I Climbed The Tree To See The World (When The Gusts Came Around To Blow Me Down, I Held On As Tightly As You Held On To Me)

by sarcastic_fina

Summary

The path to self-discovery, including becoming Coulson's assistant-slash-liason-slash-bff, Captain America's lady love, and rating fourth on the SHIELD BAMF scale, was like the yellow brick road; it was chaos and confusion around every bend.
Prologue

The path to self-discovery, including becoming Coulson's assistant-slash-liaison-slash-bff, Captain America's lady love, and rating fourth on the SHIELD BAMF scale, was like the yellow brick road; it was chaos and confusion around every bend.

Instead of gold, it was paved with missiles, bullets, flesh wounds, botched romances, an endless fight against her own Peter Pan syndrome, standing up to her mother, and paperwork. A shit-ton of paperwork, in fact.

And it wasn’t paved so much as a collection of different settings, from the bleak grey walls of SHIELD to the shiny, shiny surroundings of Jane’s lab, the gun-powder ridden shooting range, to a barn and back-country dirt road that she’d rather never, ever walk, drive, or even so much as helicopter over again.

She was a grunt. Never mind the expensive shoes and the company card that could, and did, buy her new ‘adult’ wardrobe. At the core of it, Darcy was just one more worker ant. In fact, if she really looked back, to as far as oh, birth, grunt was basically all she’d ever been. A snarky grunt, but she was pretty sure her psychologist would just call that a defense mechanism.

Maturity was a funny thing.

In Darcy’s mind, she always associated it with a fun-sucking, life-altering, fall down a rabbit hole to hell. Instead of Alice and her acid-trip of weirdness, it was more like stepping out into the corporate world as a suit-wearing drone, with the only drive in life being small talk at the water cooler and a tortoise race toward a passable pension. These were things that made Darcy’s skin crawl; they made
her stomach roll. So it was no surprise that ‘maturity’ had never been on her to-do list.

When Darcy was a kid, her mother often told her to stop asking so strange, so be more polite, always wondering why she was so immature, why she couldn’t just act her age. But as Darcy remembered it, she was just being herself, just enjoying what childhood and life had to offer. So she climbed trees in the pretty, flower-print dresses her mother made her wear. So she made mud pies and served them to her little brother like they were chocolate cake. So she constantly caught bugs and used them to play pranks on her teachers. She was a knobby-kneed, dirt-stained, foul-mouthed, free little kid.

When high school came around, it was like a race to grow up; everybody wanted to be treated like adults. And she played into that a bit, didn’t every teenager? When she wasn’t getting into trouble for standing up against adversity —also known as talking but to her teachers— she had an after-school job and she paid for her own sputtering, rust-ridden car. She had a fake ID and she occasionally convinced the liquor store clerks that ‘hey, with these puppies?’ she’d motion to her chest, ‘you really think I’m a high schooler?’ Whether it was the fact that hello boobs or she was only after a six pack of light beer, what’s the harm?, she generally got away with it.

But then came college and eighteen and real, true blue adulthood, with hunting down scholarships and sending out applications, hoping and pleading that someone saw she was worthy enough to get into their school. And suddenly, she was that little kid again, who just wanted to climb trees, trap bugs in her teacher’s desk drawers, and make out with cute boys in the back seat of her car. She didn’t want responsibility and bills and some boring cubicle job. She wanted freedom.

It manifested, she guessed, in complete confusion. What the hell did she even want to do with her life? Culver University apparently thought she was a worthy applicant and welcomed her over. Darcy originally started out wanting to major in art; what field of art she really wasn’t sure. What she knew was that she liked museums and her mind was like a Picasso, so it just seemed to jive. So she went with interior design because she thought, hey, buying furniture on someone else’s dime and setting up a house! Not bad! Only Darcy wasn’t good at designing other people’s houses; she was good at knowing herself and her preferences. And the people that would probably be hiring her were going to want something a little more high-end than her love of tweed and wicker. So she switched majors, leaving art entirely when she realized she just didn’t fit there outside of a hobby, and instead found Languages.

In her head, all she kept thinking about was how kickass it was going to be that she’d speak a bunch of different languages, or at the very least understand them, and that she could turn that into an awesome jet-setting lifestyle where she was constantly on the move, moving from foreign city to foreign city, maybe even working for somebody as a translator. She was picking up languages easier than she expected; in fact, she was kind of a linguistics super-star. But overall, she wasn’t sure she liked what kind of field she’d be working in. Her professor was getting excited about her skills and told her that she might find an internship with the UN, interpreting for them, to be a great career opportunity. And then she watched the movie The Interpreter, or, okay, she watched the beginning of it, before she got bored and couldn’t stop focusing on how Nicole Kidman had permanently frowny eyebrows. And finally, she decided that maybe she should take her language skills and just cut and run while they were still awesome. Before she was just a person in a room wearing headphones, translating boring crap for old, half-asleep politicians.

This somehow led her to political science… Maybe it was the idea that she didn’t want to just facilitate change, she wanted to be change, but she finally thought she knew where she wanted to be. So she put aside her failed attempts at her two previous majors, and tried not to cringe every time her mother brought up how much she’d cost her parents by not thinking things through in the first place. Darcy bit her tongue whenever she wanted to remind them that they had plenty of money and she’d hardly made a dent. Times were tough and it probably wasn’t a good idea to be just throwing around
money any which way. But when her mom used words like ‘flighty’ and ‘immature’ Darcy got her back up.

She liked herself just fine, but her mom wasn’t wrong. She’d always flitted from thing to thing, never really settling on one exact idea of who she was or what she wanted. All she really knew was that her future felt like it was looming over her. Other people she met were so excited to start their lives; to be done school and to take what they’d learned and apply it to a job. But Darcy looked at it like it was the end of her world, not the beginning. She wanted fun and freedom and restrictions were not part of her package.

When she found the internship with Jane, she looked at it as a ‘get the hell away from school and have one last awesome adventure’ kind of situation. She’d never been to New Mexico and, sure, it was still in the States, but it wasn’t Culver and it wasn’t home, where her mother would have that disapproving face and her father would hide his head in his newspaper, leaving the child-rearing in her hands. No matter how painfully obvious it was that Lorna Lewis had long ago given up on her middle child ever growing into a respectable person. And maybe Darcy fed that image a bit, wanting to be rebellious, to piss off the mother she could never please as much as possible. Probably another tick in the immature column, but whatevs, might as well dedicate herself to it at this point.

As it turned out, Puente Antiguo was less ‘adventure’ and more ‘holy shit, does the desert ever end?’ For the most part, since she wasn’t enough scientist for them, she was put on collating and Pop-tart duties. Darcy could do this. Never mind that she happened to be a kickass cook who could put together some really awesome meals from just about anything; she’d lived on a college budget and a hot plate, she learned how to adapt. All Jane Foster wanted was a hot Pop-tart in hand when she brought her head up out of the haze that was science. So Darcy let herself slump into the box they put her in; snarky, underachieving, poli-sci student who only cared about her six credits and iPod. Which, she had to admit, was a pretty apt description most of the time. And if neither Erik nor Jane picked up on the fact that she was fluent in French, passable in German, and loved to curse in Russian, then bonus for her.

Don’t get her wrong, because she actually really liked Jane. She was just this side of kooky scientist, what with her insanely genius level intellect coupled with her general lack of personal upkeep. Eating, bathing, and sleeping eluded the scientist who was actually a pretty awesome friend when she wasn’t completely lost in the super-maze that was her mind. And Erik, who was generally grumpy with Darcy, reminded her of her grandpa, who was impatient and rarely had anything nice to say to anybody, but he loved his kids and grandchildren and he always snuck her caramels and told her she was his favorite. She chose to totally ignore that he did that with all the grand-kids and just wanted them to feel special.

So while Darcy thought New Mexico was generally a crap-place for a last hurrah before adulthood really took over and she had to take her degree and make a modern working woman of herself, it wasn’t too bad. Margarita night with two drunken genius scientists would remain in her fondest memories. And then, just as she was resigning herself to the dusty recesses of small-town New Mexico, a friggin’ God of Thunder came out of a rainbow bridge and turned everything upside down.

This, she would later decide, would be the big turning point. It wouldn’t look like it at first. When it was happening, all she could think about was Area 51 and how Agent iPod Thief would probably make her sign so many gag orders she’d have early onset arthritis. But it was really just the first step. Learning about Thor, about SHIELD, had started her on her journey of self-discovery, or something super-serious like that. After Thor defeated the giant robot-flame-thrower from hell, he took off to do damage control in Asgard, and then bye, bye rainbow bridge and hello depressed, man-blues Jane.
In the next few weeks, Erik would take off to do super, top-secret business for SHIELD, Jane would dedicate every waking (and some non-waking; that were a little scarier) moment to rebuilding the bridge. Darcy would finish her internship and return to Culver to finish up her degree. The ink was still wet when Coulson showed up with that half-smile of ‘knowing’.

“Miss Lewis,” he greeted her with a faint nod.

She looked him up and down and then said, “One second.” She left him at the door and returned wearing sunglasses. “All right, where’s the MIB mind-wipey pen?”

His lips twitched and he dropped his eyes for a second as if taking it to compose himself. “That won’t be necessary,” he finally said.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “What’s up, Son of Coul? I’ve been mum on all things Gods, aliens, and government cover-ups…”

He glanced down either way of her hallway before taking a step forward. “I have a proposal for you, Miss Lewis, one I think you’ll find very lucrative.”

She frowned, but held the door open wider for him. “I’m listening…”

Darcy figured it was just a ploy. That they saw her as their weakest link and wanted to keep a closer eye on her. But apparently Jane had signed on to a shaky contract with SHIELD wherein they’d supplied her with a lab and everything she needed to get the Einstein-Rosen Bridge back up and operational, obviously because they were interested in what was going on over on the other side and not because they had concerns regarding Jane’s romantic life.

“She needs somebody to watch over her,” Coulson said. “Since she’s familiar with you, we thought you might be a better choice than any of our agents or interns.”

“She needs somebody to keep her from drowning in her Cheerios,” Darcy corrected with a snort. “And I’m guessing she won’t let one of your jack-booted lackeys hang around because she doesn’t trust them.”

“In a nutshell,” he agreed with a shrug.

“I’m not sure you understand what my degree is in, Agent Smith,” she told him on a sigh, before taking a seat on the edge of her bed, next to her newly packed up dorm things. “I was interning for Jane because I needed six credits. The only science I rock is of the political variety…” She shrugged. “I like her and I don’t want her working herself to the bone, but I can’t construct my life around her needs…” She raised an eyebrow. “Just ’cause I start out a lowly grunt, doesn’t mean this caterpillar won’t grow some wings.”

Arms crossed in front of him, one hand gripping the opposite wrist, he stared at her, brow furrowed slightly. “Working for SHIELD would have its advantages… We may be a secret organization to the general public, but I guarantee you that those who work in politics, who have a hand up on the right rungs of the ladder, know who we are…” He raised an eyebrow. “We could be the foot you need in the door.”

“You’re saying you’ll help me make connections, kick my career into action?” She snorted, leaning back. “That all sounds pretty in theory, but let’s face it. Making coffee and Pop-tarts for Jane isn’t exactly the kind of preparatory interning I need to make it anywhere… My shiny new degree was mostly just class work and an internship with the wrong kind of science… I need something solid, and I’m afraid running errands for an astrophysicist isn’t going to get me that.”
“You drive a hard bargain,” he said, though he looked like he admired her brain, whereas the last time they went toe-to-toe he was exasperated over her passion for her iPod. “You’ll teach someone to take over your position with Dr. Foster,” he decided with a short nod. “Prepare them, endear them to her, and when you’re done, you’ll work directly for me.”

She frowned, eyed him up and down, and then said, “I want in on politics, Coulson, not espionage.”

He offered a vague smile. “In a few months, you’ll know how naïve that statement was,” he muttered. “In the meantime, you’ll work as my assistant, and trust me, you’ll be meeting all the right people, shaking all the right hands, and making the kind of impression you need to if you want to make it in that world.” He waved his finger around. “I have agents coming for your things; we’ll have you moved into SHIELD headquarters by tonight.”

“And if I say no to the offer?” she asked, rising from her bed, hands on her hips.

“You won’t,” he said simply, side-eyeing her as he moved toward the door.

“What, does your super-try training come with mind-reading skills too?” she snarked.

“Miss Lewis, you’re leaving Culver with passable grades, above-average intelligence, an inadequate brain-to-mouth filter, and a complex about growing up…” His eyebrows rose. “You were in and out of trouble in your teens and that lack of direction followed you into college, where you had trouble deciding on a major. You took the internship with Dr. Foster because you’d run out of time to find one in your actual field of expertise and she, being desperate, took you.” He shook his head. “I’d venture a guess that you’re not even sure you want to work in this field, but you’re on your last leg and your parents won’t pay for you to be in school forever…” He opened the door and faced her. “I can’t decide your future for you, but I can give you the tools to find out if this is what you want to do.”

Darcy stared at him, rolling the information over in her head.

Coulson was right. If she signed on with them, he probably would introduce her to senators and politicians, not even just those in the States, but internationally. It was that which made her pause.

“You travel a lot?”

His lips curled at the corners. “Constantly.”

“And I’d be going along…?”

“As soon as you train someone to take over in your stead with Foster, we’ll be attached at the hip.”

She smirked. “I’m hippy, Coulson, might make dodging bullets a little hard to do.”

“Try not to cause any international incidents,” he said, in a voice that said he’d had enough people do that in the past. “You’ll be outfitted with a bulletproof vest, if you’re at all concerned.”

She shrugged. “Do I get my own gun?”

He blinked. “I’ll answer that question after you’ve been tested.”

She frowned. “Tested…?” She shook her head. “What happened to paper-pushing and assisting? I thought I’d be fetching you your morning coffee and updating you on which big-wig you were lying to so things stay copasetic, all while personally schmoozing my way into a comfy job somewhere with awesome benefits.”
“You will,” he said simply. “And to make sure that you’re prepared for the kinds of situations we’ll be faced with, you’ll be tested. Physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially. If everything turns out as expecting, you’ll enter field training.”

“That sounds like running…” She grimaced. “Is there a lot of running?”

He blinked at her again, and she took that as his silent sign that yes, there would be a lot of running.

Sighing, Darcy stood from her bed. “Y’know, there wasn’t a phys ed portion of my schooling… Nobody ever said Capitol Hill was a literal climb.”

His mouth twitched again. “I’ll take that as your verbal consent to sign on with us.” He snapped his fingers.

Three agents suddenly appeared and stepped into her room to start collecting her things.

Darcy watched her college life be carried away by g-men and wasn’t sure if she was happy or terrified.

Probably the latter.
Part One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I.

Darcy met Jane in her lab, still juggling a ‘Welcome to SHIELD!’ packet that was basically all Do’s and Don’ts (mostly the second) and an itinerary that Coulson had made up for her specifically.

She whistled as she walked into the shiny lab, with all new equipment, and a harried astrophysicist sitting in the center, surrounded by papers of all sizes, covered in Jane’s familiar chicken scratch. “Moving up in the world or what, huh?”

Jane didn’t notice her right away; sure, she gave the general hum she passed out when she recognized that somebody was talking to her but weren’t worth her interest, but she obviously hadn’t realized who was talking.

Darcy knew this because when it did finally click, Jane’s head came up so quickly it sent the three pencils she had in her hair scattering every which way. “Darcy!” she cried, before shoving herself to her feet.

Somehow, in a few short months, Jane looked even tinier than Darcy remembered.

She blamed the twelve empty boxes of Pop-tarts she saw lying around. Twelve! Didn’t SHIELD have a nutritionist or something? Somebody who could look at her and say, ‘This one needs more protein and less Pop-tart in her diet!’

Nearly tripping over her papers, Jane made her way over, her arms out. “I wasn’t sure you’d come!” she declared.

Darcy waved a dismissive hand. “Hey, you kidding? What else did I have to do?” she dismissed, before wrapping her arms around her favorite scientist and letting herself sink into the familiar hug. It wasn’t often that Jane was the tactile type, but she gave good hug when she actually put a little effort into it. And right now, Darcy was pretty sure this was the equivalent of a bear hug, if that bear was a tiny, underfed cub.

“I missed you,” Jane admitted. “It was so… quiet.”

Darcy laughed, and totally wasn’t teary-eyed, like… at all.

When Jane finally pulled back, Darcy offered up a smirk. “So listen, first time in New York, not even slightly jet-lagged, how’s about you and me go get something to eat?”

“Oh, well…” She frowned, looking back at her work on the floor. “Um…”

Reaching for her, she tugged on her shirt sleeve. “One night, dude… It’ll be there tomorrow.”

Jane chewed her lip, but finally nodded. “Sure… Just this once.”

Darcy grinned, because yeah… Once, her ass. She was all for the Return of Thor, capitals necessary, but she didn’t want Jane losing herself in her mission either, and she’d seen a focused Jane Foster, it could get insane. Plus, and it was the perfect excuse, really. She was about to take on this huge job
offer Coulson had dropped in her lap and embrace the super-heavy responsibility of adulthood… She should probably have her fun while it was still there for the taking.

Whatever excuse needed, she got Jane out of the lab that night; they went out for Thai before buying a cheap box of wine and holing up in Jane’s super-tiny SHIELD offered apartment. Which was more like a box with a bed in it, but whatevs; they just needed somewhere to sit while they got drunk, and it worked just fine.

…

Darcy was settling into life at SHIELD as well as could be expected.

Her inner interior designer (regardless of not finishing it) made walking through the bleak grey halls a cringe-worthy experience; sometimes she thought she could hear her eccentric teacher weeping over the dull color spectrum and offering suggestions like throw pillows and area rugs. But it wasn’t Darcy’s job and not one she thought anybody would appreciate, so she tried to make up for the lack of color around her by being as intensely, eye-burningly bright as possibly. Neons were her friend and she happened to find some nice, cheap, second-hand clothes at a shop a few blocks over, so she stocked up and did her own version of striking back at the man… Which was probably hypocritical since she was going to be the man, sort of… For the most part, people left her to it; there were a few whispers and some pointing, but eventually they got over their color shock and let Darcy be her outrageous self.

A week in, her emotional/physical/mental state assessed and tested, and it was time for Darcy to be introduced to training.

Problem? She was pretty sure she was in the wrong training group.

She made her way over to instructor, who was built like a brick house— more in the literal sense rather than the way the song described; a song she happened to be humming the tune to under her breath. With muscley arms and a square body shape, she stood glaring out over her recruits like they were her plebs and she would make them into warriors. Darcy appreciated the sentiment, but she kind of loved her soft parts and really just wanted a passing grade so she could go play in Coulson’s jungle gym of politics.

“Uh, Mrs. Miyagi?” she asked, staring up at the, legit, 6’7 amazon woman. “I think somebody accidentally bumped me up to black belt when I should still be with the kindergartners…”

The woman, who was severe looking enough, turned to glare at her. “Name?” she repeated, possibly even louder.

“Lewis, Darcy,” she roll-called, snapping her feet together and giving a mocking salute.

Darcy stuck a finger in her ear and winced. “Okay, wow, that was unnecessary. I’m like three feet away and you have angry football coach voice…”

“Name?” she repeated, possibly even louder.

“Lewis, Darcy,” she roll-called, snapping her feet together and giving a mocking salute.

 Didn’t even get a smile, just upturned eyes like she was addressing her brain’s rolodex. “Ah, Coulson’s fresh meat,” she said, thankfully in a normal pitch. “You’ve been upgraded.”

Darcy blinked. “How can I be upgraded if I never even got familiar with the starter-package?”

“Your test results came in; you were above-average in almost everything. That puts you with me.”

“The above-average part or the almost-everything part?”
“That’s the thing… I’m not an agent! I’m a wannabe-politician of sorts…” She shook her head. “I want to change the world; I don’t want to lift it over my head like I’m Miss Universe!” Her voice was rising and she knew she was gathering attention, but she’d seen the boys and girls she was about to be training with and they were all washboard abs and arms bigger than her head. Well, okay, the women weren’t quite as cut, but looks were deceiving, she was pretty sure any number of them could kill her with their pinkies. “Look, just send me back to the remedial class and we’re good, all right?”

“Not happening.” She turned to face her. “You’ve been tested and deemed fit to train with me. I don’t care if you’re underweight, overweight, or you spend twenty-four hours a day behind a computer playing Tetris and eating Cheetos. You’re mine now and I’m going to whip you into shape until you are as prepared as you possibly can be.” She leaned her head down to stare Darcy in the eye. “You are going to cry, you might even throw-up, every single muscle in your body is going to hurt, even the ones you didn’t know you had, and you are going to beg for your mommy before I’m done with you, but I promise that when it’s over, when I know that you are as capable as you could ever be, you will walk out of this gym feeling accomplished.”

“I’d rather walk out right now feeling ashamed,” she muttered.

And then she got a smile, and it transformed the woman’s face into something almost breathtakingly beautiful, making the Brick House song surprisingly apt. Suddenly, the instructor’s buzz-cut blonde hair fit the angular shape of her face, warm with her olive complexion.

“Achieving what you want is never easy, Miss Lewis, that’s why it’s worth it.” She stood back upright, faced her soldiers-in-the-making, and then gave a sharp whistle, calling their attention to her. “I am Antimache Pallas, you may call me Tima,” she introduced herself. “When you are here, you will do as I say. You will not talk back; you will not give up; you will not fail.” She put her hands on her hips. “Here, you will succeed, transform, and you will make me proud.” Taking in a deep breath, she yelled, “Now get into formation!”

Darcy stood off to the side, confused. The only formation she knew of was downward dog, and she was pretty sure they weren’t about to get into some yoga positions.

“Lewis!” Tima said, before pointing at an open space between a man twice the size of her and a woman who was short, but leanly muscled.

Awkwardly, she made her way over and then looked at either of them. “Any chance one of you could tell me what she means by formation?”

“She just means get into lines. She’ll walk up and down to see where our problem areas are and then figure out a plan to work on them,” the girl informed her.

“Problem areas?” Darcy snorted. “How about my career choice?” She rolled her eyes. “Stupid Coulson…”

“You work for Coulson?” the man asked, looking at her sharply. “And you’re only now starting training?” He gave her a look up and down, as if he suspected something different.

“Ew, are you trying to figure out if I slept with him to get my job?” She glared up at him. “I may not know the finer art of killing someone, yet, but I have a taser, buddy, and it’s going to be aimed at your jewels if you let that tiny little thought get any bigger.” She stepped up to him, completely
ignoring the fact that A. he was almost as tall as their instructor and much more muscled, and B. he’d probably trained a lot more and could easily detain or even kill her.

She considered for a moment, explaining what she was doing there and why she was starting out where she was, though she’d have to leave Thor out of it since this guy was still in training and she didn’t know how trustworthy he was, but at least letting him in on the Jane and poli-sci background. But she realized suddenly, why the hell does she need to explain herself to this chump? So he has some false idea of who she is, based mostly on her appearance, and has decided she got her job on her back… Well screw him! Darcy knew who she was and what happened and she really didn’t care if this testosterone junkie did or not.

“Coulson doesn’t let just anybody work under him. It’s a privilege that only a few agents of SHIELD are qualified for.” He crossed his meaty arms over his chest and raised an eyebrow. “So how’d your earn your stripes, Newb?”

When Darcy was four, she punched a boy in the nose because he told her she dressed like a boy and she was ugly.

At six and a half, she put glue in a girl’s hair because she told Darcy her glasses were dumb.

Just short of nine, she got into a fist-fight with a boy two grades higher, and about fifty pounds heavier, than her because he kicked a stray dog and laughed when it whimpered.

Twelve had her sucker-punching a girl for calling her a slut just because Darcy’s boobs were noticeably large, despite the loose-fitting shirt she wore.

Laney, her older sister, was dumped by her boyfriend almost immediately after she lost her virginity to him; Darcy was just fourteen at the time, but she rubbed Laney’s back all night as she cried and the next day, Darcy went up to the senior and kneed him in the junk.

Nearly fifteen, she found out her little brother was being bullied; she waited after school and when she found the three bigger boys, she scared them so bad that one of them pissed themselves; they never touched Michael again.

In her freshman year of college, she fought off a guy robbing an older woman, using just her giant-ass purse to beat him away which, yes, did have a brick in it, because she was just prepared like that!

And months ago, she tased a Norse god because he looked drunk and argumentative and he’d started coming at her when he thought she’d insulted him.

So, with her history, it was really no surprise that when this jack-hole thought he could intimate and degrade her, she reacted by jamming the heel of her foot down onto his instep, throat-punching him, and then kneeing him in his jewels. A nice combo, she thought. Maybe he wasn’t expecting it, or maybe he wasn’t as well trained as she’d thought, because he didn’t even get a chance to block it. Instead, with a whimper-y cry, he hit the mat and curled up into a foetal position.

“Pop-tarts and tasers, bitch!” she said, throwing her hands up.

And yeah, okay, nobody else knew what the hell that meant, but Brawny Asshole was down for the count and everybody else was looking at her like maybe they didn’t want to go toe-to-toe with her crazy. Good enough for her!

“Lewis,” Tima said.

She looked over at her instructor.
“That part of the test that you weren’t as developed in…?” She let the question linger before saying, “Handling confrontation.”

Darcy grinned. “Heh… Oops?”

Tima sighed. “Back in formation.”

Darcy turned around to face her properly, and the rest of them followed suit.

Except Brawny Asshole; he stayed on the floor, crying.

…

In the next few weeks, Darcy learned that training was hard, but it was probably ten times worse when she felt about as strong as a kitten and everybody else were pitbulls.

From six in the morning until two in the afternoon, she was Jane’s bitch, with a lunch break to keep her sanity. But from two until five, she was Tima’s to mold and order around. Darcy spent every day of her week, because weekends didn’t exist at SHIELD, learning how to incapacitate an enemy with every single thing they could think of… File folder? There’s a nifty vein to paper cut a victim to death. Simple blue office pen? No fears, we could think about six different places that could go to severely injure, blind, or kill somebody! Ha-ha-HAAA.

Darcy was slightly terrified of these people and their blasé attitude toward, essentially, murder. Or, well, in her case it was probably self-defense.

For clarification’s sake, however, she did have to admit that Tima wasn’t so much a cold-blooded killer as she was a survivalist. Her way of teaching always had a ‘You will survive because you are prepared not to die’ twist to it. She didn’t think all of the agents cared for it; some of them really just wanted to get in the field and do some damage, but Darcy wasn’t exactly excited about all the ways she could use a paperclip to take an enemy out. The necklaces she used to make with them would never be the same. Now what would she do when she was bored and Jane didn’t have anything for her to do? Because walking around with a necklace made of murder was so off the table!

Thankfully, from five o’clock at night until five the next morning, when she got up to shower, knock back a bowl of Wheaties, and watch super early cartoons, she was home free. No training and, as long as Jane managed to pull herself away from her science, no worries about her absent-minded scientist. On the nights when Jane didn’t, which were a lot more regular than those she did, Darcy would spend a few hours coaxing her to eat dinner and possibly get some sleep. Sometimes it didn’t work and others it did; it was a fifty-fifty chance either way.

So outside of eight hours of sleep and those few hours spent trying to convince Jane to be a normally functioning person, Darcy had free time… Which was mostly spent eating ice cream or avoiding her mother’s phone calls. Yeah, so she hadn’t exactly told her family that she’d moved to New York and was currently working her way up to a secret government position… How was she even supposed to put that without giving away SHIELD’s existence?

Hmm, something to talk to Coulson about. Later… When she actually wanted to talk to her parents.

So… When hell froze over.

…

“Jane, c’mon,” she sighed, waving a mug of coffee at the distracted astrophysicist. “Standing hurts. Take your coffee and let me sit down.”
With a huff, Jane reached out blindly for the mug. “Why are you even here if you’re in pain?” she wondered. “Don’t you have sick days?”

“I don’t think SHIELD lets me take those considering they’re the reason I’m in pain,” she reminded, easing herself into the ultra-comfy desk chair with the orthopedic back that adapted to the shape of her spine. “Seriously, Tima’s a slave-driver… I ran laps until I threw up yesterday! I can still taste barf, Jane. I so did not sign up for that!” She grimaced, shoulders slumping. “Burritos are forever ruined for me.”

Jane snorted. “Yeah, okay…”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine, don’t believe me. But you’re all cozy up in here with your fancy, shiny tools and your machines that you didn’t have to build out of our toaster…” She shook her head. “Coulson’s got me in weapon’s training tomorrow, Jane… They’re giving me a gun!”

“Well, I doubt they’d give you one if they didn’t think you’d—” She paused, as if realizing what she was saying and what they were talking about. Her eyes widened and her mouth parted. “Oh my God!” She turned to look at Darcy. “Do they even know you?”

“Right!?” she agreed. “Somebody is going to get shot!” She shrugged. “Y’know, I’d prefer it wasn’t me, but I can’t take it off the table…” Her eyes widened. “I get clumsy when I’m nervous!”

“I know!” she said, nodding. “Is there any way out of it? Like, could you come down with something and just skip that part?”

“Yeah,” she scoffed, “There’s a plan! He’d probably set me up with a private tutor and I’d be expected to learn it in half the time.” She groaned, dropping her head back against the cushion of her chair. “Why’d I ever do this?”

“Well, I’d like to say it’s because you missed me and wanted to make sure I was okay, but I know it has more to do with trying to get your career off the ground,” Jane offered.

Darcy’s eyes fell to her. “Hey, you know I care about you, right?” She raised an eyebrow. “I mean, I was legitimately worried that you might starve to death after I left…” Her brows hiked. “I left post-it’s everywhere!”

She snorted. “I noticed.” Rolling her eyes, she shrugged. “I know you care, Darcy. You have an… unusual way of showing it, but I knew it.”

“Good.” She stacked her hands on her stomach. “Cause we’re friends, even if you’d ditch me for science any day of the week and I know that when Thor shows up, you’ll be all ‘oooh, abs’ and ‘Darcy who?’ and I’ll just be shooting people’s toes off and silently praying to the Amazonian Gods to spare me and let me live a slovenly life of couch-potatoism…”

“I won’t ignore you just because I get Thor back,” she dismissed, frowning. “I miss him and I… I care about him, but…” She sighed. “It was only a few days…” she muttered.

“A few days in which you and tall, sweet, and cut got really close… Seriously, the heat was coming off in waves…” She shook her head. “Look, Jane, you deserve to be happy too, and not just in a lab.” She sat up. “Do I totally support your ass-kicking science skills? Hell yes!” She raised a hand for a high-five and smiled as Jane gave it to her. “You’re a top-notch genius and you always will be. But that doesn’t mean you can’t have a little man-meat on the side.” Her eyebrows hiked. “I’m pretty sure the world owes it to you!”

Jane laughed. “Well, I wouldn’t be opposed to it… And Thor was really nice…”
“And cut.”

“He might not seem very smart, but he’s actually got layers.”

“And his abs were lickable.”

“Even just thinking about what I can learn about his culture and the world he comes from…”

“And look at how big he is; I mean that’s got to translate to other areas, right?” She paused.

“Right?!”

Jane threw something at her.

Darcy tried to duck but then gripped her side. “Ow! Cramp! Cramp!” She fell sideways in her chair.

“Oh God, call a medic… The national guard… anybody with some pain medication…” She bit her lip and cried out. “Man down! Man down!” she cried. “Get me the good drugs!”

Rolling her eyes, Jane merely turned back to her work.

The doors swished open then and Darcy could hear the clomping of boots. “Is something wrong in here?” a man asked.

Darcy couldn’t lift her head, still crouched to try and alleviate the pressure on her side. “That’s not Coulson,” she said, her voice muffled. “Jane, who is that?”

“Hm?” the doctor looked over. “Oh, it’s Captain Rogers.”

“Who?”

“You can call me Steve, ma’am,” he reassured, before he knelt down next to Darcy and placed a hand gently on her shoulder. “Miss, are you okay?”

Darcy stared down at his polished shoes. “No, I’m not okay! My entire life is in a tail spin and it’s all Coulson’s fault.”

There was a pause before, “I think I can relate,” he replied.

Darcy slowly began to sit up, very much aware of every muscle in her body. Her hair was shrouding her face and she was panting. “Yeah, somehow I don’t think we’re on the same thinking plane, Cap.” She gripped her side as it pulled and winced.

“Were you injured?” he asked, batting her hands away and carefully probing the area.

All she could see were hands; his were large, tanned, and had long, dexterous fingers. “Watch the goods,” she grunted.

His hands stilled. “I didn’t mean to invade your personal space,” he told her immediately, sounding sincerely apologetic.

She smiled and let out a little chuckle. Reaching up with her hand, she dragged her hair back and out of the way. “It’s cool, I was just cramping up. Bossman’s got me on a strict training regimen and my instructor is slowly killing me… Whipped into shape, my ass, she’s just kicking it…”

When she finally set eyes on him, she was a little… awe struck.

She hadn’t been expecting that.
Well, no, maybe she was expecting the perfectly parted hair and the pressed clothes, but that was based on his shiny shoes and good manners. She wasn’t, however, expecting him to look like *that*. Like chiseled cheek bones she could cut herself on, full pink kissable lips, and crystal blue eyes that were wide and worried and pulling off a puppy-dog look she had never seen outside of Disney movies. “Wow, okay, goodbye ovaries,” she muttered.

His brows furrowed. “I… I’m sorry?”

“You should be, I might’ve needed those… eventually.” She stretched a little straighter and took in a careful breath, hoping it wouldn’t hurt and smiling when it didn’t. “Darcy Lewis,” she introduced herself. “Temporary lab assistant, soon-to-be working under Coulson, and eventually, changing, shaping, and possibly overthrowing the world.” She stuck a hand out for him.

“That’s an interesting ten-year plan,” he said, lips twitching up in a smile as he took her hand and shook it; with a nice, firm grip, she noticed.

“Ten years,” she scoffed. “More like one… Maybe, if I ever get out of training and into schmoozing, before the year is out.” She shrugged. “I can dream.” She raised an eyebrow. “You said you name was Steve Rogers…? Like 40’s propaganda twist Captain America? Parents big World War Two fans or…?”

“Uh…” He scratched behind his ear. “It’s complicated…”

“Yeah,” she snorted, “I hear that a lot.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s like a SHIELD agent’s motto or something…”

“Glad to hear I’m not alone,” he mused.

“Not such a small world after all,” she agreed.

His eyes darted down for a moment. “You’re all right though?” he wondered. “Because if Agent Coulson is doing anything that might harm you, I can speak to him if you want.” Geez, he sincerely looked like he would take it up with the big guy himself if it meant an injustice was being done; if her ovaries hadn’t already self-destructed, they would now.

“I appreciate the offer, Cap, but I’m fully capable of fighting my own battles…” She shrugged. “Unfortunately, this is mostly one of those things that can’t really be changed… I made my bed and now I gotta lay in it…” She pouted. “Fleas and all.”

He hummed. “I don’t know… I think there’s usually a solution to everything… As long as it doesn’t hurt anybody else and you do it for the right reasons, I think you can find a way out if you have to.”

She watched him a moment, looking so serious and concerned for her well-being. A virtual stranger. “Optimist, huh?”

He shrugged, smiling. “I think when you spend enough time in the gutters, silver linings become a close ally.”

“Well, this girl’s silver lining is eventual world domination,” she reminded. “So for now, I think I’ll just have to tough it out and hope it doesn’t kill me on the way.”

He nodded. “I hope you’ll remember me and take pity when you eventually do take over the world.”

She laughed and gave him a wink. “With that face? You’ll be hard to forget.”
He flushed a pale pink and cleared his throat before standing up, and holy crap, she’d be getting a kink in her neck if he got any taller. “It was nice to meet you, Miss Lewis. I hope your training goes well.”

“Nice to meet you too,” she said, nodding. “And fingers crossed it does.”

He waved at her as he turned to leave, calling goodbye to Jane as he left, unruffled by her distracted hum of farewell.

Darcy bit her lip and leaned back in her chair. “Remember when I said Thor was cut and you totally deserved to jump him?” She didn’t get a reply since Jane was in full science mode, but Darcy continued on aloud anyway, “I’m thinking I deserve a hot Captain of my own to wrestle around with…” She shifted in her seat, wincing as everything vibrated with overuse. “Ugh, as soon as my full body bruise fades…”

Chapter End Notes

*Antimache* means Confronting Warrior

*Pallas* is Greek for sword.
II.

Darcy held the gun with just her pinky and fore-finger, letting it point down toward the floor, the safety very much on (she’d checked three times since it had been handed to her).

While everybody else was shooting at the target papers, Darcy simply stood in her booth, noise-mufflers on, silently praying to whoever would listen that her gun wouldn’t accidentally go off and hit a vital organ somehow. Probably by ricochet.

A hand tugged her left muffler out of the way. “Lewis, is that how I showed you how to shoot your gun?”

She frowned. “I can’t be sure, but I definitely think it was in the part where you said, ‘Know your target, don’t shoot for the sake of shooting, shoot because it will save your or somebody else’s life…’ I could be wrong, but I don’t think killing paper is going to save anybody…”

“That doesn’t apply during practice,” Tima told her, exasperated.

“I don’t want to get philosophical on you, but shouldn’t these lessons transcend to everything? I mean, here’s a gun, but shouldn’t I be looking at diplomacy first? What if the paper wants to talk? What if he wants peace, not war?” She turned to look at her. “Negotiation talks are our friends, Ti…”

Unimpressed, Tima replied drolly, “Darcy, if you don’t shoot that paper, I’m going to make you run laps.”

She raised the gun.

And missed.

Well, no, she actually shot Debbie’s paper, but she was like three over to the left so that was probably… bad…

With a huff, Tima moved in behind her. “You’re too stiff, your hips are wrong, you pulled instead of squeezing, and you’re scared.”

“My hips are awesome,” she countered.

While she couldn’t see it, she knew Tima was rolling her eyes.

Her instructor remodeled her body; she adjusted her hips, her arms, even kicked at her feet. “Everything in your body needs to coexist with this gun. It will be a part of you.”

“A very lethal part,” she muttered.

“Yes.” Tima’s hands gripped Darcy’s forearms and steadied them. “In this business, it is kill or be killed… You will shoot when you have to shoot. You will learn to read these situations, to anticipate them, and when the time is right—or wrong, depending on the situation— then you will take comfort in knowing that you are prepared and you are strong.”

“I am woman, hear me roar,” she snarked under her breath.
“Don’t sass me,” Tima ordered.

Darcy bit her lip.

“Focus on the target, Darcy; tell me what you see.”

She squinted. “Paper and rings.”

“What color are the rings?”

She frowned. “Red and blue.”

“And?”

“What do you mean and? They’re red and blue.”

“And white,” she reminded. “As well, the center is a black circle, is it not?”

“Okay, so I didn’t think the white really counted…”

“Everything counts,” she told her heavily. “We’re starting out with these, but when I put up the body-targets, a shot is a shot. The more centered, the better.”

“Shoot to kill,” she sighed.

“Shoot to live,” Tima countered.

“Don’t pretty it up…” She frowned. “Either way, somebody gets dead.”

“And what we’re aiming for here is that it’s not you.” She squeezed her arms once more. “Focus on the center, on the black… What do you see?”

“Are you kidding?” she scoffed. “That’s like, the size of a grain of sand from this distance… I’m new to guns, this isn’t a sharpshooter gig!”

Her hands came up to Darcy’s head and directed it. “Focus!”

“Fine!” she exclaimed with a huff, staring directly at the target.

She could hear the snap-bang of the other guns; she could see the paper targets lurching with each bullet that hit them, over and over again. She could smell gunpowder on the air and hear the thumb over her own heart. She could feel the sweat on her palms, sticky around the gun. She could feel Tima’s callused hands on her cheeks, her thumbs tapping.

What was she tapping?

Morse-code?

No.

Heartbeat. She was tapping along to Darcy’s heartbeat.

Darcy focused on that; on the constant tap, tap, tap. She squinted into the distance and zeroed in on her target. She stared at that little black dot that seemed so very far away. A dot that seemed miniscule in comparison to everything else. She stared and stared and tap, tap, tap. She stared and stared and and and snap-bang-repeat. She stared and stared and the tiny little dot seemed to get bigger. Not by
much, but enough that it didn’t seem quite as far as before. It didn’t seem completely out of the realm of possibility.

“You will look for an opportunity,” Tima said, close to her ear. “You will assess your abilities and every outcome and when it is time, you will take the shot.”

So Darcy stared and stared and—

“That’s enough for today,” Tima finally called. “Guns down, unloaded, step back.”

She released Darcy to follow her orders before making her way up and down the line, checking papers, humming, neither approving or disapproving, and then she finally pivoted, snapped her feet together, and told them they were dismissed.

Everyone but Darcy left.

She stared at her paper still up and in the distance, not a hole in it, and then down to her gun, never fired.

“What if it’s never the right time for me?” she wondered, turning her head to seek out her teacher.

“Then you are a lucky woman, who will never have to make a hard decision in her life and will coast along with the ease of a leaf on the wind.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow. “So what, if I don’t kill the paper target, my life must be roses?”

“It’s not the paper I’m asking you to kill, Darcy.”

“No, you’re training me to kill somebody else, one day, you hope!” Her eyes widened. “I’m not a soldier, how many times do I have to tell you people? I’m a paper-pusher, a coffee-getter! My purpose in this stupid life is to do everything nobody wants to do. Because according to everybody else I’m good at a lot of little, menial, stupid things. Because I can’t or I won’t grow up and even when I do, I know I’m just going to be sad and bored and have to live in the confines of pencil skirts and regulations!” She threw her hands up. “I don’t want the gun and I don’t want the desk. I want…” Her eyes darted away, chest heaving with breath. “I don’t know what I want, but I’m not a killer!”

She shoved past Tima and stomped out into the hall. She was nearly running as she made her way through the hall, dodging suit after suit, agent after agent, racing toward the elevator, where she flashed her security pass. She was brought down to the main floor, where she escaped through the lobby, ignoring the confused looks of people who had no idea the building was outfitted with a secret organization. She ran outside and dragged in deep, shuddering breaths of air, her blurry eyes scanning the streets of New York City.

*What the fuck was she doing in New York?* she wondered, not for the first time.

Darcy started walking, hugging her arms around her waist, weaving in and out of oblivious city-folk.

She walked and she walked, but she didn’t know where to.

She didn’t look at street signs; she didn’t stop for a map or ask directions. This was the first time she’d actually been out in the city since Coulson and his goons had flown her out and driven her into the underground entrance of SHIELD HQ. And in the last month, she’d only been in the training facility, lab, and her all-grey sleeping unit. She absolutely would not call that dreary, colorless, *cell* an apartment. It was life-draining; being inside of it made her think the suicide rate probably sky-
rocketed for SHIELD employees. She wouldn’t be surprised if they used them on detainees to make them crack.

Darcy found a park; she decided it must be Central Park, although she hadn’t seen a sign. Really, her only knowledge of New York parks was Central and that was because it was basically famous, or infamous, she wasn’t too sure. She walked until she found a bench overlooking a duck pond and then she took the whole thing for herself. She sat in the center, dropped her bag on her right, and then glared at anybody who got too close. Including, and she would later feel bad for it, an old bad with a brown bag of bread crumbs.

She didn’t want him intruding on her wallowing and she really didn’t care how selfish that was. Besides, she saw him later, standing atop a bridge, just as content there as he might’ve been on the bench.

Darcy dragged her legs up and crossed them underneath her as she tried to figure out what she was going to do.

Coulson hadn’t mentioned that she might have to shoot someone if she worked for him. In fact, most of her job description involved ‘assisting,’ be it for Jane or him. She’d never known of assisting involving arms training. And yeah, okay, she knew it was SHIELD so technically they were just trying to prepare her in the event that shit went down and she had to pull her gun in the name of national security or like, whole world saving stuff. But Darcy had always considered herself to be more of the make love, not war type. She admired Stark for taking a stand when he realized his warmongering kill-machines were being used against America as much as for them, and instead decided to scrap the weapons department entirely and focus on world growth. She believed in standing up against adversity, she just always thought it would be more in an emotional and vocal way, rather than pulling out the literal big guns and popping one off.

Dragging her hands over her face, she sighed.

Was this just her trying to run again? Like changing her majors, was this just her looking for an excuse? And hell, she had a few of them. Training with guns wasn’t the worst of it. She was pretty sure the running and the martial arts and the being body-slammed was pretty damn grueling. While Marcus, aka Brawny Asshole, had steered clear of her, she still had to contend with the others. And they were all seriously strong mofos. They’d had previous training and some of them were straight out of the ARMY or the Marines, and it showed. Darcy was all soft curves; she didn’t even like stubbing her toe and they wanted her to go head-to-head with some ridiculously deadly people.

Sure, it was paying off some. She was leaner and whatever those lunge things were, they were doing awesome things to her ass, but she still kept her figure, thankfully, and she didn’t have to go all GI Jane and buzz her hair off either. She was getting better at running, no longer huffing and puffing and throwing up her lunch, thank God; barf was so not on her menu of okay things. There was definition in her arms, not anywhere near the kind in Tima’s or the other women in the group, but it was all round and hard and she felt kind of badass whenever she noticed it. So yeah, there were upsides and she wasn’t the worst person to ever be trained.

But sometimes she looked at what was going on and she just didn’t understand it. What it meant or why it was happening and really, just, why her.

When someone sat down next to her, she was mentally exhausted. She wasn’t even going to bite their head off. At that point, she just wanted to curl up in a ball, call Jane to come get her, and then cry into a bowl of ice cream.

Unfortunately, however, she didn’t’ have her bag. Which meant she didn’t have her phone. Which
meant she had nobody to come get her and she wasn’t even sure she was in Central Park. It was a big city; it had to have more than one park, right?

Sucking it up, Darcy turned to ask her new bench partner if he had a phone she could use to call in an SOS and get back to… home? No, that didn’t sound right. HQ was… SHIELD. It was work. It wasn’t home. Home was the townhouse she’d grown up in with her older sister Laney and her little brother, Michael. It was where her dad took her out back and taught her how to play baseball with the apples that fell off the tree. It was skipping rope on the sidewalk with the neighbor kids and making chalk drawings that overlapped and created just a mess of colors. It was where her mom taught her to cook, even if she did lose her patience with how messy and uncoordinated Darcy was. It was where her nana would fuss over her on holidays and her grandpa would sit in the old leather armchair, doling out caramels to one kid at a time. It was the smell of her sister’s perfume and her brother’s gym socks and her mom’s fresh apple pie and her dad’s cigars. It wasn’t cold or grey or emotionless.

Her eyes were stinging as she turned to ask for the phone, but as her lips parted, she instead found Coulson, and he was holding out a handkerchief.

She stared at it incomprehensibly.

He gave it a shake and she finally took it, rubbing at her eyes and taking a deep breath as her shoulders slumped.

“Here to fire me?” she wondered, and couldn’t be sure if she was relieved or disappointed.

“Why? Because you had a minor breakdown?” He waved a dismissive hand. “I’ve seen worse.”

She blew her nose on his handkerchief and grinned when his lips turned down. Obviously she’d be keeping the square of white fabric, embroidered with his initials.

“Do you like working for SHIELD, Miss Lewis?” he asked, hands folded primly in his lap, gaze focused ahead.

She shrugged, leaning back against the bench. “Wasn’t what I expected…”

“I warned you there’d be training,” he reminded.

She raised an eyebrow. “Seriously? That’s your defense?”

He smoothed out his jacket and gave a faint sigh. “When you were tested, it was more or less just to reaffirm what I already knew,” he told her.

“And that’d be…?”

“You’re a smart woman; deceptively so given your grades and how you carry yourself. You’re capable, even if you pretend you’re not, and refreshingly honest. You’re protective, of friends, family, and yourself. As much as you don’t like violence, at least with guns, you don’t mind fighting for something you believe in or if somebody’s hurt you… Which are all admirable qualities.”

“But…?”

“But personality wise, Darcy, you are not what SHIELD usually looks for in an agent…” he said simply. “You’re moody, emotional, you react instead of planning, and in terms of whether or not this is what you want to do for the rest of your life, you don’t know… SHIELD agents live and die here; they only live as long as they’re prepared for. And when they die, they’re most likely still field
agents. Most of them don’t make it very high in the food chain…” he admitted.

“Wow, you’re really selling it. Don’t give all the good stuff away,” she complained.

He half-smiled. “I’m not training you to become an agent, is what I’m saying.” He paused to pick absently at a piece of lint, leaving his suit otherwise immaculate.

“Because I don’t fit into that pretty little box of emotionless and willing to die for my country?”

“Because I have bigger plans for you,” he corrected.

Her brows furrowed. “You lost me. You start out all ‘Darcy is awesome,’ and then you went ‘Darcy is volatile,’ and now you’re back to ‘Darcy is too awesome for SHIELD,’ so…”

“You wanted to work in politics,” he reminded. “And I’m going to introduce you to them, in a manner of speaking…”

Her eyes narrowed.

“You’re going to see the darker side, seedier if you will…” He nodded. “Some of them will be people SHIELD watches because we recognize them as enemies, as targets, or possibly as terrorist organizations that may or may not become a threat… Each of those groups will be marked with different color codes so you’ll know beforehand.”

“Before what?”

“Before you ingratiate yourself to them.”

“You want me to befriend terrorist-minded politicians…?” she repeated, her mouth ajar. “The hell?”

“I want you to liaise for us. You’ll make connections, friendships in some cases, with people in government capacities all over the world… You’ll learn their secrets, even guard them occasionally, and you will understand that some of them, while they might be nice on the outside, are cold-hearted killers on the inside.”

“Is there the opposite of that going on too? Like maybe I meet Bin Laden 2.0 but he’s actually like a sweet teddy bear and he’s just totally misunderstood…?”

He blinked at her.

She frowned. “What a gyp.”

“You wanted adventure in your life, Miss Lewis… You wanted excitement and politics and traveling the world,” he reminded.

“I distinctly remember saying no espionage,” she reminded, her eyes wide.

“That’s the beauty of it,” he said. “They will always know who you are. There is no front. You are Darcy Lewis, political scientist, learning the ropes.”

“And also sticking my finger in every corrupt pie all over the world…”

His mouth twitched. “Not all the way in, maybe just the tip.”

She laughed, her eyes wide. “Did you just make a sex joke?”
He cleared his throat, eyes falling.

“You did!”

He shifted in his seat, lips pursed. “In any case—”

“I’m never forgetting this,” she assured, grinning.

“I’m sure you won’t,” he muttered sullenly.

She sat back, feeling lighter, despite the heavy subject of their conversation. With a sigh, she stared out over the duck pond. “So you’re training me to handle guns and kick ass just in case somebody realizes I’m funneling information back to you guys and I have to save my own bacon?”

“We’re training you because I would never put you out in the field unless I knew for certain that you were as prepared as you possibly could be…” He turned to stare at her seriously. “You’re smart, Darcy. Both book and street-wise.”

“You keep saying that word, but I do not think you know what it means.”

His lips twitched in a sign that he got her reference. “You are smart,” he argued. “You speak three different languages outside of English, you IQ is above average, and while your grades didn’t always reflect it, which I suspect had more to do with the fact that you spent more time on Tumblr than you did on your homework, your actual test scores were extremely high…” He frowned. “You let people dismiss you, even treat you like you’re of lesser intelligence, all the while knowing that you’re smarter than they think…”

Darcy chewed her lip. “It wasn’t always an act…” She raised an eyebrow. “I’m not astrophysicist smart.”

“Which is good, I already have one of those and she’s doing her job just fine, I don’t need another. I need you.” He stared at her profile. “You can try it, see how the hat fits, and if you don’t like it, I guarantee you I will find you something you do like. Or, at the very least, I’ll get you work in Washington, with anybody of your choosing.”

“Obama,” she said immediately.

He let out a faint chuckle. “That’s actually very do-able.”

Her eyes widened and she turned to look at him. “No way!”

He raised an eyebrow and gave her what she deemed his ‘smug’ look. “If it will get you to come back to SHIELD and give this another try, I will personally introduce you to him.”

Darcy waffled, her eyes falling. “I can pull the chord any time I want to?”

“I won’t stop you.” His expression was earnest.

“And I won’t have to kill anyone unless they’re trying to kill me?”

“As far as I know,” he hedged.

“And you’ll make sure Jane’s new assistant feeds and waters her every day?” She pointed, exclaiming, “She needs fresh air, too!”

He smiled. “You’ll still train her replacement. I’ll have résumés sent to you tonight so you can pick
out your favorites and whittle them down.”

She nodded slowly, agreeably. “But only because I’m an Obama-stan,” she declared.

“If I knew that was all it would take…”

She snorted, but pushed up from the bench and stretched her legs. “C’mon, I don’t know where we are or how to get back to HQ…” She frowned. “Y’know, now that I think about it, it was kind of ironic that I sent the dude with the breadcrumbs away…”

Coulson laughed under his breath. “We’re in Central Park, Miss Lewis… I’ll also have you set up with GPS.”

As they walked down the pathway, presumably toward one of his non-descript, black SUVs, Darcy pivoted and started walking backwards. “So what are the chances that SHIELD sabotages Romney’s bid for president? He puts the ass in asshat,” she mused.

He watched her, somehow looking younger with how amused he was with her. “You don’t need to worry about Romney, Miss Lewis, SHIELD is fully aware of the damage he could do to the country should he be elected.”

She grinned. “Awesome. Load off my mind.”

“Glad to hear you’ll sleep better at night…”

“That reminds me…” She raised an eyebrow up at him. “What is SHIELD’s policy on painting our cells?”

His lips turned down fractionally before he cleared his throat and said, “I’ll make you an offer… I’ll pretend you didn’t ask that and I’ll pretend I don’t see you in the halls with paint cans…”

She grinned. “Deal.”

…

Darcy’s talk with Coulson helped clear some things up for her. She still wasn’t sure she was made for this job, but she was willing to see what it was really like before she completely blew it off. When she got back to SHIELD, she found Jane, dragged her away from the lab, and made her go drinking with her. There were two SHIELD agents not so subtly lurking nearby to make sure they didn’t get into trouble, or give away government secrets, not that she’d learned many, yet.

The music was loud, to the point that lyrics just weren’t necessary, but Darcy appreciated the bass and the general tune, so she gave it her all on the dance floor, dancing off her frustrations. In between Jane’s fruity drinks and Darcy’s ice cold beer, they were ignoring anybody who asked them to dance. It was girls’ night, which meant no boys. And if, once or twice, she noticed the agents twitch like they wanted to intervene, she waved them back and dealt with it herself. She didn’t need testosterone at the moment and the guys usually got the gist and let them to it.

Hours later, they left buzzy and all danced out. More importantly, Darcy was happy to see that Jane was smiling, not so troubled and Thor-related angsty. She dropped Jane at her grey room and then went on to her own. She was hoping to sleep in the next morning, in part because Jane would definitely be out for the day, but training was up and kicking butt at six sharp, as if their guard had let Tima or Coulson know about her night out and were trying to exact revenge for how difficult she was. Of course, Tima said it had more to do with being prepared for anything, even the event that she was hung-over and not at all badass, but Darcy surprised even herself. Apparently Coulson’s
pep-talk had worked because she was up and ready and met training that morning with a tiny bit more enthusiasm than usual.

Until Tima told her to skip rope and then she refused on the grounds that her chest would give her a black eye.

A small-scale argument ensued that Darcy was both surprised and excited to find she actually won. But, well, that was probably due more to wannabe-super-agent Kenny Ingrid passing out from dehydration rather than because of her solid argument points.

She would take her wins where she could get them though, and put the skip rope away.

…

Later that afternoon, Darcy found herself at the shooting range. In fact, she was in the same box she’d been in before only now she was actually sitting on the counter where her gun once was, legs crossed, staring at the paper in the distance, gaze focused solely on the little black circle.

“If you stare any harder, you might hurt yourself…”

Darcy turned, somehow recognizing, and yet not, the voice that called out. The range was otherwise empty, until Steve Rogers came in. He offered her a half-smile and a wave. Her mood perked a little but she admitted that probably had to do with the fact the fact that he was even more attractive than she remembered.

He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “Um, we met in Dr. Foster’s lab,” he offered, as if she could really forget.

“I remember…” She nodded. “Handsome soldier-type offering medical help for a cramp…”

He flushed, ducking his eyes. “Are you feeling better?”

“I should hope so…” She sighed, turning herself and leaning back against the divider. “Stop me if I get too deep, but… You ever just wake up and wonder what the hell happened to your life?”

He blinked and then gave an almost incredulous laugh. “Yes, I can say with certainty I have.”

She hummed, and stared down at her hands in her lap. “When I was seven, I wanted to be a professional tree climber…”

He walked toward her, hands in the pockets of his pressed khaki pants. “Is there a market for that?”

Her laugh echoed in the room, joined with a grin that twisted her lips up. “Not really…” She shrugged. “But I was seven and a tom-boy and there was nothing better than getting to the top and looking out over everything and just feeling like it was so small and I was so big…” Her eyes rolled as she snorted lightly. “And then being big meant growing up and…” She shook her head. “I was better at being young and getting dirty and making mistakes…” Her mouth thinned into a frown. “The tree-climbing part was fun, easy. But now it’s like I’m at the top and I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“So you’re lost…,” he said, nodding. He moved to lean against the opposite divider, eyes turned up to meet hers. “I think I might be in a similar boat.”

“Yeah?” She eyed him. “I dunno, you look pretty put together.”
“You don’t exactly look out of sorts yourself,” he reminded, brows hiked.

She smirked. “And how do I look, Captain?”

His cheeks suffused pink. “I, uh…” He cleared his throat and reached up, scratching behind an ear. “What I meant was that you seem put together… Confident.”

“Confidence is easy to fake,” she said, shrugging. “And besides, even if you’re confident in some things, it doesn’t mean you are in others…”

His brow furrowed. “Like what?” he wondered. “Can you give me an example?”

“Like…” She exhaled, long and deep. “Like when it comes to strangers, making those first impressions, I’m gold.” She nodded, her eyes wide for emphasis. “I can convince anyone I first meet that I’m funny and lighthearted and y’know, the go-to girl for fun…”

“But you’re not?” he wondered, frowning.

“I can be…” she admitted. “I’d just rather stay at home and knit or spend a few hours on Tumblr or…” Her lips twitched. “Climb trees… But don’t get me wrong!” Her eyes widened. “I have my fun side. Mostly related to margarita nights or dancing.” She shrugged. “It’s just… It’s the long-term stuff I suck at… It’s making plans and making friends and sticking to these things that I kind of don’t always do…”

“You’re friends with Dr. Foster…”

“Yeah, but that was mostly because I interned for her and now I’m keeping her alive until I get her replacement set up…” She shook her head. “I mean, yeah, we’re friends, but in the big sense of it, y’know? Like going out into the world and making that connection with someone where you’re just so in sync that they finish your sentences… I’ve never really had that. And I want it, only I’m kind of socially awkward and I never say the right thing and now it’s even worse because I’m training to be like, some super politician and Coulson has all these expectations and I can’t even shoot a paper target, so what am I gonna do if Bin Laden 2.0 tries to kill me?”

He blinked at her slowly. “I feel like we might’ve gotten off track a bit somewhere near the end…”

She laughed abruptly. “Just a tiny bit.”

He offered a smile. “If it’s any consolation, I find you to be very charming.”

She bit her lip, her heart turning over at the sincerity in his voice. “It is.”

“It’s kind of weird, isn’t it?” He shook his head, brow furrowed. “That a stranger’s opinion even matters.”

“I don’t know about that…” She shrugged. “I mean, you doctored me up and now you’re listening to me spill my soul, so I think we’re a step up from stranger.”

He perked a little. “You’d be the first since I started at SHIELD then…” He nodded at her. “It’s an honor.”

She chuckled. “Hey, if you wanna be my first non-Jane friend, I’d be happy to take you up on it.”

“I’d be glad to,” he agreed. And then paused, looking past her toward the target. “I could show you how to shoot, if you’d like. I’ve had some practice…” His eyes turned away, haunted.
“Don’t worry about it.” She shoved herself to a standing position, suddenly really wanting to wipe that look off his face. “C’mon! Timi keeps a carton of ice cream in the fridge in the training floor staff room… My card works on the lock and I think this batch has brownie chunks in it.”

He raised an eyebrow at her as she hooked her arm around his and dragged him out of the room. “Should we be taking her ice cream?” he worried.

“Yeah, sure…” She nodded. “I do it every night. If I didn’t, she’d probably worry.”

He frowned. “I’m not sure I follow your logic.”

She snorted. “It really only works if you want it to.”

Steve shrugged and let her lead the way.

While he protested a little as they basically broke into the staff room and stole the ice cream, he shut up when she shoved a spoonful of double chocolate fudge with brownie into his mouth.

“Tha’s re’ry good,” he said through a mouthful.

She grinned. “See? Evil pays.”

He snorted, lifting a hand to cover his mouth to keep the ice cream in.

Darcy licked the spoon free and grinned at her new friend.

Life was looking up.

Although, as she watched sinewy muscles flex under his shirt, she had to admit that it’d be looking even more up if this friendship made its way to the next level, or better yet the penthouse. Preferably without clothes.
Part Three

III.

Picking her replacement was hard, and it wasn’t even just because hello, she was awesome, who could really compare? It was more that all of the résumé’s Coulson dropped in Darcy’s lap, which took a week to separate into no’s and maybe’s, were really detailed but clinical. They were about where they went to school, what they studied, what their ambitions were. And even the pictures attached were of stone-faced pod-people. Darcy didn’t care if they graduated at the top of their class or considered Tony Stark’s work to be a leap forward in modern technology. She wanted to know if they could cook a Pop-tart and knew when to forcibly remove Jane from her work. She needed to know if said work or Jane’s health would come first. She needed to be sure that whoever took over in her stead kept Jane sane (as much as possible at this point), made her leave the lab when she reached day—what is that smell, oh my god it’s me, and somebody who made her stop and relax and breathe. Because, while Darcy was so totally not ditching her super-smart genius scientist completely, she wouldn’t always be there to pick up the slack.

Which was why, and she actually really appreciated the timing because she knew Tima had drills planned, she took the day off to personally assess every single suit who thought they could do her job as well or better than her.

The first was Joseph. He was a junior agent, a Sagittarius, obviously ate all of his vegetables, and was recently injured on the job. He thought some light lab duties might help fill out his day until he was ready to get back into the field.

“So you plan on abandoning her as soon as you’re all healed up?” Darcy said, not bothering to beat around the bush.

He blinked, eyes falling to the side. “I would make sure that a suitable replacement was found,” he assured.

Her eyes narrowed. “So you want her to repeat the process of getting to know someone and trusting them around the same time she’ll finally remember your name…?”

He frowned. “I could be on leave for six months, depending on the rate of recovery.”

“I repeat, by the time she finally gets your name right, you want her to meet someone else she’ll have to trust with all of her work…?” She waved her hand around in a ‘follow my logic here, buddy’ gesture. “This paranoid little 90 pound astrophysicist who lives on coffee and Pop-tarts…” She shook her head. “And what exactly do you think will be your light duties? Because trust me pal, those giant machines she occasionally builds herself? Yeah, they don’t move themselves…”

He grimaced, shifting in his seat.

“Listen, I appreciate that you got shot up in the line of duty, but I’m not putting Jane in anyone’s hands unless I know they’re going to be giving her their all.”

“I take my job very seriously, ma’am,” he argued, jaw-ticking as he sat up a little straighter in his chair.

“And I take my friend very seriously.” She pointed at the door. “It was nice meeting you, good luck healing, send in the next victim, please.”
He huffed at her, but climbed from his chair and walked away.

Darcy went through six more people, all of whom asked her if Stark ever visited the labs, if Iron Man was part of S.H.I.E.L.D., what her clearance level was, would Jane be working on anything that would get their name published.

*Eeent.* Wrong.

The eighth person on her ‘maybes’ list was a man who spent the entire interview dominating it with complaints on ‘society today’ and ‘science in my day…’

Darcy had just about given up; in fact, Grandpa Simpson was the last on her maybes list, which meant she’d either have to rethink her reject pile or tell Coulson to round up another batch of hopefuls.

And then there was a knock at her door. By her door, she meant Coulson’s, since she’d commandeered his office when her favorite agent (what? She didn’t like any of the others!) was out of town on top secret business, that he may or may not have dangled in her face so she’d pick a replacement faster and start working for only him.

“Door’s open,” she called out.

Slowly, it parted with a loud creak; Darcy couldn’t help the twitch of her lips. She’d bet money that Coulson left it squeaky so that nobody could sneak in. “What’s up?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. She hadn’t looked up from the picture of her last reject since she was drawing an eye patch and moles on his face with permanent marker. And yes, this was his S.H.I.E.L.D. file, so eventually someone, probably Coulson, would see that picture, and have their view of tough-as-nails, *In My Day,* forever changed.

“Uh, I saw an open intern position online...” a voice said. “I know the deadline for résumés was last week, but I thought I’d give it a try anyway.”

“Takes balls,” she muttered.

“Last I checked, I had those.”

She smirked, her eyebrow ticking. “Check often?”

“A daily basis. To reassert my manliness, of course.”

“Of course.” She raised her head after adding a particularly curly hair to the mole she’d drawn. The man, and she hesitated on that word since he couldn’t be more than eighteen, was tall, a little on the lean side, with messy brown hair, an easy grin, and thin, square glasses that looked a little on the retro side. He was *not* an agent, she decided, her head tipped.

“College?”

“Starting in September,” he admitted.

She waved her hand in a ‘gimme’ motion for his résumé.

He shrugged his backpack higher on his shoulder and crossed the room to hand it to her.

She frowned as she looked it over, saying, “September, huh? So your hours would be kind of wonky…?”
“Well, I guess that depends on what the internship has to offer…” His feet shifted. “I mean, if it can give me a better education—”

He had some top-notch recommendations that even she recognized and his high school grades, since he’d attached a transcript, were off the charts high. “What field of expertise did you want to go in?”

He reached up to adjust his glasses. “I’m interested in genetics, but… I love science.” His brows hiked with meaning.

“So you wouldn’t mind working for an astrophysicist?” She leaned back in her chair; okay Coulson’s chair and it was heaven too, orthopedic back and everything! “Jane Foster, you heard of her?”

He ducked his head slightly, his mouth spread in a wide smile. “I’ve read her work, yes.”

He said it with the kind of reverence everyone else had given Stark’s name.

Darcy gave him another point in the win column.

“Genetics and astrophysics aren’t exactly buddy-buddy…” she reminded.

“I want to learn,” he told her earnestly. “And it’d be an honor to learn under Dr. Foster…”

Darcy snorted. “Yeah, well, wait until you see her genius at work. I mean, we’re talking cold tea, stale, three-day old Pop-tarts, and when she gets really involved, she lives on coffee and five-hour energy drinks…” She frowned. “When she can sneak them…”

“Sounds like a handful,” he mused.

“For someone so small, yes.” She leaned forward, dropping her forearms onto the table. “Okay, listen… You’re the only one I half-way like that’s come in today… But you’re young—” She eyed him uncertainly. “Really young. And you want to work in a totally different field…” She held her hands up. “Not that I really care. I’ll be honest, what I want out of an intern is that they make sure Jane is taken care of.” She started ticking off her fingers. “That means feeding her, making sure she gets enough sleep, forcing her out of the lab for fresh air at least once a week, bare minimum, and more than anything— and yes, I include science in that— you would need to make sure Jane knows she’s cared about.”

His brows furrowed. “Cared about,” he repeated.

“I don’t mean you need to hold her hand and tell her she’s the bee’s knees,” she dismissed, rolling her eyes. “I mean you need to befriend her, let her know that it’s not just about your future or your schooling or how awesome it’ll look on your résumé that you worked with her.” She stared up at him seriously. “Jane is a person. She’s an awesome person. A little eccentric, especially when she hasn’t slept in a few days, but still awesome.” She nodded. “So if you want this, really want this, you need to know that you aren’t just working for a scientist who wrote some papers or some books that were like, whoa, mind-altering…” Her head shook. “You’re working for a woman who is human and has flaws and every once in a while, wakes up from her science coma and remembers that yeah, friendship is good.”

“Okay…” He nodded, before saying more certainly, “Okay.”

“Coolio.” She raised an arm, hand out, “So I totally didn’t even ask but, what’s your name, Kid?”

“Oh!” He shook her hand. “Uh, Peter. Peter Parker.”
She grinned. “Nice to meetcha, Peter. I’m Darcy Lewis.”

He paused, looked down at the name tag on the desk, and then raised an eyebrow. “So why’s it say Coulson on the front?” he wondered.

“That’s classified,” she said in her best agent voice.

His lips twitched.

“Too much?”

“I’m not sure you should go so deep next time…” He waved his fingers at his throat. “Kind of ruins the serious face.”

“Notes taken,” she said, shooting a finger-gun at him. “Now!” She stood from the chair and circled the desk. “Come with me, young Jedi, I’ll introduce you to the fair Lady Jane…” She hiked her eyebrows at him over her shoulder. “Paws off though, she’s all about a guy named Thor who you will no doubt hear more about on margarita night.”

“Thor like… Mythological Norse God of Thunder, Thor?”

She snorted. “You have no idea.”

Peter fell into step with her, eyes wandering. “So how long have you worked here?”

“Eh, like a month and a half, give or take a week…” She shrugged. “Time flies.” She pivoted right down another hall. “Okay, so basic things you need to know right off the bat… You’ll be doing a lot of collating, Jane likes her interns to be scienc-y so I was a rare exception, she’s currently working on recreating a rainbow bridge, you will get a care package informing you of all the ins and out that someone who can’t access our classified files needs to know.” She raised a finger. “1. No, I haven’t met Stark and b, I don’t know or care if he or his Iron Man alter-ego is affiliated with SHIELD. 2. If you have any questions, you ask me, not Jane. Jane barely knows what floor she’s on. 3. If you can’t find me, find Coulson. No substitutes.” She cut her arm through the air with emphasis. “4. You don’t share anything that happens in the lab or on property with anybody else. If I find out you did, if I find out you took any of Jane’s work home with you or you try and pull some ‘this work is mine, not hers’ bullshit, I will tase you to within an inch of your life and then I will stomp your balls into dust.” She turned to look up at him. “Any questions?”

“Why are you looking for a replacement if you’re so protective of Doctor Foster?” he wondered, brows furrowed skeptically.

“Because, like I said, not really the same field of science.” She pointed at herself. “Poli-sci major, linguistics and interior design before that. I can collate, feed, and mother Jane, but that only gets either of us so far. She needs somebody to bounce ideas off of that actually gets her science-talk and who can also rein her in when she gets off track…” She paused outside of Jane’s lab doors. “Plus, I’m moving up in the world, or at least with SHIELD.” She shrugged. “Coulson’s got big plans for me on the political spectrum and I figure it couldn’t hurt to test the shark-infested waters.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

“Cool.” She put a hand to the door and then paused. “Did you really see an ad online?”

His mouth curved at one corner. “Not… exactly.”

She scoffed. “Do you even know what you just wandered into?”
He shrugged before raising his eyebrows. “Shark infested waters?”

She grinned before backing in through the door and crooking a finger. “Come into my lab, said the spider to the fly…”

Peter let out a choked laugh behind her.

“Jane?” Darcy called out. “Look, I brought you a pretty intern to do your bidding!” She motioned to Peter like he was ‘A new car!’ on Price Is Right

Jane did little more than grunt and wave a ‘that’s nice, leave me alone’ hand.

“And that charming woman is your new boss…” She see-sawed her head and amended, “Well, outside of me until I’m sure you’ve got the chops.”

Peter took a look around the lab and nodded. “I can work with this.”

“I like the cut of your jib, Kid,” Darcy declared.

“Likewise,” he returned with a grin.

…

Darcy didn’t have to tell Coulson she’d gone over his head and made an executive decision to hire outside of SHIELD.

He already knew.

She was just sitting down for dinner— she’d sent Peter out to get them all celebratory pizza and took Jane’s tools away from her so she’d sit and eat with them— when Coulson sent her a text.

*His background check came out clean. Would it be too much to ask that next time you just follow protocol?*

While she was writing back that *yes, yes it would*, a second, anticipatory text arrived.

*Never mind. Stupid question.*

She laughed as she took a bite of her cheesy pizza. She couldn’t tell if she was growing on Coulson or if he was just that used to rolling with the punches.

Shrugging, she looked over at Peter and Jane, who were bonding over science speak – she heard ‘molecular’ and zoned the hell out. All she knew was that she was pretty sure she found a good replacement; the idea was equal parts awesome and sad. Still, regardless that she was a little sad to be passing on the torch, she gave herself a pat on the back. Jane needed somebody and Darcy was making progress in her own life.

She imagined her mother would give a harrumph of near-approval.

Close enough.

…

Darcy was panting, red in the face, and seriously reconsidering ever letting Coulson talk her into becoming a pseudo-agent.
They were sparring today and so far Darcy had shown that she was really good at being overpowered. She was pretty sure she had a full body bruise at this point and she couldn’t understand why Tima hadn’t just given up on her already and just benched her. She wouldn’t be offended; she was pretty sure she was putting all of the woman’s hard work to shame.

“Enough!” Tima yelled as Darcy struggled on the floor, being choked out by Marta’s legs wrapped around her throat. Exasperated, Tima leaned over her, hands on her hips. “Why didn’t you tap out?”

“Well… I was on the verge of blacking out…” she managed. “I figured, why not go for broke?”

Rolling her eyes, she shook her head. “What have I been teaching you, Lewis?” She knelt down, staring at her seriously, waving Marta off to spar with the others.

“I think you need to reword that to what are you trying to teach me and I’m just not learning?”

She clucked her tongue. “This isn’t about being the best, not in your case.”

“Gee thanks, I’ll hang that up on my You Tried wall!” she snickered.

Tima gave her a patented ‘I wasn’t done talking, you can add your snarky commentary in after!’ look and Darcy pursed her lips to show she was paying attention.

“As I was saying…” she continued. “Everybody else in here is learning this because the want to be the best; they need to be the best. You are learning this so you can work with the best and hopefully survive…”

Darcy blinked. “I feel like my ratio of survival is on the limited side when you put it like that…”

“It is…” Tima reached out, took Darcy by the hand, and yanked her up to her feet. “Unless you start learning.” With that she gave her a hard slap to the back, that nearly knocked Darcy right down on her ass, and then walked off to yell at a few others.

Grumbling to herself and wondering where she might steal a few extra ice packs for her bruised and battered body, Darcy just happened to catch sight of Coulson out of her eye, standing like a stalky-stalker in the doorway. Rolling her eyes, she exaggerated a limp as she made her way over. “Come to write a ‘get out of gym free’ card for your poor, newly disabled future-assistant?” she asked, lips tilting. “Or just here to watch me make an ass of myself?”

“Both,” he admitted freely.

Her brow furrowed. “Can we focus on the first one?”

He looked past her before shouting, “Tima, Lewis is with me for the rest of the afternoon.”

Her instructor waved a dismissive hand, though Darcy noticed a number of training agents were watching them speculatively. As she grabbed up her things and followed Coulson out, this time with just a general limp, she raised an eyebrow at him. “You know the office gossip is I got my job here on my back, right?”

“Well, you did just spend most of your sparring sessions on it,” he quipped, unmove.

“Funny,” she snorted. “You’re a real joker, Coulson. Nobody will believe me when I blog about it later…”

He raised an eyebrow, mouth tilted faintly. “Miss Lewis, are you concerned about these rumors? Do
“You think they reflect badly on you?”

“Of course they do,” she scoffed. “But ‘care’ is a strong word…” She shrugged.

“You incapacitated a junior agent when he suggested it, didn’t you?” he said knowingly, this time a smile actually tugging his mouth upward. “A man, if I remember correctly, at least twice your size.”

“Adrenaline rush,” she dismissed.

He hummed, before turning abruptly down a hallway.

Darcy followed, rolling her eyes, knowing that if she asked where they were going she’d only get a cryptic reply.

And then he stopped outside of a plain brown door, unmarked, and pointed at it. “This is you.”

“This is door,” she snarked.

His eyes dropped, amused. “This is our language department,” he explained.

She frowned. “Good for it. I already speak four; pretty much at capacity.”

“You speak one fluently and three passably…”

She sighed, somewhere between not wanting to sit through any more language classes and not wanting to return to sparring. “Is this really necessary?” she complained.

“Darcy,” he began, and she knew it was serious because he only ever used her first name when he wasn’t getting personal, “You have an amazing talent for languages, people, and sarcasm… The last is less of an encouragement and more of an observation.”

“I happen to think it deserves encouragement.”

He blinked at her. “The point is, with the job you’ll be taking on, the more education you have, the more languages you know, the better you will be.”

“I’m fluent in pig latin and bullshit too, if those count,” she muttered.

He reached for the door handle. “What do you think?”

She blew out a long breath and groaned. “Fine… But this stuff better come in handy later…” She pointed at him. “You get bonus points for getting me out of sparring though. So maybe it evens out…”

“I wouldn’t thank me just yet. After seeing your technique today, I’m going to have to ask Tima to work one-on-one with you during you free time.”

“What free time?” she shrieked.

“With Mr. Parker taking over most of your duties in Dr. Foster’s lab, you’ll have more time to spend on your preparation.”

“Most of my duties?” She snorted. “He started like yesterday.”

“Then get him up to date as quickly as you can.” He swung the door open and Darcy’s eyes darted into the room to see ten students and a teacher staring at her. “Have a good day at school,” he said, in
Darcy rolled her eyes. “Thanks dad,” she returned before making her way inside and quickly plopping down at an empty desk. “This isn’t one of those ‘stand in the front and introduce yourself’ situations, is it?”

The teacher simply shook her head.

“Awesome. Then can I get a pen, a piece of paper, and possibly the bathroom pass?”

She looked to Coulson.

He shook his head. “Two out of three. If you give her the last one, we’ll find her smoking outside of the gym…”

Darcy laughed, her head falling back.

Nobody else seemed to get it, but the teacher did give her paper and a pen.

It took her ten minutes to figure out they were learning the finer points of Portuguese. …

“Where did you get this?”

Darcy raised an eyebrow at her favorite astrophysicist, currently trying to talk around a mouthful of cookie dough ice cream. “Stole it,” she said, shrugging.

Jane blinked down at her bowl before shaking her head and dismissing it. “So what’s up?” she wondered, stirring her bowl as she sat back in her chair.

She was looking passably normal; her hair had four pencils in it and she had color coded sticky notes running the length of each arm, all of which had scribbling on them so Darcy didn’t touch. She’d been buried deep in her work and Peter had clocked out for the day, so Darcy had come to rescue her friend from the clutches of science… with ice cream she’d nicked off of Tima.

“Nothing… Just wanted to check in, see how you were doing with Peter, if you even noticed he’d replaced me, possibly practice some Portuguese on you… Y’know, the usual.” She turned her spoon over and licked it clean before resting it against her lips a long moment. “So? Answers, questions, hypothesis?”

Jane folded her legs beneath her in her chair. “I noticed Peter. We had dinner together a few days ago; I’m not that forgetful…”

Darcy raised an eyebrow. “A. that was last week, and B. yes, yes you are.” She kicked her legs up on top of one of the desks. “It’s cool though; you wouldn’t be Jane if you weren’t.”

“Hmmmm…” She scooped another bite and filled her mouth.

“You’ve got that face on.”

Her nose wrinkled. “Which face?”

“The ‘I’m lonely’ face.”

Jane rolled her eyes. “I don’t have one of those…”
“Oh, please, we all have one of those faces!” Darcy’s eyes widened for emphasis. “I grew up with a brother and sister constantly around and driving me nuts and I still had that face.”

She snorted, before her eyes fell and focused on the floor. “I just… I like this.”

“I know, right? Cookie dough always hits the spot,” she returned, nodding.

Jane rolled her eyes. “Not the ice cream… Although it’s awesome too.” She stirred her bowl, focusing on the melting contents. “I mean, I like this…” She motioned between them. “I like having someone I can talk to. Someone who doesn’t think I’m completely crazy…” She frowned, slumping a little, her shoulders narrowing in. “And I know it’s selfish, but part of me doesn’t want you to go work for Coulson. I want to keep you for myself.”

Darcy stared at her a long moment before nodding. “You know I’m just gonna work for Coulson though, right? Like… I’ll still pop in, every chance I get, make sure you’re being taken care of… And when I get back from traveling, we can have girls’ nights, with ice cream and boy-talk and you can try and explain whatever it is you’re working on lately.”

Jane scoffed. “Oh don’t give me that,” she muttered. “You’re a lot smarter than we ever gave you credit for Darcy, I’m pretty sure that’s been proven by now.”

“What is it with people playing the ‘smart’ card?” She shook her head. “Hi, sitting across a room from a friggin’ astrophysicist, ‘kay? Smart is not what you apply to Pop-tart makers!”

“You know four languages and you’re working on a fifth!”

“Okay, one of those is English! We don’t give out awards to people because they speak the same language they were taught from birth! And two, I never finished my major in language, so it barely counts!”

“Seriously, I think you should see the SHIELD psychologist; you’re your own worst critic,” Jane said, eyebrows hiked.

“How did this conversation turn on me? I was offering to be a totally awesome friend and still visit you!” she reminded.

“And that’s nice, really! I appreciate it!” She nodded. “It’s just, I know I said I didn’t want you to leave me, but I also don’t want you to think you’re not capable… Working for Coulson is a big deal; aside from Director Fury, Coulson is like… right up near the top.” Her eyes widened for emphasis. “He hand-picked you, Darcy… I mean, he might’ve only found out about you because of what happened in Puente Antiguo, but he obviously did some research…” She shook her head. “Don’t get me wrong, because I appreciate it, but don’t you think if SHIELD wanted me to have an assistant, they could’ve just found somebody for me?” She raised an eyebrow. “They’re not above completely ignoring what a person wants and doing what fits them better… But Coulson went out of his way not only to convince you to come here, but he designed a job specific to you.”

“What are you trying to say here, Jane?” she sighed.

“He sees something in you… Something he didn’t see in who-knows-how-many different agents that have come through SHIELD…” She nodded. “He’s your mentor.”

“I think it’s a little late for me to be getting a mentor now… I mean, maybe if he’d popped in when I was still an impressionable teenager and guided me to make better choices, like not giving it up to that asshole Jimmy Hamilton in tenth grade… But now?”
“There’s no set time limit on finding direction in your life,” Jane argued.

“And with that little kernel of wisdom…” Darcy stood from her chair. “I’m going to bed. I’ve gotta whip Peter into shape before I start my one-on-one training with Tima tomorrow.” She started for the door, waving her spoon behind her.

“Darcy?”

She turned, hand on the swinging door. “Yeah?”

Jane chewed her lip. “I… I’m just really…” She sighed. “I’m happy for you…” A slow, small smile appeared. “This is a really great opportunity for you.”

Darcy did her best not to cringe and nodded. “Yeah, it’s not bad.” She offered a vague smile in reply. “Night, Jane… Try and get some sleep, hey?”

She saluted her before turning and rolling herself over to her desk.

Darcy left, making her way down the hall, destination the elevator.

The floor that the SHIELD apartments were on might as well have been underground; it was devoid of natural light and often made her feel like she was trapped.

She keyed in her code and fairly fell into her bed, all the while rolling Jane’s words over in her head.

This is a really great opportunity for you.

Really great opportunity.

Opportunity.

Darcy, for as long as she could remember, had run in the opposite direction of anything that could help her grow up. And it looked like she had something new that was inching her that way once more.

The question was, would she run this time?
IV.

As it turned out, Peter was a pretty awesome assistant. He randomly disappeared from time to time and occasionally showed up looking like he’d been recently run over, but for the most part, he was a hard worker that always got what Jane was talking about and added in some great snarky commentary that Darcy could always appreciate. The only downside was that since Peter was working out, Darcy needed to spend more one-on-one time with Tima.

She liked Tima. She was an Amazonian, ass-kicking, hear me roar kind of woman. The only problem with that was Darcy more of a modern, tasing, hear me grunt in pain type of woman. That wasn’t to say she didn’t appreciate how awesome Tima was in every respect, she just thought in comparison that she was kind of… basic.

“You need to rush me,” Tima told her, shoulders hunched, arms spread, body tensed for a fight.

“Are you crazy? There aren’t enough Wheaties in the world to make me do that!”

She rolled her eyes. “You will meet worse enemies than me in your lifetime, Lewis. Now rush me!”

She nodded at her sharply. “Show me what you’re made of!”

This was basically Tima’s teaching skills when it came to Darcy. She would tell her what to do, Darcy would fight it, Tima would egg her on, and finally…

“Oh, this is going to hurt…” she whined before giving a war cry and running at her.

And it did. It always hurt.

“You are waiting to lose!” Tima snapped, pushing back up to her feet.

“Because I know I will,” Darcy choked out, arms wrapped around her waist as she tried to will her body to stop vibrating from the hit she took.

“If you believe that you cannot persevere, you never will.” Tima reached for her water bottle and used a towel to dab the sweat from her face. “You’re a strong fighter, Darcy, but only when something triggers you. I need you to be a strong fighter always. You must be ready for any eventuality and not just the event that someone offends you or someone you care about.”

Darcy lay panting on the mats, her skin flushed and sticky with sweat. “But if I’m fighting someone, won’t I react like I should? If I only get jazzed for fighting when someone steps on my toes, then…”

“Your training is not reactionary fighting. You need to be aware of your surroundings, assess what and who is dangerous, and prepare for the eventuality that one or all of those things will work against you…” She shook her head. “When you walk into an office, I want you to mentally catalogue everything you can use as a weapon, then what is closest and most efficient, and finally, understand that if you have to, you will use these things to fight for your life.”

She closed her eyes. “Why can’t I just have a universal panic button?”

Tima let out a long, irritated sigh before she started muttering under her breath.

“I’m hopeless, aren’t I?” Darcy sighed. “It’s okay. You can say it.”
All she kept thinking was of her own mother’s voice, repeatedly tell her just that.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Tima told her sharply. “You’re challenging, not hopeless.”

“That’s not what my report cards said…” She rolled onto her stomach and propped her head in her hands. “Seriously, since kindergarten on, they just gotten progressively worse, until somewhere around eight, one teacher told my mom to just focus on making sure my brother and sister turned out semi-sane.”

Her face morphed into anger and she tipped her head. “And? Did you mother take this advice?” she asked, in a voice spitting with venom.

Darcy’s eyes fell as she wondered how to respond to that, how to put into words what it looked like when her mom got that exasperated ‘what am I going to do with you?’ look on her face. It wasn’t warm or loving; it was just tired. And Darcy got it, really. She’d been running amok for as long as she could remember; she had a wandering mind and a huge imagination. When she was in class, she wanted to be outside. When she was outside, she was climbing everything within reach. When rules and boundaries came into play, she did everything she could to avoid them, skipping her way in and out through loopholes, making it a mission in life to never be the peaceful, rule-abiding, young adult they wanted her to be.

“When I was thirteen, somebody told my mom she should put me into a boot camp for wayward kids…” She shrugged. “She didn’t, but… I dunno, I think she regrets that even now…”

Tima let out a long sigh before moving across the room to take a seat next to Darcy. “You’re a headstrong woman, Darcy… You don’t like the limits others create for you, but you create many of your own… You want to be better, the best even, but as soon as it’s close, you avoid it, undermine it, try to make yourself out to be less talented than you are.”

She frowned. “I can’t tell if this is a pep-talk or not,” she muttered.

“This is a reality check, αγαπητέ κορίτσι.” (dear girl)

“ενδιαφέρουσα προσέγγιση!” (Interesting approach!) she snorted.

“You can accomplish many wonderful things, Darcy Lewis…” Tima stared down at her sincerely. “But you never will unless you stop sabotaging yourself.”

Darcy opened her mouth, but Tima covered it with her hand.

“No. No sarcastic come back, no funny one-liner…” She stared at her seriously. “We’re done for today. Your homework is to think about what I said.” She pushed up off the floor then and walked away, leaving Darcy lying on the floor, frowning.

When Darcy next saw Steve, he was in a retro gym, with a giant boxing ring taking up one half, a line of punching bags down the middle, and old pictures and peeling posters on the walls. Center in it all, Steve was taking some serious frustration out on a punching bag.

When the chain snapped and the bag fell, splitting and spilling on the floor, she gave a long whistle.

He turned, his eyes wide, sweat making his flushed face shiny. “Darcy!” he exclaimed.

“In the flesh,” she replied, half-smiling. “Check it out; I brought non-stolen ice cream…” She tossed
him a pint of Ben & Jerry’s Cherry Garcia, which she wasn’t surprised to see he caught without even trying. She shrugged. “I wasn’t sure what kind you liked, so I got you one I liked just in case you didn’t want it…”

He half-grinned. “Thank you… I think.”

She waved it off, before directing her eyes to the fallen bag. “You must have some mad muscles, Steve-O.”

“Oh, uh…” He looked over at the bag and winced. “It was an… old bag…”

She raised an eyebrow. “This is an old gym,” she said, looking around at their surroundings pointedly. “And I’d know because I spend way too much time in the shiny modern one they have upstairs.”

He hummed, moving to put his ice cream down so he could unwrap his hands. “I like the peace and quiet,” he told her, taking a seat on a long, wooden bench.

She followed him. “Yeah, I can see the appeal,” she admitted, straddling the bench. “I mean, I’m surrounded by kickass agents who all pretend they’re not laughing when I get my ass handed to me, so… A little privacy’s gotta be a good thing.” She eyed his biceps as they stretched under the sleeves of his shirt. “But I’m guessing you haven’t lost many fights in your life.”

He let out a choked laugh, eyebrows hiked. “You’d be surprised.”

“Yeah?” Her eyebrow arched. “I don’t know, Popeye, it looks like you ate all your vegetables growing up.”

“Sure,” he agreed, nodding, “But it didn’t help much.”

“Well, something had to change,” she mused, before reaching across and poking him in his shiny, muscly arm. “Because those aren’t full of air.”

“No…” He stared down at his own arm. “Just a super special serum.”

“Say that six times fast…”

He blinked, looked over at her. “That doesn’t… surprise you?”

“I don’t really have the details… I mean, I could probably try and get them; Coulson keeps letting me borrow his office and he’s kind of crap about logging out, but…” Her lips tilted. “Personally, I think he’s trying to test my curiosity level rather than actually being that absent-minded.”

Steve frowned. “Agent Coulson doesn’t strike me as someone who would forget something like that…”

“Right?!” She nodded. “Which is why I keep filling his internet history up with cute cat pictures, so he knows I’m not really tempted… I mean—” She shrugged. “I’ve been tempted… I wanna read my own file, maybe Jane’s, see if he’s got one on Tima or himself, but…” She shook her head. “My job’s gonna be pretty top level stuff eventually and I figure if he wants me to know something, I will, so…”

He considered that before nodding. “So you haven’t peeked at any of the files?” he wondered, eyeing her sideways.
“Why? Worried I know all about your secret Furby fetish or something?”

He frowned. “What’s a Furby?”

She blinked. “You’re so sheltered, Steve…”

He flushed, his head ducking.

“Hey, don’t get bashful on me now, big guy.” She reached over and patted his arm. “It’s not like the Furby is one of those friendship deal-breakers…”

Worriedly, he wondered, “Is there a list of those? Should I be brushing up on these things?”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Why don’t we backpedal a little and you let me in on the big serum secret?” she wondered. “And then we can talk creepy little hairballs that are a kid’s toy verging on AI territory.”

Steve sighed, staring down at his hands where he held the bunched up remains of his boxing tape. “It’s a long story…” he told her.

“You wanna just eat ice cream and talk about Furby’s?” she offered. “I mean, no pressure. If it’s sad or something, we can just skip it…”

He turned to stare at her, eyebrow raised. “I really like you, Darcy.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not hard on the eyes,” she said, shifting in her seat slightly at the intensity on his face. Men who looked that good should not be looking at her like that if they just wanted to be friends.

His lips turned up at the corners. “That’s true,” he agreed. “But I meant the kind of person you are.”

“So far you’ve found me cramped up and whining like a four year old, I laid out my existential crisis on your shoulders, we stole some ice cream, and we built a friendship on our mutual uncertainty about the control we have over our own lives…” She shook her head. “I don’t know what version of me you downloaded, but I’m nothing special.”

His smile drooped slightly. “For someone so amazing, you can be very hard on yourself,” he said.

“I’ve had practice,” she said with a shrug.

And, wanting to change the subject, she wiggled her own pint of ice cream. “Now, new friend of mine, what d’you say to vegging out over some TV?”

His eyebrow rose like he was unfamiliar with the idea.

Snorting, she stood from the bench. “Me, you, ice cream, and TV makes four…” She nodded her head for him to follow. “I managed to fit one inside my tiny, crap-tastic sleeping quarters… Pretty sure it’s against protocol and we’ll have to share the bed as a pseudo-couch, but I’m sure we’ll manage…” She paused, looking over at him, “That is if you don’t grow anymore muscles on top of your muscles…”

He glanced down at himself. “I wasn’t planning on it.”

“I don’t think you have much left to work with anyway,” she said, admiring the way his arms stretched and flexed.
She thought he might’ve been doing it on purpose, just randomly squeezing his bicep, all because she was not so subtly staring.

“Is it weird that I’m wondering who would win if you took Tima on?” she wondered, brows furrowed.

Steve laughed. “I’ve met Tima…” He grinned at her. “She’d win.”

Darcy chuckled as they left the retro gym, hitting the lights on their way out.

As they made their way toward the elevator, she couldn’t help but notice he was taking covert glances at her too; somehow she didn’t think her flexing was nearly as cool as when he did it.

Totally didn’t stop her.

…

“Oh, hey boss,” Darcy said, feet up on the desk as she spotted Coulson standing in the doorway to his office. “So, I kind of borrowed your office… There’s not a lot of space around here for studying…”

“You have your entire languages classroom,” he reminded, shaking his head slowly.

“Yeah, but… people are in there.” She stared up at him. “I don’t do group studying.”

“I’m starting to understand why your principal made a notation in your high school transcripts that you were a regular but not always unpleasant guest in his office…”

She grinned. “Me and Mr. Goldman were tight… I’d get sent in and he’d just direct me to a chair and the candy dish. He gave up lecturing me and instead let me do my homework for the next class since he knew whatever teacher I pissed off wouldn’t let me back in.”

“Have you ever wondered why you were so combative with your teachers?” he wondered, moving to take a seat in one of the two chairs in front of his desk rather than forcing her out of his.

She shrugged. “Because I have no brain-to-mouth filter and most of them were douches?”

“Why were they douches?” he asked with a completely straight face.

“I dunno… I guess Marshall was a jerk because he constantly picked on kids who were shy, never put their hands up, anybody who looked like they didn’t know what he was talking about…”

He nodded encouragingly at her.

“And Talbot was a bitch because she talked to us like we were stupid… She made us feel like we were a waste of her time…” She frowned. “And then there was Mr. Rayes and he didn’t like being asked questions; you either got it or you didn’t and if you didn’t then he didn’t have time to explain it to you.”

“Are you finding a common theme here, Darcy?”

She frowned, eyebrow raised. “My school had a really shitty screening system on teachers?”

His lips pursed. “Each of these teachers that you didn’t like were bullies… They either picked on particular students or the whole of the class…” He sat forward in his chair and eyed her. “Do you know what else your principal wrote in your records?”
“That I talked too much and stole the school mascot senior year?”

“That you were exceptionally bright and you would always stand up if you thought injustice was being done around you.”

Her eyes fell. “What if I don’t though?”

“For instance?”

“What if I’m good at standing up for others but not always good at standing up for myself?” Her mouth turned down. “Or is that something else?”

“Injustice is injustice, Miss Lewis… Maybe the reason you don’t stand up for yourself is because you don’t see yourself as a victor… At least not one worth saving.”

She sighed. “That’s deep, Coulson.”

His lips twitched and he stood, raising an eyebrow.

She rolled her eyes, but hopped out of his chair, waving back at it. “Your throne, your majesty.”

He circled the desk and sat down, dropping a file in front of him. “Tima says you’ve been stealing her ice cream less,” he commented.

She laughed and took a seat on the corner of his desk. “Yeah, well, I figured if I’m going to ruin all the hard work you guys are putting into me, I might as well pay for it myself…”

He looked over at her, face carefully blank. “I noticed you’ve made friends with Captain Rogers…”

“Ya did, did you?” She wiggled her eyebrows. “Spying on me, Son of Coul? Or does Cap tip your fancy?”

He blinked at her. “Darcy, do you know who Captain Rogers is…?”

“Uh… Steve…?”

He stared at her a long moment and then nodded. “He’s a good person. I think you’ll benefit a lot from knowing him…” His eyes turned off to the side in thought before he added, “And him in knowing you.”

She shrugged, jumped off his desk, and gathered her books. “Whatevs. We just hang out, eat ice cream, and watch crappy reality TV sometimes…” She hugged her books to her hip and started for the door. “Parker’s doing a good job with Jane, FYI.”

“I’m aware.”

“I’d scoop him up fast if I were you,” she suggested. “Kid’s a super genius who’s equal parts funny, awesome, and not even slightly close to being a drone…” Her eyes narrowed at him. “Unless he’s a plant…” She tipped her head. “He’s not, is he?”

He stifled a smile. “I didn’t plant him. He’s just a civilian who happens to like science…”

“You say so…” She reached for the door. “Hey, so I’ve got a test on Friday, mind if I keep borrowing your desk while you’re busy?”

He sighed as he thought it over before saying, “Fine, but no ice cream.”
She grinned, winked, and saluted him before she left.

Yeah, she was pretty sure she was his favorite.

…

Darcy quickly realized that if she needed to find Steve, he’d be in the old gym. He wasn’t on S.H.I.E.L.D property as often as the rest of them, in part because he had his own place out in Brooklyn, but he still stopped in Monday through Friday, talked to Coulson specifically, and then went about his top secret soldier-y stuff that she never really asked him about because he always looked kind of sad.

She knew that when he wasn’t on property, he mostly spent his time exploring New York and drawing; she’d peeked at his sketch book but he always got pink and stuttered and, while she wasn’t exactly boundaries oriented, she knew it was a touchy place so she left it alone. She was pretty sure that somewhere, somebody was weeping over her progress as a polite human being.

After dropping an armful of bright paint in her room and realizing she had no ladder to help her with the high points, Darcy went looking for him to give her a hand painting her cell. She’d meant to do it earlier but with time constraints and just a general lack of motivation after she’d worked out, it had been left a disgraceful shade of grey for way too long.

She’d asked Jane to help her out, but her favorite astrophysicist was in deep with something science-y, something that got even snarky Peter so excited that he couldn’t use layman’s terms without breaking into a fit of laughter and running his hands through his hair. “It’s just really cool,” he would tell her, grinning fantastically.

So they were a no-go and Coulson was off doing super-agent-y stuff, which just left Steve.

Not that Darcy was complaining; any chance to see him flexing, his white t-shirt or his blue plaid button-up stretching… It was like All-American, Homegrown porn. He was the perfect symmetry of apple pie and sexiness that Darcy very much wanted to taint. Buuut… then she’d remember they were friends or he would get shy when she offered up a bold statement about how attractive he was or she was and she’d have to back up the hormones train and instead work her frustrations out either by herself or by repeatedly sparring with whoever Tim would put in front of her. In fact, she thought she might have to thank Steve for being the reason she was actually starting to get this sparring thing down. She wasn’t the best, but she was progressing, and that was pretty big, she thought.

Darcy leaned in the doorway and watched him for a moment, her arms crossed over her chest.

Steve always looked so intense when he was boxing. His brow furrowed and his whole body tensed up. It wasn’t even about the arm porn, although she definitely appreciated it, but there was something haunting him and a heaviness always weighed her down when she noticed it. Like part of her just wanted to get rid of whatever it was that was bothering him.

The lights were dim in the gym, like the bulbs were aged, on their last leg, and definitely not following the green movement. She padded quietly across the room; when he wasn’t concentrating on his boxing, he always heard her coming. She’d tried to sneak up on him a number of times when she saw him in the halls, but he always turned around just before she spooked him, offering a knowing smile.

Here, now, though, he was completely absorbed in the quick jab of his fists making dents in the bag.
That was another thing.

Steve was strong. Like, almost supernaturally strong. She got the muscles, she’d spent many an hour thinking about them, but there was something else. Something, she assumed, that had to do with that super secret serum he’d mentioned. But she wasn’t prodding. No! Bad Darcy! She was letting him have his space until he wanted to talk. Even if it was gnawing at her a little.

She was just ten feet away when he stopped, his hands on either side of the bag, his head bowed, and a faint smile tilting his lips. “You almost had me…” he admitted.

She grinned. “What gave me away?”

He turned his head to look at her, his brows knotted slightly. “Your perfume…” he said.

She ducked her head and gave herself a sniff. “Is it that strong?”

He shook his head, licked his lips, and just stared at her a moment. “No, I just… It’s familiar to me now…” He cleared his throat and looked down at his hands as he started to unwrap them.

She stepped up to help, batting his hands apart and starting on the left. “So, now that you’re done killing this poor, defenseless bag…” She raised an eyebrow up at him. “How do you feel about painting?”

“I’m better with a pencil… Or charcoal.”

Her lips twitched and she put on a deep, husky voice as she told him suggestively, “I want you to draw me like one of your French girls…”

He was staring at her mouth, his eyes round, and swallowed thickly. “I… What?” He blinked a few times, but he couldn’t drag his eyes from her lips. “French girls?”

She grinned slowly. “C’mon? Titanic…? Jack and Rose…?” She shook her head. “It’s a classic!”

He finally met her eyes and offered a sheepish smile. “Sorry.”

“No, uh-uh.” She shook her head, glancing down as she started on unwrapping his other hand. “You and me are gonna watch that…” She nodded for emphasis. “Right after we paint my cell.”

“You finally picked up the paint?” he asked, amused.

“Shut up…” She rolled her eyes. “I was under duress!”

“You were tired from working out and you don’t like doing anything if it interrupts your favorite shows,” he argued, mouth twitching.

She snorted. “Hey! Don’t pretend you don’t love those shows!” She squeezed his hand, realizing it was now tape free and she was just holding it. “You’re hooked on The Bachelorette, Steve! Admit it!”

He frowned. “I just want her to be happy and fall in love with the right person.”

Darcy bit her lip to keep from laughing and gave a long sigh instead. Turning, she hooked her arm around his. “You’re a rare breed, Steve…”

He flushed and stared down at her. “Is that a bad thing?”
“You kidding?” She raised an eyebrow. “I’m just glad I found you.” She winked. “Now I get to keep you all to myself.”

He ducked his head as he grinned.

…

They painted each wall a different color; pink, blue, green, and purple.

They had to keep the door open to let the fumes out, so she wasn’t surprised when they were caught.

It wasn’t long before an agent walked by and saw; he tripped, spilled his coffee all over himself, and then scurried away, presumably to tattle on her.

Shrugging, Darcy sat down on her bed, moved carefully away from the walls, and then patted the spot next to her as she turned on Titanic.

Steve didn’t pretend not to cry or pull some macho-trip, he just wiped at his eyes and told her, “They could’ve tried harder to share the door.”

“Thank you!” she agreed. She held up a hand, “And don’t even get me started about tossing the necklace! Seriously, she didn’t think her granddaughter couldn’t use something shiny?”

Steve chuckled, brightening back up.

Darcy didn’t even care that, since the door was still open, people were not so subtly looking in on them curiously.

She was sprawled out on her bed with a ridiculously handsome and good man, the ‘My Heart Will Go On’ theme song crooning loudly in the background, credits rolling, and her room, no longer a cell, was rocking four of Roy G. Biv’s boys on her walls. All in all, Darcy thought her night was a slam-dunk.

As far as she was concerned, everybody else was just jealous.

…

The next day, however? Not as fun.

Drills, drills, drills.

More gun practice in which all she did was stare, stare, stare.

And finally she’d done her big test in Portuguese. She was semi-confident in her mark, but… Not enough that she didn’t take Jane out to get shit-faced on the off-chance she failed miserably.

“Why are we drinking again?” Jane wondered, swaying dangerously from side to side, and trying, badly, to knock back another shot.

“Wow, I think you’ve had enough,” Darcy said, taking the shot away from her before drinking it herself.

“Hey…” Jane glared. “That was mine!”

“Here, you can have this mint,” Darcy told her, digging it out of her purse. “There you go, Sport,” she said, curling Jane’s fingers around it.
Jane, too drunk to realize this was not the greatest thing ever, let out a long, “Ooohhh… Dar-cyyy…”

She rolled her eyes. “How is it I’m celebrating crap marks but you’re drunk?”

The astrophysicist, basically a super genius, was struggling to unwrap her mint, her brow furrowed with intense focus. “Cause deep down you know you did really awesome and you’re gonna be the best assistant Coulson ever had and then you’ll take over the American government with how wonderful and smart and funny you are and I’ll just be pining away for Thor in my lab, surrounded by Pop-tart wrappers and you’ve even got a handsome blond of your own that helps you paint your room and watches sappy movies with you!” Jane said, getting progressively more emotional until she was just about sobbing.

“That escalated quickly…” Darcy blinked. “Um… Some clarification points… A. Steve and I are just friends—”

Jane snorted and rolled her eyes. “Maybe right now, but you don’t see how he looks at you!”

“Something we’ll touch on more when you’re less drunk,” Darcy assured. “Two, you’re not going to be pining for Thor forever, okay?” She shook her head. “You’re insanely smart, Jane, you’ll find a way to open the bridge again.”

She sniffed, slumping in her chair. “What about you taking over America with your awesome?”

“Well, I mean…” She shrugged. “That’s inevitable.”

Slowly, Jane smiled. “Yeah…”

Darcy shook her head, amused, and dug out her cell phone. “I’m calling a cab. We’re going home, missy.”

She was too far gone to argue… much.

They got home relatively okay, although holding back Jane’s hair as she puked in a gutter wasn’t a highlight in her life.

Still, she knew Jane would do it for her if the roles were reversed, and really, what Jane had said had been kind of eye-opening.

Her life was finding some weird balance.

She still had a lot of work to do and whatever was going on with Steve was still in the friendship zone, but… Things were actually starting to make sense for her.

And then Jane hurled again and she lost her train of thought.

…

Darcy didn’t want to toot her own horn, but… She totally aced her Portuguese test.

And, because she actually did want to toot her own horn, she told everybody she saw that day, and the next, and also sent a memo to Coulson… via singing e-card.

He sent her back one with a giant gold star on it.

And the itinerary for a trip he was taking the following month, with a spare ticket so she could join him.
On the downside, he also sent her a schedule for a couple classes that would help her brush up on her Russian, German, and French, as well as a curriculum for foreign customs.

…

She spent an hour waffling over calling her parents; some part of her was really excited to share her news, another part recognized that they had no idea what was going on with her. She’d sent an obligatory, ‘Yay, I’m not dead, just super busy being awesome and working and stuff,’ email, but she hadn’t answered any of their calls.

She knew, however, that she couldn’t put them off forever. And wouldn’t it be a better idea to talk to them when she had great news?

Pfft, maybe. It wasn’t likely that her mom would care either way.

The phone rang four times and she was just about to hang up when it was finally picked up, the woman on the other side breathless. “Hello?”

Darcy hesitated before finally breaking out in a smile. “Sup?”

“Darce?” She blew out an exasperated breath. “You little jerk, where the hell’ve you been?”

“Wow, I can really feel the love coming through the phone, Laney!” She rolled her eyes. “I’ve been busy. You got my emails, didn’t you?”

“Yeah sure, but anybody can access that shit. I was starting to think you’d been kidnapped and somebody was trying to keep it hush, hush so they just sent one of those out every couple weeks so we wouldn’t put out a bolo…”

Her brows furrowed. “A. You watch too many crime shows, and B. What kind of kidnapper gets that involved?”

“Well, I watched this episode of Criminal Minds once…”

Darcy leaned back in her chair and just let her talk.

It was a half hour later before the subject circled back to its origin point, instead covering a variety of random topics about celebrities and TV and serial killers, oh my.

“So seriously, where are you and what’s going on?”

“Ummm… New York,” she answered, picking at her nail polish. “I finished up at Culver, shiny new poli-sci major under my belt, and then I got this really cool job offer so I packed up and moved…”

“Just like that?”

She nodded. “Just like that.”

A few silent seconds passed.

“Spit it out, I can feel the judgement coming through in waves,” she sighed.
“Is it a cult? Did you join a cult?” Laney’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Do you need me to break you out? Send you supplies? Something? Anything?”

Darcy snorted. “Wow, no, but I appreciate your imagination.”

“Well… I grew up with some interesting people,” she said drolly.

“Hey, Michael’s the normal one, don’t lump him in with us,” Darcy muttered, kicking her feet up on Coulson’s desk, just barely managing not to kick over his pencil jar.

He always seemed to know when she did, like she knew the order of the pencils was wrong after she’d piled them back in.

“Normal,” she scoffed. “You just mean he’s not as weird as us…”

“I resent the word weird,” Darcy argued. “I prefer ‘superior level of awesome.’”

“I like that. Maybe we can have jackets made up,” her sister mused.

“Yes!” she agreed, her eyes wide. “And something really random on the back, like a liger or something.”

“You need to get over your Napoleon Dynamite phase,” she complained.

“You need to stop pretending you don’t love that movie,” Darcy returned.

“Okay, but only the steak part…” Laney allowed.

“Whatever, that movie gets better the more you watch it.”

“You watch it enough for both of us, thanks.”

She snorted, but played with the long, curled cord of the phone for a minute. “So…? How’s the fam, anyway?”

“Well, Michael’s good. I think his arm is healed from the last time he went dirt biking…”

She grinned. “Not for long,” she mused.

“Way to keep the spirit, Darce. I think half the reason he gets in so much trouble is because he’s trying to make up for your lack of contribution.”

Her eyebrows hiked. “Hey, nobody asked him! And besides, I’m wreaking havoc over here just fine…”

“Until I see New York news reports calling you by your first name and dubbing you their menace, I won’t believe it.”

“Warm the cockles of my hearts, why don’t you?” she sighed.

“Dad’s good, too. Mostly golfing lately. I think he’s bored,” Laney continued. “Mom’s got him on a diet because she saw a bunch of commercials on high blood pressure and stress and strokes and stuff… His doctor said he was fine, but mom’s not buying it. And you know her; nobody knows better than mom, not even board certified physicians!”

Darcy snorted. “Yeah, well, having mom on his back will probably bring on a heart attack, and then
mom’ll say ‘I told you so’ to top it all off.”

She leaned back and knocked her fist against the wood wall; superstitious enough to worry her words might somehow cause just that to happen to her dad.

“She’s not _that_ bad…” Laney said, trying to play mediator.

“Yeah? So she hasn’t been cooking up theories on why I haven’t called?”

“Well, only a few… _hundred_…”

Her lips twitched. “Did any of them involve jail or being on the run?”

Her silence was enough answer.

Darcy rolled her eyes and told herself it didn’t sting. “Whatever…”

“Well, in her defense, you just kind of dropped off the face of the earth… I mean, a few emails and we were supposed to assume everything was good?”

“It’s not like we were talking every day anyway…” She shrugged. “I figured nobody would mind if I took some time to settle into my new job.”

“Which _is_…?” she probed. “You didn’t exactly leave many details.”

“It’s a _job_, or career… Technically, for the time-being, I’m working for Jane Foster; you remember, from when I was interning in New Mexico?”

“Oh, right, the physicist chick…”

She nodded. “Yeah, so I’m helping her out for a while until a position opens up… I’m guaranteed the job; I’m just doing a little in-house training for it.”

“And that job would be…?”

“Well, I don’t know if it has a direct title yet, but…” She hedged, “I’ll be meeting a lot of politicians, getting my foot in the door, doing some traveling, that kind of thing…”

“For…?”

“What’s with the third degree?” She frowned, grabbing up a pen and flicking it back and forth. “It’s a job, Laney. Work, money, repeat.”

“I dunno, you just seem really weird about it…”

She sat up suddenly. “Oh my God, you still think I was kidnapped or I’m in a cult or something, don’t you?”

“Eh, it crossed my mind,” she admitted freely.

“You really think they’d let me have the phone?”

“Depends on the level of brainwashing, I’d guess.”

“Seriously…” Darcy shook her head. “Stop watching so much TV.”

“Fine, but… If you were ever in trouble, you remember the password, right…?”
Darcy smiled slowly. When her and Laney were little girls, they agreed on a special word that they would always remember and only use in emergencies. “I remember,” she assured.

“Good. You say that and I’ll be there. I’ll drag you out of the cult kicking and screaming if I have to!”

Her head fell back as she laughed abruptly, tears springing to her eyes more out of appreciation than anything. “I missed you,” she admitted.

“Yeah, well, call more often,” she said easily.

“I’ll mark it down on my to-do list.”

“Top priority.”

“As if you’d be anywhere else.”

A companionable silence echoed for only a moment before Laney finally wondered, “So? You gonna call mom and dad?”

She frowned and sunk low in the chair. “Couldn’t you just pass on that I talked to you freely and was in no way coerced by cult leaders and/or kidnappers?”

“I could…” she admitted. “But, I won’t!”

Darcy sighed. “You’re a cruel, cruel woman.”

“Hey, you gotta face her some time.”

“Well, yeah, but I was kind of hoping that would be in the distant, distant future… Like, her death bed or something.”


“Yeah?”

“I missed you and I love you and I’m saying this because you need to hear it… Pull on your big girl panties and call mom!”

With that, Laney hung up on her, and Darcy pouted as she hung the phone back up.

“Skank,” she muttered, falling back in the chair and crossing her arms over her chest. “I hate it when she’s right…”

Right or not, Darcy didn’t call her mom that night.

Or the next.

In fact, she was suspiciously busy that whole week…
Part Five

V.

Customs class was actually kind of fun. Learning the do’s and don’t’s of other countries, some of them really weird in comparison, was pretty cool. However, the idea of actually putting them into action and not offending someone, a lot more worrisome. Darcy was pretty sure she was going to piss off some people, because she just knew she’d fall into old habits.

As for her languages classes, brushing up on her French was a piece of cake. German was a little more difficult. Russian was the worst, but that’s because she mainly focused on the cursing. She understood when it was spoken, but writing it down and sometimes wrapping her tongue around it was the hard part. Turned out though, her teacher was kind of awesome, and thought Darcy’s handle on languages was super cool, so she worked with her personally to make sure she was getting everything down.

Training was going really well. She still hadn’t shot anything, but she’d begun noticing things. Like when she walked into a room, her eyes immediately scanned for weapons and took stock of everyone around her. Sometimes it was just a passing perusal and other times she recognized that she was searching actively for a threat. Either way, Darcy realized that her brain was adapting, it was picking up things, it was trying to protect her in the long run, and she thought that was a pretty awesome tool to have.

“You should make me a little plaque or something,” she told Coulson one afternoon.

He raised an eyebrow. “Should I?” His lips twitched. “For most clever quip or snarkiest jab?”

“General awesomeness works,” she assured.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he mused.

A week later, she found a plastic trophy in her bedroom, sitting center atop of her television, with a little plaque that read,

_Darcy Lewis_

_For her outstanding performance in all things “awesome” related._

Oh yeah, she was definitely his favorite.

...

When Darcy met Tony Stark, she tased him.

She’d been deep into her studies when one of her ear buds was plucked and a deep voice whispered, “I don’t think you’re supposed to be in here, half-pint."

She blamed the reaction on Timi constantly telling her to be prepared, because she had her taser in hand and pressed up against Stark’s jugular as soon as he finished his sentence.

In her defense, he was being creepy.

In his defense, he was… Tony Stark.
She leaned over him, wincing, as he twitched on the floor, staring up at her with wide-eyes, his teeth clenched.

“Um… Sorry?”

“What… is… wrong… with you?” he managed, his face a bright red.

“Well, I’ve never been tested, but…”

When he’d finally regained control of himself, she shrugged. “Wanna try that again?” She held a hand out. “I’ll start. Darcy Lewis, future assistant extraordinaire to Super-Agent Son of Coul.”

He blinked, took her hand, and answered, “I don’t think I need to be introduced.”

“Well, considering the last time you tried not introducing yourself you got tased, I might argue that…” She helped him up from the floor and dusted off his shoulders, even though Coulson kept his office immaculate; even dust bunnies feared his kickass wrath. Finally, she knocked her knuckles against Stark’s arc reactor. “My shocktastic hello didn’t cross any wires, did it?”

He raised an eyebrow, looking almost offended. “Hardly. That poor substitute for a taser is nowhere near powerful enough.”

She hugged her taser to her chest and glowered at him. “You watch your mouth! This baby has saved me from muggers, rapists, and Norse Gods!”

His brows furrowed. “For clarification, could you repeat that last one?”

Knowing that was a slip of the tongue she probably shouldn’t be sharing with media focal points like Tony Stark, even if he was a real live super hero, she instead replied, “Forest… hogs…”

He stared at her. “You tased a hog in the forest?”

“Don’t judge me!” she told him.

He held his hands up in surrender. “In your defense, I’m sure I’ve done worse.”

Her lips curved in a grin. “True.” She raised an eyebrow. “So what’re you doing back here, anyway? Coulson’s secretary doesn’t let just anybody on his playground…”

“Oh, her?” He shrugged. “You’d be surprised what this face can get you,” he said with a grin.

She snorted. “No, I wouldn’t.” She put her hands on her hips and pressed her shoulders back to emphasize her chest. “I’ve got a secret weapon of my own, thanks.”

His eyes dropped, took her cleavage in admiringly, and then nodded. “I can see how that would open doors,” he admitted.

“Makes a mean shelf, too.”

Just then, the door swung open, and Coulson walked in. He looked between their smirking faces and sighed. “I was hoping you’d be done studying before he arrived.”

“Too late now, Bossman, the apocalypse is imminent,” Darcy snarked.

He shook his head, moving to take a seat at his desk. “I have no doubt,” he muttered.
Stark looked between them thoughtfully, but Darcy merely grabbed up her books. “Thanks for the study space,” she said. “And nice meeting ya, Stark.” She waved at them. “I’ve got an ice cream and Real Housewives date with the Cap. Laters.”

As she was walking through the door, she overheard, “So Agent, what’s with the hot piece? Secret daughter or secret lover? You can be honest, I promise I won’t tell…”

Darcy rolled her eyes, closed the door behind her, and waved at Coulson’s secretary before she checked her wrist watch and hurried her steps.

Ten minutes later, she left the elevator to find an anxious Steve waiting.

“I was starting to worry,” he told her. “You’re never late for Housewives.”

She grinned. “So that’s my tell, huh? If I don’t show up for our reality TV date something awful’s happened?” She swiped her card and took a step inside, dropping her books on the edge of an end table. When she looked back, Steve was standing in the doorway, his eyebrows hiked. “What’s up?”

“Is this a… date?” he wondered sheepishly.

She smiled. “No.”

“Oh.” He looked away, cheeks running a little pink.

“If this were a date, we’d either be outside of SHIELD or doing something a lot more interesting on my bed,” she told him.

And then his cheeks were red.

He ducked his head a little as he stepped further into the room. “Duly noted,” he said, mouth twitching with a smile.

Darcy turned on the TV and climbed onto the bed to join him. She wondered what he’d do if she admitted that doing something more ‘interesting’ sounded like a pretty awesome plan, in her opinion.

She watched him out of the corner of her eye, plaid shirt buttoned-up all the way but looking very relaxed in his surroundings.

Hm, maybe not yet. She didn’t think he was ready for her.

But soon.

She grinned.

Very soon.

…

Darcy had been minding her own business when she was unceremoniously shoved into a room.

“Ow, what the hell?” she complained, looking around.

Tima appeared by her side, arms crossed behind her back. “What do you see?”

“Well, now that you’re asking, I definitely see this afternoon’s lunch on my shirt…” She stared down at herself. “Pizza sauce,” she explained, pointing at the stain. “Embarrassing…”
Her instructor raised a dismissive eyebrow. “In the room, Lewis.” She nodded her chin forward. “Tell me what you see…”

Darcy took a good look around her. “Uh, somebody’s abandoned office…” She frowned, walked forward, and ran a finger through an inch of dust layering the desktop. “Seriously, I thought we had a cleaning service for this kind of thing…?”

Tima gave an exasperated sigh. “What can you use?”

“Oh…” Shrugging, she took another look around. “Stapler, both to knock them in the face and possibly distract them with my mad stapling skills… C’mon, most people are gonna be pretty ‘wtf’ when they’ve got staples layering their skin, am I right?”

Tima waited.

“Uh…” She spun in a circle, eyes pausing on various items. “Okay, so there’s an envelope opener, pretty much just a fancy, not quite as sharp but super pointy, knife… I can use the lamp cord to choke someone out… Paperweight to the temple or to break their nose… If we were in a physical fight too, I could open the file cabinet; use the drawer against their head…” She nodded, still searching. “The curtains dislodge; I could use the pole as a weapon… And the chair; it’s got a metal skeleton but loose bolts holding it in…” She frowned. “This office is put together kind of crappy, but also a super death-trap, what gives?”

“It’s a training exercise,” Tima dismissed. “What else?”

“The pictures have glass in them; I could knock one over someone’s head… There’s pens, pencils; right to the jugular… Um, I guess some of the books; I could use those to hit them over the head…”

“And?”

“There’s more?” Darcy searched but she couldn’t find it. “What, you want me to pull up the carpet and wrap them in it?” she wondered.

“The most trustworthy weapon you will ever find in a room…” she began before turning to look at her. “Is yourself.”

She rolled her eyes. “Way to drop the wisdom on me, Ti.”

Shaking her head, Tima turned and walked out. “And you need to be more aware of your surroundings; I was stalking you for three floors,” she called back.

Darcy stuck her tongue out even though Tima couldn’t see her.

Somehow, it just didn’t carry the same weight.

…

“And I want a pony and a new car, both in pink, and—”

“Last I checked, I wasn’t a robust old man who brought good cheer on the masses,” Coulson interrupted her, raising an eyebrow.

Darcy snorted from where she sat in the seat across from him. “Okay, so here’s the deal…”

He sighed, waving a hand for her to go on.
“It’s my birthday.”

He blinked. “No, it isn’t. Your birthday is exactly nine days from now.”

“Okay, creepy,” she told him, waving a hand. “But anyway, I want to celebrate my birthday early. I’ve got tests all next week, on customs and languages and all that fun crap you piled on me, so I’m going to be too busy.” She shrugged. “And sure, I’d be good with blowing off a night of studying to get blitzed, but that probably won’t help in the long run. So…” She wiggled her eyebrows at him hopefully. “I want to have a small party; just me, Jane, Steve, you, Tima, and, y’know, Peter, if he ever stops having episodes with ‘falling down’…” She frowned. “Personally I’m starting to worry his aunt beats him, but he won’t talk and I don’t push and it’s just a thing, right? I mean, maybe you could get an agent or two to keep an eye on him, maybe talk to the hag if she really is knocking him around?” Her eyes narrowed then and she said decisively, “No, never mind, I’ll do it.”

“Back on topic, Darcy,” he intervened.

“Oh, right, so I was thinking we could have a small party. Y’know, cake, alcohol, alcohol-flavored cake, strippers, presents, possibly a petting zoo…” She shrugged. “Can I get you to sign off on that, or…?”

He stared at her a long moment before finally he shook his head. “Not this week. It’s not possible.”

Darcy slumped in her chair. “Oh, come on,” she complained. “I know you save the world like, weekly, but can’t we just let it go to hell a tiny bit so I can have some fun?” She jutted out her bottom lip. “Haven’t I been especially awesome lately? Don’t I have an average of Exceeds Expectation on pretty much everything you put me in to?”

“You still haven’t completed arms training,” he reminded.

“Oh, okay, just bring up the one black mark on my record!” she exclaimed, throwing up a hand. “Way to totally ignore my general perfection for that one, tiny imperfection…”

“Darcy…” he sighed, sitting forward, resting clasped hands on his desk. “Can you explain to me why you’re having so much trouble with it?”

She glowered. “I just don’t get the point… You said I wouldn’t be getting a gun, Tima’s training me how to kill people with paper weights, why the hell do I need to know how to fire a gun for then?”

His lips pursed as he stared at her. “You’re missing the point,” he decided.

“Then please, somebody point it out to me! I’ll get a map, okay? You can add the ‘You are here!’ sign to it and then put a giant blinking ‘Where you should be’ sign for clarification, all right?”

He glowered. “I just don’t get the point… You said I wouldn’t be getting a gun, Tima’s training me how to kill people with paper weights, why the hell do I need to know how to fire a gun for then?”

His lips pursed as he stared at her. “You’re missing the point,” he decided.

“Then please, somebody point it out to me! I’ll get a map, okay? You can add the ‘You are here!’ sign to it and then put a giant blinking ‘Where you should be’ sign for clarification, all right?”

His lips twitched and he shook his head slowly. “What do you think Tima’s trying to teach you when she tells you to shoot the target, Darcy?”

“Uh… how to shoot the target!” she said, in a ‘duh’ fashion.

“This is what I want you to do,” he told her, nodding. “The next time you’re standing in the gun range, I want you to take down the target… The blue ring will represent something, the white something else, and so on and so forth… And then when you shoot that target, whatever ring you hit is going to represent something that you wanted to hurt or kill or get rid of, okay?”

“So like, ring blue could be creepy, crawly spiders if I want it to be?”
“Sure,” he said, folding his lips to keep from showing his general amusement with her. “Pick something that suits you.”

“And then what?”

“Shoot it.”

She blinked. “That’s it?”

He simply stared at her.

Huffing, she stood. “Fine.” She started for the door. “But the week after my tests, I’m having a huge party and you are totally not invited!”

“Even if I bring the alcohol flavored cake?” he wondered teasingly.

She paused. “That’s the only exception!”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

She waved goodbye over her shoulder as she left.

…

Darcy stared at her phone.

Six mixed calls.

Her sister, her brother, her mother, her mother, her mother, oh, one from Jane… Apparently she found her phone. Ten bucks says it was inside the microwave… again.

She called Jane back first.

Yes, it was in the microwave; she was just calling to let Darcy know she’d found it and to call off the search.

Then she called her sister, because ever since she’d finally gotten in contact with Laney, they’d been trying to keep up more. Especially since Laney had started dating someone from work and was still in that ‘He’s so dreamy and perfect and how does my name sound with his? Cute, right?’ And Darcy went with it because it was easier than thinking about how her and Steve got together every night and watched TV while she pretended she didn’t physically ache every time he smiled or laughed or looked at her out of the corner of her eye while she conveniently looked away just in time not to be caught mooning over him.

“So tell me more about this guy? What are his hobbies? His annual wage? Is he a dog or cat person? Does he have a criminal record? Oh, and part b to the last question, would you like me to check if he hasn’t mentioned whether he maybe robs-slash-kills people?”

“Well… He likes fishing, oh and skiing… Uh, his annual wage is probably around mine, maybe higher… I think he said he had a cat… Is that weird? Should he be a dog person?” Laney wondered.

“Anyway, no, I don’t think he has a record and no, you can’t check… How even would you?”

“What vegs, Laney, don’t judge a man on his pet choice, geez,” Darcy returned, snorting.

“Okay, enough about me, you’ve been stalling for like an hour…”
“Uh, hello, I’m not the one who started brainstorming about what your future children would look like with this cat-loving freak!”

“Darcy!”

She laughed and leaned back in her bed, shoving a pillow up higher under head.

“Let’s talking about what’s going on with you… Your birthday’s coming up, are you flying out or…”?

“Uh, no, I don’t think so…” She plucked at a loose thread on her shirt. “Y’know, busy with work and stuff and Jane and… I’m having this big party here so, y’know, can’t really flake on that, right?”

“Darcy…” she sighed. “You can’t avoid mom forever.”

“But I’m getting really good at it,” she argued.

“Uh-huh, too good at it…” She snorted. “I passed on the ‘Darcy is still alive and oh by the way, she lives in New York now’ news, just so’s you know, and they’re not exactly thrilled…” She paused. “Well, no, actually dad was cool with it. He went on for a bit about that time he went to New York and how the subway was an interesting place. But I could hardly hear him because mom was like, breaking the sound barrier. She was totally not okay with it.”

“Yeah, well, good thing I don’t need permission anymore…” Her lips twitched. “Not that it mattered, since I always forged her signature anyway.”

Her sister let out an exasperated noise. “Just call her, okay? Or, I don’t know, send a letter or an email or something…”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Fine, sure, I’ll snail-mail her a post card.”

“Good. Anyway, I should go. Email me your birthday list and/or your visit home itinerary, okay?”

“Ugh, I’m not coming home,” she whined, frowning.

“We’ll see,” was all she said. “Love you, Kid.”

“Love you too,” she muttered.

After she hung up, Darcy frowned at her cell for a long minute, finger hovering over her contact’s list.

“You’re such a coward,” she told herself before throwing her phone away and rolling off her bed.

She fell asleep that night, crying into her pillow as she watched Steel Magnolias.

…”

“What is she doing?”

Peter looked up from the desk he was sitting at, poring over notes. “Oh, uh…” He ran a hand through his hair, tipped his head, and then frowned. “Well… I gave her some Pop-tarts for lunch and then she started using them to, um, make something…”

“I can see that.” Darcy blinked. “How long has she been playing with her food?”
Peter pulled the sleeve of his labcoat up to check his watch.

Rolling her eyes, she walked further into the lab and started snapping her fingers. “Hey! Jane!” She clapped her hands.

Slowly, the astrophysicist blinked and raised her head, staring up at Darcy in confusion. “I… I had this great idea, I just… I had to get it down…”

“Yeah, well, that’s why we have these nifty things called pens…” She eyed her skeptically. “Have you been sleeping? This is usually stage three exhaustion stuff…”

“She told me she got eight hours last night,” Peter piped up.

“She was up and working when you got here?” Darcy asked back.

“Yeah, she was perky…”

Raising an eyebrow, Darcy stared down at Jane, who slowly wilted under her.

“Okay, fine, so I took a five hour energy drink just before Peter showed up,” she admitted.

“That’s what I thought.” She held a hand out as she sighed. “C’mon… It’s bed time.”

“But—I—and—”

Darcy glared at her. “You either get some sleep or I start taking your toys away!”

Jane slumped, but took Darcy’s hand and stood up. “Okay, but nobody touches what I made…” she declared, her eyes wide as she pointed back at her creation.

“I’ll let the janitorial staff know,” Darcy reassured, rolling her eyes as she shoved Jane along and right out the door.

Peter followed, readjusting his glasses. “Sorry Darcy, I guess I probably shouldn’t take her word for it…” He shrugged. “In my defense… She’s really good at Pop-tart art.”

She hip-bumped him. “Don’t worry about it. Just be happy we figured it out before stage five…” She shuddered. “You do not want to see Jane in stage five exhaustion…” She stared up at him, her eyes wide and serious. “There are things you can’t unsee, Petey.”

He grimaced, more at the nickname than what she was suggesting.

After they got Jane settled, Darcy joined Peter back in the lab.

“I’m avoiding Tima… She’s doing blind attacks, so I figure the less I move around, the less chance I have of her jumping out and trying to fight me…” She shuddered. “I’ve had enough of being beaten up, okay?”

Peter raised an eyebrow. “Is there a reason you’re being trained?”

“Eh,” She waved a dismissive hand. “I may or may not be getting myself thrown into hostile situations… I mean, I’d lean pretty heavily on the may, but that’s just because they keep trying to cram me full with this customs stuff and I keep… being me…” She shrugged. “So chances are, people will get offended, and I will have to fight my way free with a stapler…”

“Hmm…” He nodded. “Okay, not the weirdest scenario I’ve heard of.”
She grinned. “You must live an interesting life.”

“Uh…” he ducked his head as he smiled. “Well, it’s not normal, let’s just say that.”

She eyed him for a moment, sobering. “So hey, listen… I know it’s probably none of my business, but…” She leaned forward, clasping her hands. “The home life can get difficult, y’know? And sometimes things happen or people do stuff and we don’t know who to turn to or something, but… If you were like, in a situation and you needed someone to talk to or… help you… I’m your girl.”

He blinked at her. “I’m not sure I follow…”

She sighed, deflating a little. “Half the time you show up here looking like you just went a few rounds with a Mac truck. What’s the sitch? Do I need to follow you? Scare some bullies off? Put in a child abuse claim?”

He shook his head slowly. “I... You…” He frowned. “You think Aunt May is… abusing me?”

“Look, no judgment, but unless you’re in a fight club… Something is way off…” She held her hands up, her eyes round and her brows hiked. “Boundaries are important, I get that, but if something’s going on and you don’t know how to handle it, I mean… I might look short, but I’m scrappy and I own an illegal taser…”

“Wow, okay… I think I’m flattered that you care and also a little bit offended that you don’t think I can handle myself.”

She rolled her eyes. “Men. A woman tries to help and they’re all, ‘Woe is me, you’ve offended the size of my junk,’ but a guy offers to save a chick and he’s all, ‘I am gladiator, be amazed by my shining armor!’”

He snorted as he broke into laughter.

Darcy smirked.

When he was done, he just leaned back in his chair. “Listen, Darcy…” he stared up at her sincerely. “I appreciate that you were worried… It’s… nice that you care. But I… I’m not getting abused. And…” His lips twitched. “If you knew my Aunt May, you’d know how crazy that is…” He shook his head. “Uh, as for looking beat up…” He shifted in his chair, playing with the sleeve of his lab coat. “It’s complicated and… I can’t really talk about it. But, I know what I’m doing…”

She stared at him a long moment. “All right, I’m gonna give you the benefit of the doubt here… But—” She pointed at him. “Only if you promise me that if it ever gets out of control or you need help, you’ll come to me.”

He smiled slowly and nodded. “I will.”

“Coolio.” She sat back in her chair and sighed. “Okay, so I’m going to need you to come with… I want lunch and I’m hoping you can block me if Tima tries to jump me.”

He frowned. “You’re gonna throw me at her and run away, aren’t you?”

She grinned. “You’re a grunt, dude; let’s just call it initiation.”

Peter sighed, but he stood from his chair and went with her all the same.

…
She should have seen it coming.

Really, it was a good thing Coulson didn’t want her to be an agent, because her skills were totally lacking.

“So I know we usually watch TV around this time,” Steve started.

“Yes, we do, I’ve got popcorn popping,” she said, pointing a thumb at the microwave. “I mean, it was some guy named Bill’s… He left it in a cupboard, but y’know, I’ll replace it later or something.”

He blinked at her. “Your random theft is a little worrisome…”


His mouth twitched up in a smile. “Uh-huh.” He rubbed his hands together. “Anyway, uh, I was wondering if maybe we could skip the TV thing tonight…” He shifted on his feet. “I know you’ve been really on guard since Tima started her sneak attacks, so I was thinking maybe we could work on your self-defence tonight instead.”

“You want me to spend what little time I have off fighting with you?” She frowned. “I dunno… Rolling around on a sweaty mat instead of…” She paused, her eyes narrowed. “Actually, yes, on second thought, we should totally do that.” She raised a finger. “I hope you know, however, that I learn better when my teacher is suspiciously shirtless…”

His brow furrowed. “This is a technique Tima employs often or…?”

“It’s one I’m putting into effect, right… now.” She nodded. “Unfortunately, you’ll be the guinea pig.” She reached over and patted his chest. “I’ll take it easy on you.”

He bit his lip as he smiled, ducking his eyes. “Is this shirtless training mutual or is it an arbitrary law that only applies to me?”

She laughed. “It can be mutual, but I don’t think the wrestling will stay PG-13 for long that way…”

He flushed pink and cleared his throat. “We, uh… We should head down to the gym.”

“Down?” Her eyebrow ticked. “The gym is like three doors over.”

“Actually, I was thinking we could do this in my gym… It’s more comfortable and there’s less chance of interruption and…” He paused, trailing off, and seemed to go even redder as he realized the implication he was making.

Chuckling to herself, Darcy shrugged. The microwave went off, so she collected her hot bag of popcorn, hooked an arm with him, and said, “Lead on, Cap!”

It didn’t take them long; they munched on popcorn in the elevator, which she would later decide distracted her from the obvious.

Steve let her go in first, fairly pushing her into the dark room.

She turned around to snark at him about all the fun they could have in the dark when he flipped the lights, and then a loud cry, mostly by Jane, of “Surprise!” went up, making her stumble back in shock, arms thrust out and bag dropped, popcorn spilling.

“Christ on a cracker, what the hell!” she cried, looking around in confusion.
And then, suddenly, she realized…

There was a crooked Happy Birthday banner on the wall and a table set up of wrapped presents. Another held snacks and drinks and a two-tiered pink cake.

She blinked, her eyes stinging a little.

There was Jane and Tima and Peter (looking a little worse for wear), and Steve came up to stand at her side, offering a half-smile. “Happy birthday, Darcy,” he told her.

And she almost cried. Seriously.

There was a frickin’ banner and Coulson got her a pink cake and these people were her friends.

It wasn’t so long ago that she’d been telling Steve that she sucked at making friends, but these people… Even if they instructed her in how to kick ass or only traded snarky jabs in between letting her have his office to study, even if Jane spent most of her time doing science and Peter was still relatively new, even if she had a massive crush on handsome, sweet Steve… These were friends.

And then…

There was a clucking noise.

Darcy turned her head and saw that there was a small petting zoo; she didn’t know how they smuggled it in but it was there.

A freaking petting zoo!

She burst into laughter, her head thrown back, and felt all her stress melt away.

Jane hurried forward to hug her, squeezing her tight, and wishing her a happy birthday. Coulson didn’t give her a hug but he did give her a glass with a pink alcoholic drink inside that tasted like cotton candy. Tima gave her a strong hug, slapping her on the back. Peter was gentler about it, but she wasn’t sure if that was because he looked like he was sore. And finally, she leaned on Steve, her arm around his waist.

“Not bad. I totally didn’t suspect anything,” she told him, taking a sip of her pink perfection.

He nodded, smiling. “You deserve it,” he told her.

She squeezed him and together they walked over to the presents and food tables.

The cake?

It had cartoon strippers drawn on it.

Because Coulson never did anything half-assed and apparently, if she wanted it, he’d get it for her. No matter how ridiculous.

All in all, she had to say, she had the best friends a girl could ask for.

So when she blew out her candles, she only asked for world peace…

And a million dollars.

Oh, and maybe Steve, wearing nothing but a red bow.
Fingers crossed they came true!
VI.

The incessant ringing of her phone was driving her nuts.

She only left it on because she needed the alarm to let her know when study time was up; truth be
told she was waiting hopefully for that time so she could close up her books and walk away with a
‘Well, I tried,’ feeling. She wasn’t above hating school, even if it was unconventional one being run
out of a dark room in a secret government agency. Alas, it wasn’t her alarm, somebody was calling
and they weren’t giving up.

With a sigh, she grabbed it up and flipped it open without checking the ID. “Yo,” she greeted
distractedly.

“I thought you were supposed to be some big shot adult now. Pretty sure ‘yo’ is too hip for you.”

Darcy grinned. “My, oh my, if it ain’t my prodigal little brother…” She leaned back in her chair,
notebook in her lap. “What’s up half-pint?”

He snorted. “Darcy, I’m like a full foot taller than you… And also, since you haven’t called in ages,
you’re the prodigal daughter.”

“Well, special’s always been my middle name, might as well stick to it in my old, old age.”

“Yeah, what are you now, like thirty? Forty?”

She rolled her eyes. “Such a charmer, Mikey, how does your boyfriend put up with you?”

“I’ve mastered your princess pout; falls for it every time.”

Laughing, she swiveled her chair side to side and stacked her legs up on top of the desk in front of
her. “Don’t use it too much; they get immune if you oversell it.”

“How are mom and pops?” she wondered, drawing cartoons in the margins of her notes.

“Good, good. Mom’s pissed because I didn’t apply for college and dad still things I’m going through
a gay phase.”

She snorted. “I don’t know why. Jack’s awesome. Personally, I’ll adopt him into my own little
family if you two ever break up.”

“Thanks for the family solidarity,” he muttered drolly.

“Plus I think it’d be funny if you guys ever have a son… Michael and Jack’s son…” She grinned to
herself. “Michael Jackson!”

She could practically hear him rolling his eyes through the phone.

“I know… You tell that joke every time you come to down to visit and get drunk when mom gets
snippy.”
“Which is always,” she reminded.

“She’s worried about you.”

“Wow, subtlety just don’t exist in our family… Like when you came out of the closet…” Darcy snorted, shaking her head at the memory.

Half asleep, Michael shuffled his feet as he entered the dining room. Yawning, he took a seat in between his sisters and said, “Hey, pass the toast… Thanks. I’m gay. Jam too, please.”

While Darcy watched her dad start choking on his bacon and their mother simply roll her eyes, as if she’d always known, she passed him the apricot jam and added, “I’m brunette. Egg me!” She made a gimme motion at the plate of scrambled eggs.

And Laney shrugged, unperturbed, and said, “I have blue eyes. Pass the salt.”

When her dad finally stopped choking, he looked between his three children, taking a united front of support and making it clear they knew Michael’s sexual orientation not only wasn’t a choice but something they understood and loved about him, and finally he just sighed. “Fishing?” he asked him. “This weekend?”

Michael half-grinned. “Cool.”

“Whatever, some things don’t need subtlety…” he dismissed. “And don’t change the subject. Are you gonna call mom or what? Laney keeps trying to tell her you’re fine but she won’t believe it until it comes from you.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Yeah?” His tone suggested whatever it was keeping her busy it would never be important enough.

“Doing what?”

“Top secret spy stuff; very hush, hush,” she said, smirking.

“Darce…” he sighed, in a tone that replicated their mother’s exasperation.

“Hey, did I mention I made friends? Met a cute boy? Have a shiny new job?” She wiggled her eyebrows even though he couldn’t see her. “Wanna talk about that?”

“We’ll talk boys and shit later. Try n’ focus,” he said seriously. “Look, I know you don’t like it when I play this card, but you owe me… I covered for you every time you asked me to. I even helped forge dad’s signature when you brought home principal’s notes,” he reminded. “So do me this solid and call mom.”

“Nobody ever says to call dad. He’s getting the short-end of the stick, y’know? What if dad wants to talk? He’s the one suffering through a mom-enforced diet! Give the man a break!”

He snorted. “Don’t make me come out there, okay? I will throw you over my shoulder and drag your ass home.”

She frowned. She was pretty sure, before all the SHIELD training, that he totally could. Michael was six foot five, lean but wide-shouldered. He was an athlete through high school and a bit of a daredevil considering his love of doing tricks on his modified dirt bike. And growing up with Darcy and Laney, he’d been wrestling his sister’s most of his life, just for things like time in the bathroom and the TV remote. Since puberty, he had a height and weight advantage that he used to get his way.
too often. Though not as much lately, since Laney went away to college and, a few years later, Darcy followed in her footsteps, leaving him at home with just their parents and Otis, the wheezy, on-its-last-day Jack Russell terrier they’d had since Darcy was ten.

“Listen, when I have the time and energy, I’ll call mom,” she assured. “I’m just…” She chewed her lip. “I like what I’m doing and I’m kind of scared that if I tell her, she’ll do something or say something and I’ll screw this up.”

“Like what?”

“I dunno…” she sighed, frustrated. “She just… She says these things and suddenly it’s like, I rethink everything and I—I hate it. She makes me feel bad about the choices I make so I—I change them.”

“Darcy, you give mom too much credit,” her brother said. “If you like where you’re at, stay. Mom is just mom; she says things, does things, you gotta take it with a grain of salt, y’know? She’s not perfect.”

She snorted, slumping down in her chair. “Yeah, I’m not so sure.”

He blew out a long breath. “Look, whatever she says, however it makes you feel, in the end, she’s your mom and she loves you and she just wants to know that you’re okay and you’re happy.”

“Yeah…” she rasped back, swallowing tightly. She reached up and scrubbed at her eyes. “Listen, I gotta go. I’m working, so…”

“All right. Just… Call me more, okay? It’s boring and quiet over here… I don’t like it.”

Her lips twitched. “All right, I’ll call. God, you and Laney, you’re so needy.”

He snorted. “Whatever.”

She grinned. “Love you, M.”

“You too, D.”

Darcy hung up and dropped her phone down to her chest, gnawing at her lip.

She folded up her books and hopped out of Coulson’s chair, making her way out of his office. “Hey, Dolores,” she said to the secretary. “You see Bossman, tell him thanks for letting me have his office today.”

“Of course, Darcy,” she assured.

Saluting her goodbye, Darcy made her way up to her floor, dropped her things off in her room, and then went down to the old gym Steve liked to frequent.

He wasn’t around and she knew he didn’t often remember to keep his cell phone on him. Instead of bothering him, she found the roll of tape he left on standby, wrapped her fists, and started taking her frustrations out on the old, swinging punching bag. She let the smell of the gym, musty and dusty, the weight of the bag under her knuckles, and the general feel of the room that was no longer bright with her presents and birthday banner, sink into her.

Her mind zig-zagged in and out of thought; starting with her mom, frustrated with her all her life, seguing into her dad teaching her how to hold a baseball bat, followed by a memory of her sister trying to show her how to do her make-up, and her and Michael dancing in her room, singing at the
top of her lungs. She thought about college, about sitting in her interior design classes, looking at fabrics and colors, buttons and zippers, and being overwhelmed by how the others did it, how focused and driven they were. She remembered her languages class and how so many students struggled or stressed out while she picked them up so easily, but bored just as quick when it became more than just a cool thing she knew. When her professor started making suggestions about internships and job opportunities. She remembered the disappointed noise her mother made each time she called and said, “Yeah, so that wasn’t really working, but it’s cool because I found something else and I really think this one will fit…” She thought of her poli-sci classes and how things started to fit together a bit. Not perfectly, but more than the rest. And she thought of Jane and New Mexico and Thor. Of jack-booted thugs and stolen iPods.

And finally she thought about being at SHIELD. Of her languages and customs classes, her training with Tima, hiring Peter, trying and failing at ruffling the stoic super-agent Coulson, and of meeting Steve. Of reality TV and painting her room, breaking into the staff room for ice cream, and admiring his good-boy charm while secretly wanting to tarnish it with dirty, sweaty sex on the same mats she was circling the punching bag on.

When she stepped back, she was exhausted, more emotionally than physically, though sweat dribbled from her temples and collected on her back.

Groaning, she hugged the punching bag and pressed her forehead to it, closing her eyes.

“I’m so fucked,” she muttered under her breath.

She turned her head, letting her cheek rest there, and squeezed her eyes as they burned. Her tears broke through and sniffing, she laughed to herself about how very un-badass it probably was.

But she wasn’t some cold, efficient, super-kickass agent.

She wasn’t anything.

Just a grunt.

Like always.

...

Darcy enjoyed the element of surprise, mostly because it worked in her favor. So when she saw Steve walking in the opposite direction down the hallway, frowning in confusion down at his phone, she hooked her arm with his elbow and said, “Walk with me.”

He looked up, eyebrows hiked. “Darcy, hey!”

She smiled; there was something about how his pitch always went up when he saw her, like he was really and truly excited to be around her that just made her feel good. “Sup, Cap?” She steered him down the hall. “So what do you say to getting out of here?” She wasn’t so much asking as telling though, and hustled him onto the elevator.

Steve could’ve gotten away at any time. She figured, if he wanted to, he could untangle himself and give her any number of reasons he couldn’t go before he planted his feet on the floor and didn’t budge. But instead he went with her and didn’t kick up any fuss at all. She chalked it up to trust and mentally patted herself on the back.

“Is there anywhere particular that we’re headed?” he wondered.
She shrugged; she had an idea, actually. “You got somewhere to be?”

He smiled slowly before saying, “Not if my other option is spending time with you.”

She bit her lip. “That was some smooth talkin’, Steve.” She squeezed his arm. “Keep it up and this girl might just fall for your charms.” She raised an eyebrow. “And then where would you be?”

He ducked his eyes. “Hopefully on a date with a beautiful woman…”

Her heart thudded in her chest, but before she could do anything, like potentially ruin the moment, somebody else joined them on the elevator. Darcy and Steve shuffled to the right and she leaned herself against his side, her head falling against his arm. He probably didn’t know she could see him in the shiny surface of the elevator walls, but he was mirrored there, looking down at her and smiling widely.

Ugh, she was so totally not going to survive whatever they turned out to be.

When they reached the main floor, they had to go through a few different security procedures before they were released into the general public, none the wiser of the secret government agency under their noses. The city was loud; she winced at the sudden influx of noise and turned left down the sidewalk, bringing Steve along with her. He didn’t ask where they were going, but she knew he was curious.

They bypassed a coffee shop she’d visited the few times she managed to leave HQ and go exploring — more like, got lost, but she wasn’t telling anybody that— and she waved at the barista who recognized her and smiled when she walked by.

It was six blocks over that she finally stopped, just outside of a small, underused jungle gym. Maybe it was the time, kids were still in school at one in the afternoon, right? But the place was empty, leaving the swing set she specifically came to sit on wide open. She slid her hand down to take Steve’s and tugged him along as she delightedly hopped onto a swing, the chains jangling.

He half-smiled at her and gently sat in the one next to hers.

The park was surrounded by tall, brick housing complexes, which meant, for the part, that the outside noise of traffic was mostly blocked out. She could hear the whistle of the wind and the flap of laundry on the wire. She pushed off with her feet and let the swing take her up. She leaned forward, pushed her feet back, and enjoyed gravity’s pull. For a minute, she just closed her eyes and pumped her legs, letting the air whip around her, cool against her skin.

When she finally looked, she was high up in the air and staring at the cloudy sky. As she came back down, the wind forced her hair forward and it crowded around her face. She dropped her feet down and let them skid against the ground, slowing her down.

Steve sat watching her; a familiar warmth filled his face, like just looking at her was something to be revealed at.

As she came to a full stop, she leaned her face against her hand, gripping the chain loosely. “You remember when we met?” she asked him, eyebrow ticked.

He nodded, mouth curving at the corners faintly. “I heard you yelling in pain from the hallway,” he said, amusement lacing his tone.

“He, that cramp was reaching threat level red!” she argued, her eyes round.
He chuckled under his breath.

“Anyway… I was just thinking… I said something, about how my life was in a tailspin and you said you got it…” She looked over at him sidelong. “And later, when I was having my freak out at the gun range, and I said something about wondering what happened, what went weird in my life that made it this way, you said you knew how that felt…” She frowned. “I never really asked, and I’ll bet it has something to do with the top secret serum thing you brought up, but…” She stared searchingly at him. “You okay, Steve?”

His eyes were set on the ground a long moment, brows furrowed. “We came all this way to talk about me?” he tried to joke.

But Darcy pushed her feet into the ground and moved her swing closer. She covered his hand where it was tightly gripping the chain of his swing. “You’ve done a pretty good job of talking me down from my freak-outs,” she told him. “And I might be using this to avoid another, but I’m still seriously interested… So what happened in your life that screwed you up? Mom issues? Dad? Girlfriend cheat? Dog run away?” She frowned. “Lay it on me.”

His head turned and for a while he just stared at her hand covering his, looking pale and small in comparison. She rubbed her thumb over his knuckles and waited.

“Do you remember when you asked me if my parents were big on World War II, and that’s why they named me after Captain America?” he wondered, a sardonic twist on the title.

She nodded.

“They didn’t. They… weren’t. I…” He ground his teeth together. “I am that guy. I…” He cleared his throat, gaze slowly lifting to meet hers. “I was born in 1920… I had a lot of health problems, but I… I tried not to let that stop me. I tried to be stronger than my body was.” His jaw ticked. “And when the war started, I tried to enlist…” He smiled sadly. “Multiple times… Until finally, I met Dr. Erksine and he… He had this amazing opportunity for me…”

Darcy listened as he laid it all out; he wasn’t kidding about the serum. As he explained what he’d been like before, she created a picture in her mind of a short, thin, pale man, lean in the face, but with Steve’s same bright, strong eyes. She imagined his resolve and his friendly, good-nature were just parts of the original package, passed on to the beefier body. She smiled to herself as she thought about how the good person he was hadn’t been changed by the outside package.

And then he talked about Peggy and the adoration in his voice made her stomach drop out a little. Her smile strained and she turned her eyes forward, still listening, still cataloguing every immensely important detail. Because it all made some weird sense; it all explained so much of who he was and the things he didn’t know or do like modern men. And sure, fine, his lack of knowledge on romance movies, that was easily dismissible, even if Titanic and When Harry Met Sally and Dirty Dancing were all classics, but there were other things like his inability to use, and general frustration with, certain technology. Or the way he talked sometimes, adding ‘Miss’ and ‘ma’am’ and he was so polite and chivalrous and sure, the 20’s and 30’s weren’t perfect but they obviously instilled some qualities in him that men of the modern world didn’t have as much of.

“And then I woke up here… And I realized they were trying to convince me that I was still in my time, but… I knew something was off. I…” He shook his head. “I escaped and then Director Fury met with me personally and he offered me work at SHIELD while… They worked out the kinks in a special program or something, I’m not sure.” He sighed. “And for first few months I… didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know how to survive. I… My friends, they were all gone. Bucky…” His voice went out, strangled, and his hand squeezed the chain tighter. “Bucky was gone and I’d always… I
relied on him.” He closed his eyes and sighed. “And Peggy. I just… I finally got my chance, you know? Things were coming together and… Then it was all gone.” He frowned.

“Heavy,” she said, her voice soft. She tried to take it all in; there was so much to process. “So I guess I must’ve been some trip for you, huh? I mean…” She smiled sarcastically. “You go from life in the 30’s with all those ‘dames’ and you come here and you get a face full of me…” Her brow furrowed. “I hope I didn’t ruin you for modern women, Rogers; it’d be a crying shame for the future groupies you’ll collect.”

He turned to look at her, confused. “Darcy… You’ve been amazing.” He stared searchingly at her. “You were the only one who treated me like a regular person. I… To everybody else I was either Captain Rogers or I was Captain America…” He smiled slowly. “I was just Steve to you. Which…” He sighed. “Which is why I was so selfish and kept it to myself. I shouldn’t have… I should have been honest with you from the beginning, I just… It… felt good…” His eyes fell slightly. “When you said we could be friends, it was… You were my first friend since what happened and… I relied on it. I relied on being normal with you. On watching reality television and eating ice cream and… listening to your conspiracy theories on SHIELD and the agents…” He smiled to himself. “I know it’s complicated and you probably need some time to think about it, but… I hope it won’t change how you think about me.”

He said it so sincerely, but she could see in his face that he was expecting it would. That he was waiting to look at her and see that her whole reaction to him would be different. Maybe she should have questions. Maybe she should be more freaked out. But… A few months ago, she was just a poli sci graduate with little chance of doing anything with her life, and now she was settling in at SHIELD as a kickass liaison under the kickassiest super agent. Her former boss and current friend was creating a bridge between worlds and she was starting to think the boy she’d hired to replace her as Jane’s assistant was an underground cage fighter of some sort. Don’t even get her started on pre-SHIELD and the Norse God she tased. And now here she was, sitting on a swing next to Captain America… who was possibly still in love with a woman from the 40’s.

So she laughed, pushed off, and started swinging again. “Well, I think you give credit to the hot grandpa movement, if it’s any consolation…” She smiled, swinging back and forth. “Hey, you wanna go dancing with me tonight?” she wondered. “I was gonna take Jane out to karaoke but Peter said she had a breakthrough and, since I know you’re more of a jiving jazz type, I think I know a bar we could hit up. Real low key, good music, cheap drinks…” She raised an eyebrow. “You in?”

He stared at her, like he was both surprised and… not. She imagined she had that effect. “Uh, yeah, sure, I… I’d love to.”

“Cool,” she said, leaning back and smiling as she swung through the air. “I’ll snag Coulson’s company card off him and we’ll charge SHIELD, call it a field trip if anybody asks…”

Slowly, he shook his head at her, smiling. “Are there any rules you won’t break?”

“Just the ones I make for myself.”

“Is it a long list?” he wondered, beginning to swing next to her.

“Not long enough,” she sighed.

She added fall in love with a man already in love with someone else to her rules list and tried not to let the way he smiled at her make her heart flip so much.

On the walk back, she tucked her hands in her jeans pocket so she wouldn’t touch him; she had to be
firm with herself, after all.

And yeah, she knew taking him out dancing would test that. But she had no brain-to-mouth filter and she’d wanted to reassure him that he was still just Steve to her.

It was either going to be a phenomenal disaster or a terrible success.

…

“Run that by me again,” Jane said, pausing in her work.

“Steve is in love with someone else but I think I might have real feelings for him and not just the ’wanna get in your pressed pants’ kind of feels, and we’re going dancing tonight so I need to know if I should dress down, to remind myself that this is a no-go zone, or I should dress up to show him what he’s missing and maybe boost my confidence…”

She blinked at her.

Peter rolled across the room on his desk chair to admire both outfits Darcy was holding up. “How do you know he’s in love with someone else?” he wondered, raising an eyebrow skeptically.

“Because he basically said so, Peter Piper,” she snapped.

“He told you he was in love with someone…?” His eyes narrowed. “And then said yes when you asked him to go out dancing?”

She frowned. “He’s super polite and I don’t think he thought I meant like date-date, just… Y’know, two friends, dancing…” She shrugged. “Whatever, we had a heart-to-heart and I knew he was worried I didn’t think of him the same way, so I wanted to show him I did.”

“By taking him out dancing and possibly trying to make him regret that he’s in love with someone who isn’t you?” He shoved his glasses up the slope of his nose and frowned. “I don’t know, Darcy, I think maybe you heard him wrong.”

She deflated. “What do you mean, Genius-Boy?” she sighed.

“He means he thinks Steve likes you…” Jane stared up at her, brows hiked. “Like like-likes you.”

“What she said,” he agreed.

“Yeah, well, you weren’t there, so you didn’t see how he lit up when he talked about perfect, ballsy, shoot up the bad guy, Peggy, okay?” She waved the clothes at them. “So? Confident hottie or comfortable friend?”

Jane stood from her chair, frowned, and then walked right past her. “Come on…” She shrugged her lab coat off.

“Uh, where are you going?” Darcy wondered, staring in confusion.

“We are going shopping,” she declared, motioning between them. “We’ll get you something to wear for tonight that’ll make you feel awesome and him regretful but also walks the understated, ’didn’t even have to try’ line.”

Darcy lowered her arms. “Yeah?”

Jane smiled at her. “Yeah.”
“Well, who am I to pass up a shopping spree?” She dropped her clothes over the back of a chair and started for the door with Jane.

“Uh… I’ll just… wait here then,” Peter said.

Darcy snorted at him over her shoulder. “Don’t you have some pickled peppers to pick?”

He smirked. “Just a peck.”

She laughed in appreciation as she walked out the door.

…

As it turned out, Jane was an awesome shopping buddy. They tried a number of stores and, for a woman who hardly ever left her lab, Jane was surprisingly good at finding her way around New York. They settled on a killer red dress that hugged her body, with cap sleeves, fabric that crossed over her chest in a v-fashion to emphasize but still cover, a tiny ruffled waist-skirt that hailed back to another generation of fashion, and a square bow to top it. Lastly, she dropped way too much on a pair of black velvet platforms, and resolved to wear them every day to make them worth it.

“So what’s the deal?” Jane wondered as they sat outside of a coffee shop. She licked the foam from her top lip and raised a brow at Darcy. “You and Steve hang out almost every night.”

“Yes, I’ve officially moved up in the world to favorite person to watch reality TV with…” She rolled her eyes.

Jane reached over and squeezed her hand. “I don’t think that’s it…”

“Please don’t join Peter’s line of thinking and try to convince me that Captain Awesome wants me to be anything more…” She shook her head. “I have enough issues; this is just a really handsome, unattainable topper.”

She frowned. “What else is wrong?”

“How about my life? My entire existence thus far?” she complained.

Jane rolled her eyes. “Could you be more specific?”

She pouted, slumping down in her chair. “I haven’t called my mom.”

“So call her now.” She shrugged. “What’s the big deal?”

“No, I mean… I haven’t talked to her since right after I graduated…”

Jane’s eyes widened. “Darcy it’s been, like… months.” Her lips pursed. “Right?”

“Yes, Jane…” Her eyes rolled. “Despite the fact that you have completely lost contact with the stream of time, it has been months.”

“Does she even know you’re in New York?”

“Yeah, but only because my sister told her…” she admitted, shrugging one shoulder. “I just… didn’t know what to say…”

“Well, it’s good to start with ‘Hi’.”
“Sure, and I’ll add ‘Sorry it took me so long to call; you probably thought I was dead, but surprise!’” She offered a sarcastic thumbs-up.

Jane snorted. “What’s the deal with you and your mom anyway?”

“Nothing. Just everything I do is a disappointment. You know, totally normal stuff…” she trailed off, turning her eyes away.

“Oh.”

She frowned. “Don’t ‘oh’ me. I don’t want your sad, poor Darcy ‘oh,’” she muttered. “It wasn’t. I—”

“So what if my mom constantly thinks I’ll never do anything with my life and I keep proving her right, huh? Who cares if all she has to do is say my name a certain way and I feel like stepped on crap?” She threw her hands up. “Plenty of people have mom issues!”

Jane blinked. “Okay…”

“That’s right! It is okay!” She crossed her arms over her chest and sat back in her chair. “And I’m fine. F. I. N. E. Fine.”

“Yeah, you are,” a random man walking by called out.

“Oh shove it, asshole. Private conversation,” she snapped, rolling her eyes dismissively before turning back to Jane. “I’m all coffee’d out, you wanna head back to SHIELD?”

“Um, sure…” She stood up, drained her mug, and then picked up her own small bag of clothes she’d bought, at Darcy’s insistence.

As they started back toward HQ, Jane reached over and hugged Darcy around her shoulders. “I’m proud of you,” she said.

Darcy looked up at her, her throat tight. “What’s not to be proud of?” she joked, but her voice was choked with emotion, so it didn’t quite hit the right note.

Jane took pity on her and just smiled. “So how much is Steve Rogers going to wish you were his girlfriend tonight, right?” she said, changing the subject.

Darcy appreciated her for it and went with the new topic of conversation.

It happened to be one she quite enjoyed, in fact.

…

“On a scale of seven to ten, how much do you trust me?” Darcy said as she walked through his office door. “And before you ask, seven is a lot, ten is with your life.”

“I think the scale might need adjusting,” a voice that wasn’t Coulson’s answered.

Darcy blinked and then tipped her head at the man sitting behind Coulson’s desk. Immediately, Darcy was put on the defensive; she started searching the room for things she could use as a weapon, and really, Coulson’s office was a veritable torture chamber of pointy, deadly things.

The man across from her gave a chuckle. “Easy Killer, I’m not one of the bad guys…” He kicked his
feet up on the desk and stacked his hands on his stomach, adopting a pose Darcy often did when she was on the phone with her siblings, complete relaxation.

She thought she should be offended that he wasn’t the least bit worried about what she could do to him.

“Coulson doesn’t let just anyone behind his desk, guy wearing Kevlar like it’s in season.” She frowned at him. “And where is the oh-so-special agent if you’re a friend of his?”

He shrugged. “In a meeting.”

“Did Dolores let you back here?” She backed out the door to look for the secretary, but didn’t find her, and when she looked back, the smirking man was looking her up and down.

“Hey! This dress is not an every-man’s ogle,” she warned, pointing at him. “This has specific eyes waiting on it.”

He raised a skeptical brow. “You and Coulson?”

“Oh my God,” she sighed. “Is it so insane that maybe I just work for him? That maybe we’re just friends?” She put her hands on her hips. “Do boobs automatically mean tail to you jerks?”

He blinked at her. “I’m sorry?”

“I’m so tired of this male-ego bullshit. Coulson is my mentor; the Miyagi to my karate kid, okay?” Her eyes widened for emphasis. “And if you make a wax on, wax off sex joke, I will end you!”

His lips twitched. “You must be Darcy,” he finally said, nodding. “I almost didn’t recognize you…” His eyes narrowed. “You were in Puente Antiguo when Thor touched down.”

She frowned. “The hell do you know that?”

“Barton,” he introduced himself, before shoving off the desk and standing. “Agent Clint Barton, ma’am. I’m one of Coulson’s strays too.”

Her brows furrowed. “Did you just call me a dog?”

“You get riled easily, don’t you?”

She glared. “Are you saying I’m volatile?”

He chuckled, grinning. “You must really push his buttons…” He examined her thoughtfully. “Good. He needs that. He’s got too much stress in his life.” He started looking around then, as if he thought Coulson was nearby, watching or listening.

She wouldn’t put it past him.

“So you’re an agent?” she asked, eyeing him up and down. “You don’t look like the others.”

“I’m… special.”

“Gold star for you,” she scoffed.

His lips twitched. “There a reason you were looking for Coulson?”

“I believe she was hoping to borrow my company expense card,” the man in question suddenly
appeared at her back.

“Ninja,” she said, turning her head to see him, smirking when he offered a half-smile of acknowledgement. “So?” She held a hand out. “On a scale of seven to ten?”

He stared at her a long moment. “This is for your outing with Captain Rogers?”

She gave him a spin to show off her red dress. “What d’ya think?”

He raised an eyebrow. “He’s either a very lucky or very stupid man,” he admitted.

She grinned at him. “Won’t know ‘til the night’s out.” She winked at him.

Coulson dug into his jacket and pulled out his wallet. “You have a limit, Miss Lewis.” He handed over the shiny new card, freshly printed with her own name.

Her eyes were wide as she looked up at him. “Holy skittles! All for me?” she joked.

“You deserve it,” he said.

She frowned. “My tests aren’t until tomorrow, how do you know I’ll—” The look he gave her cut her off.

“You’ll do fine,” he assured. And then, with a knowing tilt to his lips, added, “F. I. N. E. Fine.”

She snorted. “Spy,” she said, like it was an insult, before she swept past him toward the door. She paused, looking over at the curious Barton. “Nice meeting ya,” she said, waving a hand.

“You too,” he returned, before turning his blank, stoic agent-face on Coulson.

Darcy rolled her eyes and walked away.

...

Steve had agreed to meet her outside of his gym, in part because not as many people frequented the area, which meant they wouldn’t get nearly as many curious stares.

Darcy fidgeted anxiously in the elevator, playing with the fabric around her waist, flattening the small bow, readjusting her bra. When the doors dinged open though, she put on her brave face and stepped off to meet him.

Her stomach flipped when she spotted him, his hair parted immaculately, his pants freshly pressed, and his buttoned shirt tucked in. He was talking to himself, pacing, waving one of his hands. And then he paused, and she smiled, because she knew it was her perfume. It always gave her away.

When he looked up, she watched as his eyes widened and his lips parted, brows hiked high on his forehead.

“Darcy, you… You look amazing…” He took a step toward her and then thrust forward a bouquet of flowers. “Here, uh… I… I got these for you.”

She smiled, her eyes falling to take in all the different kinds and colors. She’d never been a twelve, long-stem roses type; she liked the mix and match much better. She collected them into her hands and brought them up to breathe in; the scent was beautiful, and the soft petals and reaching baby’s breath tickled her face.
“Thanks,” she said, turning her eyes up to see him.

He smiled, nodding, and then offered her his elbow. “We’ll just stop at your room and then…” He eyed her searchingly. “If you’re ready?”

She swallowed thickly and stared into the bright blue of his eyes. “Yeah… I am.”

As they started toward the elevator, he said, “You know, for a second there, when I looked at you… I forgot what year I was in.”

Her smile faltered.

And Darcy remembered her rules list.

Off limits, she reminded herself. Steve Rogers was just a friend. And he was going to stay that way.
Part Seven

VII.

The bar was dim and smoky, with small round tables clustered together and small candles flickering on each one. Steve helped her with her jacket before they sat down. There was only a handful of patrons joining them, two of which were an older couple with white hair and matching wedding rings; they were cuddled in close, leaning on one another as a band finished out its set. There were two girls sharing a drink at another table, one held up a lit lighter to show her approval for the song choice. And a lone man sat near the back, writing in a journal.

The bartender brought them over the beers they’d asked for as they passed and for a moment Darcy just watched as Steve seemed to take in the atmosphere and the music and relax. She’d done a little Googling on the 20’s, 30’s and 40’s, wanting to be prepared, but she still didn’t feel like she had much of a handle on the era. She knew about the 40’s mostly from a WWII standpoint, and her political courses liked to focus on the propaganda spin they’d given Captain America. But one look at the real Steve Rogers and she knew that if he was involved, it was for the right reasons.

“You must miss it,” she said, eyeing his face. “I mean, it must really weigh on you… Everything the world used to be.”

“It wasn’t all better,” he admitted, picking at the label on his beer bottle. “But there were important things, people, that I left behind…” He nodded. “And I miss them.” He tipped his bottle back and took a long drink.

She watched as his throat worked, jumping with each swallow.

He looked far too handsome for her sanity. She’d never really gone for the clean-cut, boy next door type, but she could admit that might’ve had to do with rebelling too. Her mom would’ve been thrilled if she’d dated a nice guy instead of the tatted up, motorcycle riding, leather-wearing, bad boys she liked to associate with.

Then again…

“You have a bike, don’t you?” she asked.

“I do.” He nodded. “I like to work on it some days when SHIELD doesn’t need me to come in…” He frowned. “I use it in the city sometimes, but I’ve found the subway more accessible…”

“Yeah, traffic’s not fun out here,” she agreed. Smiling, she added, “You should take me for a ride some time…” She shrugged. “I have a thing for bikes.”

And, didn’t she. The first boy she slept with had a beautiful Harley. She was more in love with the bike than the boy, but one long ride later, wind whipping through her hair, and she’d been high on adrenaline, kissing him so hard she thought she’d cracked her teeth. One thing led to another and she’d had her first sexual encounter; sadly, it wasn’t nearly as good as the ride on the bike was.

“I’d like that,” he said, nodding.

“Tell me more about what it was like around here, when you were growing up,” she suggested, shifting in her seat to get comfortable.

Steve lit up, leaning his elbows on the table, and started a lengthy, mostly one-sided conversation
about Brooklyn and his childhood. And Darcy, who usually had the attention span of a squirrel, listened to everything he said. Maybe it was just his voice, which had a deep, almost hypnotic quality to it, or the animated way he waved his arms around, or how happy he looked when he talked about it or told stories about his ladies’ man of a friend, Bucky. But she perched her chin on her fist and she just watched him, how his eyes warmed up and his smile spread his lips, and the way his eyes wrinkled at the corners when he laughed.

“I… I’ve been talking forever,” he said. “If you let me keep going, I’ll give you my whole life’s story.”

She shrugged. “Would that be so bad?”

“It’s boring,” he assured.

“Maybe to you, since you lived it, but it’s a whole new world and it’s called Steve from where I’m sitting…” She grinned. “I like the way you talk.”

“I talk a certain way?” he wondered, brow furrowed.

“Kind of, I guess…” She shrugged. “Mostly I just meant your voice… You have an awesome voice.”

“Oh…” He smiled to himself, his eyes falling. “So… What about you then? Tell me about your family,” he suggested.

“Oh…” He smiled to himself, his eyes falling. “So… What about you then? Tell me about your family,” he suggested.

“Uh, well, I’ve got an older sister and a younger brother, Laney and Michael…” She nodded. “They’re… awesome.” She shrugged. “Laney’s funny and quirky and she’s obsessed with crime shows and books and when we were growing up she wanted to be a lawyer, so… She is.” Her eyes turned off. “She passed the bar last year and she’s been kicking bad-guy ass through the legal system since… Mom and dad couldn’t be happier.” She took a long drag of her beer. “And Michael is just…” She waved a hand. “The coolest kid ever. I mean, you can’t hate him; it’s impossible. He’s funny and smart and he took all the good genes, ‘cause he’s the handsomest guy I’ve ever seen. Well…” She waved a dismissive hand. “Until you. But, different, right? I mean, Mikey’s my brother, so, ew, but…” She trailed off; maybe the beer was already getting to her.

He grinned at her. “You sound close to them.”

“I am… I love them; they’re my peeps.” She nodded, drawing shapes in the condensation on the bottle.

“And your parents?”

“Uh, my dad’s the strong, silent type who loves fishing and thinks infomercials are the devil’s work… But I think that might partly because my mom will buy anything if it has a one-hundred-percent satisfaction or full refund guarantee…” She rolled her eyes.

He chuckled. “Are you close with your parents?”

Her lips pursed as she tried to think of a way to answer that. She wasn’t… not close to her parents, exactly. Her and her dad were tight when she was younger, before he had a real boy. Okay, so that was bitter. But sometimes, she thought he traded her in as soon as Michael came out, penis for all to see. He was a good guy, just hard to relate to after she hit puberty and didn’t look so much like a flat-chested tom-boy.

And her mom…
That was a basket of issues she preferred not to touch.

“We should dance,” she decided and stood from the table. She took his hand and dragged her up with her, pulling him toward the dance floor.

“Oh, I’m not very good,” he warned. “And I’m a little worried that if I step on your toes, I’ll break them.”

She snorted, put his arms around her waist and dropped her hands on his shoulders. “So don’t step on them.”

A girl sat at the piano and the tune that filtered out almost made Darcy pause, but she pasted on a smile and looked up at Steve. “It’s just a side to side sway, all right? I’m not expecting fancy footwork here.”

He smiled uncertainly and turned his eyes down at their feet worriedly.

_It's not the pale moon…_
_That excites me…_
_That thrills and delights me…_
_Oh no…_
_It's just the nearness of you…_

They shuffled, left and right, slowly pressing in closer, until he couldn’t see his feet and instead had to look her in the face.

His fingers twitched on her sides and very slowly began to make their way around to her back.

She smoothed her hands up his shoulders to the nape of his neck and felt his hair brush over her palms, soft and light.

_It isn't your sweet conversation…_
_That brings this sensation…_
_Oh no…_
_It's just the nearness of you…_

Darcy’s hips finally met his and she felt his hands, which seemed so large, rub up and down her back slowly, spanning over her shoulder blades and then back down to the flare of her hips, the tips of his fingers reaching down over the ruffled skirt, lingering just before the curve of her backside before making a sweep back up, this time a little harder, his hands feeling heavier.

_When you're in my arms…_
_And I feel you…_
_So close to me…_

She wanted him to go back down, to cup her and lift her so she could wrap her legs around his waist and bury her fingers in his hair and kiss those lips that were so full and pink. She wanted to strip off the wrinkle-free clothes and drag her nails down his skin, sink then in as he pushed her dress out of the way and pulled her black lace underwear to her ankles. She’d unzip the dress but it would pool at her waist and he’d bury his face at her chest, and—

_All my wildest dreams came true…_
_I need no soft lights to enchant me…_
_If you would only grant me the right…_
_To hold you ever so tight…_
His fingers slid up over the top of her dress and she felt the pads grazing the nape of her neck. Her breath stuttered out of her. He speared his fingers into her hair and her head tipped back. Her body flattened against his, half of her own volition, and half because he gave her just a gentle pull and there wasn’t much space between them to fill in the first place.

She wondered, briefly, if that was his heart or hers that was pounding so hard. She thought she could feel his against her but in the same moment she could hear hers in her ears.

And then he was leaning down; down, down, down.

And she lifted up on her tip-toes; up, up, up.

*And to feel…
*In the night…
*The nearness of you…*

Her eyes were half-lidded when the tip of his nose brushed hers but they fell completely at the barest touch of his lips. She squeezed the back of his neck as his mouth settled over hers, and curved her arm around his shoulder as she held him close. He tasted like beer and toothpaste and he smelled like the leather of his jacket and the woodsy cologne he wore.

His lips were firm; while Steve could be shy, even bashful sometimes, he was by no means hesitant. She imagined he didn’t really have time to be. With the war, having to be the leader of his group, he had to make the decisions, good or bad, and he had to own them. So here he was, presented with her, and he could either go in, with all cylinders firing or he could half-ass it. Darcy appreciated the approach he chose.

For as long as Darcy had known Steve, she’d been attracted to him; that boiled over in the moment. What could’ve been a simple, sweet kiss, turned into mouths slanting together, teeth scraping over lips, tongues licking, soothing, flicking, tangling. And hands; hands gripping at clothes and digging into skin, pulling her up until she was off the ground a few inches, making a squeak of surprise but quickly distracted by the way he suckled her bottom lip and his teeth bit down on it. Moved by the way his fingers danced over her neck and through her hair, how they pressed insistently at the small of her back, as if he wanted to take her into himself, fuse them entirely.

The piano faded away and was replaced by another song, but Darcy could hardly tell what it was. She could barely tell the difference between the beat of the music and the staccato of her heart. It was just panting breaths traded between parted, swollen mouths, and his body, so hard and firm and large, making her feel tiny in the best kind of way.

And when the struggle for air started to burn, she pressed her lips away from his, mouthed over his jaw, the faint whiskers tickling her lips, and she pulled his hair, his head dragged a few inches to the right, and she kissed her way down his neck, suckling and scraping his teeth over his skin. His cologne smelled stronger here and just as heady. Again, she thought of how it would feel, his large hands dragging her underwear down and shoving her dress up.

She felt her feet hit the floor gently; he was leaning into her now instead of pulling her up to his level, and his hand skirted down her hip, spread over her thigh, squeezing, his finger pressed into the curve of her butt meeting her thigh. If her dress weren’t so tight, she’d happily lift her knee and wrap it around his hip, feel his fingers wander over her skin, trace the underside, the inside, bury between her legs.

His hand was gripping her hair and he dropped his head to her shoulder. And she felt as his lips pressed a soft kiss at where her sleeve finished, his smooth lips touching her skin. And her dirty
thoughts morphed into something more sensual, more intimate, to a lazy Sunday in bed, with roaming mouths and hands and teasing, a warm thrum of constant arousal kept at a certain enjoyable pitch. And she realized she’d never really had that; with all the men she’d dated before, it was never so close, never soft or sweet. But Steve… She thought he could be both. He could be the push and pull and quick stripping of clothing, meeting half-way, pressed against a wall or over a desk, wherever they could get it. And he could also be the slow, tender lover who lingered and enjoyed, spending hours exploring.

Her knees shook with the revelation but she couldn’t tell if it was with anticipation or fear.

She rubbed her lips together and stared at his neck, already bruising from her mouth. “We should get out of here,” she murmured.

He lifted his head to look at her, brow furrowed.

She reached up and pressed a quick kiss to his lips. “C’mon, Stud,” she teased, with a smile. “Much as I’m having fun, I do have a test to write tomorrow and… We stick around and we’ll probably start breaking public decency laws…”

He flushed red, cleared his throat, and nodded. But he didn’t let go right away, instead he rubbed his hands over the small of her back and moved to her side, his arm around her waist. He helped her with her jacket and they paused at the bar to pay for their drinks before they left.

They caught a cab back to HQ, sitting in silence but pressed in tight to each other’s sides. She rested her head against his shoulder and watched the city move by outside the window, refusing to let that niggling ‘What about your rule?’ problem make itself known.

She played with the zipper on his leather jacket and breathed in the smell of it mixing with him. His fingers ran up and down her back and played with her hair. She thought she could get used to it; too used to it.

When he climbed out, he offered a hand back to help her and she felt the dull ache of not being good enough flash through her.

Here was Steve, basically the shining endorsement for all things ‘good’ and then there was her, who’d originally bought the fantastic dress she was wearing to show him what he was missing out on.

If they were on someone’s shoulder, she’d be the devil and he’d be the angel. It just… wouldn’t work.

Deflated, she hugged her arm around him tighter and refused to look up at him.

He walked her to her room and when she detangled, he smiled down at her. “I had a really great time,” he told her.

She nodded. “Me too. I, uh…” She let her hair fall over her shoulder, half-shielding her face.

He reached forward and brushed it back, tucking as much of it as he could behind her ear. “You should get some sleep. You’ll want to be well rested for your test.”

She nodded. “Me too. I, uh…” She let her hair fall over her shoulder, half-shielding her face.

He reached forward and brushed it back, tucking as much of it as he could behind her ear. “You should get some sleep. You’ll want to be well rested for your test.”

She looked up at him, looking sweet and genuine and totally not expecting that their hot make-out would lead to amazing sex.

She frowned. All she wanted to do was ask him what the hell he even saw in her, but they were
having this moment and it was one of those things she wanted to hold on to when it all blew up in her face. So she just leaned up and kissed him, soft and short, running her thumb over his cheek. She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and shrugged. “For luck,” she said, before turning and opening her door.

When she looked back at him over her shoulder, he was smiling, watching her from the corner of his eyes.

“Night Steve.”

“Goodnight Darcy,” he returned, nodding before he turned and left.

She closed her door and leaned back on it, letting out a long sigh and closing her eyes.

After she kicked her shoes off and unzipped her dress, she crawled into her bed, gathered up the bouquet of flowers still in their wrapping, and hugged them, breathing in their sweet scent.

She plucked two petals from a sunflower and let them drop down to her bedspread. “He loves her, he loves me not…” she muttered. “Story of my life.”

...

Darcy was surprisingly awake the next morning, considering she spent most of her night picking apart every last thing that had happened, trying to find a reason.

Why would he kiss her? Why, when he still talked about Peggy like she was the be all, end all of his life? Why would he dance with her like he did or hold her or—or look at her like that if he was still in love with someone else?

Darcy’s insecurities played havoc with her emotions and she struggled to understand if she was overthinking things. If it’d just been a ‘caught up in the moment’ kind of thing. If she was completely misinterpreting his signs or his feelings or just everything, like she’d always done. Jumping the gun, to conclusions, assuming the best of the worst people and the worst of the best people.

She lay in her bed, squeezing her phone, wishing she could call her mom and have her tell her what she needed to do. Even if it was just that disapproving sigh of hers, it would turn her in the right direction. It would turn her in some direction, at least.

But instead, she turned over onto her side and she fingered the loose petal that still clung to her sheet, and wished she was as smart as people kept telling her she was. She wished she could just fix herself and be perfect and be enough.

When she woke, she went to her classes and she wrote her tests, letting herself get lost in conjugating and customs and that part of her brain that had collected everything her teachers said and filed it away as important. She walked out feeling like she’d just aced it all, worthy of a Rocky jumping cheer. Instead, she realized that the following week she’d be joining Coulson on her first ‘outing’ as his aid or assistant or whatever.

Panic welled up inside her but she didn’t know what to do or who to talk to or where to go.

Before, she’d always drifted. Back home, if she screwed up and wanted to get away, she’d climb the tree in her backyard and sit on the branches, stare up at the sky as it grew darker and darker and the day that she’d ruined would disappear entirely. And in college, she’d just… changed majors, moved on, tried something else. But here, at SHIELD, she’d felt like running away and she hadn’t. She’d felt like she was losing control, but she held on, she kept trying.
She started moving, weaving in and out of people, hurrying down hallways, but she didn’t know where she was going until she was there.

“…"

“I noticed your company card wasn’t maxed out last night,” Coulson said in greeting.

Darcy slumped into the chair across from him and folded her legs underneath her. “Can I ask you something?”

“As long as it doesn’t have to do with my love life or confidential information, sure,” he replied, closing a file in front of him and resting his clasped hands on top of it. He gave her his full attention and waited patiently.

“When you came to get me, was it really because Jane needed an assistant? Or did you always know you wanted me for this position?”

He was quiet a moment, contemplative. “I knew I wanted you.”

She shook her head slowly. “What did I do in Puente Antiguo?”

He shrugged. “I had a feeling.”

“What are you, Gibbs now?” she scoffed.

His lips twitched. “Darcy, I looked into you when I realized something was happening in New Mexico. I looked into everyone involved. But something in your transcript jumped out at me.”

“The lack of motivation in my life? My crap ability to grow up? My consistent failure at being a normal person? What?” she exclaimed, throwing her hands up.

“You were lost,” he said, nodding. “But you made yourself lost.”

“How is that a good job recommendation?” She felt the tears dribble from her eyes and angrily wiped them at them with the back of her hands. “I am a mess! I’m a stupid kid who you all seem to think is a lot more capable than she actually is!” She shook her head. “So what if I can speak a bunch of languages or if I know how not to offend foreign politicians or if it came down to me and a relatively strong but totally average person, I could beat them up! I—I’m just some dumb kid who has never done anything right and who will consistently make the wrong choice!” She stabbed a finger through the air. “Only now, I’ll have the security of the whole frickin’ country on my hands when I do it!”

He didn’t so much as flinch at her rising tone or her waving hands or her gulping, heaving breaths. Instead, he pulled open the drawer of his desk, took out an envelope, and slid it over to her.

“What’s this? My letter of resignation?” she snorted.

He didn’t answer, so she picked it up and flipped open the top.

Inside was a plane ticket, only this one wasn’t marked like the last one he’d given her.

This one was marked for home, and it was to leave that day.

“You’re sending me home?” she said, her voice sounding hollow, cracked.

“You need to go back, Darcy…” He stared at her sincerely. “Because as long as you’re still living
there in your head, you’re not going to survive here.”

She swallowed thickly. “You learn that on Dr. Phil?”

“I TiVo it and watch it when Supernanny is on hiatus,” he returned, lips curved up at the corners.

She rubbed her cheeks clear of her tears. “Y’know, she might kill me… You might have to find a replacement.”

“I’m not sure anybody could quite live up to the standard you’ve set …” He smiled. “And you haven’t even technically started working yet.”

She grinned, a laugh escaping her. “You’re welcome.”

He shook his head. “I’ll expect you back next Tuesday… We’re leaving Wednesday morning and I’ll need my new assistant with me.”

She sniffled, nodding at him. “Okay.” She pushed up out of her chair and started for the door.

“And Darcy?”

She looked back.

“You might not see your own potential…” He raised an eyebrow. “But I wouldn’t have hired you unless you were the best possible candidate.”

A small smile crossed her mouth. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, Son of Coul.” She shot a finger-gun at him and walked out, tucking her plane ticket in the back pocket of her jeans.

Taking a deep breath, she tried not to freak out that she’d be going home to face a woman who would no doubt spend the next few days either screaming at or giving her the silent treatment.

She wasn’t sure which was worse.

...

“Well, I think it’s about time,” Jane said.

Darcy rolled her eyes and spun in her chair. “Thank you. You’re such a big help.”

“What did you want me to say, Darcy?” she sighed.

“That you’d hide in my luggage and come with me or, I dunno, go in my place or something!” she exclaimed.

“I’d go, but I don’t think I have the necessary requirements,” Peter piped in.

Darcy snorted. “No, but my brother would love you… If he didn’t already love a floppy haired boy with hipster glasses.”

“Peter, you should probably avoid her until she’s not mean anymore,” Jane warned.

“That wasn’t mean! Jack wears seriously hipster glasses and they look exactly like Peter’s. It’s an obser-freaking-vation.”

“Okay…” Jane sighed, pushing back from her desk. “What is this about? Is this about going home to
“see your mom or about your date with Steve or is it something else?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Steve and I kissed,” she answered, squeezing her eyes shut.

“What?”

“Told you so,” Peter sighed.

“Shut up Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater,” Darcy muttered, sulking.

“Why are we sad about this? This is awesome!” Jane reminded happily. “Darcy, you’ve liked him since he came in here all, ‘save the girl from her cramp!’” She grinned. “And now he likes you and you kissed and…” She shrugged. “Well that’s all I really know, so… Fill in the blanks.”

“He told me about his childhood and I talked about my family and then we danced, partly because he wanted to know if I was close to my parents and I didn’t want to open that can of words and the next thing I know we’re practically eating each other’s faces and there’s hands everywhere and… I panicked and realized that I was gonna fall for him and he’d still be hung up on Peggy and then it’d just be one more thing to add to the growing pile of crap that my life is getting closer and closer to becoming…” She slumped in her chair. “Oh God, kill me now, put me out of my misery…”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she admonished. “Look, whatever happened with this Peggy woman is over… Obviously, he cares about you and he wants to see where it goes.” She shrugged. “I mean, if he wanted to be with Peggy, he would be, right?”

Darcy moaned dramatically in pain.

“What? What’d I say?”

“Peter, be a friend and just smother me…” She cracked an eye to look at him beseechingly. “Make it quick. Satan doesn’t like to wait.”

“Oh, enough,” Jane said. “Come on, I’ll help you pack.” She walked toward her, grabbed the back of her chair, and started dragging it toward the door.

Darcy frowned. “Why do you wanna get rid of me so bad, huh?”

“This is for your own good,” she assured.

“Ten bucks says she makes a break for it before you get to her room,” Peter called as they left.

Darcy tried to run when they reached the elevator, but Jane anticipated her.

For such a small woman, she really could tackle.

... 

Darcy found him in his gym; her bags were packed and the plane was leaving in a few hours. Jane has repeatedly told her how lame it would be for her to leave and not at least let him know. Regardless of how she was freaking out, he wasn’t privy to her crazy mind, so… Deciding not to be a douche, she headed down to the old boxing gym and found him poised for a fight and jabbing so hard at the bag she wouldn’t be surprised if the chains snapped and it broke open on the floor… again.

She considered for a moment how she was going to bring it up, but then decided subtlety wasn’t exactly her forte.
“So I’m leaving town.”

Steve paused, his fists still raised, the punching bag swinging back and knocking into him. He turned to look at her, surprised to find her leaning against the wall near the door. She’d kept her distance so her perfume wouldn’t alert him.

“I… What?”

She shifted her feet. “I, uh… I’m taking off for a few days… Heading back home for clarity or something.” She shrugged, swinging her hands in front of her and rubbing them together. “I’ll be back Tuesday, but… I have to leave again Wednesday morning because me and Coulson are heading off to do top secret spy stuff…” She wiggled her fingers in the international sign of ‘spooky magic,’ which yeah, didn’t exactly mean the same thing but whatever.

He nodded to himself, gaze searching the floor, brow furrowed. “So… But this… I—I mean this isn’t because we kissed, right?” He swallowed and looked over at her. “You’re not… I don’t know, regretting it or something…? Are you?”

“No, I… It’s…” She sighed and dropped her chin to her chest. “Listen, I…” She swallowed and shook her head. “I’m not the kind of woman that you want to date.”

He frowned, opening his mouth to argue.

“No, really, I… I’m a mess.” She threw her hands up. “I’m going home because I haven’t talked to my mom in like, two or three months. I— I was scared to because she’s the only one in my life who constantly reminds me that all I’ve ever done is made bad choices and ruined good opportunities. I’ve frequently run away from anything good in my life. I always get in trouble, I talk back, I get into physical fights with people if they offend me or somebody I care about. I—I am weird and loud and I talk too much and I will bring you down with me because that’s all I do. I ruin things. I ruin really good things. And you don’t deserve that. Because you are so nice and sweet and funny and handsome and—and when I kissed you it was like—like I was just h-home and I haven’t felt that, ever and I… I won’t hurt you, okay? Being with me would hurt you, so…” She blinked furiously.

“So I’m going to go home and I’m going to let my mom break down everything I’ve screwed up since the day I was born and when I come back, I’ll be Coulson’s super-assistant and we probably won’t even see each other anymore and you can find some nice, sweet, normal girl who isn’t so lost. Or— Or somebody more like Peggy, I—I don’t know. Whatever makes you happy, I guess.” She threw a hand up. “So…”

She nodded and started for the door, before pausing, turning around, and telling him, “And just, I know it doesn’t hold much weight anymore, but… You have so much to give, Steve… I know you miss those people in your past and that world that you grew up in, but there are so many awesome things you could do and people you could meet if you let yourself… If you showed them the guy that I got to know.”

He stared down at his hands, playing with the tape wrapped around them, grinding his teeth.

“Bye,” she whispered before turning and running away, holding her breath to stop herself from crying.

The tears spilled anyway.
“Get in loser, we’re going home,” she heard.

Darcy rolled her eyes as she turned around, her duffel bag over her shoulder. “Seriously?” She approached Michael’s car and climbed in. “Mean Girls?”

He grinned. “Nice to see you too.” He leaned over and hugged her, squeezing her tight.

Darcy melted, wrapping her arms around her brother and sighing into his shoulder. “I missed you.”

“Missed you too, jerk.”

When he tried to pull back, she held on tighter.

“Darce?”

She shook her head. “I’m an idiot.”

“Not gonna argue,” he admitted, rubbing her back. “But what happened this time?”

She sniffled. “Nothing… Everything…” She squeezed her eyes shut. “Ugh, why do I always screw up good things, Mikey?”

“I don’t know. Fear?” He snorted. “We all screw up sometimes.”

“Yeah,” she scoffed. “Not as much as me.”

“You’re just harder on yourself,” he argued, pulling back and looked down at her searchingly. “Seriously, Darce… Mom sighs and you read a million little things she’s nitpicking about you, but she didn’t say anything…”

Her eyes widened. “She didn’t have to!”

“Because you’re doing it for her! You’ve already picked out everything you did wrong; you gave it a rank and put it in alphabetical order.” He shook his head. “You’re an awesome person. You’re funny and smart and one of the coolest people I’ve ever known.”

“Well, that just proves you’re sheltered,” she muttered, turning around in her seat and crossing her arms over her chest. “Now can you sneak me home?”

He sighed, rolled his eyes, and pulled away from the curb. “You don’t think they’ll notice when you’re hanging out in your old bedroom?”

“I’ll keep the door shut and be extra quiet.” She shrugged.

“You’re an idiot,” her brother sighed.

“We’ve established this! Now drive!”

…
The tree in their backyard was insanely tall.

Or, okay, it was crazy tall when she was a kid, now it was just an average tree of average height. And older.

“Lookin’ good,” she told it, patting the scratchy bark. “Season’s treatin’ ya well, huh?” She nodded. “Yeah, you’re lookin’ a little sparse in the leaves area, but it’s cool. I hear that’s in these days…”

She took a look around her yard even though she knew nobody was home. Even Michael had taken off, having a date with Jack. Darcy hiked up her jeans a little so they wouldn’t be too confining and started to climb. It wasn’t as easy as when she was a kid, or she wasn’t as limber, whatever. But eventually she reached the top, or as close to it as she could get without breaking a few tree branches. She’d put on a little weight since she was younger, though most of it lately was muscle mass.

The tree still curved to her though, which she appreciated. It was scratchy at her back, but firm and strong and it smelled like childhood. She rested her head back and stared up at the blue sky, scattered with clouds.

She couldn’t count how many times as a kid she’d climbed this tree. To escape, to calm down, to be alone, to run away from trouble. More often than not it was because she’d done something and she knew she was going to get yelled at, so she climbed her tree, shrouded by branches, and waited for it to be over, for the panic to recede, for her parents to hopefully cool off.

“So I’ve got this job… This really amazing job, actually…” The wind whistled through the branches and a few more leaves detached, falling to the ground below, collecting with their brothers and sisters. “Okay, so I haven’t actually started it yet, but I know it’s going to be amazing… Like, everything I could ever want. I’ll get to travel and meet new people and I’ll do something that changes the world, y’know? Maybe even saves it…”

She nodded, biting her lip. “But I’m afraid that if I do this, I’m not going to be good at it or… I’m going to disappoint someone. Like Coulson…” She swallowed. “He’s so badass, right? I mean he could stare you down and you’d wilt!” She hugged her arms around herself. “And he believes in me. Like legitimately thinks I’m going to be awesome and… what if he’s wrong? What if I turn out to be the worst mistake he’s ever made?”

She gnawed at her lip. “And then I have to come back here and tell my mom that I failed… again.” She snorted. “Even though this job was basically tailor made for me! Like how much more pathetic could I get, right?” She laughed emotionally before it petered out on a sigh. “You’re so non-judgemental, Tree… This is why we’ll be bros for life.” She patted her hand down against the branch beneath her and finally closed her eyes and just relaxed, letting the fresh air surround her.

She watched as the sun went down and the sky bled slowly to black. She waited until the stars started to appear, like tiny fireflies, far out of reach. And then she climbed down from the tree and keyed in the security code. She was exhausted, partly from the flight and partly just from her life in general. She snuck upstairs to her room, tip-toeing as she went. She could hear her brother’s TV going and the one in her parent’s room too, so she knew they were probably settling down for the night.

Dinner was long put away and her stomach gave a rumble. She figured she’d wait another hour for them to be knocked out and then go downstairs and fix herself a plate. She glanced once back at her parent’s door and then reached for the handle on hers, pushing it open slowly and taking a step inside.

Her light was on, which was weird.
Even weirder, her mom was sitting on her bed, hugging her pillow.

She was dressed for bed in her favorite terrycloth bathrobe, her hair was tied up off her face, which was scrubbed clean of make-up, making her seem even older.

When the door closed behind her, it alerted Lorna Lewis that somebody else was with her. She reached up to swipe at her eyes, sniffled, and then turned to face them. But she paused when she saw Darcy, her brows furrowed. “Darcy?!” She climbed from the bed, tossing the pillow back. “What—What are you doing here?”

“Uh… Surprise?” She offered an awkward smile.

Sighing, her mother’s shoulders fell and she shook her head. “What happened?”

Her lips pursed. “Nothing. I can’t come home and visit?”

Her eyes widened. “You haven’t returned any of my phone calls for the last two months!”

“Oh, so I was busy…” She shuffled her feet and yanked her sleeves down to the tips of her fingers before rubbing her hands together. “I got a job in New York; I’ve been training for the position, I didn’t have a whole lot of down time.”

Her mother raised a skeptical brow before nodding. “Well? Don’t I get a hug?”

Rolling her eyes, Darcy crossed the room and wrapped her arms around her mother, who was the same height and general build as her. She smelled like facial cream and toothpaste. Darcy couldn’t help but smile and squeeze her a little tighter. Yeah, they had their differences, but her mom was still her mom.

“Hey, what were you doing in here?” she wondered.

“Hm?” Her mom shook her head. “Oh, your father was watching some silly show on TV. I just needed to get away…”

“Oh…” She frowned. “Living room too far for you?”

“We should change the sheets on your bed,” Lorna said dismissively. “Nobody’s used this room since you went away to school…” She stepped back from her, tightened the rope of her robe, and started for the door. “I’ll grab everything; you strip the bed.”

Darcy saluted her, snapping her heels together.

She rolled her eyes as she left.

Doing as she was told, she pulled back the blankets and the sheet and took off each of the pillow cases too, since her mom was thorough. A few minutes later, her mom returned with a stack, everything carefully folded. “There…” She put her hands on her hips. “You’ll be staying for breakfast?”

“I was hoping to stay until Tuesday, so preferably any and all meals during…” She shrugged. “I can help. I still remember how to cook.”

Her lips pursed as if she didn’t think so, but she nodded. “Sure, you can help me with breakfast tomorrow.’

“Coolio.” She nodded and started dressing her pillows. “Uh, well, thanks… I’ll see you in the
morning…”

“Sure…” Lorna turned back to the door. “Have a good sleep.”

“You too.”

After the door closed, she threw her head back and sighed.

It was going to be a long week.

…

“Hey Munchkin,” her dad greeted her the next morning, kissing the top of her head.

“Sup daddio,” she returned, picking at the bowl of blueberries on the counter in front of her. “Pancake?”

“Please.”

“No butter!” her mother shouted from somewhere in the house.

“I won’t tell if you don’t,” her father said, accepting the plate and digging out a knife-full of butter so slather on top.

Darcy grinned, and piled on a few strips of bacon, strictly on the ‘not for dad’ list.

“I know you’re cheating,” her mom called again with a sigh.

“I’m highly offended,” her dad said through a mouthful of bacon. “I take my health very seriously.”

“You have butter on your chin,” her mom said, appearing at his side to hand him a paper towel.

“Thank you, dear.”

Darcy rolled her eyes, smiled to herself, and reached for another handful of blueberries.

“So, Darcy, what do you have planned for today?” her mother wondered, taking a seat next to her husband.

She shrugged. “Catching up on sleep, mostly,” she admitted.

She had to admit, the idea of crawling back into bed seriously appealed to her. She’d been getting up at the ass crack of morning every day since she started at SHIELD and she wanted a break.

“Don’t be silly. You can come shopping with me,” her mother decided. “We have a few groceries to pick up and then…” She eyed her up and down. “Maybe we’ll get you some new clothes.”

“I can buy my own clothes, mom,” she sighed. “I got these from a second-hand shop a few blocks from my… apartment.”

“That’s nice, but you’re living in New York, you’ve got a new job, so why don’t we get you something nice? Like a power suit!” she suggested, nodding.

Her dad was giving her the ‘just go with it’ face, and Darcy bit her tongue. She flipped another pancake and wondered how long it would be before she started hiding in her tree again.

“Oh, did you hear? That lovely Carla North is getting married!” her mom told her. “Isn’t that
wonderful, Darcy?"

Oh God, she was already starting on the ‘settle down and give me grandbabies’ talk.

She was in her tree before sundown.

...

Darcy actually didn’t like golfing. She found it boring. But she was willing to do just about anything to get away from her mom, including taking her dad up on his offer of a day at the golf course.

“Your mother’s happy to see you home,” her dad said, looking through his bag of golf clubs.

And seriously, how many did one person need? This was why Darcy liked putt-putt; there was only one and it never changed.

“Yeah, I’m sure she’s singing my praises,” Darcy muttered.

“She’s missed you…” He took a preparatory swing, as if testing it, and then replaced the club he held with another. “It’s not like you not to call…” He eyed her. “Is there something you want to talk about?”

“Besides the half-alien baby I gave up for adoption out of terrible, terrible shame?” she asked with a straight face.

“Besides that,” he said, unmoved by her snark.

He’d obviously gotten better while she was gone; or Michael was overdoing it.

Sighing, she shrugged. “Nope. Nothing to tell. Just working and stuff.”

He hummed before finally moving to take his place, placing the ball and its pick in the ground. “You know, Darcy… You always had a tell as a child.”

Her eyebrow quirked. “I did?”

“Yep…” He got into formation, something Darcy never had the patience to learn. “Besides climbing your tree, you used to fidget with your hands, when you were upset or you were lying.”

She looked down and saw she was tugging on the sleeves of her shirt. “Habit.”

He nodded, smiling to himself. “You know where I am if you ever wanna talk,” he said.

“Hiding on the golf course, eating fast food in your little cart and brushing your teeth so mom won’t find out?”

He pointed at her. “Exactly.”

She grinned.

Sometimes, her dad was flawless.

And other times…

“You still need to talk to your mother.”

She frowned. “Lame…”
For the most part, over the next few days, aside from the first where she took Darcy shopping for so long her blisters had blisters, her mom stayed busy with various volunteering and charity works she had on the go, and her brother split his time between her, work, and Jack. Every morning she got up and helped her mom prepare breakfast while they shared idle chit-chat about nothing in particular, steering carefully clear of anything important.

And then her mom asked her, “So are you seeing anyone?”

She frowned, focusing on the eggs she was cracking. They’d be having veggie omelets for breakfast and she was put on egg duty while her mother was currently at the chopping board with three peppers; red, green, and yellow.

“Uh… Not… really…” she answered, digging into the bowl to try and catch a stray chunk of shell.

“What is ‘not really’?” Lorna wondered. “You’re either dating or you aren’t.” She raised an eyebrow. “Do you have a special man in your life?” She paused. “Or woman. Whichever.”

“There’s a guy… Steve…” She shook her head. “But it didn’t really… work out.”

“But he’s still an option?”

She paused. “No.”

“Of course he is.” Her mother half-smiled as she continued chopping. “If he wasn’t, you wouldn’t have mentioned him.”

“I mentioned him because he was the last person I went on a date with and because… I like him, I just…” She frowned. “Never mind. It’s stupid.”

She scoffed. “You think I’ve never been stupid over a boy? How do you think I met your father?”

“Ew, I prefer to think you and dad procreated in a very unconventional way… By wishing and praying for perfect children and then having us appear into existence.”

Lorna rolled her eyes. “Tell me about Steve. What’s he like?”

Darcy bit her lip, finally fishing out the shell and wiping it off on a paper towel. “I dunno, he’s… Sweet. And funny, but like, unexpectedly… And he’s handsome and warm and he’d do anything for anyone, he’s just that kind of person… Like Timmy’s in a well and Steve would find a way to get him out.” Her eyes widened for emphasis. “And he’s… He makes me feel like I’m the most interesting person he’s everknown, which is weird but nice.”

“Why is it weird?” Lorna frowned. “Of course you’re interesting. Why wouldn’t he find you interesting?”

She glanced at her, eyebrow raised. “How about the fact that I’m a train wreck?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Darcy,” she dismissed. “You’re so dramatic sometimes.”

“Call it a coping mechanism,” she muttered, grabbing up the whisk.

“Coping mechanism for what?” her mother demanded. “You had a wonderful life; you might’ve made it difficult from time to time, but it all turned out well in the end.”
“Why do you do that?” she sighed, throwing her head back and glaring at the ceiling.

“What?”

“It’s like you can’t compliment me without insulting me… Like being nice to be is too hard so you have to balance it out…” She shook her head. “Why can’t you just say what you really think?”

Lorna paused, put her knife down, and wiped her hands on a tea towel. “And what is it you think I think, Darcy?”

She stared at the counter a long moment, her hands fisted. “Just forget about it. It's not worth it. Forget I even brought it up.” She wiped her hands off and started to walk away.

“Stop.”

Sighing, she listened.

“Look at me.”

Darcy turned slowly, staring at a spot over her mother’s shoulder.

“Explain.”

She ground her teeth together. “My whole life…” Her voice gave out.

Lorna circled the island and took a seat on the bar stools on the other side. She pushed out a seat and patted it to ask Darcy to join her.

Swallowing back the lump of emotion in her throat, Darcy walked over and climbed up, fiddling with her fingers for a long moment. “I… You…” She blew out a heavy breath. “I’m never good enough,” she finally managed in a choked whisper. “For you.”

Lorna’s brow furrowed tightly. “What?”

“I just… All I ever remember is you being disappointed in me…” She shifted in her seat. “Don’t do that Darcy. God, Darcy, why can’t you be normal? What trouble did you get into now? Why do you have to be so difficult? Why can’t you just stop fighting? And be quiet? And be smarter? And be like your sister or your brother or anybody but you?”

“Darcy, I…” Her mother stared at her searchingly. ‘I never meant it like that…”

“How else was I supposed to take it?”

“I… I thought…” She blew out a breath and shook her head. “You were so headstrong growing up and I—I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know how to talk to you, how to get you to just… Not— Not be normal, but… I didn’t know how to talk to you. You weren’t like the others. You were always so smart and you just had all of these big ideas! You wanted to stand up for everyone and save the world and you wanted to climb trees at all hours of the day and night…” She shook her head. “I had all of these people telling me that you were different and you shouldn’t be and I didn’t know what else to do except… I—I just wanted you to fit in and be happy and be loved. I didn’t know you’d feel the opposite.”

“I never fit in… And I was okay with that!” She stared at her, her eyes wide and stinging. “Because I fit in now. I— I found the right place and the right people and I’m not lonely anymore and I just… I can’t be, y’know? Because as soon as I get comfortable, I feel like I can hear you in my head, telling
me everything I’ve ever done, everything I ever liked was wrong. So this has to be wrong. Even if it feels rights, it’s going to blow up in my face because I always screw it up!”

“I didn’t—I—I never…” She stopped, closed her mouth, and finally took in a deep breath. “Darcy, you are an amazingly bright woman… Despite everything, despite anything I said or—or how I tried to change you, you were so resilient…” She closed her eyes and took a moment to breathe. “You always knew what you wanted and how to get it and… I admired that.”

“But I don’t. I don’t know what I want!” She threw her hands up. “I thought I wanted interior design and I sucked at it. I thought I wanted to be a translator but as soon as I got a chance to be, I ran. And now I’m here and I’ve got this really cool job that I know could be the greatest thing I’ll ever do but every time I get close to doing it, I pull back. And I—I just need you to tell me what to do. I need you to tell me this is it or it isn’t it or something. I need something!”

She shook her head. “I can’t make that choice for you…”

“Why?” She laughed. “You made every other choice!”

“And I was wrong.” She reached for her and took her hands, squeezing them. “I was wrong to take that choice from you. I should’ve listened to you when you said you wanted to climb trees and wear overalls and play sports. I should’ve listened when you told me that you wanted to be a superhero or the president or walk on the moon. I should’ve listened when you told me you weren’t sure interior design was it for you, because you needed guidance Darcy, but you didn’t need me to tell you what to do. You knew what to do. You knew what you wanted. I…” She smiled sadly. “I was just standing in your way.”

Darcy stared at her anxiously. “What if I screw it up?”

Lorna reached up and cupped her cheek, brushing away a stray tear. “Then you try again.”

“Yeah, that sounds good in theory, but I’ll be traveling all over the world. If I screw up in the wrong place, it could literally mean my head. I could be beheaded!”

“Well, maybe you should try a little harder not to while you’re in those particular places…” her mother admitted.

She snorted. “Solid advice.”

Lorna smiled slowly, hesitantly. “Darcy, you’re my daughter… And I love you, okay? Even if I don’t show it in the conventional way. Even if I make mistakes sometimes… You are my little girl… The same who spent hours hiding in trees and feeding Michael mud pies and wearing all of her sister’s new clothes, pretending to be here…”

“I also dressed Mikey up in her clothes,” she admitted, smirking.

“Which explains why there was so much laundry when you three were growing up,” she mused.

Darcy laughed, before turning and grabbing the paper towel to blow her nose.

“Do you feel better?” Lorna reached over and brushed hair back from Darcy’s face, tucking it behind her ear.

“Yeah, I guess… I mean, I’d be happier without the runny nose, but…” She shrugged. “What can ya do?”
Her mother smiled. “Breakfast?”

“Sure.”

Together, they circled around the island and got back to their stations.

But Darcy felt lighter, more at ease than she had in a very long time.

She wasn’t sure how long it would last. For all she knew, her mother would do the same old things as soon as a little distance was between them, but the important thing was Darcy told her how much it hurt her; she’d stood up and admitted that she felt lost and broken and like she wasn’t enough. And her mother acknowledged that she’d made mistakes.

It wasn’t perfect.

But it was something.

…

“So does this mean you’re coming back early?” Jane wondered hopefully.

“Actually, yeah… I was thinking I’d catch a flight out really early Monday instead,” Darcy told her. “I was gonna stay, since mom and me are on the same level, for now at least, but… I kinda wanna get back, get settled, prepare for the out-of-town trip of awesome, and—”

“Beg Steve’s forgiveness and make him fall in love with you?”

“Something like that. My idea had more sex. Sweaty, gym-mat sex.”

Jane snorted. “Visual not needed.”

“You’re just jealous,” she teased.

“Yes, actually, I am,” she admitted freely. “Although, I think I’m making progress on the bridge, so… Maybe not as jealous as I could be.”

“Focus on the positive; I like it.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve gotta do something, or I’d lose my mind over here.”

“Peter’s helping out, isn’t it?”

“Oh Pete’s great… I mean, he disappears at random and he’s apparently really clumsy, I mean he comes in with a new bruise every day, but…” She sighed. “It’s just hard. I want Thor back, but it seems like every time I make a step in the right direction, I get thrown back to the start.”

“Do not pass Go; do not collect $200.”

“Exactly.”

Darcy grinned. “Well, I dunno what to say, Jane, except that I know you and I know you’ll open that bridge.”

“Yeah, yeah…” she sighed. “Okay. I’ll let you go… See you Monday?” She chuckled. “If you don’t run into Steve first.”
“Nah, I’m coming right to your lab. We’ll go out, get lunch or something, and I’ll tell you about the incident where I might’ve driven dad’s golf cart into the lake.”

“What?”

“Best part?” She paused for effect. “He doesn’t know I did it once when I was a teenager too.”

“Darcy…” she admonished.

Laughing, she shrugged. “Does it really surprise you?”

“Honestly? No. Not even slightly.”

She grinned. “It’s an awesome story. I’ll tell you about it when I get back; remind me.”

“Okay.”

After they’d hung up, Darcy rolled off her bed and made her way next door, knocking twice before walking into her brother’s room.

He and Jack were making out on the bed and she cleared her throat. “Well, this is better than that awkward time when you were thirteen and I walked in on you rub one out to a picture of Johnny Depp.”

“I think that scarred me worse than you,” Michael said, sitting up on his bed. “Like I can’t look at Johnny anymore without cringing.”

Darcy grinned. “Price ya pay for not locking your door.” She leaned over and offered her fist. “What’s up, Jackie-Be-Nimble?”

Jack pounded her fist before reaching up to readjust his glasses. “Usual. How long’re you back in town for?”

“’Til Monday. Actually I was just coming to let Mikey know I’m leaving a day early.”

He frowned. “I thought you and mom made up…?”

“We did.” She nodded. “But I’ve got a business trip on Wednesday and I want to get ready for it, so…”

Jack smirked. “Liar. You’ve got a ‘there’s a cute boy’ face going on.”

She rolled her eyes. “There’s no way I have a face for that.”

He shrugged. “I do.”

“Hey!” Michael complained.

“Which I’m always wearing, because my boyfriend is always cute,” Jack corrected, waving a dismissive hand. “So?” He looked up at Darcy and raised an eyebrow. “Who’s the dude?”

“There is no dude. No dude exists. Let’s bury this theory and be done with it.”

Michael grinned. “His name’s Steve.”

“Awww, Steve and Darcy…” Jack’s eyes lit up. “Starcy!”
Her brother gave his boyfriend a dopey look. “He just decided to ship you guys.”

Darcy shook her head, turned on her heel, and walked out.

Admittedly, she was smiling.

‘Cause Starcy?

Uh, yeah, that was awesome.

...

“Do you have to go?” her mother wondered, fretting over Darcy’s clothes, smoothing them out and rebuttoning her jacket for her.

Darcy batted her hands away. “Yes.” She shrugged her bag higher on her shoulder. “I can’t hide forever, right?”

Clasping her hands together, Lorna stared at her a long moment before smiling. “You’re all grown up,” she said, letting out a soft laugh.

“I still wear Spongebob pajama pants and drink milk right out of the carton, don’t sign me up for adulthood too fast,” she warned.

Shaking her head, her mother smiled, and pulled her in for a hug. “You’re going to do wonderful,” she told her. “Show them what you’re made of.”

“If you keep squeezing, I’ll be showing you,” she complained.

Her mother ignored her, stroking a hand down her hair affectionately. “I love you.”

She half-smiled. “Love you too, mom.”

“And you’ll call?” She pulled back and stared at Darcy sternly. “I mean it, no more ignoring my calls for months!”

“I promise,” she assured.

“Okay…” She smoothed her hands over the shoulders of Darcy’s jacket, picking at lint. “Okay, well…” She pulled her hands back. “You should go. I think your plane’s boarding soon.”

She nodded, pausing to lean in and kiss her cheek. Finally, she turned and hugged her dad goodbye, telling him she hid a stash of mini-chocolate bars in her bedroom for him to snack on.

“You were always my favorite,” he said against her ear.

She laughed before moving on to Michael, who bear-hugged her tight.

“Keep an eye out,” he said, smirking. “I might just come up and visit you soon.”

She snorted. “I don’t have a whole lot of space, but I’ll see if I can put you up somewhere.”

“Five star only,” he said, “I’m picky like that.”

Rolling her eyes, she socked him in the arm. “Be good and don’t get Jack pregnant. Think of his figure!”
Her brother laughed thickly and pulled her in for another hug. “Love you, D.”

She squeezed him close. “Love you too, M.”

After a few more whispered encouragements from her mom, she waved goodbye and stepped back, turning to join the masses in climbing on the plane back to New York.

They stayed to wave her off and for the first time, she didn’t feel like she was running when she left. She felt like she was going in the right direction, for the right reasons.
Part Nine

XI.

Darcy wasn’t even surprised when she climbed off the plane and found Coulson himself holding up a sign that read her name. She laughed and walked toward him.

“Lewis?” he asked.

She quirked an eyebrow. “Maybe. Who’s asking?”

“Agent Phil Coulson,” he said. He reached for her bag. “I have a job proposition for you…”

Grinning, she shook her head and bumped his shoulder with hers. “You’re one of a kind, Bossman.”

“You’re not too bad yourself, Darcy.” He tipped his head. “So? How was the trip?”

“You mean you didn’t bug the house?” she asked in mock-surprise.

He merely raised an eyebrow.

“It was… enlightening.”

“Good.” He turned to look at her. “I hope you got enough rest…” He smirked. “Because Tima’s waiting on you. She has a few drills she wants you to run; think of it as last minute prep before you dip your toe in political espionage.”

“Can Tima wait until after I’ve had lunch with Jane?” she hoped.

“Sure.” He paused for effect. “If you want to run drills on a full stomach…”


“Steve third,” he added.

She glared. “You are way too involved in my life.”

He laughed under his breath. “It’s crossed my mind a few times, actually.”

She smiled. “It’s because I’m your favorite, right?”

He turned to look at her. “One of,” he agreed.

“Top three?”

“Easily.”

She felt it was definitely a fist-pump worthy situation.

…”

Apparently, the drills Tima wanted to run were of the shooting guns variety.

This time, the rest of the class wasn’t present. It was just her and Tima at the gun range.
“What am I asking you to shoot, Darcy?”

She frowned. “Paper?”

“And?”

“Eventually people? If, y’know, I have to…”

“And?”

She sighed, shoulders slumping. “Why can’t this be multiple choice?” she complained.

Tima shook her head and reached over, pushing a button that brought the target in. “I believe Coulson gave you some advice once…”

“You kidding? He gives me advice all the time; only it’s usually in a subtle, droll way, like he doesn’t want to play the Miyagi card too obviously.”

Ignoring her, Tima gripped the target as it came in close. “Each of these rings will represent something. Anything you want to fight. A fear of some kind; I don’t care what it is. But when you shoot these targets, that is what you’re destroying. Not an imaginary person, but the fear you have inside you. You’re shooting your fear of death or heights or clowns,” she listed, waving a hand. “The point is, when you shoot that target, you’re shooting something inside you. Something that hurts you. Something you don’t want to eat at you anymore.”

“And when it’s a person on the other side of my gun?” Darcy wondered, staring down at it.

“The only time you will pull that trigger is if somebody is trying to kill you first,” Tima reminded. “And if they made that mistake, then they deserve to be shot.”

She cracked a faint smile.

Tima detached the target, folded it, and handed it to her. “You’re a capable person, Darcy… But only if you think you are.” With that, she took a step back. “Lesson over.”

“What, that’s it?” She scoffed. “I haven’t thrown up or shot anything…” She tipped her head skeptically. “I think you’re losing your edge, Ti.”

She rolled her eyes. “I can only teach you so much, Darcy. Eventually you have to put it into action.”

“So… I’m done? Darcy is complete? I’m a real girl?” Her eyebrows hiked.

Tima smiled at her. “You’re as prepared as I can make you for this mission… If you feel like you still need training or anything happens, then I will help you prepare for the next time… Until then?” She nodded. “Class dismissed.”

“Okay…” She hugged her target to her chest. “Wow, I thought I’d be more excited when I didn’t have to run drills anymore… But mostly I feel like my security blanket was taken away.”

“I’m always here if you need me, Darcy.”

“Oh my God and you didn’t call me Lewis!” Darcy pointed at her. “This is wrong!”

Chuckling under her breath, Tima turned to leave. “I have molded you quite nicely, I think, with all your rough, snarky edges very much intact.”
Darcy snorted. “Yeah, no buffing was taking that out.”

When she was left alone, she took a look around to make sure the range was still empty. Finding it was, she unfolded the target and laid it down on the counter.

She stared down at ring after ring.

Digging in her purse, she came up with a black marker and uncapped it with her mouth.

She held it over the paper as she frowned down at it; thinking, thinking, thinking.

There were four rings; red, white, blue, black.

Darcy scrawled something out on each one.

Her fear of growing up; marked Peter Pan.

Her lack of direction; shown in a wonky compass rose.

Her long-held belief that she wouldn’t be good enough, with ENOUGH written in black bold lettering.

And lastly, she wrote her own name.

For always getting in her own way; always running when she should have stayed; and for standing up for everyone but herself.

Finally, she folded the paper up, tucked it in her bag, and left.

…

Not at all surprising, Darcy found Jane in her lab. She was poring over notes, muttering to herself, chewing on the rock-hard crusts of an old Pop-tart.

“I made her a new one but she ignored it,” Peter told her. “Oh, and welcome back.”

“Thanks.” Darcy sighed and walked over to Jane. “Hey, Genius, remember who promised who lunch?”

“Darcy?” Jane blinked up at her. “Is it Monday already?”

She snorted. “Yeah…” She shook her head. “Okay. Sleep first and lunch tomorrow then, sound good?”

“Oh, but I was just…” She reached for her work but Darcy slapped her hands. “Let’s go.”

Jane deflated and followed her out. “Pop-tart?” she wondered hopefully.

Peter passed her the new one as they walked by and Darcy left it in Jane’s hands. “There ya go. Problem solved.”

After she got Jane set up in her room and tucked into bed, visions of Pop-tarts dancing in her head, she left. She considered going back to the lab and catching up with Peter, but instead she gathered her resolve and rode the elevator down.

She could hear the sound of his fists hitting the punching bag from as far as the hall around the
corner. She walked silently and slunk inside, keeping to the wall, just watching for a moment.

Déjà vu washed over her as he traded jabs, left and right, and the bag wobbled from each hit.

Sweat collected on his brow and his shirt stretched with each movement. His face was flushed, his mouth set in a hard line, and his shoulders were hunched with tension.

When she walked forward, she swallowed, knowing what was coming.

He was mid-hit when he paused, every muscle in his body strained. And then he turned his head, his eyebrows flared, eyes a little wide. “Darcy…” he said, though it was deflated now, no longer that bright, excited exclamation.

“Hey…”

“I thought you weren’t going to be back until tomorrow…” He looked down at his hands. “And then you were leaving with Agent Coulson for business…”

“I was. I—I am.” She nodded. “I came back a day early, so…”

“Ah.” He started untaping his fists. “You had a nice visit with your family?”

“It was cool. My mom and I buried a hatchet of repression and my long-held fear of not being good enough, so…” She shrugged. “Probably something to go down in the Lewis family history books.”

He offered a faint smile. “I’m glad then.”

He started walking away, toward the gym bag he had waiting by the bench.

She watched him go.

“So this is what it’s going to be like?” she wondered. “Really awkward small talk?”

He sighed. “I don’t know what you want from me,” he murmured, taking a seat on the bench.

She chewed her lip.

“When we met, you wanted to be friends. Things… changed, and there was a connection there. Something I haven’t felt in… ever. And when I wanted to see where that went, you decided that you weren’t good enough for me…” He rested his elbows on his knees. “So I’m trying to respect your decision not to be with me, but it’s difficult…” His jaw ticked. “It’s difficult because you are so beautiful and funny and… alive and when I’m with you I feel like I—I’m real and here and… You were the only person I really had; the only person I trusted. And I was… falling for you, even when we were just friends. I—I was falling for you when you looked up at me, that first time we met, and you told me you were planning on saving the world. Which—” He laughed. “Should’ve been a deterrent but instead all it did was make me want to know you… And the woman I got to know was incredible. She couldn’t see it in herself but she was wonderful.

“Darcy—” He stood from the bench and walked toward her, staring at her searchingly. “You are the most real person I have ever met. You are unapologetically yourself, even when you put yourself down… You light up a room when you walk into and it just—it changes everyone. I can see it in people when they see you. You just, you bring this energy with you and people are helpless to it. I was helpless to it…” He smiled softly. “I don’t like reality TV, I like spending time with you. I liked knowing that every night, I’d be hearing your laugh and your voice and seeing your smile… And I’d feel you looking at me when I wasn’t looking at you and I’d hope that maybe you felt the same way.
So that night… That amazing night at the bar, when we were dancing and it all just came together, that… That was the best night of my life and…” He sighed, his eyes dropping. “Then you were leaving and it felt like you were breaking up with me before we’d even started. So…” He put his hands up. “Yes. This is what it’ll be like. Really awkward small talk… Because being around you and not being with you is painful… And I don’t know how to go back… I don’t want to go back. I…” He licked his lips. “I want to go forward.”

Darcy opened her mouth to reply but her voice failed her. Her throat was tight with emotion and her stomach was flip-flopping, her heart beating out of her chest. She walked toward him slowly and stared up at him.

She took his hands into hers and rubbed her thumbs over his knuckles and finally she put those hands onto her waist and she slid her arms around his neck, and she said, “Then let’s go back and I’ll do it right this time, okay?” Her hand slid in behind his neck and guided him down, bringing their heads closer.

He paused. “You’re sure this time?” he worried. “You won’t…?”

She nodded, smiling. “I’m sure.”

He stared searchingly at her before finally, he smiled, and crossed the last bit of space between them.

It was even better than she remembered.

His mouth and his hands, his teasing tongue and scraping teeth. The way he pulled her into him, arms banding tight around her, gripping her shirt tight in his fist.

She dragged her fingers through his hair, curled her nails down neck, and smiled as he bit her lip reactively.

There was no music this time; no test in the morning; no niggling fears that ate away at her.

And no dress to keep her from hitching her leg over his hip. He grunted against her lips and smoothed a hand down the length of her leg, squeezing and kneading her thigh.

They stumbled back, barely missing the punching bag, and she paused, pulling away. “Okay, so this fantasy I have about the training mats? Usually they’re super clean or I just don’t think about it but these things get walked on a lot, don’t they?”

He nodded.

“Okay, so my room then?”

He swallowed tightly.

She grinned and gripped his shirt, tugging him along behind her.

…

He found his confidence somewhere between making out in the elevator, with her shoved up against the wall, and her opening the door to her room. They stumbled inside, the door shoved closed behind them. His hands were running up and down her back, getting bold enough to dip low over her ass. She lifted up onto her tiptoes to encourage his hands lower. Getting the massage, he cupped her through her jeans, squeezing and kneading as he did.
Darcy pulled back from his mouth, panting, so she could focus on his t-shirt; she tugged it out of his pants and slid her hands under, wandering his stomach and encouraging the fabric up his body.

He leaned back just enough to reach back and pull his shirt off before his hands were back on her again.

She let out a little hitched breath at the finished product; she swept her hands from his shoulders down his front, thumbs following the square lines of his pectorals and fingertips catching on the ridges of his abdomen before sliding back up his sides and around to his back. She drew circles along his skin with her nails and stared up at him watching her.

“Tit for tat?” she asked, releasing a hand to reach for her shirt.

He beat her to it and started pulling her shirt up her back. She raised her arms and ducked her head until the fabric fell away. She reached behind to undo her bra and tossed it away before climbing back on her bed, her head falling against the pillows.

He knelt, crawling after her, and paused, head tipped, eyes set on her stomach. He reached for her and she felt his finger trace a familiar spot; the raised pink line of a scar.

“I fell out of a tree back home… Well, actually I did that a lot,” she admitted. “This was just the only time the tree fought back.”

He rubbed his thumb over it, back and forth, and then he leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to it. She buried her fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck and swallowed tightly as he started pressing kisses all over her stomach and ribs and hips. He looked even more tanned in comparison to her pale skin. He was so large and hard while she was small and soft. His mouth ventured higher until he paused for only a split second and then his tongue ran flat against her left nipple, plucking lightly with his teeth. His hand covered the other breast, kneading and rubbing.

Darcy pulled her knees up and he settled between her legs comfortably, his lower half cradled to her. She slid her hands down his sides, catching on his blue and white striped boxer shorts, and she started angling them down his sides, using her feet to help her out until they were out of her way entirely. Jesus, every part of him was sinewy muscle. She rubbed her thumbs over his hip bones, following them down, down, and finally she scooped her hand under and wrapped it around his shaft.

He grunted against her, turning his head to look down at him in her grip. She pumped slowly, sliding her hand up and swiping her thumb over the pre-cum collecting. She watched the muscles along his biceps and shoulders stretch and flex. She circled the head of his cock a few times, rubbing the underside, before he reached down and covered her hand, letting out a shuddering breath. “Wait, wait...”

She paused, let him adjust, and then he was moving down the bed; he got rid of his boxers and knelt between her legs again, this time grabbing the sides of her underwear and pulling them down her legs. She smiled at the sharp tug he gave and lifted herself off the bed. He tossed the scrap of red fabric away before gliding his hands down her thighs, parting them. He leaned down, one of his
hands sliding up her side, spanning her hip, and he looked at her for permission.

Swallowing, she gave him a nod, and watched as he used his other hand to part her, rubbing his thumb over her slit before he separated her folds, rubbing them slowly, spreading the wet heat that had collected. His shoulder pressed against her leg so it stayed open while his cheek lay against the opposite thigh, faintly scratchy with whiskers.

Darcy’s hands twitched; she gripped the pillow behind her as Steve explored. He circled her clit, watched her reaction, cheek jumping, and face flushed with arousal. He slid his fingers down and circled her opening before slipping the tip of one just inside. He thrust slowly, a few times, before adding a second, and curling them as they reached deeper inside her. She rocked her hips and felt him rub his cheek against her, the scraping of his whiskers making her shiver. And then his face wasn’t on her anymore and she opened an eye, wondering briefly when she’d even closed them. He’d ducked his head down and his tongue flicked her clit once, twice; he smiled as she let out a desperate noise. And then his tongue was running flat across her, his fingers moving quicker, deeper, more confidently. He suckled her labia, teeth and tongue teasing them.

She considered telling him she saw stars when she came, but mostly she just cried his name and rode the wave. Bursts of pleasure exploded inside her, making her hips jut forward for more, muscles twitching, toes curled. He kissed away from her, licking the seam of her thigh meeting her pussy, scraping his teeth over her hip bone, and climbing his way up her, mouthing her stomach and ribs and pausing to kiss the tips of her breasts, before he was face to face with her.

She leaned her head up, still panting slightly, and kissed him, licking his lips as he pressed more firmly against her, burying a hand in her hair while the other was pressing into the mattress to keep him from leaning too heavily on top of her. She slid her legs up and wrapped them around his waist, her heels digging into the hard cheeks of his ass. She scrubbed her fingers through his hair and down his shoulders, gripping tight. For a few minutes, that was all they did; just slanting mouths and reaching tongues, and she loved it. She loved that he wasn’t so focused on getting there that he didn’t enjoy the in-between.

His mouth eventually wandered away from her and down her neck, suckling her skin, and she thought he might be returning the favor or the hickey she’d given him back at the jazz bar that first night. While he was busy, she reached across to her bedside table and dug out a strip of condoms. Safety first. She tore one free and left the rest on top of the stand before bringing the pack up and tearing it open with her teeth.

Steve leaned back from her, smiling down at her neck, and then saw her waving the condom at him. He flushed slightly. “I didn’t even think about…”

“Well, in your defense, I don’t think you were planning on having sex today,” she reminded, before sitting up.

She took it upon herself to roll it on him, but it was partly just an excuse to touch him again. He was long and thick in her hands and she spent awhile just stroking his shaft and rubbing the head of his cock before he was leaning into her touch, his hands squeezing her shoulders, and she got the memo. She slid the condom on and laid back on the bed, adjusting herself for comfort.

“I’ve never…” he warned.

Darcy half-smiled. “I know.”

“I don’t want to… disappoint you,” he admitted, looking self-conscious.
“You’ve already made me orgasm, Steve. Disappointing is not the word I’d be using.”

He ducked his head as his face lit up; he didn’t look so uncertain anymore.

He pressed inside her a few inches and she hiked her legs high on his sides, her breath leaving her in a harsh pant. Leaning over her, he buried his face at her neck, and thrust again. She bit her lip and gripped his shoulders. It’d been awhile and she felt almost too tight, but he was slow and patient and when he finally bottomed out inside her, he just laid there a moment, breathing hard against her shoulder, pressing kisses to her skin and licking up her neck.

And then he was moving and her hands were guiding his hips, nails dug into the tops of his cheeks, setting a pace they both liked, that kept her climbing up toward a second climax.

Steve was a quick learner; he watched her for what she liked and repeated it at random, looking for ways to prolong it for her while still giving her what she wanted. His hands were always moving, running up and down the lengths of her legs, over her hips and stomach, cupping her breasts, circling and rubbing her nipples, and higher, tracing her arms with his fingers, smiling when he found places that were ticklish. Everything he did, he did with reverence and Darcy felt loved, appreciated, like she was the most beautiful woman alive.

Her hands were just as busy; there was so much of him to touch and she wanted to reach all of it. She dragged her nails down his back and bit his shoulder as he buried his mouth against her upper-chest. The angle of his hips had him rubbing against her clit each thrust and squeezed her legs around him as she felt it begin; his name left her on a choked gasp as she came, rippling around him, arching up into the waves of sensation rushing through her.

He was watching her face, his chin balanced on her, and he brushed her damp hair back from her face, tracing a flushed cheek with his thumb. He leaned up to kiss her and she felt languid and blissed out; she leaned into it, gripping his neck tight. She managed to maneuver him onto his back and laid on top of him for a while, letting her body calm down a bit. She kissed up his face, over the faint scruff of his jaw, the sharp cut of his cheek bones, the thick curve of his eyebrows, the slope of his nose, and back to his lips, suckling the bottom, nipping lightly. And then she darted down and bit the edge of his chin before she was kissing down his body, licking at the sweat that had collected, making his skin shiny and salty. She slid her hands down past her mouth and between his legs, framing his cock with her thumbs and forefingers. While she was rubbing her face against his stomach, her thumbs sunk lower and gently kneaded their way around his balls.

Steve let out an impressive string of curses that made her grin. She could feel his body tense and relax underneath her. She rubbed slowly until he was panting and reaching for her. “Darcy, Darcy, Darcy…”

She climbed back up his body, tugging at his nipples with her teeth before she was straddling his waist on her knees. She pressed her lips to his in the same moment she guided him back inside her and sunk down, taking him in to the hilt. He groaned, his hand spreading over her back, fingers pressed in hard. She brought his other hand up to her breast as she started moving, circling her hips and changing up the pace at random, starting out slow and shallow before suddenly going fast and deep only to level back out.

She pushed her hair back over her shoulders and wished she’d tied it up; it was heavy and hot on her neck. She leaned her body back, partly for the angle and partly to give her relief from her hair for a little while. Steve liked it; he was cursing again and his hands had found the tops of her thighs, squeezing as she rode him.

One of his hands slid up and he sunk his thumb between them to rub her clit. She could feel him
twitching inside her and knew he was finally reaching his climax. She turned her head up to watch him. His head back, neck strained, brow furrowed tightly, and he was panting heavily, his cheeks blowing out with each indrawn breath. His eyes were dark and watching her, pupils blown. He called her name when he came, multiple times, and his thumb rubbed harder to bring her along with him. She would blame her third orgasm partly on the fact that she made him look like she’d just created world peace and that was a serious ego boost.

She fell against his chest, their skin clinging together in sweat, and tried to catch her breath. “Gold star, Cap,” she murmured, patting his chest.

“Same to you,” he said, rubbing his hand up back and tangling his fingers in her hair.

“Y’know… Originally I was just going to stop in and ask you to forgive me for being a jerk… Maybe ask you out for a drink or something…” she admitted.

“You weren’t a jerk,” he argued. “You were… insecure.”

She snorted. “Yeah, story of my life.”

He sighed. “I don’t know why… I wish you could see yourself the way I see you.”

She looked up at him. “Post-sex, I bet I look even more amazing than usual.” She stretched up and kissed him before rolling over onto her side. “We should nap,” she told him, yawning as she curled up into her blankets.

Steve climbed off the bed, made a stop at the trash can and her tiny bathroom, and then joined her in bed, wrapping himself around her and burying his face at the nape of her neck. His body was warm and swamped her.

“We could go out tomorrow… Your last night before your trip with Coulson,” he suggested.

She covered his hands with hers and squeezed. “I know a little jazz bar…” she said.

She could feel him smiling as she drifted to sleep.

…

Darcy met Jane for dinner that night; she walked into the restaurant and found her favorite physicist waiting at the bar, sipping a bright pink drink from a tiny red straw.

“You look better. Get a good sleep?” she asked as she took the seat next to her.

“You had sex!” Jane accused, pointing at her.

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Thank you. Please announce it to the whole restaurant next time,” she muttered.

She glared at a few staring people before turning back to Darcy and grabbing her hand. “Please tell me it was Steve and you’ve fixed things.”

“Who the hell else would I be sleeping with?” She raised an eyebrow. “I’m offended by how little you think of me morally, Jane! I’ll cry myself to sleep tonight.”

She snorted. “Whatever, just fill me in so I can live vicariously through you.”

Shaking her head, she hopped off the stool. “Later. Right now, why don’t we have something to eat
and you can tell me what breakthroughs you made while I was dealing with twenty-plus years of emotional, family stress.”

“Have you talked to your mom since you got back?” she wondered, following her over to see the maître d’ about their reservation.

“Yeah, I called her when I landed. So far, so good.” She shrugged. “I’m still waiting for the other shoe to drop, but I guess for right now things are looking up.”

“You’re a pessimist,” Jane told her.

“Can you blame me? I’ve never seen a double-rainbow, Jane! What is the meaning of life?” she exclaimed.

Laughing to herself, Jane bumped Darcy’s shoulder. “Is it so hard to believe maybe things are really turning around for you?”

“Yes. Absolutely.” She nodded. “I’m telling you, something is going to go wrong.”

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “Fine. But not tonight…”

“I dunno; food poisoning would be pretty awful,” she mused.

Jane glared at her.

“What? I’m just saying!”

Contrary to Darcy’s fears, the night finished off without a hitch.

In fact, after she got back from dinner, she dropped Jane off at her room (not the lab! Score!) and then called Steve. Who just so happened to still be on SHIELD property so they had their first naked *overnight* sleepover. Wherein she felt it was necessary to make him watch *When Harry Met Sally*; he was a good sport though. Although that could’ve been because he was using her boobs as a pillow; one might never know.
Part Ten

X.

“I knew it! I knew things couldn’t stay good!” she grunted, her hands under Coulson’s armpits as she dragged him out of the line of fire.

“Put it in the report,” he told her weakly. “We’ll add foresight to your long list of skills.”

She snorted, rolled her eyes, and then leaned him back against a wall, covered by stacks upon stacks of crates. “Come out to the country, we’ll talk to some arms dealers, have a few laughs…” she mocked.

“If you could focus, John McLane…” Coulson said.

“Gun,” she said, waving her hand at him.

“I’m out. The only one I have left is strapped to my ankle.”

She bent and pulled his pant leg up and out of the way, unstrapped the smaller gun, and handed it to him.

“I’ve called it in; we have help coming but it’ll be awhile,” he warned.

“Right. So this is was one of those dandy situations where the bad guy wants me dead and I have to kill him first…” She let out a huff. “Only nobody trained me for if I had an injured partner on my hands and most of these situations were in offices… Not warehouses filled with gun crates!” She paused. “How long do you think it would take me to open a crate and use their own weapons against them?”

He eyed the stack in front of him, nailed shut. “Too long and you don’t have a crowbar.”

“Spoilsport,” she muttered on a sigh.

“You’ll need to take them out yourself. Preferably one-on-one so you’re not overwhelmed.”

“And what? Leave you here alone?” Her eyes widened. “Uh, how about no?”

“Darcy, I’m a trained agent of the highest order. I can take care of myself.”

“That is not a flesh wound,” she said, pointing at his stomach. “That is a serious, bleed out and die, kind of wound.”

He stared at her, unblinking.

“God, you’re a jerk, you know that?” She stood up, stripped off her brand new blouse, tore it into strips, and then bent to wrap them around him. “You don’t get to die,” she told him decisively, shrugging her jacket back on to cover what little modesty she owned. “They come, you shoot. You run out of bullets, and you throw the empty gun or your shoes or whatever the hell you can reach. But you don’t die.” She stared up at him, hard. “Understand?”

His lips twitched. “Understood.”

“And this is the last time we play nice with gun dealers,” she said, standing and checking her own
gun. “Shouldn’t even be a first time.”

“In my defense, their Craigslist ad seemed very friendly,” he dead-panned.

She snorted, her defenses cracking, but then she bit her lip. “I’m not forgiving you for this until we’re back at SHIELD and you’re on medical leave.”

“I won’t take leave,” he disagreed.

“Oh, you’ll take leave!” Her brows hiked. “I will shadow you every single second of your day if I have to, but you’re going to take time off for the giant bullet hole currently in your abdomen.”

“If you get any louder, we won’t be leaving here alive to argue this,” he told her.

“Fine.” She took the safety off her gun. “Just know that I’ve never actually shot this thing…”

With that, she left.

While Darcy quickly and silently made her way through the maze of crates, she thought about how she’d gotten to this place. Not even in the whole grand scheme of what insane choices she’d made over her life that caused her to become a SHIELD agent, but instead just the last day. The night before, she and Steve had gone on their date; they’d had dinner and went dancing at the jazz club and everything had been peachy keen. She was in a normal, functioning, good relationship with a man who was probably, technically, ninety years old, but he looked great for his age and was probably ranked best out of every man she’d ever dated or had feelings for. ‘Probably’ was just polite; he was definitely the best. Including his skills in bed; he might’ve been a ninety year old virgin pre-Darcy, but he was making up for lost time and learning at an accelerated rate. She was still a little sore after the marathon sex and she’d had to sleep on the plane ride over.

Darcy didn’t really do country, but she thought since she’d been living it up in NYC and prior to that she was dying of boredom in the desert, in only made sense that they had farm country to the list. What she hadn’t expected was that they were meeting with international arms dealers. She would like to point out that keeping AK-47’s in a barn seemed tacky somehow.

“Why are we playing nice with them again?” she wondered as they walked from the all-black SUV he’d had waiting at the air strip for them to the tall red barn sitting in a remote part of a small town he drove them to. “And also, can I just say that we’ve ventured into Texas Chainsaw Massacre territory…?”

“Duly noted,” he said. “And we’re here because it’s important to keep the lines of communication open.”

“Uh-huh.” She stared at him dubiously. “Are we running a sting or are we telling them to get off American soil? Because, tip? There should be more than just me and you here for that.” She frowned. “And also I’m not dressed appropriately for this.”

He looked over and took in her new blouse and pencil skirt. “You look nice,” he offered.

“I look like someone who was expecting to be introduced to politicians, not farm-folk with a gun collection.”

“Technically, they’re not from around here…”

“What? You mean we don’t deal with rednecks married to their cousins?” she said in faux-shock. “Color me surprised.”
His mouth twitched. “They’re internationally known,” he said. “The last time we’d caught word of them, they’d made it over the Mexican border before we could intervene.”

“I didn’t think borders mattered to top secret government spies.”

“In some cases.” He readjusted the cuffs of his jacket. “We all answer to somebody, Miss Lewis. We’re not without rules and regulations.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “Somehow I’m not sure you’d survive without ‘em, Coulson.”

“Ready?” he asked as they reached the barn doors.

She sighed. “As ready as I can be,” she muttered.

When they walked inside, she wasn’t sure what to expect; a room full of wooden crates with an open circle in the center, lit up by too-bright bulbs, and a table where a man sat, three goons at his back, was not it.

“That’s Boris Chechnyoff,” she said, eyeing the main man before she looked at Coulson. “Nicknamed the Bloody Prince of Russia... Because he drew a crown on all of his kills’ foreheads with their own blood,” she whispered furiously.

“A little dramatic for my tastes,” Coulson replied before taking a step forward and offering a wide smile. “Boris,” he said in greeting. “I’m so glad we could meet on such time restraints.”

Boris grinned darkly. “You have much balls to contact me and arrange this meeting. Usually it is I who asks for meetings,” he said, before his eyes cut to Darcy. “Who is this?” He stood from his chair and circled the table, buttoning his jacket as he went. He held a hand out for her to shake.

Darcy glanced briefly at Coulson before reaching out and taking his hand. She bit her tongue to keep from making a snarky remark.

“You shake, little one. Do you fear me?” he wondered, his eyes flashing as if the idea appealed to him.

“Haven’t acclimated to the weather here,” she said, tugging her hand back.

He laughed, throwing his head back, a robust, deep noise echoing.

But Darcy couldn’t associate it with humor; it was much too dark and sinister for that.

“Он привел этого кролика поиграть с нами? На ужин будет тушёная крольчатина!” (He brings this rabbit to play with us? We will dine on rabbit stew!) he told his friends, who chuckled, nodding.

“Да! Да!” (Yes! Yes!) they said.

Darcy rolled her eyes and opened her mouth to reply, but Coulson put a stilling hand against her wrist.

She folded her lips and shut up.

“So, Agent...” Boris took a seat on the edge of the table. “I have honored your request. I come, I speak to you, what is it you want, hm?”

“World peace is a big one; it’s been on my list for years.” Coulson nodded. “And global warming.”
He clicked his tongue. “Unfortunately, I’m not sure you can help me with those.” He tipped his head and stared at Boris. “But there is an issue with illegal guns being moved in and out of my country… We’ve found a number of them marked with your crown.” He stood a little straighter. “I’m going to need you to vacate United States soil and… not return.”

“Кем он себя возомнил?” (Who does this man think he is?) one of the goons demanded.

Boris raised a hand to tell him to shut up, a ruby ring glittering on his finger. He stared at Coulson. “You asked nicely and so I will reply in kind,” Boris told him. “If you promise that we will have enough time to leave, you will not get in our ways, and there will be peace on our leaving, then our materials will be packed and we will leave.”

“You won’t be stopped,” Coulson agreed. “You have six hours.” He half-smiled. “Pleasure doing business with you.” He turned to leave and directed Darcy to start moving. “When I say duck, you duck.”

“What?”

“Oh, but Agent?” Boris called after him.

He turned back to him. “I’ve changed my mind. I, unlike you, are not so polite.” He pulled his gun.

Darcy was shoved unceremoniously out of the way. “That wasn’t duck,” she muttered, but turned over onto her knees and started crawling as bullets were flying. She took cover behind a stack of crates, covered her ears against the noise, and tried to focus on what was happening.

Dirt was being kicked up as bullets surged into it; she could hear shouting in Russian.

“Где он?” (Where is he?)

“Вы его потеряли?” (You lost him?)

“Убейте его, вы идиоты! И принесите мне кролика!” (Kill him, you morons! And bring me the rabbit!)

Darcy could hear footsteps growing closer and her heart pounded in her chest. She reached for the gun under her jacket and remembered how Tima had shoved it into her hand and wished her good luck before she left. Good luck her ass! This was the worst luck! Tima officially deserved a knock on wood when she talked.

A hand covered her mouth and she let out a squeak, pulling her gun free.

“Shh,” she heard.

Her eyes darted to the left and she saw Coulson kneeling next to her, one of his arms banded tight around his waist; she could see blood blooming on his jacket. Her brows furrowed. He released her mouth and grimaced. “Things didn’t go quite as planned.”

She rolled her eyes. “You think?” She pushed up onto her knees and wrapped an arm around him to help him, “C’mom. Boris said to kill you and bring me and I just got an amazing boyfriend and made up with my mom, I’m so not down for being kidnapped…”

The fact that he didn’t even put up a struggle when she had to help him stand said a lot, and none of it was good.
So now here she was, trying to track down a Russian mobster and his two goons, since apparently Coulson had killed one, injured another, and then gotten shot in the process.

Darcy grimaced down at her feet, confined in semi-difficult high heels. She kicked them off and pressed them against a crate, hoping she’d have time to come back and get them before they left. It was one of those idle, ridiculous thoughts, but she held on to it all the same. She cocked her head and listened for noise, but all she could hear was the scurrying of rats, either in the farm house somewhere or inside the crates; she wasn’t sure she really wanted to know.

She tried to ignore the fact that it was just her against three men; men who killed for a living. One of whom had ‘Bloody’ in his nickname, like that wasn’t warning enough.

She reached the opening of where the crates made a horseshoe, the table turned off and a man lying dead in the dirt, face down, a puddle of blood underneath him. She considered her options; there wasn’t a whole lot to work with in the center. She could break up the desk and go Buffy Summers and stake them, but she didn’t think that was the best choice of action. The chair was metal and foldable; if TV wrestling was to be trusted, it could do some damage. But there was a gun; dead dude’s gun was just a few inches from his outstretched fingers.

She took a good look around and didn’t see anybody, so she made a run for it. She reached the man and bent down, grabbing up his gun and half-expecting him to pull a horror-movie classic and grab her wrist. But he didn’t; he was just stone-cold dead. She paused on that and stared down at his pale face and unmoving body.

And then bullets were flying, kicking up dirt and getting closer, and she realized she probably should’ve looked up and checked for them to take up a sharpshooting position on top of the crates. Darcy skirted the bullets and raced back toward the opening. She raised her head to search out the gunmen and saw the gun more than the man. She raised her newly taken gun and started firing back; she didn’t exactly have an idea of what she was aiming for. More of a deterrent than anything, she imagined. It worked when the gun swung away and the man ducked for cover, but as he did, he fell. She heard the shout before his body slammed into the ground.

She stared, unmoving for a second.

And then—

“Схватите ее! Она убила Михаила!” (Get her! She killed Mikhael!)

Bullets. More bullets.

Ugh.

Darcy ran, but this time she was going toward the door. If she could just get to the SUV, she could drive it into the ramshackled, piece of crap farm, load Coulson inside and get the hell out of Dodge.

There was some scrambling, some cursing, and right before she reached the door, a missile flew through it.

She watched in horror as the SUV blew up.

“Are you kidding me?” she screamed. “I knew I should’ve opened a crate!” she complained, before turning around and racing back inside, making her way along the crates once more.

She could hear Boris shouting to find her, get her, kill her, but Darcy was in a daze.
Her mind was going back and forth between the blaze of the SUV, their chance at salvation, and the sickening thunk of the body. She’d killed somebody. Her! Okay, so it was technically unintentional and she was only trying to get him to stop shooting at her, but still… He wouldn’t have fallen if she hadn’t shot back…

She was a killer.

It was a cold feeling and it made her insides shake. But she knew she had to make a choice; either she killed the other two men, not unintentionally either, and got Coulson out or she raced around hoping they’d run out of bullets and give up on her. All the while praying they didn’t find Coulson or he managed to kill them so she didn’t have to.

As she stood, leaning against a barn wall, panting, she tried to wrap her head around her situation. Kill or be killed. Hadn’t Tima told her it would come down to that? That eventually, someone would want her dead and if so, then they deserved to die. Maybe it wasn’t always that black and white but in the here and now, she thought it was. Taking a deep breath, she bounced side to side on her feet, and started moving, resolve growing with every step.

“Где она?” (Where is she?)

“Мы практически поймали ее!” (I almost had her!)

“Практически - это недостаточно хорошо! Я хочу ее голову. Обратно она отправится в гробу!” (Almost is not good enough. I want her head. We’ll send her lucky foot back in a box!)

Darcy followed the voices, searching above. She thought she saw shuffling and then a body, a man, leapt down, landing in a crouch. She had a choice; either follow the man or take out the Bloody Prince of Russia.

Swallowing, she looked up to where Boris was sitting, a large gun in his lap, a cigarette dangling from his lips. He tapped his foot as if there was a song playing in his head.

Maybe it was the cowardly thing to do, but she went after the other man. He was probably closing in on Coulson anyway and she wasn’t sure how strong her boss was at the moment.

When she came around the bend, she saw him, pale but breathing, staring up at the man sneering down at him, gun trained.

“Where is the girl?” he demanded.

“What girl?” Coulson replied, furrowing his brow.

“You are a stupid man. You come here, demand that we leave?” He scoffed. “You do not order The Bloody Prince! He—”

“Oh my God, shut up with the pretentious bullshit,” Darcy ordered, drawing his attention, her gun already aimed. “Listen, I don’t want to kill you, but I will if I have to…”

“Тупая сука!” (Dumb bitch!) he spat, cocking his gun.

Darcy fired in the same moment he did; her shoulder snapped back as a bullet sliced across her bicep. The man she’d shot at was taken off his feet, whether by luck or not, her bullet went straight through his throat.

He clutched at his wound as he laid on the ground, twitching and bleeding out.
“That’s no way to speak to a lady,” she said, turning her eyes away from the sight.

“That’s no way to speak to a lady,” Boris’ voice interrupted as he slipped in behind her. “нет,” (No) he discouraged, his hand at the back of her neck as she went to turn. “You are tricky, little one… I underestimated you.” He tisked. “I should have expected more of Agent Coulson. He does not trust just anybody.”

Darcy’s jaw flexed and she glared, turning her head up to look at him. “Вам следовало послушать его совет и уехать!” (You should have taken his advice and left!) she snarled.

He stared at her a long moment before his mouth curved with amusement. “You speak my language well…” His lip curled. “If not for the American twang.”

She spat at him.

He managed to avoid it but reared back and glared. “You usually bring the Widow, Coulson…” He raised an eyebrow. “Has your taste in women changed so much?”

He grinned from where he was folded on the ground. “Not as much as you’d think.”

“Perhaps it is good then… You will have something pretty to look at when you die,” he said, before raising his gun and taking aim.

Darcy’s eyes widened and before she gave it much thought, she reacted.

She slammed her foot back down on Boris’ and he flinched, yanking his leg back and falling off balance. She turned, used her elbow to against his to force his arm up. She grabbed onto the gun while slamming her knee into Boris’ stomach and, with a hand wrapped around his hair, yanked his head up in the same moment so she could head-butt him. She felt his nose crack under her forehead before she twisted, slamming her elbow into his cheek and felt as it fractured under the hit. Throat-punching him, she tripped his feet out from under him. He fell to his back, releasing the gun mid-fall, she took it, and slammed her foot down onto his sternum, holding him in place, her gun aimed at his face.

“She’s very protective,” Coulson said.

“She’s very protective,” Coulson said.

“Perhaps…” Boris said, his nose bleeding profusely, his face swelling. “But is she a killer?” he asked.

It happened in a flash, he knocked his arm into her knee and she pitched backwards.

He scrambled for her dropped gun while braced to meet the ground and tried to aim for him.

He got his finger on the trigger and had the shot first, she closed her eyes.

She was still vibrating from hitting the ground when the gun went off, but she didn’t feel anything.

There was a grunt and then a body hit the ground and when she opened first one eye and then the other, she spotted Coulson, his ankle gun in hand, still smoking.

Boris was dead on the ground.

Darcy sighed, rolled over onto her stomach, and rested her chin on her stacked hands. “What is your life?” she wondered.

He offered a half-smile.
Shaking her head, she shoved up to her feet and started toward him; her body hurt from head to toe, but she imagined it would be ten times worse when the adrenaline rush wore off. “This was insane, you know that, right?” she asked him.

“Not my worst mission,” he admitted.

Rolling her eyes, she bent to help him up from the ground. He winced, but didn’t complain. She wrapped her arm around his waist and started walking slowly, destination the door. She paused halfway there to grab her heels; seeing Coulson’s exasperated look, she said, “Hey, I paid an arm and a leg for those and I don’t know how long we’ll be walking!”

He sighed, but didn’t comment.

When they finally got outside, the sun seemed too bright. Darcy blinked against the rays, feeling like she’d been stuck inside the barn a lot longer than she was. “Civilization,” she muttered, and started toward the dirt road they’d driven in on. “Or, y’know, as close to it as we can get right now.”

Coulson snorted.

“Remind me again why we needed to talk to those jackholes? I mean…” She looked up at him. “All we really accomplished was getting shot and killing four people.”

“One of whom was a mobster who had a kill list a mile long,” he reminded. “I think a bullet wound or two isn’t much price to pay in comparison.”

“Wow. You are sitting down with a psychologist when we get back,” she told him, shaking her head. “Listen to you, all ‘oh, it’s just a bullet wound!’ Don’t get self-righteous, save the whole world, on me, Coulson. I’m the one carrying half your body weight because you decided to try and tell the Russian murderer to just politely pack up his guns and leave.” She rolled her eyes. “The hell kind of idea even was that?” She scoffed. “I’m seriously doubting your reasoning abilities.”

Darcy kept up a steady stream of chatter as they walked down the road, half of it questioning whether Coulson was sane or what S.H.I.E.L.D. thought was a good strategy of attack if they only sent the two of them in, one of which was a rookie who wasn’t even technically an agent.

When she heard the blades of the incoming chopper, she finally stopped. Her eyes stung with relieved tears, in part because he was leaning on her more and more and she was worried, and also because she wanted to go home and eat ice cream and let Jane tell her she was okay. And maybe cuddle with Steve and let him fuss and be sweet.

“You did good, Darcy,” Coulson told her.

She turned her head to look at him. “Save your energy, Bossman. The cavalry is here.”

He shook his head. “I’ll be fine. This isn’t my first rodeo.” He offered a faint smile. “I’m serious, you know?” He stared at her searchingly. “You lived up to expectation. Beyond even.”

She blinked against the burn in her eyes. “I was scared,” she admitted. “I was terrified!”

“We all are the first time…” He squeezed her. “But you stuck in there, you saved my life… You didn’t run.”

Her brow furrowed. “I didn’t run.”

He nodded.
She laughed. “People were shooting at me and the one time I don’t run away is probably the time I should have.”

He snorted.

The helicopter set down and they waited until the agents and medics piled off.

She turned her head to look at Coulson and shouted over the noise. “Thank you!”

He raised an eyebrow.

“You changed my life!”

“Don’t thank me yet...” he warned, lips tilted with amusement. “We have another business trip two weeks from now...”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Don’t ruin our moment!”

He chuckled, but winced at the pain.

Moments later, they were surrounded, and Coulson was taken from her grip and helped to the chopper. Another medic started in on her, probing the wound on her arm and checking her pupil response. She batted him away. “I want to go home. Now!”

The agents stayed to clean up the mess, but she, Coulson, and the medics, lifted up and started back toward New York and SHIELD and home.

Darcy didn’t look out the window to watch it all pass her eyes, not the smoldering SUV or the barn filled with four dead men and a crapload of guns. She moved over and took Coulson’s hand as they started on his wound. He squeezed in thanks and she nodded down at him before wondering how many times in the rest of her life they would be in a situation like this. The idea worried her, but not in the way it had before.

Darcy wasn’t scared about being good enough to do the job. She was scared the job might hurt or kill her or someone she considered a close friend.

With that in mind, she decided to take Tima up on the extra training courses and to hit the gun range as soon as she could.

Because next time? Neither of them were getting shot and if somebody wanted to tango, Darcy wanted to know she was going to lead.

“So what are the chances that after you guys organize all the confiscated guns, I might get the missile launcher as a belated birthday gift?” she asked him.

Coulson’s lips twitched. “Very low.”

“So you’re saying there’s a chance!”

Coulson was taken in for surgery as soon as they arrived back to SHIELD.

Her shoulder wound was bandaged and cleaned up on the chopper, but someone checked it at HQ too before sending her off. She was promised that as soon as Coulson was out of surgery, she’d be informed, before she went down to find Jane, avoiding the suits that would no doubt rush her with
armloads of paperwork to fill out.

She looked like a mess and she knew it; there was hay stuck to her hair and her clothes, which were torn and messy. Her jacket was holding it together with one button under her bust. When she walked into the lab, Peter looked up and dropped a handful of slides.

“Darcy!” he shouted. “Are you okay?”

“Huh?” She looked over at him, her brow furrowed. “Oh, uh, yeah, I just… There was a gun fight… in a barn… We won.”

He eyed her appearance before wondering skeptically, “Are you sure?”

She burst into hysterical laughter.

“Oh my God, Darcy…” Jane hurried over. “Are—Are you bleeding?”

“What?” She looked at her arm, where the sleeve of her jacket had been torn off for them to work on her bullet graze. “Oh, no, it’s cool. They already cleaned that up. Couple stitches and I was good.”

“You… You’re a mess. I… I don’t understand. I thought you were going to meet a politician or—”

“I met a prince,” she said, vaguely. “He was a little… hostile.”

They blinked at her.

“Can I have a hug?” she wondered, her lips trembling. “I killed two people; I think I deserve a hug.”

“Oh, Darcy…” Jane gathered her in close and squeezed.

Peter walked over and rubbed her back. “Your power suit is nice,” he told her.

She laughed. “I’m so glad I hired you…” she said, sniffling, “Even if I think you’re in a secret fight club.”

“I’ll explain some time,” he told her reassuringly.

“That’d be cool.”

“It involves spiders.”

Her nose wrinkled. “Ew, keep it to yourself.”

He chuckled.

Eventually, Jane pulled back and brushed Darcy’s tangled, dirty hair from her face “C’mon, I’ll help you get cleaned up,” she offered.

Darcy grinned. “Finally, a role reversal!”

Rolling her eyes, Jane hugged an arm around her waist and Darcy leaned into her.

“So guess what?”

“What?”

“I’m not afraid anymore,” she shared, smiling.
“Well, I suppose there isn’t much to be afraid of after you get into a gun fight and kill two people…” Jane mused.

“Right?!” She held up a hand. “High-five!”

“You’re the most bizarre person I’ve ever known, Darcy…” She hugged her. “I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

“Good, ‘cause you’re stuck with me, as is.”

For the first time, she didn’t feel bad about that. In fact, she thought she was pretty damn kick ass.

...

Later, after she’d showered and changed and received word that Coulson was recovering and she could visit him the next day, during visiting hours (yeah right, she was totally sneaking in at shift change), Darcy curled up in her bed with a stolen bowl of Tima’s ice cream. The frantic knocking at her door made her smile; she knew who it was before she opened it.

She got an armful of Steve before the door was completely open. “I heard what happened, I… Are you okay?” He rubbed his hands up and down her body, searching for anything out of place.

She smiled up at him. “Totally fine. Small shoulder wound, barely anything…” She pulled him into her room and closed the door. “C’mon, I was just about to turn on Housewives.” She climbed onto her bed and waved the half-eaten bowl of ice cream. “Want some?”

He stared at her, mouth quirked on one side, and just sighed. “You’re a whole new breed, Darcy.”

With a laugh, she leaned back against her pillows, and scooped up a spoonful of ice cream. Patting the place next to her, she said, “Wanna know all the dirty details?”

Seriously, he said, “Every single one.”

He kicked off his shoes and shrugged off his jacket before climbing into bed next to her. He gathered her in close and she rested her head on his chest, her legs tangling with his, and the ice cream bowl balanced on his stomach.

“So there’s this totally normal barn, right? And I’m thinking Leatherface is going to leap out and get us any second…”

He brushed his fingers through her hair as she talked, humming and nodding to each detail she gave, some unimportant, others rather critical, and she could feel him tense each time things got difficult. When she shot back at the man and he fell to his death, he stroked her ear. When the missile flew past her head, he rubbed her shoulder. When she was forced to shoot the man who’d found Coulson, he threaded their hands together and squeezed. When she went toe-to-toe with The Bloody Prince of Russia, he kissed her forehead, lingering.

“Remember when you told me I should find a nice, normal woman and date her?” he asked.

She turned her head up and looked at him. “Just realizing how not normal I am?” she joked.

“I don’t want normal.” He tucked her hair behind her ear. “Darcy, you’re amazing. And I’ll be worried about you, probably constantly, but… You handled yourself and you’re capable and strong and smart…” He stared at her searchingly. “And I love—”
She kissed him. She moved the bowl of ice cream out of the way and dropped it haphazardly onto the bedside table before climbing on top of him. Because she knew what he was going to say, she could read it in his face, but she didn’t want to hear those words right now. Not when he’d just freshly learned she could have died. Just like she didn’t want to return them in the heat of the moment, of knowing she could be gone and she’d only just found him. So instead, she let her body do the talking, and it had a lot to say.

If things were a little rougher, a little more desperate with the knowledge of how close death came, then it was all the better.

...

Hours later, with a snoring Steve at her side, Darcy would slip out, get dressed, and take the elevator to the SHIELD medical unit.

She would find Coulson bored with the offered TV and set him up with her laptop and the latest episodes of Supernanny. And as she sat there, curled up in a chair, with her boss and her friend, knowing that she was in love with a good man, that she had three close friends in a physicist, a self-defence trainer and a genius intern, and she had repaired some of the damage between her and her mom, she found peace for the first time in her life.

“When you hired me, did you think we’d become friends?” Darcy wondered.

“I knew you were special,” he said, turning to look at her. “This job requires a lot of trust, Darcy. You will be with me, every step of the way, good and bad, for a long time… So you have to be prepared for things like this. Situations like today…” He stared at her searchingly. “But if you’re not, say the word, and I’ll set you up with a position working under the president tomorrow, if you want.”

She picked at a loose thread on the knee of her jeans. “Obama’s awesome,” she said. “But I think I’ll stick with you for a while…” She nodded. “Y’know, just in case you need somebody to save your life or something.”

“I think we’re even on that front, since I saved your life minutes after,” he reminded, smirking.

She rolled her eyes. “I totally had Boris right where I wanted him.”

He raised an eyebrow. “He was about to shoot you.”

“And then I would’ve haunted him for the rest of his life… I would’ve driven him totally nuts; hiding his keys on him, closing doors randomly, changing the channel, making the volume go up and down…” She nodded. “I figured in a few years, he’d be consumed with paranoia and get out of the mobster business.”

“That was your big plan?” Coulson pursed his lips to keep from smiling. “In the last seconds before he killed you, that’s what you came up with?”

“Well, you probably should’ve invested in crisis training,” she said, shrugging.

He laughed, his head falling back, a hand covering his stomach as he shook with humor.

Sighing, he shook his head, and smiled at the ceiling. “You might be my favorite,” he admitted.

“I’m at least your best friend,” she agreed.
“Would you like a trophy for that too?”

She nodded. “It’d be appreciated.”

…

When she crawled back into bed, Steve turned over and spooned around her. “How’s Agent Coulson?” he wondered sleepily.

She smiled, rubbing his arm with her hand. “Good. I think I was promoted to his bestie at some point… Probably when I saved his life… Has that effect.”

He hummed and kissed her ear. “I’m sure he appreciates it…” He rubbed his face against her shoulder. “I know from personal experience that you’re a good friend to have.”

She laughed. “Yeah, well, I’m not sure how conventional our friendship was, especially since I wanted to jump your bones from the second I laid eyes on you.”

He chuckled. “I can relate.”

“Yeah,” she mused. “For a ninety year old soldier who lived a very different life, you get me surprisingly well.”

“Probably because loneliness and confusion are universal…”

She turned over. “Gettin’ deep, aren’t we?”

“I’m half-asleep, I don’t think anything I can say can be held against me,” he said, smiling tiredly as he brushed her hair back from her face.

She smirked. “I know something that can and wants to be held against you,” she said, wiggling her eyebrows.

Laughing under his breath, he leaned her back against the bed and smoothed his hand up under her shirt. “You’re insatiable, Miss Lewis.”

She slid her hands down his chest and winked at him. “For very good reason, Cap!”

It was a good thing Coulson was so many floors away or he wouldn’t have gotten any sleep, not with the noise level on Darcy’s.

Although, she thought the note pinned to her door with a dagger was a little much, and on the passive aggressive side since they politely asked her to respect everyone else on the floor.

Since that sounded like too much work, they just decided to start having sleepovers at Steve’s place.

Much better plan.
Epilogue

One Year Later

“No, mom, I really can’t invite President Obama to dinner…” Darcy rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I know, he’s a really cool dude and his family is awesome, but we’ve only met twice and I don’t think inviting him over is really appropriate. And we’re only in town for tonight, so… Y’know, short timing and stuff.”

Coulson raised an eyebrow at her.

She made the universal sigh for ‘blah, blah, blah’ with her hand before pausing, listening and smirking. “Yeah, sure, I bet Coulson would love to come to dinner…”

He glowered and shook his head at her.

“Oh you know somebody you think he’d like?” She nodded. “Well, I mean, I’ll have to vet her myself, give her the third degree, make her sweat in one of our interrogation rooms with that one, blinky bulb hanging over her head, but… Sure. That sounds good.”

Coulson rolled his eyes and checked the magazine in his gun before taking hers from her and doing the same. He held up two fingers to tell her had two more guns on his person and she replied with three fingers of her own.

He looked her up and down skeptically.

She shook her head in a ‘you don’t want to know’ sign and he shrugged before handing her gun back so she could put it in her chest holster.

“No, of course I won’t really put her in the interrogation room, mom… Well, actually, I could, but I’d have to blindfold her on the drive over…” she mused.

Snorting, Coulson checked his watch and then tapped it.

“Listen, I gotta go, I’m at work…” She nodded quickly, rolling her eyes as if it would somehow encourage her mother to hurry up. “Yes, Steve got your care package; he ate all the baked goods, the jerk. Didn’t even leave me a cookie…” She snorted. “Yeah, he loves the sweater you knit him… Although I think the card you added about how you’d make a really attractive grandmother was a little much. Subtlety is not in you, mom, you need to work on that.”

Coulson gave her stomach an appraising look and she socked him in the chest, shaking her head and glaring.

“Oh, I really need to go. I’ll tell Steve you love him and want him to be your son-in-law and impregnate me with millions of beautiful babies later. Right now I need to go do top secret spy stuff…”

Coulson gave her an exasperated look.

She shrugged back at him. “Love you too. Tell dad and Michael… Okay… Okay… Bye.”
Finally, she hung up and stuck her phone back into her jacket. “Sorry.”

He blinked at her. “Why does your mother have your work number?”

“She stole it.”

He raised an eyebrow.

Sighing, Darcy explained, “Last month, you remember Steve and I went down to visit?”

He nodded.

“Well, Dad took Mike and Steve golfing and it was a big thing so mom set up this girls’ day, but it was all a ploy!” She swiped a hand through the air. “While Laney and I were talking about something, I dunno, some crazy crime show she loves, mom snuck into my purse and texted herself from my work phone. Now she calls all the time.” She shrugged. “Seriously, it’s like she’s trying to make up for lost time when we were on the outs.”

“Why don’t you just have the number changed?” he wondered. “Or tell her she can’t call you on that number…?”

She blinked at him. “Phil, do you remember when you met my mom?”

His eyes turned off in memory and Darcy thought to herself about how her mom had spent basically an hour interrogating him and telling him that if anything happened to her daughter, she would personally destroy him. She’d been waving knitting needles around at the time.

“Your mother can be kind of scary for a suburban charity worker who knits and bakes in her spare time,” he admitted.

“Uh-huh. And you were a complete stranger back then,” she reminded, waving a hand. “So what do you think she’d do to me?”

He frowned. “Point taken.”

“Thank you.” She readjusted her suit. “Now…” She turned toward the door. “Ready?”

He stood a little taller before turning and asking, “Your Portuguese is good, right? You haven’t taken any refresher classes since you started with me.”

“I can almost definitely ask them where the bathroom is,” she replied.

He blinked at her.

“Não seja um bebê. Posso lidar com isso. Eu juro que não vai iniciar uma crise internacional ... novamente.” (Don’t be a baby. I can handle this. I promise I won’t start an international crisis… again.)

He sighed, took the safety off his gun, and nodded at her.

She grinned, winked, and swung open the door before marching inside. “Então, qual de vocês é o traficante de drogas?” (So, which of you is the drug dealer?)

Coulson held his breath until the laughter reached him. Shaking his head, he muttered, “Can’t argue with results.”
Darcy’s favorite part was coming home.

Sure, she liked the shoot-'em-up parts too, especially since she’d gotten really good at it, but it was when the dust settled and she and Coulson returned to SHIELD intact, filled out a mountain of paperwork, and then went their separate ways to rest, that she loved most. In the last year, she had played sidekick to Coulson’s gun-toting, secret agent man shtick for all of about three seconds and then she was promoted to his partner, something she was pretty sure defied SHIELD protocol. But when she was back at HQ, she was training, and when she was on a mission, she was his partner. Offers came and went for her to take her job to a next and different level, to get the desk job with any number of politicians, both straight and narrow and crooked as they come, but she’d turned them down. Not out of fear of what those jobs entailed but instead because she’d found where she wanted to be.

Darcy was not an agent. Her job didn’t exactly have a title. To some she was Coulson’s assistant or pet project, where to others that knew them, she was his partner. And when they weren’t coordinating the Avengers in an effort to keep the world safe, they were on their own private missions, sometimes on American soil and often not. Not everyone they went up against were politicians or of a like mind, though she later found out that Boris had been working directly under a dirty Senator who knew gun trafficking provided a big paycheck. Others, however, were just bad guys doing bad things that needed SHIELD to step in and stop them. The kind of bad guys that didn’t need super-heroes to don the suits and play ball but also weren’t run of the mill enough for regular police forces, instead they fell into a middle ground made for the agents that had been especially trained for that sort of thing.

So at the end of the day, Darcy was just the average American citizen who knew too much, had way too many guns, was best friends with an astrophysicist and a secret agent, happened to know and be friends with Spiderman, and who still trained often with the affable Tima. She had acquaintances in presidents, prime ministers, senators, and any number of politicians all over the world. She was personally buddies and babysitter to the unruly and often antagonistic Avengers. And last, but not least, when she came home, there wasn’t any grey, soul sucking walls in sight.

Darcy hopped out of the cab, paid the driver, and hiked her bag up higher on her shoulder as she climbed the steps to the red-brick townhouse. She stuck her key in the lock and pushed open the door, briefly overcome with the excited golden retriever wagging its tail at her feet. “Hey General,” she said, scratching behind his ear. “Where’s your dad, huh?” She closed the door and kicked her shoes off, dropping her bag down on the floor before she padded through the house.

“Steve?” she called out.

“T’m in the back,” he returned.

She smiled as she walked through the living room, with its wicker and plaid and overstuffed armchair and couch, the fireplace mantle covered in little trophies Coulson had given her over their partnership, and the pictures, new and old, of friends and family. She skirted around the art table he had set up, pushing the chair in underneath it, and paused to see what he was working on. There were colors everywhere; paints, pastels, pencil crayons. She couldn’t quite make out what he’d started, just a faint outline of it making its way through. She was sure he’d tell her about it, so she filed it away and kept walking.

It was Thursday, which meant he was cooking since they traded off days, so she wasn’t surprised to smell a chicken roasting in the oven. Her mouth watered and she licked her lips before looking down at the dog. “We’re eating like kings tonight, huh?”
He yapped at her happily, tongue lolling from his mouth.

The back door was open, but the screen door was closed; she pushed it wide and let General go first before following him out onto the porch.

Darcy’s eyes widened as she stared out at their back yard. “Is that…?” She blinked a few times. “You planted a tree?”

Steve looked up at her, one eye closed against the bright sun, and grinned. “It wasn’t easy. But I found a service and they had it moved over.”

Darcy walked down the stairs and gaped up at it. “Is it…” Her throat burned for a second. “Is that my tree?” She blinked quickly. “Mom said they had to have it pulled… She said the city forced them.”

He walked over to her, tugging off his gloves from where he’d been fiddling with the dirt, fixing the grass. “Your dad wanted to cut it down; he said it was too much trouble to clean up after each fall…” He shrugged. “I know how much you love it, so I asked if I could have it moved over.”

“Steve…” She bit her lip and laughed. Walking forward, she pressed a hand to the familiar bark. “This was my haven when I was a kid…” She shook her head. “It was everything to me. I—It was my best friend.”

He just watched her as she gazed at the tree a long moment before finally turning and hurrying over to him. She jumped into his arms and wrapped herself around him. “Thank you.”

He rubbed her back as he held her.

Darcy hadn’t wanted to run away for a long time; not since she’d stood up and faced her problems.

In her room, framed, there was a target paper, and through each ring was a bullet hole that she’d put there; she kept it as a reminder.

But this tree represented her through most of her life; the scared girl who didn’t know what to do or how to face her fears, the rebelling teenager who was really good at shouting back but not so much at listening, the college student who was afraid of becoming an adult, and lastly, the woman those three had created, second-guessing everything she ever did.

At the top of that tree, she’d sat and looked down on the world and felt like she was bigger than it all, but in truth, she’d been doing everything she could to hide from it, to get as far from responsibility and maturity as she could get. Now, she would climb the tree to embrace who she’d been and how it had brought her to where she was. How every one of her mistakes had combined to get her to the right place and the right people and the right her.

If it wasn’t for all the times she’d changed her mind, changed her major, screwed up, talked back, and fought against everything that came up against her, then maybe everything would be different, and not for the better. She wouldn’t have met Jane and Coulson wouldn’t have taken an interest. She wouldn’t have signed on with SHIELD so she wouldn’t meet Steve or have been able to relate to him in a time when he was so lost and confused himself. She wouldn’t have made up with her mother because she wouldn’t have said how it had affected her, or maybe it wouldn’t have affected her at all, she didn’t know. What she did know was that her and her mom were closer than ever. That Jane was happy and healthy and very much in love with an alien Norse God. That Coulson was the best partner she could ask for, even if he did totally get Loki’d that one time and put her through some serious friendship turmoil. And that Steve was the love of her life.
“You remember what you asked me the other night?” she said, leaning back in his arms, scrubbing her nails through his hair.

He raised an eyebrow, amused. “When I asked you to marry me, you mean?”

“Yeah, that,” she said.

He laughed. “I do.”

“Hey, that’s my line!”

Okay, so ‘mature’ was a strong word…

[End.]

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