of nervous graduates in front of her took their turns to pass across the stage, Darcy watched the sky carefully. Dark clouds were beginning to form, and she crossed her fingers and hoped that the rain would stay away long enough for everybody to cross the stage. There was something strange about the clouds, though. They seemed to be drifting together, in the centre of the sky, and they started shifting colour, turning from dark grey to almost purple. There were waves of worried conversation shifting through the mass of people gathered to watch the hundreds of graduates, and more than a few people pointing at the sky and snapping photographs.
As Darcy’s row stood to begin to make their way along the aisle and to the stage, she saw Bruce lean over Thor’s bulk to talk to Jane urgently, pointing at the sky.

_Not today_, Darcy wished, shutting her eyes and crossing her fingers. _No intergalactic shenanigans, today, please?_

She was standing on the steps at the side of the stage, just about to make her entrance, when a crack of lightning, ten times brighter than any she’d ever seen before, ripped across the sky. Some people screamed in alarm. Wind sprang up, whipping the edge of her robes up into the air and lifting her cap right off her head, along with those of most of the other graduates.

The President of the University was appealing over the microphone for everybody to stay calm when the huge mass of clouds, now violet in colour, broke open in the centre and a huge silver sled thing flew through the gap, ridden by a cloaked figure with a big red hood pulled down low over his face.

“I am Mohnek!” he announced. “And you will cower beneath me, puny mortals!”

“Oh God,” Darcy sighed. “Another one.”

Behind Mohnek on his silver sled flew what Darcy could only call minions, small green creatures that darted about the sky on smaller versions of the sled thing. They started firing lasers into the crowd, which started to panic the people there, who started running madly all over the open ground.

Darcy watched at the Avengers sprung into action. Despite wearing a beautiful pale green dress, Natasha had somehow smuggled her Widow’s Bite and several handguns into the ceremony. Darcy watched as she took aim and knocked several of the flying minion creatures off their sleds, which crashed into the ground. Steve’s shield flew through the air with deadly accuracy, dispatching more. Pepper had been carrying Tony’s briefcase, and he quickly suited up. Thor was already summoning Mjolnir from the tower, and Darcy winced to think of the property damage it would cause as it flew straight to his waiting hand.

Bruce was still Bruce, and he was currently grabbing her parents and yelling at Jane and Pepper to follow him to the library building that was standing proudly behind them.

The library.
The scared people on the ground had to get into the library. It would provide cover for them, and perhaps more importantly, give the minions nothing to aim at, so the Avengers could draw their fire. Waiting for a break in the noise and confusion, Darcy ran across her graduation stage to the podium at the other side.

“Everybody, get into the library,” she yelled, the sound system still miraculously working despite the stray laser blasts shooting around. “Get to cover! Follow the path up the hill to the library! Do it now!”

She kept repeating the instruction, grabbing the microphone and jumping for cover down behind the stage when a barrage of blasts came straight at her. She heard a very familiar roar then, and saw the Hulk bound down the hill from the library to the rapidly emptying seating area in front of the stage.

“FLYING MONKEY MEN NO HURT DARCY!” he thundered. He leapt in the air, grabbed two of the minions on sleds and bashed them together until they were just pieces, falling to the ground. Darcy flinched as a bit that was recognisably an arm rolled towards her hiding place. She peered closer at it, and the wires that were trailing from the end that had been ripped from the body. Wires? She reached out a tentative hand to grab it, and sparks flew. She shrieked, and dropped the part. Luckily, it failed to turn into a Hand of Orlac and attack her. It just stayed on the ground, a useless piece of machinery.

They were fighting robots. Fucking green space robots had come to Earth and ruined her graduation.

Commando-crawling across the grass to reach the microphone, she shouted “Hey! Guys! They’re robots! Not living things!”

From her position under the wooden stage she could see the giant sled in the sky wheel around and the Mohnek dude point in her general direction. She couldn’t hear what he was saying over the noise of the wind, and the laser blasts, and the Hulk, who was still bashing whatever he could get his big, angry hands on. Whatever it was, she decided, it wasn’t good news. And he knew where she was hiding.

“Fucking brilliant,” she muttered, crawling quickly on the grass under the stage to the far end. She emerged and gauged the distance from there to the library, where frightened people were still crowding in.

Too far.
Maybe if she had taken track, and not archery…

Too late to worry about that now.

“Darcy!”

She looked up to see Clint, in a seriously snappy grey suit, stand on top of one of the giant screens that had been erected so that everybody had a good view of the graduates as they walked across the stage. He had a quiver slung over his shoulder, and he was firing off arrows at impossible speed as he ran along the top of it.

“At my signal, I’ll lay down cover, and you run for the library!” he commanded.

She nodded, looking up at him for the signal to run like hell. Unfortunately, all she saw was a laser blast hit the area just underneath Clint’s foot. Clint swung his arms out desperately to keep his balance, but another blast caught him just under his other foot and he fell sideways off the side of the big screen.

Even over the sound of the lasers, the wind, the Hulk and the distant sound of sirens, Darcy heard his body hit the ground with a sickening thud.

She darted out from her hiding place to his side, yelping as blasts landed not far from her side.

“Are you okay?” she asked, shaking him.

“Yeah,” he panted, sucking in a deep breath and cradling his hand. “I landed…on my arm…”

One look at Clint’s shattered hand made Darcy want to puke. She actually had to look away, before the bile that rose in her throat made an appearance. Because that’s how she wanted to go out, killed by a space alien robot in a pile of her own puke, and still not in possession of her degree. His leg, on closer inspection, probably shouldn’t bend that way either.
“Stark said we have to get the big guy,” Clint told her, his face a sickly green. “But he’s too clever. He keeps himself surrounded by the littler guys, Stark and Thor can’t get near.”

“Could you get him with an arrow?” Darcy asked. “One of your special ones?”

“That was the plan,” Clint said, looking down at his ruined hand. “But now… I can’t even hold the bow with this, never mind actually hit anything.”

“I’ll get Natasha,” Darcy said, scrambling to her feet. “Or Steve. Steve could probably do this.”

“No time,” Clint said sharply. “You do it.”


“You have to,” he grunted, shifting around so he could grab at his quiver with his undamaged hand. “It’s easy. My bow’ll do all the hard work. All you have to do is nock it, aim it, and let fly.”

“I’ll miss!” Darcy protested.

“Then you’ll fire again until you hit him!” Clint yelled.

“Alright!” Darcy screamed back. “God! So fucking pushy!”

She saw Clint’s bow on the ground a few feet away. She scrambled across to it, grabbed it, and came back again.

“It’s too heavy for me,” she said, her hands shaking slightly.

“You’ll be fine,” he said, as soothingly as a man in complete agony in the middle of a battlefield could. “Here’s the arrow. Don’t worry if you don’t get him the first time, I’ve got two of these.”

“Oh great,” Darcy said, taking the arrow and promptly dropping it.
“My bow’s a compound, you used one of those?”

“No, just a recurve,” Darcy said, holding the bow the right way up on the second try.

“It’s gonna be easy. Compounds take the pressure off your draw, so you can hold it longer,” Clint said. “So don’t worry about missing the shot. Take your time. You need to get the arrow into the sled. By blowing that up, Stark thinks that it will knock out whatever is controlling the robots.”

“Right,” said Darcy, breathing hard. “Hit the big silver thing. Right.”

She picked up the bow. It was much heavier than she was used to. Her hands shaking, she nocked the arrow and peered out from around the side of the large screen. The rest of the Avengers were holding their own, but Clint was right. Nobody could get near the big sled.


She raised the bow, desperately trying to stop her hands from shaking too badly. She looked down the sight in the middle of the bow, drew back the string, waited until the large silver sled came into view, and fired.

“Whoops,” said Darcy, as the arrow fell short and landed in what had been the guests’ seating area. It exploded on contact, throwing splintered wood into the air.

“Did you get him? Clint yelled.

“What part of ‘whoops’ makes you think I hit anything I was supposed to?” Darcy snapped back. “Give me the other arrow.”

It rolled across the ground to her.

“Make it count,” Clint told her.
Nodding grimly, Darcy picked up the arrow. The wind had affected her last shot. She’d never had to worry about that before, her class had always been indoors. This time, she was going to do better.

She nocked the arrow, pulled back on the string and got her targets in her sights again. She waited and waited, the sweat dripping down her face. All the noise of the battle around her fell away, until she could just hear her breathing, and feel the tension in the string in her fingers. She saw the sled swing around until it took over her sights completely.

She let go of the string.

The arrow flew straight and true through the air, whistling past one, two, three small robots until it landed right in the forehead of Mohnek. It exploded immediately, splintering the man and his sled into tiny pieces. As soon as their leader was dead, all the remaining small robots shut down, and fell from the sky, crashing into the floor.

The wind died down. The clouds lightened, and drifted apart to become normal clouds again.

“DARCY!” bellowed the Hulk, throwing back his head and roaring, turning this way and that to look for her.

Darcy scrambled out from behind the giant screen.

“I’m okay!” she called, putting down Clint’s bow and making her way across the piles of robot parts in front of the stage. “Don’t worry, I’m fine!”

“DARCY HURT,” the Hulk said, pointing at her arm.

“That?” Darcy said, peering at her arm.”That’s nothing. Just where the bow string slapped against my arm. No big deal. I’m okay, really.”

“HULK SMASH,” he told her conversationally.

“I saw, big guy,” she said. “You’re the best at that. Can you help me, though? Clint’s fallen and hurt his hand, and his leg, and I can’t help him get up. You have to be gentle though. Like when you
“DARCY SMALL, HULK STRONG,” he boasted, lumbering over towards the big screen that Darcy led him to. With one huge tug, he lifted it out of the ground and threw it over his shoulder, to reveal Clint lying on the ground behind it.

“Hi, Hulk,” Clint said.

Hulk bent right over to peer at Clint.

“LITTLE MAN HURT,” he announced. “HULK BE GENTLE WITH LITTLE MAN.”

And surprisingly, he was. He scooped Clint up carefully, aware that his leg was hurt. The movement was still enough for Clint’s eyes to roll back in his head in pain, but the Hulk walked carefully over to the rest of the Avengers, who were now being joined by a stream of police officers and paramedics and some brave people from the library.

Steve grabbed a gurney from the paramedics too nervous to go near the Hulk, and Clint was put on it as gently as could be managed. Steve rolled it over to the paramedics, who took one look at him and started injecting him with anaesthetic immediately.

“You did really well, Hulk,” Darcy said, patting him on the hand. “Thank you.”

“HULK LIKE TO SMASH,” he said, looking around at the scene. “NO MORE SMASH NOW.”

And with that succinct statement, he began to shrink in size and lighten in colour, until Bruce stood before her, in all his naked glory.

"Darcy," he said, taking a few stumbling steps towards her. "You're alright?"

"I'm fine," she assured him. "You kept me safe."

He grabbed her hands and held them firmly, taking in her bedraggled appearance.

"I got your mom and dad up to the library, but I looked back and I saw that...that..."

"Killer robot, apparently," Darcy chimed in helpfully.

"Right, the killer robot, he started firing at you on the stage, and...I guess the other guy took over."

"The other guy rocked it," Darcy told him. "Saved my life and took out most of the flying monkey
creatures."

"I was so worried," he said, pulling her in for a hug.

"I love you so much," Darcy blurted. "I'm sorry that I've been so stubborn."

"I love you too," Bruce said, squeezing her hard. "So very much Darcy, and I'm sorry, I should have listened to what you've been trying to tell me."

"We're both idiots," Darcy said, pulling out of the hug to cradle his face between her hands. "But we're both alive, and I don't want to fight with you any more."

She kissed him, long and hard, and poured everything she had into it. He gave as good as he got, tightening his arms back around her and keeping her close.

"I want to sleep with you tonight," Darcy told him when they came up for air. "I don't care about sex, we can wait for that, but I just want to be close to you. Is that okay?"

"Is that..." Bruce said in disbelief. "Darcy, I don't want you anywhere else, ever."

"Oh god," she said, dabbing at her eyes. "That's the most romantic thing anybody's ever said to me. I know we're standing in the middle of a battlefield and everything, but I honestly don't think that anything could ruin this moment for me."

They both sighed.

"I really shouldn't have said that, should I?" Darcy said, wincing. "What hell have I unleashed upon us now?"

"I can see your mother running down the hill towards us," Bruce said. "She's got a good turn of speed."

"I guess it's time to meet the parents," Darcy sighed. "You up for it?"

"Sure," Bruce said amiably, dropping a kiss onto the top of her head. "But I think I'd better find something to wear first."

"Holy crap, you're naked," Darcy marvelled. "I totally did not notice that."

"That really does not bode well for our sex life," Bruce said dryly.

"Oh, you know what I mean," Darcy said, rolling her eyes. "Here, have my gown. It's a little on the short side, but it should cover everything.

Bruce donned it just as Darcy's mother broke through the security cordon around the Avengers and the main battleground.

"Darcy, are you alright?" gasped her mother, who had elbowed her way through the police cordon with the typical Lewis panache and firm application of the steel elbow.

"I'm fine, mom, don't worry," Darcy said, soothingly. "Everything's under control."
“Well, maybe not everything,” Bruce said quietly.

“We didn’t bring the bag with your spare pants in, did we?” Darcy asked.

“No,” Bruce said, pointedly. “And I’d rather not meet your parents for the first time when I’m naked. So if we could try to…” he trailed off.

Darcy's father had caught up with his wife, and eyeballed Bruce, who stepped closer to Darcy for protection.

“Darcy, that large green man…” her father said, looking at Bruce. "Has turned into a naked one," he concluded. "Hello again, Dr Banner. Thanks for your help earlier, getting us into the library."

"You're welcome," Bruce said politely, clutching Darcy's gown more firmly around himself.

"Darcy," her father said sternly. "Would you like to explain why you were hugging and kissing a naked man in public?"

“Well, there was never going to be an easy way to say this,” Darcy sighed. “So what the hell.”

She took Bruce by the hand, and towed him forward a few paces.

“Mom, Dad, this is Bruce Banner. He’s my boyfriend. You may have noticed that he sometimes turns into a large green man called the Hulk. Hulk may look scary, but he’s a sweetheart underneath because basically, he’s Bruce, and Bruce is the best man I’ve ever met. Next to you, dad, of course.”

“Of course,” her father said dryly.

“Are you naked a lot?” enquired her mother.

“Mom,” hissed Darcy. “Not the time.”

“Not as often as I used to be,” Bruce said, aiming one of his charming smiles in the direction of her mother.

“Well, I can see what Darcy sees in you,” Mrs Lewis said, a familiar cheeky grin on her lips."From the back, anyway."
“Mother!” Darcy exploded, as her father just rolled his eyes. Bruce blushed.

“You’ll have to get used to that, if you’re going to be one of the family,” her father said, extending his hand. “Darcy comes by her smart mouth honestly.”

Bruce adjusted his grip on his gown carefully, then shook Darcy’s father’s hand.

“I saw what you did,” he said quietly. “When you saw my girl was down there you ran straight into the middle of all that chaos to get her to safety. Any man that does that, well, they’re good enough for me. Even if you do come with a large, green setting.”

“I appreciate that,” Bruce said, looking at Darcy. “Although I think we’ve still got some talking to do.”

“Later,” Darcy said. “After we sleep.”

“Yeah,” Bruce said softly. “After that.”

“So,” Tony said a little later, hovering a few feet above them in the suit. “Are we ready to go? I think a few drinks are in order, don’t you?”

“But, I haven’t graduated,” Darcy said, sounding a little stupid even to herself.

She looked around at hundreds of other people still milling about the area, looking shell-shocked at what had just happened. Some of them were holding their scrolls, some of them weren’t.

“It’s not fair,” she said, looking around at them all. “They all worked so hard to get here, and their day is ruined by some jerk-off and his alien robot minions! That’s not right!”

She looked about, until she spotted a familiar face in academic robes, talking to a group of other, serious-faced people.
“Dean!” she called, hurrying over. “Dean Taylor, do you remember me?”

“You’re not someone that’s easy to forget, Miss Lewis,” he said, smiling “What can I do for you?”

“I want to graduate,” she said plainly. “As does everybody with a surname starting with an L, all the way up to Z.”

“Now, young lady, I really don’t think this is the time…” one of the men in the group began, but Darcy held her hand up to his face to silence him.

“I just took out an attacking alien creature with a headshot from a compound bow, stopping the deaths of thousands and the destruction of millions of dollars of university property while you were cowering in fear, old man,” she told him levelly. “I think that this is the time to ask for pretty much anything that I want. And I want to graduate.”

“I don’t think that’s much to ask, Ronald,” Dean Taylor said, his eyes twinkling with badly concealed mirth. “After all, a headshot is a headshot, no matter how you look at it.”

And that’s how, with extremely bad grace on the part of some of the officials, the graduation ceremony went ahead. Some people decided to leave, some had been injured in the attack, but a lot of people stayed. They cleared the wreckage of the robots and the furniture into big piles around the edge of the graduation area, and they stood patiently and waited as the list of remaining students was read out and then they walked across the stage, finally having their own moment in the spotlight.

“It is customary for the University President to make some closing remarks,” Dean Taylor said as the last name was read out. “But sadly, he’s been called away on pressing matters to do with the media, and what the hell just happened in Morningside Heights. So I just think that it’s appropriate to say that I have never been as proud of a graduating class as I have of you. By staying and claiming what is yours, you have proved to be exactly the sort of people this university strives to produce; hard-working, responsible, independent thinkers who aren’t scared to pull up your sleeves and do something, for yourselves, and for others. Go out into this world and change it, people. You’re our best hope.”

There was wild applause from the graduates and their families, and from the assorted police officers and paramedics that were still on the scene.

“Good job, Miss Lewis,” a voice said from behind her. “That was a tricky shot to pull off.”
She turned around, and saw Agent Coulson standing behind her.

“Congratulations on your degree,” he said, holding out his hand.

She shook it.

“It’s good to see you up and about,” she said. “I was getting used to the sight of you flat on your back. Are you here about the clean-up?”

She gestured to the large piles of robot parts that Tony Stark was picking through animatedly.

“Yes, but isn’t your stepfather’s half-brother supposed to turn up for things like this?” he asked.

“You noticed that, huh,” Darcy said. “Oh well. Sorry. I had to have some way of coming in to see you, and that was the easiest one. You should do something about that glitch in security, though.”

“Oh yes?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “What glitch is that?”

“The one that lets anybody with even the most basic clearance have access to everything in your super-secret vault of wonders,” she said, rolling her eyes. “The honour system may be all well and good, but people know who you are now. Sooner or later somebody nasty’s going to slip through your security net and then they’ll have access to everything.”

“Been thinking hard about this, have you?” Coulson asked.

“That and so many other things,” Darcy said. “Like, the media. Dean Taylor said the University President’s off ‘dealing with the media’ right now. How can you make sure he says what you want him to say? What’s going to stop him doing a Thor on international television and dragging some other poor undergrad into a life-changing experience? You know, you were never conscious when I was first around, so I never got a chance to say this to you, but for fuck’s sake, Coulson, what were you people thinking? How could you not have had people on Thor, and Tony Stark?”

“Well, I was busy dying at the time, so I wasn’t in on those particular meetings, but that point has been raised,” Coulson said dryly. “SHIELD is not a new organisation, Miss Lewis, but it is an old
one, and one that has, until very recently, been completely covert. We have no idea how to handle our sudden emergence into the public’s awareness.”

“Well, I’d get them out there as soon as possible,” Darcy snorted, pointing at the Avengers, who were milling around with Pepper and Jane and Darcy’s parents. Thankfully, somebody had managed to find Bruce a pair of pants, which went well with the bare-chest-and-academic-robe look he was rocking. Some brave people were coming up and asking for Tony for autographs, which he was signing with glee.

“They’re the good guys, but nobody knows a damn thing about them. Everybody needs to know that when bad shit goes down, they’ll be there to end it. Permanently. You should get some official social media sites set up, so people can interact with them, in a limited way. People grew up knowing they could trust Captain America, but the Hulk is fucking scary.”

“That’s not going to be an easy sell,” Coulson noted. “There are people that SHIELD have to answer to. They would prefer it if the Avengers stayed out of the spotlight.”

Darcy shrugged. “So tell them it’s the Avengers in the spotlight, or them,” she said. “SHIELD isn’t as covert as it used to be. Maybe it’s about time that there was some accountability further up the chain.”

Coulson actually smiled at her then.

“Oh, Director Fury is going to love you,” he said softly. “You’re just like him, only in a smaller package.”

“Why is he going to love me?” Darcy asked, suspiciously.

“You’re too good an asset to waste in admin,” Coulson said bluntly. “You’ve broken the record for quickest rise in security clearance rating in thirty years. It took you all of three days to identify serious problems with the way that SHIELD runs its basic internal intelligence security. You’re practical, you think on your feet, and you get the job done. The world is changing, Miss Lewis, and SHIELD has to change with it. We need new blood, and new ideas. We need people like you. Come and work for SHIELD. Your first task will be presenting the Avengers Initiative to the public without terrifying them into rioting.”

“I’m not qualified for that,” Darcy said, shocked.
“You’re as qualified as you’re going to get,” Coulson shrugged. “SHIELD has always been more of a learn-as-you-go-along kind of place, anyway.”

“I want my own office,” Darcy said, thinking quickly.

“Okay,” Coulson said, nodding.

“And a staff,” she warned, wondering if Alison and Chuck would be up for shaking up SHIELD with her.

“Acceptable,” Coulson agreed.

“And a huge pay raise,” Darcy warned. At Coulson’s hesitation, she said firmly, “If I’m going to be in the public eye, I’m going to have to look good, and looking good doesn’t come cheap. If SHIELD can afford giant helicopter ship things in the sky, then it can afford a few trips to Chanel.”

“Done,” Coulson said heavily. “Anything else?”

Darcy grinned. “I suppose a company credit card is out of the question?”

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