Physical Phenomena

by Aenaria

Summary

It's our senses that help guide our perceptions and help us discover the world around us. These senses also help connect with other humans in a wide variety of relationships from friendship, to romance, and beyond.

Glimpses into the growing relationship between Steve Rogers and Darcy Lewis, starting from their beginning.

Notes

This piece is a bit of an experiment for me, writing chapters or vignettes based around one of the many senses that humans possess. And I've been wanting to write something with Steve and Darcy because I love those two together so very, very much. As the summary says, these are going to be glimpses and short scenes between them, so there probably won't be too much of a detailed plot from here on out. Matter of fact, I'm sort of winging this entire thing, which explains the dodgy summary. But it's fun, and isn't that what matters?

Thanks for reading!
Olfactoception

Sense: "A system that consists of a group of sensory cell types that responds to a specific physical phenomenon."

It’s common knowledge that we utilize our senses to discover the world around us. It’s this combination of senses that lets us find out about the world, classify incoming data, form thoughts and perceptions about situations, and make those connections that, in the end, make us ultimately human.

If someone could reach into Steve Rogers’ head and create his ideal vision of the perfect bookstore then the place known simply as The Bookshop came pretty darn close. A narrow store in the basement of an old brownstone that stretched back into the shadows, flickering lights that were making a valiant effort to cut through the dark and heavy air, aisles created from creaky and leaning wooden shelves overloaded with books both new and used, stretching all the way up so that the topmost books practically brushed against the low ceilings, and the sound of rustling pages one of the only sounds that echoed through the space.

Steve’s eyes flicked along the titles on the shelves that were designated the history section. The titles he was seeing were new and modern additions, a subtle reminder that time had marched forward at a steady pace while he was asleep under the ice. Still, it was his world now (a second chance he had never, ever believed would be possible, to be honest) and it wouldn’t do him any good not to get caught up on what he’d missed. While S.H.I.E.L.D.’s cultural immersion program, or whatever term they had come up with to call the crash course on 21st century life, was sufficient to get him caught up on many things, they still encouraged him to go out and learn on his own. This led Steve to The Bookshop with the intent of picking up some supplemental materials.

There was no real plan or guide for what sort of books he was looking for, just to find something that felt unfamiliar with the hopes of filling in the blanks. Okay, it may not have been one of his best plans, but sometimes it was fun just to wander and see what he could end up with, Steve thought. After picking a book about counterculture in the 1960s, Steve turned the corner into another aisle, and came upon the rather improbable sight of a young woman with her nose buried deeply in the pages of a book.

It wasn’t just the position of someone a bit hard of vision trying to read the words in front of her. In fact, given the woman’s position and the way her glasses were practically smashed up against the pages she probably wouldn’t be able to see anything at all. The white plastic strings running over her chest and weaving their way up under her dark hair combined with the muffled music noises that seemed to be emanating from around her indicated that she probably couldn’t hear anything either. Steve watched as she took a deep breath, inhaling through the nose and making her shoulders move with the motion of it.

He had a brief moment of thinking that he shouldn’t be there watching that moment, but the thought shriveled, cocked up its toes, and died when the young woman’s head turned, eyes flicking towards Steve. She seemed to freeze in place for a few seconds, then ever so slowly lowered the book away from her face, pulled one of the white strings out of her ear, and shot him a very sheepish glance. “I like how they smell,” she said. The rest of the words tumbled out, as if she couldn’t quite control the flow. “I know it’s incredibly dorky of me, but there’s just something about how old books smell. And no matter how many books I can cram onto my Kindle I still haven’t found a way
to replicate the scent, which kind of takes away from the whole experience. Sometimes, at least. Not always.” The words petered to a stop and she snapped the book shut, tapping short fingernails on the bright green dust jacket. The cover may have had a horse on the cover, but he couldn’t be sure.

“They’re timeless,” Steve blurted. “No matter where you go or how far you are from home, a book’s gonna smell like a book.” While he’d never actually thought about the implications in depth, he suspected that was exactly why he was so resistant to the e-reader Tony kept trying to foist off onto him.

She tilted her head to the side, looking over at him as a wave of dark hair fell in her face. “I never thought of it like that,” she said, brushing the errant lock out of the way. “But it does make sense. New Mexico or New York, you can always find a book ready and waiting for you. You crack it open and there’s that smell of dust and paper, and maybe just a little bit of time. If time had a smell, of course.”

“What does time smell like?” Steve found himself asking. ‘Okay, not one of the best questions you’ve ever come up with, Rogers,’ he then reprimanded himself.

She wrinkled her brow and pursed her lips, glancing down at the book and then back up at him. “Tell you what,” she eventually said. “Come get a coffee with me, and by the time we’re done I’ll have a better answer for you than time smells like a book.”

“Uh…”

“I don’t bite,” she said, with a grin that implied biting could and would happen if it were welcome in certain situations. “I’m Darcy, by the way.”

“He blinked quickly, trying to shake off the brief moment of knee-jerk panic. Sometimes it was hard to jump headfirst into the future, but going out for coffee with a bold dame who liked books wouldn’t be a bad way to help him get used to the now. It didn’t hurt that she was pretty too, with a figure consisting of curves and waves without harsh, sharp edges. The books and their timelessness would still be there later. Besides, she didn’t seem to recognize him as Captain America, something which was becoming harder and harder to avoid the more time went on. To her, he suspected, he was just another fella wandering around in a bookshop, an idea which kind of appealed to him. “You know, I could go for a coffee.”

“Awesome.” She smiled widely then, full lips spreading to reveal smooth, white teeth. “I know just the place.”

About an hour into the conversation, it came out that Darcy was the same person who assisted Jane Foster, had once tased a demi-god, and knew exactly who Steve Rogers was. When he mentioned that Thor had told him the story of his and Darcy’s first encounter more than once her response was to grin widely, toss her arms up in the air, and proclaim: “My reputation precedes me!”
Chapter Summary

Gustaoception, otherwise known as the sense of taste. Or, in which clichés are clichés because they’re true.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Two: Gustaoception

(Or, in which clichés are clichés because they’re true)

“Man, I wish S.H.I.E.L.D. was footing the bill for my apartment,” Darcy said the first time she visited Steve’s place (just as friends, of course, despite whatever insinuations Jane may have made earlier that day), staring around with undisguised awe. The apartment wasn’t actually all that big taking into account Brooklyn living but the rooms were open, the bathroom probably could have fit a twin-sized mattress inside of it, and, best of all, no annoying roommates. Apparently the pay for an astrophysicist’s assistant didn’t stretch all that far when it came time to pay the rent, which led to her bunking down with a few local college students in the effort to save a few bucks. They were nice people, just…well, sometimes it was hard to go back to everyday living when you knew for a fact what else was out there in the universe just waiting for humanity to catch up to the rest of the game. The college crowd, while fully aware of the events that had happened during the invasion, didn’t quite comprehend the details of what was going on behind the scenes. Knowing that, Darcy had been sure to come up with any number of escape plans to get away from the students. Today’s plan involved badgering her way into Steve’s place for a few hours with the promise that she’d bring pizza. Multiple pizzas, keeping Steve’s appetite in mind. She’d seen it in action in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s commissary; it was quite impressive to behold.

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” Steve said, bustling around and preparing…something on the counter. Darcy couldn’t tell from her position, so she shrugged and went to drop the pizzas on the dinner table.

“Says you. I bet you don’t have to spend over an hour on the subway just to get to Midtown.”

Steve was still occupied by the counter, so Darcy took a closer look around at the kitchen. The place was neat, with the few possessions precisely arranged for easy accessibility, she supposed. Still, there was something a bit…empty about the place, for lack of a better word. Like the apartment hadn’t yet taken on the character to match Steve’s. Darcy was a full believer in the idea of rooms taking on the personality of their inhabitants, and she’d hoped to scratch a little bit below the surface of Steve Rogers by getting a glimpse of his secret lair, so to speak. Not that it was all that secret, considering that he’d given up the address to her with only a minimum of badgering. But from what she could tell the press hadn’t figured out Captain America was living in this building yet, so at least there was still that degree of privacy there.
“How are the neighbors here?” Darcy asked, stepping forward to peer out the window. There was a fire escape that overlooked a brick wall and a narrow alley, with the last few remnants of sunlight making dappled patterns on the cracking blacktop. Not very interesting.

“How’s it going?” Steve called back. Something rattled against glass. “Relatively quiet,” Steve translated, leaning forward to see if she could see further down the alley from her window perch. She could hear the cars rushing by, but seeing them from this angle was a near impossibility. Darcy felt rather than heard Steve come up next to her, and supposed it was all of that military training that let him walk so silently. She made a mental note to ask him the next time it came up.

“You’re doing better than I am then,” Darcy said, hoping to break up the gloomy mood that had suddenly settled over the apartment. “One of my roommates has a tendency to study at three in the morning while blasting dubstep. And while I’m all for a party, when I’ve got to haul Jane out of the lab at seven a.m. because she pulled an all-nighter, I need at least six hours of uninterrupted sleep. And a big-ass coffee; that always helps too.”

“Add it to the list. On second thought, maybe not. I’m too bitter right now to give you a proper introduction.”

Darcy pulled her eyes away from the sight of a few crumpled up pieces of paper being buffeted around the alleyway and looked over at Steve. He was staring out the window himself, his hand clenched around a tall glass filled with a foamy liquid and traces of condensation on the outside. “What’s that?” she asked.

“Egg cream. You used to be able to get one for just a few cents almost anywhere. We’d – Bucky and me - save up our money and go down to this drugstore that was a few

“Try some.” Steve handed the glass over to her and she took it eagerly, anticipating the familiar and exciting sweetness. Which was easily noticeable, combined with the slip-slide of whole milk coating her tongue as she swallowed. What she hadn’t planned on was the sensation of bubbles filling her mouth as she drank, fizzing and prickling against her tongue and cheeks.

“Fizzy chocolate milk,” she concluded, handing the glass back to Steve. “Different, but I could definitely drink the whole thing without blinking.”

“It’s called an egg cream. You used to be able to get one for just a few cents almost anywhere. We’d – Bucky and me - save up our money and go down to this drugstore that was a few
blocks away from our place.” Steve sipped carefully at the drink, as if he were making sure not to spill a drop of it. “Not quite the same when you make it yourself, but it’s pretty close.” She opened her mouth to say something, but he interrupted her before she could speak a word. “And no, there’s no actual eggs in there, which is why you can’t taste them.”

Darcy glanced over at the table with its boxes of pizza cracked open and tendrils of steam rising up from the surfaces. “It’d go pretty well with the pizzas.” She looked up at Steve, a hopeful glint in her eyes. “Wanna make me one of my own?” He gave her a look back, eyebrows arcing up towards the ceiling. Still, his mouth twitched, belying the sternness she thought he was trying to project. “Pleeeease?” she wheedled further, resorting to the same tactics she’d used when she was five.

“Fine,” he conceded with a grin, heading back towards the kitchen counter. Darcy could easily appreciate the departing view, and gave herself a few moments to enjoy it before lapsing back into more serious thoughts. It wasn’t often that Steve would talk about his past, at least not to any candid, personal degree. Military tactics and campaigns, sure. But tales about where he grew up, who he was before he became the Captain, were harder to come across. That he was sharing them with her, no matter how brief the stories were? Yeah, it was definitely something new.

A week later Darcy showed up at Steve’s door asking for asylum from the crazy roommates, and brought the supplies to make egg creams along with a little something extra she had found online. Making sure he wasn’t watching, she prepared the drinks and slipped the additional component in without him watching. “Here, try this,” she said, pushing the tall glass into his hands.

He frowned down at the glass. “What did you do to it?” he asked, sniffing at the drink warily.

“Let’s call it the adult version of your childhood favorite.” Darcy motioned toward the glass. “Now drink!”

Steve raised the glass up in a silent toast, and then took a small sip. He swallowed, stopping to think for a moment, then licked his lips and cut his eyes towards her. “It’s different,” he said slowly. “Kind of like a malted milkshake but a lot more powerful.” He took another small sip. “You do realize that getting drunk off of this is pretty much impossible for me.”

“Yeah, but not for me,” said Darcy, holding up the bottle of Bols Genever that had required scouring a number of different liquor stores to find and taking a slug directly out of the bottle. No one had ever said she was a proper and delicate lady. She shook her head at Steve, who was giving her a wary look. “Tastes better with the chocolate,” she concluded.

Steve grabbed the bottle, sparing a look at the label. “Come on,” he said, “I’ll show you how to make a proper egg cream, even with your newfangled additions.”

Then he winked at Darcy, turning what could have been a rather grandfatherly statement into something quite different.
creams. But the truth of the matter is, you really can’t get more Brooklyn than an egg cream, so it’s something that I could easily imagine him missing. I’m also working with memories of my own Brooklyn born and raised mom making egg creams for me and my sister, and hearing all about how they’d go after school to get them at a nearby candy shop, and then hearing the further laments that her homemade versions just weren’t the same (even though she was talking about a time a good thirty, forty years after Steve probably would have been indulging in them). If you’ve never had one, I highly recommend picking up the supplies and making your own at home. Personally, I love the things.

The adult version of the drink that Darcy makes, called a Dutch Cream, actually does exist and can be found here: http://12bottlebar.com/2010/08/dutch-cream/. I haven’t tried this version of the egg cream yet, but considering the recipe says the taste resembles a Whopper candy, well, my mouth’s watering just thinking about it.

The good thing about being on vacation means that I have time to write, and that the next scene is already in progress. Stay tuned for more, and thanks for reading!
Thermoception

Chapter Summary

Thermoception: sense of temperature. Musings on cold and warmth, from the perspective of a man who spent nearly seventy years under the ice.

Chapter Notes

I’m not writing these scenes in any sort of chronological order. This one takes place well after the previous two scenes, though I will be going back and filling in some of the blanks with other scenes.

Cold weather was not one of Steve’s favorite things. It actually had nothing to do with the crash of the Valkyrie and the subsequent ice nap. The cold reminded him of huddling around a dimly burning stove trying to get the blood moving in his fingers while his mother fretted and worried about if they had enough coal stored away to get through until her next paycheck. When chilly drafts blew in around the edges of the windows in his new 21st century apartment, all he could think of was the small tenement flat he and Bucky had shared until the war had started. Cold was huddling for days somewhere in an alpine forest waiting for just the right moment to raze that Hydra camp right to the ground.

The plane crash had happened so quickly, quick enough that Steve had only started to understand it after the fact. All he remembered from those moments was hitting the water with more force than he ever could have imagined, and then waking up in what was supposedly a recovery room in New York. The ensuing seventy years? For him, it had passed as if he’d just had a long night’s sleep, waking up late the next day.

Steve got the feeling sometimes that people wanted him to remember. Maybe not those that he counted as friends, but many of them at S.H.I.E.L.D. were infinitely curious about what it was like being stuck in the ice for so long. The scientists were the worst, with their probing questions to determine what exactly had happened and how, however improbably it seemed, the cryogenic effects could be recreated if needed. In the end, all he could do was shrug and apologize to them for not knowing anything else.

The one moment that he could remember, that he’d thought was an unusual injury-induced dream in those few moments before he’d woken up in the future, was one that he was inclined to keep to himself. There was something private about it, of practically being outside of his body looking in and seeing his body splayed out on a table surrounded by ice, skin unnaturally pale and bluish, with the sounds of disbelief that he was still alive somehow echoing hollowly in his ears. If Steve felt cold then, he was so far into the cold that he’d gone numb, as any sense of temperature was non-existent.

Knowing that, maybe it was a combination of components that had caused Steve to arrange the couch in his apartment in just such a position that it would fall right in the beams of midday sun
that streamed in through the window. On those days when he could indulge himself, Steve would set down on the wide, squishy couch and just spend hours in that spot. Sometimes he’d sketch, catching the play of light in the trees across the street or against the sleek roof of a passing car. Other times he’d just lay there, stretched out like some overgrown cat and let the sun seep into his skin, warming his bones from the inside out. It was a luxury he’d never been able to afford before the war. Steve had been told repeatedly by many people (such as Tony, who was the one who had bought him the overstuffed couch in the first place) that it was okay to relax once and a while.

Today was one of those days where Steve was spread out on the sofa, not really doing anything in particular in an attempt to shut his brain off. To be fair, it had been a long week. Half of it had been spent flying around the world, chasing around some rogue cells that had decided that classified alien technology would be the perfect tools for enhancing their fighting capabilities. The other half had been spent disabling those self-same capabilities and locking the culprits up in a very secure location. He’d earned the break, especially since his muscles still felt strained and exhausted from the various fights. And so he stretched out on his stomach, limbs loose and pliant, letting the late afternoon light warm him up from the outside in. If only his mind would follow suit with the rest of his body’s demands.

Without warning, he felt something icy cold press against the back of his neck, right below his hairline. In the first second after that Steve’s muscles bunched up, as if to get ready to fight, until his brain interrupted the instinctual movements and reminded him that he was in a safe and secure location, and that there was only one other person in his apartment at the moment. It wasn’t far-fetched for that same person to have taken a sip of something cold before deciding to plant a kiss on his neck either, especially since he’d seen her searching through his fridge for something to drink only a few minutes before.

Steve felt Darcy begin to trail kisses along his neck as the couch dipped slightly under her weight and a hand settled on his back, the cool palm that he could feel even through his t-shirt a startling contrast to his sun-warmed skin. As the kisses moved along to his jawline, he twisted his head to the side, disrupting her plans and meeting her lips with his own. The angle was slightly awkward, and Darcy’s glasses pushed against his cheek. Still, he didn’t exactly care, especially when he felt her equally cold tongue brush softly against his lower lip.

Darcy pulled back and grinned down at him as he flipped onto his back. “Cola?” Steve guessed, blinking quickly as the sun hit his eyes.

“Got it in one,” she confirmed. “How are you feeling?” Darcy asked, her hand stroking up and down his side. “I heard that things got rough out there earlier.”

“That’s an understatement,” Steve said, running his hands through his hair and massaging his forehead briefly. Then he reached out and snagged Darcy’s arm, pulling her forward. Being the quick study that she was, Darcy easily figured out his intent and lay down, laying half on the couch and half on top of him. Body heat was a different type of warmth than the sun, Steve knew, but one that was no less appealing. And if it meant that he could feel all of the different curvatures of her body pressing up against him, that was all the better.

“Well, you’re in luck.” Darcy propped her head on his chest and tapped his chin with one purple manicured finger. “Because I am an expert at distracting people from serious shit like idiot terrorists with outer space tech.”

Steve angled his head down to look at her. “That was supposed to be classified.”

Darcy snorted, rather indelicately. “Yeah, well, someone needs to tell Thor that. He told Jane, and the rest is history.” She stretched a little further, her face ending up a mere inch from his.
“But seriously, stop thinking.”

“Yes ma’am,” Steve muttered right before she kissed him again, the world fading away as he focused on the lips that were rapidly warming against his.
Proprioception, Part One

Chapter Summary

Proprioception, or kinesthetic sense, is the sense of position of the relative parts of the body and strength of effort being employed in movement. How much effort would it really take to reach out and pull her close? Of course, the real question is if he (and she, to be honest) is ready to admit those feelings and put things into motion.

Chapter Notes

So much for keeping these things shorter. The scene ended up taking on a life of its own, which is why it's broken up into two parts for you. This is what happens when I write on the subway; I lose track of time far too easily. We're back to the UST with this chapter at least, which is something I'm pleased about. Part two should be posted sometime over the weekend.

Thank you to everyone who's left comments - it's always good to hear that you're enjoying the story! And to anyone out there who celebrates today, Happy Thanksgiving to you.

Okay, on with the fic...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, Steve. What are you doing this fine Friday evening?”

The wheedling, cajoling tone in Darcy’s voice led to a knot of nerves building in Steve’s stomach. It wasn’t the first time he’d felt it, though in the past that feeling had usually been preceded by Bucky saying something along the lines of ‘Come on, it’s the Cyclone. It’ll be fun!’ Still, politeness won out.

“Nothing much,” he replied, slowly and carefully. “What’s going on?”

“I need the brute squad to help me get these big ass boxes into my apartment.”

“Brute squad?”

“Really? No one’s made you sit down and watch ‘The Princess Bride’ yet?”

“No, I don’t think so.” At least, he didn’t think with any degree of certainty. Well-meaning people and co-workers had been exposing him to so many different aspects of the future that some of the things that they wanted him to really focus on may have slipped through the cracks a little.

“Okay, I so know what your reward is for helping me out now.”

“Darcy…” He trailed off, thinking it was impolite to turn down a dame’s request for help, even if all he wanted to do that night was stay at home and pretend, just for a small shining moment,
that it was 1945 again. It was just one of those days, where a lingering feeling of homesickness seemed to hang over him, even though nothing specific had happened to cause those feelings. To be fair, those days weren’t happening as often, not since the whole mess with Loki and the Chitauri, but they were still present, lurking right there beneath the surface.

“Come on, what are you going to do if you stay home? Mope around and get all depressed? Help me out tonight and you’ll be able to experience the satisfaction of assembling the finest flat pack furniture Sweden has to offer and watch one of the greatest stories ever told.”

Steve twirled a pencil in his hand, watching idly as his fingers flicked the barrel to and fro. And if spinning a pencil was the true extent of his plans that night, then someone should just put him out of his misery. “All right, I’ll help you out.”

“Excellent. How fast can you be ready?”

“Quickly.” If nothing else, all of those stage shows taught him the art of the quick outfit change.

“Good, ’cause I’m kind of double parked outside your apartment and there’s a cop giving me the stink-eye.”

He shook his head and grinned ruefully. “I’ll be right down.”

*                      *                      *

Even back in Steve’s day, driving in Brooklyn wasn’t an experience for the faint of heart. Hell, his beloved Dodgers were named after the idiots who ran in front of trolley cars just to get to the games on time. In the nearly seventy years since he was last in Brooklyn the traffic situation had only gotten worse, billions of large and small modern cars crammed onto roads designed for smaller and slower vehicles. Not to mention the pedestrians who popped out from in between cars without any regard for the drivers on the road. Combine that with the double parkers and the belief that the speed limit was just a suggestion made Steve grateful that the serum had improved his constitution and tamped down any potential carsickness.

While Darcy wasn’t from the city originally she seemed to approach Brooklyn driving with relish, weaving in and out of cars at top speed with an unholy grin on her face. That grin would morph to pursed lips, a frown, or something altogether worse with the flick of a switch, however – or rather as soon as the guy in the lane next to her cut her off to make a quick right turn.

Darcy laid on the horn, keeping the noise going for longer than necessary. “Get out of the way you stupid bastard!” she yelled, making Steve wince. She pulled the wheel hard, sending them in a tight curve around another double parked car, slamming Steve against his seatbelt and then back into the bucket seat in a tangle of limbs.

When he could find his tongue again, the only thing Steve could say was “I think you were up on two wheels for a minute there.”

“That’s what happens when you borrow a fifteen-year-old SUV from your roommate. Not my fault he didn’t give me directions on how his piece of crap machine works.” She pressed her foot to the floor, accelerating and squeaking through the intersection right before the light turned red. A second later she slammed on the brakes as a bus pulled out in front of her.

Steve stretched out his arms, pushing himself off the dashboard and back into his seat. “We’re almost there, right?”
Darcy’s apartment turned out to be a room in a monstrosity of a house somewhere in Flatbush. Steve suspected that the house had probably been there since his day and had gone to seed over time. The owners must have been making a bundle renting out by the room to students who wanted to be decently close to the nearby college, however, so it couldn’t have been a total wreck inside. Darcy opened the front door onto a dark hallway and motioned Steve inside, the long flat pack boxes slung over his shoulder as if they were as light as a plastic bag. “It’s too quiet,” Darcy said as she guided him up the staircase, looking around the space warily. “That means they’re planning something, which can’t be good.”

Steve didn’t often find himself in women’s bedrooms so he tried not to be too obvious as he scoped out her space. The room was long and narrow, with the high ceiling and three windows making it look larger than it really was. A small loveseat divided the room in half, and a TV stand was set up below the front window. A queen sized mattress took up almost the entire back half of the room, with a small dresser and bedside table slotted in around it. The mattress was notably on the floor, which explained the two boxes in his arms. There were a few framed pictures on the walls, along with swaths of vibrantly hued fabric to disguise the bog standard beige paint. He slid the boxes off his shoulder and leaned them against the wall. “All right, let’s get moving,” he said, feeling not unlike he was preparing for battle.

Two hours, a broken battery operated drill (Darcy’s fault), one smashed thumb (Steve, when one of the slats of the bed frame slipped out of place), and a lot of foul language later (both of them) the bed frame from hell was finally assembled. When the last overstuffed feather pillow was put into place Darcy sighed with satisfaction and flopped face first onto the mattress. “Mmm, comfy,” she said, voice muffled by the pillows and the cover. “Thanks, Steve.”

He just grinned down at her, amused by the sight of her practically being devoured by the comforter and mounds of pillows. “Not a problem. I’ll leave you to your sleep, then.” Because Darcy really did look to be about five minutes away from calling it a night and drifting off to dreamland.

“Noooo,” she said, reaching out a hand blindly and flailing until she managed to snag the waistband of his jeans. She tugged lightly. “I promised you a movie as a reward.”

“Darcy, you’re about to fall asleep,” he said. “We can do movie night another time.” Steve was about to point out that he wasn’t too far from a subway stop either and that he could easily make his way home without having to subject himself to her creative driving skills again when there was a bit of a commotion in the hall outside Darcy’s room. Feeling slightly worried, Steve crossed the room in two long footsteps and pulled open the door. Jarringly loud bursts of music flooded in, obviously not heard or noticed over the frustrated language that accompanied the bed assembly. “Mmm, comfy,” she said, voice muffled by the pillows and the cover. “Thanks, Steve.”

“I was afraid of this,” he heard Darcy say as she poked her head around him, looking down at the football players. They were so intent on their game that they still hadn’t noticed the two in the doorway who were staring down at the two guys with suspicion (and a bit of disbelief on Steve’s part). “I don’t even want to think about what’s happening downstairs if it’s spread up here already.” She patted Steve on the arm, shooting him a conciliatory look. “Might as well get comfy, soldier. It’s going to be a long night. Unless you want to go downstairs and risk potential gossip about Cap – uh, your alter ego being spotted at a college kegger.”
Steve pursed his lips, thinking fast and weighing all of the potentials. “You mentioned something about a movie?” he asked after a few moments, resigning himself to being stuck for the next few hours (and in a gal’s bedroom, no less. How had this become his life?).

Darcy gave his arm a little shake. “Good choice. Now get comfy; I’ll go liberate some snacks from the drunkies.”

* * *

One of the nicer features of Darcy’s building was the small outdoor balcony located right next to her room. The balcony, directly over the front door, overlooked the postage stamp of a front yard, sidewalk, and street below. This was where Steve and Darcy found themselves sometime before midnight, sharing a cheap bottle of wine liberated from her roommates and watching as the party, still in full swing, spilled out onto the street below. They’d watched the movie for a while, but had moved outdoors when the music blasting from below became too overwhelming for even Darcy. Steve had honestly been ready to sneak out and head home, but Darcy had pouted in his direction and fluttered her eyelids, pleading with him to stay just a little longer. The combination was hard to say no to, which was how Steve had ended up on the balcony observing a group of college students get more and more raucous as time marched on. Not for the first time, he felt more than a little bit lost and certainly out of his depth. Darcy seemed to be quite at ease, however, so he was determined not to worry about it. At least, not too much.

“What do you think the S.H.I.E.L.D. psychiatrists would call this one?” Steve mused, leaning back on his hands. “An educational experience involving the recreational habits of college students, maybe?” While the few glasses of wine didn’t even make a dent in his sobriety, it was helping to tamp down the nerves and slide him into a state of odd relaxation. Maybe it was just being nearby people who weren’t thinking about anything beyond that night, and seemed to have no cares in the world aside from where the next drink was coming from. Or maybe it was just a psychosomatic reaction to how he remembered alcohol making him feel in the time before the serum. It wasn’t worth worrying about.

“Something like that,” Darcy agreed, head bobbing up and down. “No one else would drink wine out of red plastic cups,” she continued with a grimace, holding up the offending object. There was a clatter from below, the sound of glass breaking, followed by a loud cheer. “I wonder how long it’ll take the neighbors to call the cops.” She cut her eyes sideways at Steve. “I’m actually kind of surprised you haven’t wanted to call the cops on them yourself yet.”

Steve tore his eyes away from the crowds below, one of whom was mimicking throwing one of those red cups up towards their balcony, and met her look. “Does everyone really think I’m that uptight?” He thought he’d been making strides in fitting in since the battle for New York, but apparently not. “Trust me; it takes a lot more to scandalize me than some kids acting stupid at a party.”

She paused to think, sipping at the white wine that was just a shade too sweet for her liking. “I think that you don’t let other people see that side of you enough. There’s a fun loving Steve Rogers somewhere in there, but you don’t let it come out to play all that often. And I’m not quite sure why, because the fun Steve Rogers I’ve seen in the few months we’ve known each other is pretty awesome.”

“Fun loving,” he repeated. Steve shrugged and reached for his own cup, taking comfort in the action even if the wine didn’t do a thing for him. “Did anyone ever think that maybe I don’t always act ‘fun loving’ is because I’m still trying to find my feet?” The words spilled forth before he could control them. He wasn’t normally that talkative about those emotional things he’d been
dealing with since he’d been pulled out of the ice, but there was something that wouldn’t allow him to keep his mouth shut. Or maybe it was just because he was speaking to someone who genuinely cared about him, who saw him as a person and not just some decorated hero. It was one of the things he liked best about Darcy, her ability to see past the surface and check out what was lurking behind the scenes. “Plenty of times I’ve got no idea where I belong. Sometimes I can forget about it, like tonight, and think that yeah, I’m making progress, but then so many other times…oh, hell, I don’t know.” He pressed his lips shut, feeling suddenly uncomfortable. Maybe he’d blame the wine, even though the drink was having no more of an effect on him than a cup of fruit juice would.

Darcy’s eyes narrowed, yellow lights from the streetlamps reflecting off of her glasses. “That’s a surprising show of insecurity from you, Captain.”

Steve snorted, burying his nose in his cup once more. “The Captain’s got missions to go on at least. He’s got a job to do.”

She reached out and pulled the cup away from his face, leaving her hand wrapped tightly around his. Even in the cooler, early October air her hand was still warm, and for the briefest moment he imagined it burning against his skin. “And what about Steven Rogers, the man behind the armor?” she asked.

He looked directly at her, grinning wryly. “In that case, I’m still that scrawny kid from Brooklyn who kept getting beat up because he couldn’t keep his mouth shut.”

She squeezed his hand tightly, keeping her eyes locked on his. At that moment, something in the air shifted, just slightly. Ideas that could have once been fleeting fantasies began to gain concrete status, even if it was happening in ways that the people thinking them didn’t (or couldn’t) quite acknowledge just yet. But now that the possibility of something more had suddenly become real? Well, that was new and unexpected. However, whatever could have happened in the moment after that subconscious realization was tamped down by a sudden intrusion.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone has any events or scenes they’d like to see, let me know! I’m always looking for new inspiration (especially since I’ve got quite a few senses chapters left to fill that I’ve got no clue what to do with). Thanks for reading!
Proprioception, Part Two

Chapter Summary

Part two of 'Proprioception', otherwise known as the night Steve Rogers got stuck at a college party.

Chapter Notes

The continuation of the last scene, just another night stuck in the middle of a college party. As always, thanks to everyone who left kudos and comments, it's always appreciated!

And seriously, as for the scenes, I'm open to requests. Okay, on with the show...

“Okay, wow. Whoever called you scrawny needs a serious reality check,” a high pitched voice said behind him as a hand glided across his shoulders. It was only Darcy’s groan – pained and annoyed but not at all shocked – and the grip she had on his hand that kept him in his seat and prevented him from knocking out the intruder.

“Rhiannon, stop molesting my friend and sit your drunk ass down before you spill beer all over him.”

“It’s not beer,” Rhiannon protested, sitting down right practically in between them in a wobbly, slightly lopsided heap. “It’s…something fruity. But seriously, introduce me. Because really.” She let out a dopey little giggle, which made Darcy cover her eyes with her hand. Steve suspected there was an eye-roll happening behind there, and a not very well disguised one at that.

“Steve, this is my roommate Rhiannon, one of the…however many we’ve got living in this hovel at the moment. Rhiannon, this is Steve, a co-worker of mine.” While they hadn’t exactly intended on encountering any of the partying roommates while they were holed up in her room, they’d still agreed on the co-worker cover story if someone had come to knock on their door or started questioning Steve’s presence. In times like this it paid to be prepared.

Rhiannon gave him an appraising look that would have held a bit more gravity if she still had any degree of sobriety. “You’re awfully built for one of the science geeks Darce works with.”

“Different department,” Steve said.

“Ahh.” Rhiannon nodded once, and then followed up with a quick head shake. “You don’t have a single brother by any chance, do you?”

Steve glanced quickly over at Darcy, who was looking more and more frustrated with this new intruder. Her face wasn’t all that expressive, but he’d gotten to know her well enough by now that he could even read the slight indications to how she was really feeling. ‘And isn’t that an interesting thought?’ Darcy just shook her head back at him, a sharp, quick move, and reached over
to pull the cup out of Rhiannon’s hands. “Isn’t your boyfriend downstairs? Go harass him.”

The dopey look dropped off of Rhiannon’s face and was replaced with something far more thunderous. She squirmed, fumbling in her pants pocket for a crushed packet of cigarettes and a lighter. She lit it in quick, efficient movements and exhaled the first puff roughly, smoke curling up into the night sky. “You mean the douchebag out on the back porch who’s trying to get his buddy to cough up the number of his sixteen-year-old sister just because she’s got double D tits?”

Even Steve, with all of his inexperience in male-female relationships, knew that a guy pulling a move like that screamed ‘MISTAKE’ in big, bold letters.

Darcy winced. “Okay, I retract my statement.” She reached over and helped herself to one of the cigarettes. Misery loves company and all that, or at least needs company there to keep its head above water until such time when it can kick the cause of the misery’s ass in. She glanced over at Steve, and he could read the unspoken apology in her eyes. “This one’s going to require a little bit of girl talk,” she said softly, leaning close so that only Steve could hear her.

“I just don’t get it,” Rhiannon continued, offering the pack to Steve. He wavered for a few minutes, and then carefully pulled one free from the pack.

At Darcy’s questioning look, he shrugged and leaned back over so that she could hear him over Rhiannon’s increasing tirade. “The psychiatrists at – work talked about something called full cultural immersion. This way I’m participating in the total experience of a college party,” he said, face suspiciously innocent.

“Suuuure,” Darcy drawled, through her eyes were glinting with repressed laughter.

“Besides,” Steve continued, stealing the Bic from her and lighting up with unexpected ease. “It’s not the first time I’ve sat around smoking while listening to someone complain.”

Another burst of commotion from below, combined with a few howls of laughter, pulled their attention over the side of the balcony once more and distracting Darcy from asking any follow up questions. “What the hell?” Steve asked, not quite sure what to make of the scene. It looked like they were fencing…kind of. Whatever they were doing, they were doing so very badly.

Darcy shook her head, pressing her lips together to keep the giggles back. “And now they’ve brought out the lightsabers. This night is getting better and better.”

*                      *                      *

Eventually the cops were called by some of the neighbors, who they guessed were sick of the sounds of raucous, drunken laughter, broken glass, and people trying to mimic lightsaber sound effects. Steve and Darcy watched the commotion from where they sat in the shadows of the balcony, finishing up the pack of cigarettes Rhiannon had left behind when she darted off to go confront her boyfriend – or just smack him one; she hadn’t decided when she’d left them alone on the balcony.

“I gotta say, I’m proud of you for not running away from this mad house,” Darcy said, pulling her legs up to her chest to try and block out some of the late evening (more early morning by that point) chill.

“They’re harmless. Mostly. It seems like the only thing they’re in danger of hurting is their livers at the rate they’re going.”

“And the occasional wine bottle,” Darcy said around a mouthful of giggles.
“And that. If they started to hurt people, I’d do something.” Steve took one last drag off the cigarette and stubbed it out in the plant pot that had become a makeshift ashtray. “But until then, why deny them their fun?”

“You are disgustingly good sometimes,” Darcy muttered, voice slurred with one too many glasses of wine. She shivered, a full body shake that went from tip to toes and back again. It didn’t take much for Steve to stretch his arm out, a quick flex of skin, bone, tendons, and muscles, and wrap it around her shoulders. She didn’t move, and for a moment Steve thought he had crossed some invisible, unspoken boundary. Then she shivered again and curled herself even deeper into his side. “I think you’re giving me far too much credit. I’ve done my share of stupid stuff too, you know. Especially when I was just some punk teenager.”

More obnoxious laughter floated up, followed quickly by a chorus of angry voices that were most likely the sounds of the NYPD reaching the end of their collective tether.

“Now that I can understand,” Darcy chimed in. “I have a long and slightly embarrassing history full of stupid shit I’ve done that I’ll need a lot more wine to get through than I’ve currently had.” Her finger flicked out and poked him in the side, more of an annoyance than anything else. “Besides, I wouldn’t want to offend your delicate sensibilities with my bawdy tales either.”

Steve snorted, trying not to focus too much on the feel of her shoulder tucked snugly beneath his arm. “Should I remind you again about my army days?”

“Joking.”

“Uh huh. Sure.”

Darcy stretched quickly, flexing her back against his arm and side. Then she leaned forward, checking out things below through the wrought iron bars. “So. Bets on how long it’ll take for someone to get pepper sprayed?”

Steve followed her movements, attempting to find the best viewing position while still keeping his face back in the shadows and unseen by the general populace down on the ground. “What’s the over/under on getting arrested?”

*       *       *

Darcy insisted that Steve stay the night. She said that the subway probably running at this hour of the morning, she was nowhere near coherent enough to get behind the wheel of a car to drive him back to his place, and did Captain America really want to be caught coming out of the place where a spectacularly soused Brooklyn College student had been hauled off in cuffs for attempting to push a cop off the curb? Steve eventually capitulated and agreed, if only to keep her from coming up with more and more outlandish stories to keep him there.

What unnerved him about the situation, though it wouldn’t serve him any good to actually admit it, was that she had insisted he share her bed. “What’s the point in having a brand new bed that takes up most of your living space if you can’t put it to use?” she’d said, fluffing up the pillows.

“The loveseat’s fine,” Steve insisted, determined to be a gentleman and find a better option, at least in his mind. This wasn’t a war zone; there wasn’t any need for sacrifices.

“Yeah, I can’t even sleep on that thing without having to fold myself in half. And seeing as you’re pretty much a foot taller than me, you’re going to be one sorry super solder after a night spent on there.”
The best plan that Steve could come up with, given his own tiredness and unfamiliarity with what was the proper etiquette in this sort of situation, was to follow her lead for the moment and take the other half of the bed, and then sneak off to the loveseat once she’d fallen asleep. He’d concede staying the night, but this would at least allow him some sort of safety. Besides, he was guessing that the wine would make her sleep come sooner rather than later. At least she hadn’t insisted on either of them getting undressed and seemed to be all right with him staying on top of the covers while she’d decided to burrow down between the layers of comforters.

Despite the size of the bed, there was barely more than a foot of space between them. Steve lay flat on his back, limbs pressed awkwardly to his sides to keep them from straying into that neutral zone territory. He felt his muscles twitching just slightly with the effort needed to keep them still. This wouldn’t have been a problem if Darcy had just fallen asleep like she’d said she was going to. Instead, she’d taken out her phone and had spent the last fifteen minutes tapping away at the screen. The white glow from the screen’s surface bounced off her glasses and highlighted her face awkwardly, making her look something other than human in the darkness. Her fingers danced over the screen, more awake than anything else currently in the small room.

The bedclothes smelled like her, Steve noted. Every time he shifted he picked up the faint traces of orange and powdery spices. He heard her move slightly, jeans rustling against the soft comforter. ‘How easy would it be?’ Steve couldn’t help but think. ‘Start moving the arm up the bed and before it hits a ninety degree angle you could wrap your fingers around her bicep, pull just slightly, and she’d come tumbling over, right into you.’

Steve squeezed his eyes closed, trying to push those thoughts right out of his head. Thoughts like that were dangerous. Thoughts like that could force him to look at things within himself he maybe wasn’t quite ready to confront yet. Although really, it would take a mere twist of his torso to flip himself over, bridge that no man’s land, and bury his face –

The finger poked him in the arm, practically sending him out of his skin as his body jerked roughly at the sudden sensation. “I can hear you thinking from here,” Darcy said into the darkness. “I really ought to get going,” Steve said once more. He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, trying to ground himself and get certain images as far out of his brain as possible.

“Steven?”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up and go to sleep.”

Steve chuckled lightly. Sometimes it wasn’t worth the fight, especially when nothing about the situation could really be construed as bad. Improper, yes, but not bad per se. Like so many girls of her time, Darcy had a different idea of propriety than the girls did back in the time before the ice. What unnerved Steve that was that he found himself being less and less bothered by the differing definitions.

But those musings were better handled during the day, in a location that was a little safer and definitely with a bit of a clearer head. So instead Steve replied “Yes ma’am,” repressing a grin and the urge to fire off a salute, flipped onto his side, and squeezed his eyes shut.

Steve surprised himself in the morning when he’d realized just how quickly he’d fallen asleep.

* * *
“Oh, Facebook, how I love and hate you,” Darcy mumbled quietly, determined to check out one last page before she called it a night. Just when she thought she was going to ride those few glasses of wine to a peaceful night’s sleep, the internet’s siren song beckoned.

Steve shifted in his sleep next to her, flipping around and settling in once more. Darcy looked over at him, the strong features of his face relaxed and loose in sleep. The flickering white light from her phone couldn’t take away from the fact that he was quite the handsome man.

And a good man at that, which Darcy wasn’t quite sure how to handle. In that long and slightly embarrassing history of dumb things she’d done, there were an awful lot of douchebags, jackasses, and even one potential ex-convict/mental patient in there (she wasn’t sure which, and hadn’t stuck around long enough to find out). But good guys? Those were few and far between.

What would the consequences be if she were to break a national icon?

No, wait. Rephrase that.

What would the consequences be if she broke Steve Rogers?

He seemed to be stronger than people gave him credit for, however, so maybe breaking him would be the wrong word for it. Of course, in order to do that she’d have to define that unspoken it between them, which was a whole ‘nother can of worms. What Darcy did know was that she didn’t want to go back to a time when Steve wasn’t in her life.

Darcy reached out, pushed a hank of hair off his brow, then carefully and lightly ran her fingers back, trailing over his scalp. He didn’t move, not really, but his nose wrinkled up briefly.

“You are going to get me into so much trouble,” she sighed.
Opthalmoception

Chapter Summary

Opthalmoception, the fancy word for sense of vision/sight. In short, this chapter’s all about the eye-candy…

Chapter Notes

Opthalmoception, the fancy word for sense of vision/sight. In short, this chapter’s all about the eye-candy… This pretty much directly follows up on the last two-part scene posted, which has the full versions of some of the things Darcy mentions in here.

Chapter Five: Opthalmoception

The rational part of Darcy’s brain knew that Jane needed the reports currently bundled in her arms about five minutes ago. The more base part, however…well, that was a bit preoccupied with the scenery down the hall. And what a sight it was.

Even though the Avengers had become incredibly well known since the alien attack on Midtown, it wasn’t often that they were spotted around town by the average person in their battle garb. There’d be the occasional sighting of them out doing normal, everyday things, as well as more obsessive fans that made sure to track their movements (and made having any sort of social life pretty damn difficult), but costumed sightings were often relegated to news reports. If the average folk were to see them as such, it was usually because they were being herded away from danger or were in the process of being saved from whichever danger was chasing them, whether it was an earthbound baddie or a more out of town guest.

Being technically employed by S.H.I.E.L.D., even if she was just an assistant in the science division, meant that Darcy had a marginally better chance of encountering one of the team in full fighting form. However, in the time since she and Jane had been working for them the only Avenger to visit the labs had been one memorable occasion when Tony Stark had come down to relieve a poor, hapless scientist of some technology which had suspiciously resembled some of Stark Industries’ proprietary designs.

Until today.

This was why Darcy was lingering down the hall by a water fountain and watching the delightful sight playing out before her. At least she wasn’t the only one there, so it certainly wasn’t her fault she was distracted. Heads were peeking out from various offices up and down the drab corridor, and she could hear the hushed whispers around her. Commander Fury was there, living up to his name with his arms crossed over his black leather covered chest and a scowl firmly entrenched on his face. Off to the side stood Hawkeye, gesturing expansively and speaking firmly about something Darcy couldn’t quite hear from her position. She rather liked seeing his arms in action. They had well defined muscles, honed from years of work and knowing just how to use them properly. When it
came to Captain America, all she could see was the back side of him.

But what a back it was. Broad shoulders and firm muscles tapered down into a trim waist and an ass that was hard to resist taking a big bite out of. All of that was covered in a layer of tight blue fabric that left absolutely nothing to the imagination.

‘Spandex or not, it’s kind of hard not to look manly with a body like that,’ Darcy thought. She snapped her mouth shut once she realized she was slowly tracing her tongue along her lower lip.

Darcy considered herself lucky to be one of the few people that Steve thought of as a friend. In the months that they’d known each other she’d gotten to see a side of him that not many people, save probably the other Avengers, were privy to. At least, she liked to think so. The opportunity for her to meet any of the team except for Thor hadn’t come up, so she couldn’t say anything else for sure. But in all that time she hadn’t been able to see him in person and outfitted in his Captain gear, not outside of news articles and blurry action footage. Given the sight in front of her, it was worth the wait.

“Hello, Captain Tightpants,” she muttered under her breath.

Of course, she’d seen Steve in situations that the press and S.H.I.E.L.D. agents probably had never imagined, so the tradeoff was only fair. Watching him knock back an entire pizza in one sitting was an impressive image, but Darcy had also seen a more somber side of him that sometimes had trouble crawling out of the memories of the past. She’d seen him practically collapse into a pile of giggles over the particularly astounding stupidity of one of her roommates, and then look quietly pensive and wistful during Miracle Max’s bits during the impromptu movie night. She’d even had the unique opportunity of seeing him in her bed in the morning not even two weeks ago, hair mussed up and a barely awake, dopey look on his face as he remembered exactly why he’d been forced to crash at hers and avoid her problematic housemates. If she was a braver person she might have done more than clap him on the shoulder and say that she owed him breakfast for putting up with the insanity. Sometimes Steve made her feel like she was about to take a flying leap off a cliff and she wasn’t sure if she would fall or if she would fly. It was a deeper emotion than what Darcy was used to, and it scared her more than she would ever admit to anyone. Maybe one of these days she should talk to someone about everything whirling around in her head, like Jane or her older sister (a total space cadet, but she’d always been there for Darcy when she was needed). But if she couldn’t even admit certain feelings to herself, how on Earth would she be able to talk with someone else about it?

Definition leads to reality, and sometimes living within those nebulous, undefined boundaries made things that much easier.

‘So, so much trouble,’ Darcy thought, sinking her teeth into her lower lip.

“Darcy!” Darcy glanced over her shoulder at the sound of her name being hissed and spotted Jane storming up the hall towards her, a bundle of tightly coiled energy that was barely contained by her petite frame. “We’re operating with only a small frame of time here, I needed those reports -“ Jane came to an abrupt halt, joining the small crowd of onlookers.

“Yeah,” Darcy said, turning back to continue with the ogling. ‘Not ogling,’ she mentally corrected herself. ‘Just appreciating a fine work of art…’

“Oh,” Jane said in a faint voice, crossing her arms over her chest and nodding once as she still stared straight ahead. “I totally get it.”

Darcy smirked slightly. Jane may have been dating an alien demi-god, but that didn’t mean that she couldn’t appreciate the impressive display of Captain America and Hawkeye right there for them to
enjoy. “Uh-huh.”

The small crowd was then parted by Tony Stark pushing his way through them, a large, metal… something in his arms. Darcy definitely wasn’t the science expert in this crowd, and didn’t have the slightest clue what he was carrying. “Enjoying the show, ladies?” he said in a loud voice as he walked past.

“So very much,” Darcy sighed happily, the smirk on her face growing as the Captain and Hawkeye turned around at the sudden intrusion.

“Is it done?” Steve asked, heading in their direction.

‘And the front is just as fine as the back,’ Darcy thought, unabashedly raking her eyes over him from tip to toe and back again. His face was still covered up with the cowl, and the body armor was firmly zippered and buckled into place. The pants managed to highlight just how lean and muscled his legs were. Unable to control it, Darcy could feel her tongue dart out to wet her suddenly dry lower lip. When Steve’s step faltered, just slightly, she couldn’t help but think that her in-depth examination could have been noticed. His eyes flicked her way, and then quickly back over to Tony. She just winked once at him, the corner of her lips quirking up.

Her brain flashed on the image of Steve in her bed once more, his large frame curled up in a worn and battered blanket with his eyes barely open, blurry slices of clear blue peeking through those dark lashes. Darcy inhaled quickly through her nose, trying to chase the images away and bring her brain back into the present.

Tony, meanwhile, pressed a series of buttons on the side of the metal device, making an ominous noise emanate from the depths of it. “Ready to rock,” he confirmed.

Jane looked over at her. “What’s going on?” she asked. Darcy just shook her head.

“Stark!” Fury called out, voice echoing up and down the corridor. “You and the Captain need to get that contraption up to the roof A.S.A.P!” The two men traded a look. Then, they moved as one towards the stairwell, collecting Hawkeye on their way. “As for the rest of you,” Fury continued, “stop gawking and go do the work we’re paying you for!” With that final statement he followed the Avengers out, a swirl of black leather trailing behind him.

“Come on,” Jane said, tugging at the sleeve of Darcy’s blouse and beginning to pull her back down the hall.

Darcy sighed deeply. “It was fun while it lasted.”

Yeah. That sight was going to provide her with fine mental fodder for a long, long time.
Audioception

Chapter Summary

Audioception = sound. Simple as that. In this chapter head canon ahoy. Lots of backstory and Darcy feelings, all wrapped up in a package that comes complete with Christmas music.

Chapter Notes

Audioception = sound. Simple as that. Knowing the type of writer I am, and knowing that Christmas is looming fast, there will be the inevitable discussion of Christmas carols ahead. I have an idea of which songs are playing throughout the bulk of the story, but I won’t bore you with the details of them. The important stuff in this part? Let’s just say: head canon ahoy. Lots of backstory and Darcy feelings.

This story is becoming more linear than I had initially planned. I’ve got the next six chapters plotted out and to my surprise they go in a rather coherent order. But I guess that’s what happens when you write WIPs; they take on a life of their own.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Six: Audioception

Darcy shot a glare at the ceiling of the coffee shop. If glares had that sort of energy, or if Darcy had some sort of latent mutant power that had decided to manifest itself right at that moment, the ceiling would have been reduced to cinders. “If I hear Silent Night one more time I’m going to start taking hostages,” she stated through gritted teeth.

Steve looked down at the top of her head. They were so tightly packed into the queue that they could barely move within the crowded shop, full of office workers looking for a late afternoon coffee break or tourists looking for a warm drink to soothe themselves after a long day of milling around New York City. “It’s only December 4th,” he said. “I’d bet good money the music won’t let up until the 26th at the earliest.”

“You catch onto these modern holidays quick.” Darcy crossed her arms over her chest, tucking her cold fingers into her sleeves to warm them up a bit. The queue moved forward a meager few footsteps.

Steve had gone into headquarters that day just to fill out some paperwork and complete the reports for the Avengers’ last mission, which was surprisingly pain-free and easy (for once). On his way out of the building he had been accosted by Darcy, who grabbed onto the sleeve of his jacket and began to pull him along with her. “I need help,” she said, not looking back as she propelled him out the front doors. He could have stopped her…if he’d wanted to, at least. “The coffee machine in the lab’s gone all FUBAR, the scientists are about to riot without their caffeine fix, and I’ve been elected to hit up Starbucks. Wanna help me carry all those trays back to prevent the scientists from
blowing a hole in Midtown?"

“Um…yeah, sure,” he said, deciding it was easiest to just go with the flow. He hadn’t had any urgent plans aside from doing some food shopping so he could spare a little bit of time. Even in the face of impending doom Darcy had seemed to be in a pleasant mood like she normally was. This had lasted up until the point when they’d entered Starbucks and she’d got an earful of the Christmas music.

“I don’t know.” Steve shrugged, shoving his own hands into his pants pockets. “I kind of like it.”

“You would,” Darcy grumbled.

He glanced around the coffee shop, and noted that a good portion of the clientele currently in there that was of the office persuasion were S.H.I.E.L.D. employees. He’d recognized a few of the faces, and had even received a nod of acknowledgement from Sitwell, who was a few people ahead of them in line. It made him feel a little bit more comfortable, even though there were still enough tourists in there to put Steve on edge a bit. He pulled the brim of his baseball cap down a little lower, looking down at Darcy once more. She stood there chewing at her lower lip, practically ripping at the skin until it was raw. “Are you okay?” he asked.

Darcy nodded, and twisted a long, dark curl around her index finger. “I’m fine. I just really hate Christmas music.” The stony look on her face seemed to imply a far deeper reason, but this wasn’t the time or the place to try and pick at the causes.

Instead, Steve just said: “I may have to try and convince you otherwise.” The hatred of Christmas tunes seemed to be safe ground, at least. And he really did rather like the holiday tunes, even some of the more modern ones that seemed to be in constant rotation on the radio and really had nothing to do with Christmas aside from tossing a few bells into the mix.

She snorted in a very indelicate fashion. “Good luck with that,” she said, shooting him a look over the top of her glasses.

* * * * *

It wasn’t a date, Steve reminded himself as he stared at the phone standing there on the table in his apartment. It was just an attempt to try and get a good friend of his into the Christmas spirit.

Darcy had seemed to be fairly normal over the last few days, with the holiday related grumbling from the coffee shop not making a return appearance. But then again, Steve noticed she had been particularly conscientious about not mentioning Christmas as well. The part of him that couldn’t leave things well enough alone alternated between wanting to know why she was acting so odd and trying to come up with something that would show her that Christmas wasn’t all that bad.

He’d seen a flyer posted in his neighborhood that gave him an idea for the upcoming Saturday evening. It was something that may have been well out of Darcy’s comfort zone, but Steve found a certain appeal in the simplicity of it. And come to think of it, she had dragged him along to many places that he didn’t really want to go over the last few months. Really, it was only fair that she return the favor.

Okay, as plans that he’d come up with over the course of his life went it wasn’t one of his best. But if it got Darcy to open up to him a little? He’d give it a shot.
Steve moved to his jacket to get his cell phone instead. When it came to asking Darcy to an event that didn’t even remotely resemble a date, the modern innovation of a text message made it much, much easier.

*                             *                             *                             *

He heard the sound of her boots tromping along the sidewalk before he saw her coming. Steve shifted impatiently in place, standing there awkwardly in front of the chapel. The church was one of those traditional creations, full of large stone blocks and a multitude of stained glass windows, crammed onto a plot of land that barely left any space between the church and the houses beside it.

“A Christmas concert? Really?” Darcy said as she came to a stop in front of him. She exhaled little curls of steam, catching in the streetlamps that kept the block well lit even at night.

“A classical concert featuring traditional holiday songs,” Steve corrected her. “It’s a little tamer than that stuff on the radio you’re always complaining about.”

Darcy grinned, even though she crossed her arms over her chest and attempted to look stern. “I’m only here because you said I owed you for making you go to Kings Plaza on a Friday night.”

“That too. Now come on; the show’s about to start.”

Steve led Darcy into the church, but instead of going to the main sanctuary she followed him up a small flight of stairs to the loft above. “Ooh, private seats,” Darcy said, picking her way around a bunch of stacked up chairs, some overflowing boxes, and what looked like the disassembled parts of a pipe organ.

They settled down on one of the old pews that lined the edge of the balcony, providing a wonderful bird’s eye view of the sanctuary below. People were milling around on the floor, with the sounds of happy chatter rising up to their level. Towards the front of the space, right before the altar, a full orchestra was tuning their instruments and getting them set for the upcoming performance. Behind that were a few levels of risers awaiting the choir’s entrance. The stage was brightly lit while a softer, golden lighting permeated the rest of the space, reflecting off of the dulled stained glass windows. Many of the statues within were decorated with potted plants and other fresh greenery, making the place look quite festive.

“I helped the church clean up their basement after it got flooded out because of the hurricane,” Steve said, peeling off his jacket and tossing it over the back of the pew. “The pastor did me a favor and said we could come up here for the show.”

“That was nice of him.” She tucked her legs up under her, getting as comfortable as she could on the hard benches.

Within a couple of minutes a few of the lights were dimmed and the choir began to walk onto the risers, uniform lines of red robes with black stoles. Once everyone was set the conductor raised her arms, baton upheld. A chord swelled up from the orchestra, making sure that every instrument was in harmony and in the correct key. When the baton dropped, the horns began and the choir started to sing.

The tunes were old and familiar, reminding Steve all too much of the songs he had heard during the Christmases of his childhood. The orchestration may have been a bit different, louder and a bit more expansive, but it was nice to hear that *Adeste Fideles* hadn’t really changed at all since the time before. The next song they played was not quite as boisterous but had a tinkling, dancing
quality about it and was being sung in French by his best guess.

“After my ma died I was sent to live in a Catholic orphanage run by some of the scariest nuns you’ve ever seen,” Steve said, speaking just loud enough that Darcy could hear him over the music below. “These nuns could probably even scare the Hulk.”

Darcy snorted, muffling the giggle in the cuff of her sweater.

“You can imagine that they made us go to Mass a lot. Eleven months of the year you’d see all of us kids sitting there looking like it was the worst thing in the world. Why be stuck in some stuffy old church when you could have been outside playing stickball, you know? But then December would roll around.” Steve shook his head, staring at the stage down below. “They’d get out the incense, keep the candles constantly burning. The whole thing was in Latin, which sounded good even though we couldn’t understand a word of what the priest was saying. It was enough to make that scrawny kid believe in magic, just for a little while.”

“It hasn’t really changed all that much, has it?” Darcy asked. Steve looked over at her and saw her pulling her legs even tighter under herself, as if she was attempting to compress her body into the smallest package possible.

“I went to a couple of Masses after I woke up. Some of it’s changed,” Steve conceded. “But the similarities are there too.” To be frank, it made him feel yet again like he had one foot firmly in the past and the other one planted directly in the future, creating a delicate balancing act between the two. Some days the equilibrium tipped backwards, but he was trying to keep it moving forwards as often as possible.

The dancing French tune segued into an English song, a lilting melody about greenwood and accompanied by soaring notes on stringed instruments.

“How did your mother die?” Darcy asked, rather abruptly. Still, she placed a hand on his bicep as if she were attempting to ease the blow. He appreciated the gesture, even if it wasn’t really needed.

“Tuberculosis. She was a nurse and picked it up in the wards. In the end, she just couldn’t shake it off.”

“I’m sorry.” Darcy squeezed his arm, not relinquishing her hold on it.

“Thanks.”

They were silent for a few more minutes, listening as the choir dashed headfirst into another upbeat, energetic song and then back into the softer, lulling tones of O Little Town of Bethlehem. It was during this song that Darcy sighed and leaned her head on Steve’s shoulder, practically wrapping herself around his arm.

When she began to speak, her voice was so low that he had to strain to hear her over the singers below. “My mom left us right before Christmas. She just…up and walked out one day, and after that everything just got weird. My dad eventually said it was because she was sick, mentally, but that didn’t mean anything to me until years later. And the way he said it? It sounded like he was saying it just to give her a more noble reason for leaving, rather than telling us the truth that she just couldn’t hack it as a mother.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve echoed, looking down at the top of her head and seeing her shrug.

“Don’t apologize,” she said. “I was only three when it happened; I really don’t remember
her at all. I more remember her not being there, if that makes sense.”

“It couldn’t have been easy without her.”

Darcy nodded, keeping her eyes firmly locked on the performance below. “I was so young that I think I got out of it pretty easy. Still screwed me up in the head, but I think that was almost inevitable. Daisy – my sister – she was eight when Mom bailed. There were a lot of screaming matches between her and Dad afterwards. Dad had picked us up and moved us halfway around the world and back in with his parents, so she wasn’t too happy to have to get used to Massachusetts after spending a year in the French countryside. I wish I remembered living in France.” She chuckled, but it wasn’t the happiest of laughs. “What I do remember is Daisy trying so hard that Christmas to make it fun for me. Mom wasn’t there, Dad was a wreck, and Dad’s parents hated Mom so they spent more time badmouthing her than anything else, but Daisy was determined to have the best damn Christmas possible. It didn’t quite work, especially when she kept playing the Chipmunks’ Christmas song over and over and over, but it wasn’t totally terrible.”

The music shifted once more, with the drums beginning to pound in a steady, intense beat. Darcy’s eyes fluttered shut, and she pushed herself even further into Steve’s side. He gently removed her hand from his arm, keeping his eyes forward all the while. Before she could protest, he wrapped that arm around her shoulders, giving her a quick hug. She settled down once more, curling in on herself and letting the music wash over her. “That explains your aversion to the holiday then,” Steve commented.

“You know, most of the year I don’t even think about her. We’ve all moved on with our lives. I’ve got the most awesome step-mother ever, who was more of a mom to me than she ever was, makes Dad incredibly happy, and two crazy little brothers to add to the chaos. Hell, even Daisy’s got a baby of her own now, which is a bit of a scandal in and of itself because she won’t fess up who the father is, but as it’s the most settled we’ve seen her in years we’re trying not to comment on it.”

“And what about you?”

“Me?” Steve could practically hear the grin in her voice. “I’m kicking ass and taking names in the best city in the world. And making sure that Jane remembers that there are other food groups aside from coffee when she gets into her projects. Hanging out with superheroes and mad scientists too.” She poked him in the side with her fingers. “Making new friends that I can’t picture my life without. On the whole? I’m freakin’ fantastic. It’s just…the what-could-have-beens always catch up with me during Christmas. I really, really don’t like thinking about it.”

“So it’s easier to just pretend the holiday isn’t happening then?” Steve gently questioned.

“Got it in one.”

His arm tightened briefly around her shoulders. “If I’d known earlier I wouldn’t have dragged you out here.”

“Meh, no worries. Are you having fun?” When he didn’t answer, Darcy poked him in the side once more. “Steve?”

“Yeah. I am having fun. Hearing them sing like that makes me happy.”

“Then we’ll stay.”

He could feel Darcy shifting around on the bench, not settling down until the whole of her
back was resting securely along the length of his side. She pulled at Steve’s arm, wrapping it around her waist. Her skin was warm, and he flexed his fingers just slightly against her stomach. The words ‘not a date’ floated through his mind once more.

“Steve?”

“Yeah?”

Darcy’s voice was faint and constrained, as if she were trying to hold as much emotion back as possible to prevent her from falling to bits. “Tell me again why you love this music?”

Steve may not have been the greatest when it came to understanding women, but he knew he could answer Darcy’s question. “Of course.” He leaned his cheek against the top of her head, trying to give her what comfort he could. “But first, just sit and listen.”

The voices rose to a crescendo, melismatic waves moving up and down the scales and echoing high in the rafters of the sanctuary.

“All right,” she said, her eyes fluttering shut until her lashes were just a dark smudge on pale cheekbones.

Chapter End Notes

A/n: Darcy paraphrases a line at the beginning of this story. There’s a reason for that, which will probably be revealed in a later part.

Also, there will be the inevitable exchange of Christmas presents coming up (it may not be before Christmas, knowing how I write and what real life stuff is going on, but it will happen). Any ideas for what Steve and Darcy would give each other? Because I’m stumped. Hell, I can’t even figure out what to give my own family, let alone two story characters…
Clairvoyance

Chapter Summary

Clairvoyance = the sense of visual perception of invisible objects or events. It's Steve's turn to appreciate the scenery, so to speak. But that's only one of the reasons why he makes the decision he does.

Chapter Notes

This chapter ended up surprising me a bit. I had started out to write a companion piece to chapter five, where it's Steve's turn to appreciate the scenery, so to speak. Then I had to re-write the ending about three different times, which was an exercise in frustration. The final version took a bit of an unexpected turn (but one that I think you readers will approve of) and told me that I need to listen to these characters more, because they know themselves better than I do.

Thank you to everyone who left comments about the last chapter and potential Christmas presents! I’m going to try to respond to individual comments over the next few days, but I can’t make any guarantees with the holidays coming up, so let me say it here and now: Thank you so much. The presents don’t pop up in this part, but they’ll be there in the next one. I’ll try to get it out by Christmas, but again – no guarantees.

Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoy.

After the concert, Darcy asked if she could stay the night at Steve’s place. “I just…I don’t want to be left on my own tonight,” she explained, pacing in front of the church after almost everyone had left. “Not that I’m going to do anything bad or anything like that. But I can’t see myself going to any of my roommates and asking for a hug if I need it.” She shook her head and stomped a booted foot on the sidewalk. “Twenty-two years gone and she’s still making me doubt myself. This really freakin’ sucks.”

How could he say no to that?

When they got back to his place Steve graciously offered up his bedroom and provided her with some more sleep appropriate clothing. “Thanks.” Darcy took the pajamas, hugging them close to her chest. “So I’ll see you in the morning then?”

“I’ll have the coffee ready and waiting for you.” He jerked his head towards the bedroom door. “Now go hit the rack; you look like you’re about to fall over.”

With a dramatic flourish Darcy tossed her hair back over her shoulder. “The perils of being overly emotional,” she stated. “It makes you very exhausted.” Still, she threw a grin in his direction and sauntered off to the bedroom, hips swaying beneath her short skirt and dark stockings.

Steve inhaled sharply through his nose and moved to turn the television on. The bright flash and
sharp shock of light and noise filled the living room. It wasn’t much, but it would keep him
distracted from who was currently in his bedroom at the moment.

*Would it be so bad if you asked her out on a real date?*

He wasn’t sure what the correct answer to that question was.

One of the things that war taught Steve (amidst many other varied lessons) was that you should sleep
where you could get a few winks regardless of comfort. The droning television had lulled him into a
light doze on the couch which, while not the most supportive surface for sleeping, was at least long
enough to fit his entire body. War had also taught him to be alert at the slightest sign of danger. So
when his mostly unconscious mind heard small noises of discontent coming from his bedroom
Steve’s body tensed up and his eyes blinked open.

The quick mental run-through concluded that Darcy wasn’t hurt or in serious danger. Those noises
would have sounded different than the…was that whimpering he was hearing? Nightmare, maybe?
Given the things she’d talked about earlier in the night it wouldn’t be surprising for some of those
memories to crop up in her sleep as well. That could have been the real reason for her sudden desire
not to go back to her own home. No matter what the cause was, it couldn’t hurt to check on her.
Steve reached for the remote to shut the TV off, and then crept silently towards the bedroom. He
froze in the doorway, finding himself suddenly a bit breathless.

It wasn’t often that he saw Darcy in calm moments. She had plenty of moments full of bubbly
emotions and a tendency to live just this side of chaos. Even that one night he had slept over at her
place she seemed to wake up like a firecracker, rolling off the bed in a flash to yell at one of the
roommates who had stumbled into her sanctuary while still spectacularly hung over. But calm and
quiet? He’d only gotten an inkling of it earlier during the concert. It was nothing like the sight in
front of him; it was clear that whatever noise he’d heard hadn’t come from her. Steve slumped
against the door frame, giving into the indulgence and watching her just for a moment.

Darcy was on her side, and it was easy to see her face. Her hair fell in loose waves, trailing down
her neck and across her cheeks, casting small shadows in the faint traces of moonlight. A pink
mouth pursed briefly and relaxed again, all traces of the day’s lipstick long gone. Without mascara
and glasses to cover them, he could see that her eyelashes were short and a bit stubby, but dark
enough to be easily noticed.

If the face was intriguing then the rest of the package was a pure siren’s call, Steve felt. He knew he
kept the apartment on the warmer side, but he didn’t think it was so warm that she had to remove the
pajama pants in the middle of the night. One long, pale leg rested outside of the covers while her
arms wrapped around the top, the comforter clutched close to her chest. Beneath the bottom edge of
the flannel pajama top that was far too big for her frame he could just make out the hint of vibrant,
neon blue lace.

Steve blinked slowly, locking the image into his memory. There was a part of him that would have
loved to grab his pencils and start drawing, to attempt to capture the play of shadow and illumination
on fair skin. Another part of him, and he could see it in his mind so very clearly, easily envisioned
himself sliding right into bed next to her.

*He slips into the bed behind her and pries the covers out of her arms, rearranging them until their
lower halves are covered up. He spoons up behind her and drapes his arm over her waist. With the
lightest of movements he pulls her backwards until their bodies touch – shoulder to chest, back to
stomach, and legs so intertwined that it can’t be determined where one ends and the other begins.*
He moves slowly, carefully, so as not to wake her up.

It’s not gentle enough, however. She awakens with a happy little moan, tossing her head back and making the waves cascade over his bare chest and shoulders. She wriggles about, intending to be graceful but not quite succeeding at it, until she faces him. His hand splays against her back, rucking up the flannel shirt. This also keeps them in very close contact, something neither of them is complaining about.

A grin spreads across her full lips. It’s a sleepy grin, fuzzy around the edges but burning hot in the center. They land on the small dip at the base of his throat, delivering the slightest bit of pressure and a whole lot of warmth. The small touch is enough to make him grit his teeth and tilt his head back, trying to be in physical contact with her as much as possible.

He can feel her giggle against his chest, bubbling like water from some long hidden fountain, and she begins to sink lower, pressing kisses all along the route. She can only go a matter of inches, however, before his patience is totally lost. He uses the arm that is still wrapped around her back to hoist her upwards, which makes it much easier for their mouths to crash together. Her mouth opens up and his tongue steals inside, slick and strong as it paints figures on the inside of her lips. Pale arms drape around his shoulders as strong fingers twine themselves into his hair. A light scratch at the base of his neck where hair meets skin sends a shiver down his back. Without removing his mouth from hers, he twists his torso and propels himself forward, which has the wonderful benefit of pushing her onto her back as well. And even though she’s quite a bit smaller than him there’s what feels like miles of her sleep warmed skin pressing against his entire body…

Steve shook his head and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. Thinking things like that would only lead to trouble. Especially when those thoughts made him feel a bit like a dirty old man, given that they were coming into his mind as she slept mere feet away from him.

But that wasn’t the only thing. Being around Darcy…all too often he felt like he was in over his head. That he was caught in her wave and getting pulled along in the riptide. She wormed her way into the cracks and crevices in his psyche, setting up shop and getting inside far deeper than he’d ever intended. And like the waves she had hidden depths below that roiling surface, secrets held in those deep and dark places that lurked beneath the fizzing and breaking water. He’d only seen the barest glimpse of it earlier that evening, leaving him wanting to learn more and making him want to protect her against anyone else even daring to hurt her like that in the future. And yet…there was something so overwhelming about it.

To simplify, because that metaphor had really gotten away from him and he was no poet: it wasn’t the first time in Steve’s life that he had drowned. The difference was that this time he might just go under willingly.

_The last thing you are is a coward, Rogers_, that pestering little voice in his head that alternated between sounding like either Bucky or Tony piped up. _So damn well do something about it already._

‘Oh, be quiet,’ he thought back at the voice. Steve forced himself out of the doorway and back to the couch, thinking that sleep would be a really good idea right then.

* * *

It was the wee hours of the morning when Steve woke up to the sensation of someone settling down on the couch. “Darcy? You okay?” he asked, keeping his eyes closed as he flipped onto his back. He could feel her leaning against his legs, warm even through the thick blanket.

“You know, you look really young when you sleep. Like, we’re talking total baby face here.”
Steve’s eyes popped open and he glared at her. The glare clearly stated ‘You woke me up for that?’ He did see that she had put the pajama pants on, and wasn’t sure if he should be relieved or disappointed. Fortunately, Darcy was a dab hand at interpreting those glares, and she sighed and dropped her head forward.

“Your mother?” Steve guessed.

“What else? I’m entitled to my twenty-four hours of angst over her.” She shrugged and rubbed her palms over the soft flannel pants.

“Whoever said you weren’t?”

Darcy leaned back against his legs, slumping backwards until she seemed to be practically boneless with her head lolling on the back of the couch. She rested her feet on his coffee table, stretching out her toes until she was comfortable. “All right, no one did. But that’s only because I don’t tell them what I do.” She reached out and squeezed his knee. “Promise you won’t laugh?”

It felt incredibly intimate with the two of them sitting there in the dark, Steve thought. In the lamplight coming in through the window Darcy looked fragile, like she was ripping herself open and exposing the soft innards for everyone to see. Not everyone though – just him. And for that matter, why him?

Why not you, you punk?

“Course not,” he said.

“Every year I make the same deal with myself. In December, I’ll give myself one solid day – a full twenty-four hours – to get all emo and angsty over the fact that my mom was a selfish bitch who bailed out on her family voluntarily. After twenty-four hours I shut it off, get over it, and go on to have a somewhat merry Christmas.”

“Except for the music.”

“Except for that, yeah.” She tapped her fingers on his kneecap, and it almost tickled. “Some years I can kind of control when I’m going to mope around, and those aren’t too bad. Like, I can decide a date, say that that’s when I’m going to rage, and I’m good. But sometimes they catch me by surprise, leading to the human wreck you see in front of you. I’m just sorry you had to get stuck in the middle of it.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Did she often let other people in during that twenty-four hour stretch? It didn’t sound like she did, but Steve couldn’t help but wonder as he fought back a feeling which was alarmingly close to jealousy. The hand on his knee trembled a bit, and he could feel her fingers clamp down in attempt to stop it. That small motion made Steve sit up, yank the blanket off himself, and then quickly drape it around her shoulders, tucking the ends in around her sides. “You looked like you could use it,” he said.

The appraising look that she gave him, sweeping up and down, made him realize that removing the blanket also revealed that he’d fallen asleep without a shirt on. While Darcy didn’t seem to have a problem with it (if he was reading her look right, it was the exact opposite of a problem), the air was cold and, truth be told, it made Steve feel slightly awkward. Feeling awkward was the last thing he needed that night, so when he spotted his t-shirt draped over the arm of the couch he immediately pulled it on.

Darcy just shook her head with a rueful grin and stretched forward to grab the remote off of the
“Let’s see what insomniac specials are on tonight. Give it a week and we’d have the twenty-four hour Christmas Story marathon, but until then infomercials have become a true staple in the theatre of sleepless nights.” She clicked the television on as Steve got himself settled in an almost identical position: slouched over on the couch, head on the back, and feet on the coffee table.

Honestly, Steve wasn’t quite sure if he actually wanted to know what exactly was Darcy was talking about with ‘insomniac specials’. It sounded like English, but these days he couldn’t be altogether confirmed of that. Especially with words like ‘infomercial’. Five minutes later he had determined that an infomercial was simply a really long advertisement and that while Darcy looked exhausted, she was fighting tooth and nail to push sleep off as long as possible.

“Hey, Steve?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for staying with me. I’m glad you’re here, you know?” Darcy said, elbowing him lightly while keeping her eyes focused on the screen extolling the virtues of…some portable kitchen item, he suspected.

Steve felt the corner of his lips turn up, and he quickly glanced down at her. She was intent on the flashy commercial, her face luminous even in the sickly light coming from the television screen. The drowning feeling swept over him again, and all he wanted to do now was dive in head first and be immersed in the waves. In that moment he decided that after the Christmas holiday was over and done with he’d ask her out properly and take her out on a real date. There was a small flare of warmth in his stomach, leaving behind the feeling that all of the pieces were finally starting to fit together.

He elbowed her back. “Anytime.”

By the time the sun came up they were both fast asleep on the couch, curled into each other and tucked securely beneath the warm blanket.
The quickest of glances would tell anyone that this was a well-made hat. The heavy woolen fabric was a rich chocolate color, looking soft and supple while still maintaining the sharp lines typical to a fedora. A matte black satin ribbon wrapped around the base of the crown, a contrasting stripe that drew attention upwards. The hat was classy and classic, a timeless style revamped for the 21st century.

The man wearing the hat? Well, he just looked a bit dubious.

“I look like a gangster,” Steve said as he stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. The brim was tilted downward, covering up one of his eyes. The other eye was narrowed, and the pursed lips could only be described as skeptical.

“Says you,” Darcy chimed in, leaning against the door frame and crossing her arms over her chest. “Merry Christmas to me,” she muttered under her breath, low enough that it could barely be heard. Okay, the present might have been more for her enjoyment than his, but it couldn’t be denied that Steve looked damn good right then.

Unfortunately she didn’t take into account super soldier hearing, and the look that Steve shot her via the mirror was slightly on the disgruntled side. There was an edge of something else to the look though, something that made her stomach twist with nervous anticipation. “Come on,” Darcy continued, pushing any nerves and butterflies aside. “Didn’t all you guys wear hats back then?”

Steve spun around and leaned back against the sink, mirroring her crossed arm position. “We did. It’s just a different style than what I’m used to. And a lot nicer than anything I had back then also.”

“You know, I’ve seen that baseball cap of yours. It looks like it’s being held together with duct tape and prayer at this point.” The wide brim still hid his eyes, but Darcy could just make them out below the fabric, glinting with amusement. She walked closer to him. Even though Steve’s bathroom was decently sized, it still felt like the two of them in the one small space seemed to fill up
the entirety of the room. Darcy reached out and flicked the brim with one finger, revealing bright blue eyes and a pursed mouth that was about two seconds away from breaking out into laughter.

“You think it suits me?” he asked.

“Totally.” Darcy tugged at the brim again, adjusting it until it was at a rakish angle that spoke of hidden mischief and other unspoken things.

Steve’s mouth relaxed, the pursed lips softening up into a small grin. “Thank you.”

Darcy grabbed his hand and began to attempt to haul him out of the bathroom. Luckily Steve picked up on it pretty quickly and pushed himself off of the sink, following her back into the living room. “Don’t thank me yet; that’s only part one of your Christmas present.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” he protested even as she shoved him down onto the couch.

She bent over her bag, rummaging around until she emerged with a small envelope. “I wasn’t sure how the hat would go over, so I got a backup present.” Darcy dropped onto the cushions next to him and handed him the envelope.

Steve hesitated briefly, but then took the envelope and gave her a questioning glance. “Just open it,” Darcy said, leaning back and curling up in the couch cushions.

A quick tear at the package revealed a couple of sheets of heavier card paper. Steve flipped quickly through the small cards, face lighting up with delight once he realized exactly what they were. “Darcy…this is…”

She knocked her shoulder against his, shooting him an impish grin. “While it’s not exactly tickets for the Dodgers, it is at least Brooklyn baseball, which is apparently serious business from everything I read online. Serious being a complete understatement, by the way, which I can totally understand growing up in a family of Sox fans. Anyway, since your schedule can be a bit…” She trailed off, searching for the politest word to describe the situation. Her initial phrasing probably wasn’t suitable for mixed company.

“Unexpected,” he filled in, no doubt thinking of all of the short notice missions he had to go on since he’d been put back into action, especially those involving renegade robots and their megalomaniacal creators.

“Unexpected,” Darcy agreed with a nod, “these are vouchers for you to cash in at any time during the season.”

Steve pulled his eyes away from the tickets and looked over at Darcy. She bit her lower lip, worrying the skin until it was even redder than normal. “Thank you, these are great,” he said, tapping them against his palm a couple of times. “You feel like going to a game come summer?”

Darcy smirked, covering up the nervous flutters making themselves known in her stomach again. “Just as long as you don’t expect me to root for any of the local teams. My hometown loyalty would hate me if I did.” A beeping noise began to emanate from somewhere in her purse, breaking the mood and making her groan loudly. She reached out and began to root through it, not stopping until the beeping was quieted.

“What was that?”

“The alarm I set to tell me it was time to go to the train station.” She grimaced quickly, giving him a look over the top of her glasses. “I kind of don’t want to go.” Darcy had every
intention of being suitably early for her train, maybe even trading her tickets in for an earlier ride, but
she’d been sidetracked by the opportunity to give Steve the presents she’d picked up for him. And if
she didn’t give them to him right then, she wouldn’t be able to get his gifts to him until after New
Year’s. There were some traditions that should be upheld, she thought, especially those related to
presents. So she headed over to Steve’s place, dragging her suitcase behind her and leaving it in a
rather conspicuous spot right by the front door. Now that she was there, set up comfortably on the
couch with Steve’s warm body not far from hers, the last thing she wanted to do was go out in the
cold and the rain and spend four hours on a train with tourists and college kids trying to get to their
various destinations in time for Christmas.

“I think your family will miss you if you don’t go home for Christmas, despite how you
feel about the holiday.” Steve pushed himself to his feet. “I’ll call a taxi for you.”

“No, Steve, don’t,” Darcy protested, unfolding her legs. “I can take the subway.” She
might not have had the money to take a cab anyway, having spent most of it on the presents taking
up space in the suitcase, but she wasn’t going to mention that.

He glanced out the window, watching as the pouring rain streamed rivulets down the
glass. “You’ll be drenched in seconds,” he said. Steve cut her off before she could speak again with
a quick shake of his head. “Please?”

It was a good thing most of the cabs in the city took credit cards, Darcy thought as she
nodded her agreement. “Oh, all right.”

Steve reached over to place the brand new hat on the desk and came back with a small,
square box wrapped in muted forest green paper, which he handed to her. “Merry Christmas,” he
said, then disappeared into the kitchen to call the cab.

Darcy pressed her lips together, suppressing the grin. She hadn’t been expecting a gift, not
really. Not after what she had said the weekend before. Still, she wasn’t going to say no to a present
freely given. Besides, that part of Christmas – both the giving and receiving of gifts – she had no
problem with. She gave the box another, longer look before tearing into the wrapping paper.

Patience was never one of her virtues.

She found one of the folded edges and ripped the paper off, leaving it in a crumpled pile
on the coffee table. The box itself was as unassuming as the wrapping was, so Darcy lifted the lid
and carefully pulled out the wadded up tissue paper on top. “Oh my God,” she breathed, reaching
inside to remove the pocket watch with utmost care.

The brass casing had been burnished in places, where Darcy imagined many different
hands had held the timepiece over the years. It was clearly old, well older than she was and possibly
older than Steve himself, but was in incredibly good condition. She could hear a faint ticking
coming from inside as it counted off the seconds. The back of the case was plain brass, with a small
identifying stamp towards the bottom of it. A simple chain dangled from the top and terminated in a
small clip that could be easily attached to a button hole or a belt loop. The front lid, however, now
that was a true work of art. The lacquered cover had a picture of a woman in an art nouveau style on
there, dressed in a white draped gown with a crown of red poppies on her head. Dark hair flowed
around her as she looked over her shoulder, and her arms were leisurely perched on a delicate curved
branch. Her feet dipped into a still pool of water, with only the slightest ripples around her toes.
It was a surprising gift – in a good way. She didn’t know what she had expected as a present from him, but it certainly wasn’t something like this. Once upon a time she’d made an offhand comment about regular watches always breaking on her (it may have been her fault they all broke, starting with the time she’d scraped her arm against a stone wall while riding her bike as a kid, but that wasn’t the point) and how she should get a pocket watch at some point, but it was months ago. Darcy certainly didn’t think he’d have remembered that. But somehow he did. “Steve…”

Darcy’s voice trailed off, and she looked up to see him standing in the doorway to the living room. His hands were shoved deep into his trouser pockets, and the look on his face could only be described as nervous, slightly scared, but ultimately hopeful. “I saw it in a store window,” he said, shrugging convulsively. “It reminded me of you.”

_The last of the good guys, the man out of time, and he’s standing there staring at me as if I’m the only thing in the world._

The breath rushed out of her lungs, and she clutched the watch closer. “It’s gorgeous,” she eventually said, hard pressed to find any other words. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Steve ran a hand over the back of his neck. “The, um, the taxi will be here in about ten minutes,” he said, breaking the spell that had seemed to settle over the room.

Darcy nodded, rewrapping the pocket watch in the tissue paper and sliding it into her purse. She wasn’t going to let that out of her sight at all. “That’s awfully quick for a holiday weekend.”

“Just lucky, I guess.”

“You have no idea.” Darcy slid off the couch and hustled past Steve into the bathroom. When she came back out he was still in the doorway, back towards her and awkwardly hunched over. _Oh, what the hell_, she thought, and came up right behind him to press her forehead against his shoulder blade. Steve stiffened up beneath her, but he didn’t move. “I don’t wanna go,” she whined again, the words muffled against his shirt. “My mother’s going to be a wreck trying to get everything ready for the holidays and she’ll take it out on the rest of us, Dad’s going to forget to do the shopping meaning he’ll drag me and my brothers to the mall on the 23rd to deal with all the nut jobs while attempting to find presents, extended relatives will be crawling out of the woodwork to pass judgment over every aspect of my life, and I’ll end up hiding in a closet with a bag of M&Ms yet again just to avoid the nightmare.”

“You should be happy they’re still around,” Steve said in a quiet voice.

_And foot-in-mouth syndrome strikes once more._ Feeling rather brave (if she ignored the tumbling knots in her stomach) she wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed. “I know,” she said. One of his hands settled carefully over hers, oddly light for such a strong grip. “Believe me, I know. They’re just overwhelming sometimes.”

“You know, I always wondered where you got it from,” he said, and Darcy could hear the grin in Steve’s voice.

“Oh, you’re so going to pay for that one,” Darcy attempted to poke him in the stomach, but those abs were rock solid and she was barely going to make an impression. Still, if that was just the stomach she could only imagine what the rest of him felt like. And yeah, she admitted to herself, she most certainly wanted to explore further.

Any thoughts of explorations were cut off by Steve’s phone trilling once more. “That’ll be
the taxi,” he said, giving her hands another squeeze. She just moaned into his shoulder again.

Still, Steve carried her overstuffed suitcase downstairs and loaded it into the trunk of the cab, ignoring the rain that was pouring down over them. “Let me know when you get there?” he asked, holding the back door of the car open for her.

“It won’t be until late,” she warned.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“All right.” Darcy chucked her bag into the cab, and then stretched up to give Steve a tight hug, arms wrapping around his neck. This time there wasn’t any stiffness or hesitation, just the sensation of his arms returning the motion and holding her close. “Merry Christmas,” she murmured, her cheek pressed up against his.

“Merry Christmas,” Steve replied, equally as soft.

Reluctantly Darcy pulled away, though she left her hands on his shoulders. “So I’ll see you when I get back?”

Steve grinned, looking strikingly young with his soaking wet blond hair dripping into his eyes and down his face. There was no super soldier there at that moment, Darcy knew, no American icon or national symbol. Just a young man wishing his girl a good trip. “Wouldn’t miss it,” he replied.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

As she got into the cab, she heard Steve tell the driver to take her to Penn Station. When the drive was completed and the driver was hauling the suitcase back out of the trunk Darcy found out that he’d paid her tab in advance as well. She just shook her head, tipped the driver well, and hurried inside the station. Traffic had delayed the taxi ride just enough that no sooner did she find a seat and stash her suitcase away (shoving it ungracefully into one of the baggage areas at the end of the car) did the train pull away from the platform.

The train steadily chugged its way through the night towards New England. While the car itself was relatively quiet with the wind outside and the thrum of metal wheels on rails providing a steady background noise, Darcy felt unsettled. It was as if she was about ready to jump out of her skin, and the only way to satisfy the rushing of her blood would be to run up and down the aisle until she was going to fall over. Instead (because that plan would not have gone over well with the dour looking businessman sitting next to her with his nose buried in his iPad that she’d have to climb over just to go to the bathroom) she pulled the pocket watch out of her purse once more.

Darcy hefted the weight of the watch in her hand, feeling it cool and smooth against her skin. She stared down at the woman on the cover, looking languid and relaxed on what she imagined was a warm summer’s day. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, clutching the watch close to her chest.

This – whatever this is – stopped being a simple crush a long, long time ago.

Well, no shit Sherlock, a snarky little voice fired back.

All right, then answer me this, wise ass, Darcy asked herself, how the hell do I tell Steve Rogers that I might just be head over heels in love with him?
The picture on top of Darcy’s brand new pocket watch looks like this: http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-Yg5d2rymt8U/TeLYYg2DX8I/AAAAAAAACps/EOaokA6R7Cc/s1600/summer-large.jpg (cut and paste please because I still haven't figured out the hypertext on this site).

As for the tickets Darcy bought Steve: Brooklyn’s current minor league baseball team is called the Cyclones, playing out of Coney Island. The tickets are relatively cheap, especially compared to what major league tickets go for in NYC. As for Brooklyn baseball being serious business? Let’s just say that fifty-five years later you can find people who are still bitter about the Dodgers ditching Brooklyn for California (I should know; my dad is one of them…)

My deepest thanks to everyone who left feedback and suggestions for the presents! I know I'm behind on responding to the comments, so let me say right now that they are always loved and appreciated. All of your ideas helped me come up with what you see here, so thank you very, very much.

I’ve got at least three more scenes to come after this one in the mini plotline going on here, so stay tuned. Thanks for reading!
Intuition

Chapter Summary

Intuition – the ability to acquire knowledge without interference and/or the use of reason. In which well-meaning parties offer up opinions and advice for Darcy and Steve.

Chapter Notes

Intuition – the ability to acquire knowledge without interference and/or the use of reason (OED via Wikipedia). In this chapter, well-meaning parties offer up opinions and advice for Darcy and Steve. According to a variety of sources, intuition counts as one of those things that humans can sense. So I’m going to run with it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

While the two women staring at Darcy weren’t related by blood, they had eerily similar looks on their faces. Looks that were aimed directly at her. Darcy slammed her magazine down on the kitchen counter and glared across at her sister and stepmother.

“Okay, seriously, what’s with the looks? You’re starting to creep me out a bit.”

Laura, her stepmother, froze in the middle of whisking up a bowl of cream, while Daisy tapped her mixing spoon on the side of the shallow platter, sending waves through the deep brown liquid inside. They glanced at each other, then back at Darcy. Finally, Daisy put her spoon down and pushed the platter off to the side. “It’s nothing, really,” Daisy began. “You just seem a bit…” She trailed off, obviously fishing around in her head for the best words.

Laura had no problems, however. “You’ve been off in the clouds since you got home. Now, we could blame the holiday for that, but you’re so far gone it’s not normal – even for you.” She put her bowl of whipped cream down and convulsively pushed her shirtsleeves up, then braced her hands on the counter. Even though she was in the middle of a baking frenzy for the upcoming family New Year’s Eve party which was Laura and William Lewis’ responsibility that year, makeupless and with flour and cream splatters on her shirt, she still managed to look elegant. Laura was tall and black-haired, with an accent that traversed the European continent. In her youth she’d been a model, which she claimed was how she’d ended up with such a combination of vocal intonations. She’d quit modeling before she’d met Darcy’s father, but she’d still managed to retain some of that hard earned poise. Poise, however, didn’t mean that she couldn’t be a forceful and caring mother when needed. “So what on Earth is going on with you?” she finished, tapping her fingers on the striated marble.

Darcy sat back on the bar stool and crossed her arms over her chest. She could play it dumb, but she knew exactly what they were talking about. Even though he was two hundred miles away and nowhere near the back roads of Dighton, Massachusetts Steve was still getting into her head and twisting her all up so that even her parents were taking notice. Not that they wouldn’t have noticed
on a good day, but sanity seemed to be suspended in the Lewis household during the madhouse season. And it wasn’t so much that she didn’t know how she felt about him – it had become startlingly clear to her over the last few months that she’d fallen in love with Steve – but rather how she should go about telling him of those emotional developments. A little advice from two older, wiser (okay, wiser was a bit debatable in Daisy’s case given her own emotional minefield of a psyche) women couldn’t hurt. She sighed, loudly, and tightened her arms around herself. “Well, see, there’s this guy –“

Darcy’s sentence was cut off by Daisy dropping her head forward, practically colliding with the marble, while Laura straightened up with a rather gloating look. She watched as Daisy, still face down on the marble, reached into her pants pocket, rooted around for a moment, and came back with a crumpled up wad of bills. Without looking she dropped the wad into Laura’s now outstretched palm.

“Oh, come on!” Darcy blurted out, more than indignant. Seriously, these were the people she called family?

* * *

New Year’s Eve turned out to be surprisingly sedate compared to Lewis parties of the past. This may have been because her dad’s sister had finally discovered the wonders of Darcy’s homemade cocktails (which had the dangerous ability of inspiring many a ‘never again’ moment), but no one dared suggest that to her aunt’s face. Shortly after ten Darcy escaped into the basement to avoid yet another relative asking how the world of political science was treating her.

“No, Aunt Jeannie, I work for an astrophysicist, not an assemblyman,” Darcy said, pulling the basement door swiftly shut behind her. She wiped her hands on her trousers, taking a moment to center herself before descending the stairs. The basement was more of a glorified entertainment den for her dad and brothers, fill with three different gaming systems, a pool table, dart board tacked to the wall, and a flat screen television large enough to compensate for the poor vision that was a dominant gene in the family. She found her younger brother, Alexander, down there, camped out on the couch with a portable video game in his hands and explosions blaring on the television screen.

“What are you watching?” Darcy asked, dropping down on the couch next to him.

With all of the malaise an almost thirteen year old could muster, he replied: “New York’s getting blown up again.”

“What?!” Darcy grabbed for the remote and turned up the volume. She listened to a reporter talk about what appeared to be a power plant or some other large, complicated compound on fire and sparking dangerously, sending white and orange trails into the night sky amidst clouds of smoke.

“Actually, I think that’s New Jersey,” she said, leaning closer to peer at the screen. Okay, yes, she was trying to see if Steve and the rest of the team were on site. She could admit that to herself, at least.

“No great loss then.”

“Xander, be nice.” Further explanation by the reporters on the scene stated that the refineries scattered around Newark and Linden were being attacked by creatures that had apparently come from within the oil, but she couldn’t be sure.

The words were drowned out by a clomping on the stairs behind them. Right after that Daisy sat down on Darcy’s other side, with her baby sound asleep and drooling on her shoulder. “Didn’t I see this on an episode of the X-Files once?” she asked, squinting at the screen and reading the banner that kept scrolling a constant update at the bottom.
“Was that one of the ones you tortured me with and made me watch in the dark even though I was far too young and scared shitless of it?” Darcy glared at her sister, even though it was half-hearted at this point. Some arguments had to be rehashed for old times’ sake, however. Whoever thought it was wise to let the thirteen year old show the eight year old a sci-fi horror show (at least in the eight year old’s eyes) might have been a bit mistaken, and Darcy never failed to remind Daisy of that. It was just one of those things between sisters.

“Probably,” Daisy agreed with a nod. “But hey, it built character. This doesn’t look like fiction though.”

Xander snickered, pulling his nose out of the video game. “Nope. New Jersey’s getting wiped off the map.”

This time Darcy elbowed him in the side (she could sink to the level of a twelve year old if she needed to…hell, most of the time she still thought she was fifteen in her head). “I have co-workers I like that live in New Jersey. I don’t want to see them blown up.” She turned back to Daisy. “Now give me my niece. I could use some snuggle time.”

“Oh, please do.” Daisy handed the baby over and shook her arms out with a sigh of relief. “For some reason she won’t sleep unless someone’s holding her tonight.” She stretched them out over her head, then ran a hand through the dark hair that flipped out into little wisps somewhere around her chin. Daisy and Darcy looked quite similar, both on the smaller side with quite a few curves, and dark blue eyes framed by glasses. They both used to have long hair, but Daisy had chopped most of her locks off when she’d gotten pregnant and hadn’t looked back. Maya looked like she was inheriting some of those features as well, and already sported a fringe of dark hair that held promise. Darcy ran a delicate finger down the slope of Maya’s nose. “Hey there little one,” she whispered. Maya just snuffled in response, and tucked her head further into the curve of Darcy’s shoulder. “Oh yeah, I’ve so got it,” she gloated, keeping her voice low.

The brief moment of stillness was shattered by a blur of red and gold flying past on the oversized television screen. “Ooh, superheroes,” her youngest brother Nicholas chimed in as he scrambled over the back of the couch and squeezed himself in on Xander’s other side.

“When did you get here?” Darcy asked. She hadn’t heard him come downstairs, but Nico was sneaky like that.

“Mama’ll smack you if she sees you’ve been climbing on the furniture,” Daisy said, leaning back to send a glare at the eight year old boy’s head.

“But it’s Iron Man,” Nico pointed out, dark eyes wide and innocent in a narrow face. He leaned across Xander and poked Darcy, who wriggled out of the way while trying to keep Maya from waking up. “And come on, Darce, you’ve got to try and get me his autograph. He lives in New York City too!”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Just because I live in New York doesn’t mean I get to hang around with all the superheroes,” she said. ‘No, you just get to hang out with a couple of them,’ her traitorous mind piped up. The thought sent a flare of worry through her stomach. If Iron Man was on the scene, then it stood to reason that Captain America would be called out as well. She knew that Steve was in the city tonight, having been roped into a party by Tony that he really didn’t want to go to but was being forced to anyway. Something about needing to improve his socialization skills, or so Tony claimed. Being the closest to the action, it only made sense that they got called out as well.

The worrisome feeling suddenly surged to the front of Darcy’s mind as a large disc flew
across the TV screen, pinging off of girders and smokestacks while cutting a swath through an oily creature that was making its way up some scaffolding. ‘Shit,’ she thought, her fingers itching with the sudden need to clutch her new pocket watch and not let go until she knew Steve was home safe. Instead, she rubbed a hand up and down Maya’s back, feeling the baby’s torso steadily rise and fall beneath her palm. Maya made a few soft noises, low, cooing sounds that put Darcy in mind of a pigeon, though a whole lot nicer and sweeter smelling. Still, the five month old sounded slightly agitated so she kept up the rubbing, trying to calm the baby down. “I know how you feel, kid,” she muttered.

Daisy glanced over at the two of them, eyes squinted thoughtfully. “You’re worried about your boy, aren’t you,” she said. It wasn’t a question. Still, Darcy felt she should at least give a token denial before folding.

“Excuse me?”

She waved at the screen. “He’s still in New York, isn’t he?”

“Yeah. A friend of his was giving a party tonight.” Was this what it would be like now with her family? Tell them the vaguest of truths to keep them satisfied and make sure she didn’t totally blow out the terms of the confidentiality agreements forced on her by S.H.I.E.L.D.? Mama’s advice from the day before about what to do in her romantic life boiled down to: “Life is too damned short to waste your time on those what ifs you keep concocting. And you, my darling girl, can be incredibly brave when you put your mind to it. So take the chance, ask him out or just even plant one on him. From what it sounds like he won’t be scared off by either prospect.” Darcy had to admit that she really rather wanted to find out if Steve’s mouth was as soft as it looked, but it would also mean even more partial truths to cover up what exactly he did for a living. Right now all they knew was that he was ex-military who had moved into private consulting. It was close enough… right? Rationally, she knew they’d get outed eventually, whether by some well-meaning friend or a paparazzi with a death wish. But until that time she had to play S.H.I.E.L.D.’s game. And come to think of it, it was a bit weird that the paparazzi hadn’t gotten any pictures yet of her and a certain Star Spangled Man hanging out too. Still, Darcy couldn’t complain; she wouldn’t hear the end of it from her family if those pics ever made the news.

“Well, I highly doubt the party’s going to get so out of control that he’s going to end up in New Jersey,” Daisy pointed out as Darcy tried to bring her mind back on track.

The red, white, and blue shield sailed horizontally across the television screen once more, making Darcy roll her eyes with the sheer timing of it. “There’s always a chance the oil monsters will start roaming.”

“You sure you haven’t been watching my old X-Files DVDs while on your lonesome in the big city?”

“I do have a life down there, you know.” Although considering that most of her social circle consisted of Jane or Steve and the conversations and events inevitably turned to work-type things that were covered by those damned confidentiality agreements, she couldn’t blame her sister for thinking that she spent a bit of time with her DVD player. Darcy straightened her shoulders, trying to at least look affronted – which was kind of hard to do with an armful of sleepy baby. “I even went to a concert a couple of weekends ago.”

Daisy arched her eyebrows over the plastic frame of her glasses. It was a penetrating, impatient look that wasn’t going to budge until she got the answers she wanted. ‘It’s going to be fun when Maya starts talking,’ Darcy thought. “All right, it was technically a Christmas show. In my defense the boy dragged me to it.”
Daisy shook her head, a slow grin spreading across her face. “Wow, you really have it bad for this guy.”

“He’s…unlike any other guy I’ve ever met.” Darcy shrugged, rearranging her grip on Maya. “Admittedly, I haven’t always had the best taste in men, but my shitty romantic history aside he’s still…” She trailed off, fishing around in her brain for a word that could describe Steve. “He’s just a good guy,” she eventually concluded, a bit disheartened that the creative side of her brain couldn’t come up with a better word than ‘good’.

Maya fussed again, this time loud enough to pull Xander and Nico away from the superhero show in front of them. “Give her here.” Ever so carefully Daisy transferred Maya into her arms, rocking her slowly to try and calm her down. “Yeah, the Lewis girls get notoriously nervous around good guys. We know how to handle the douchebags and the jackasses, especially when they try to pull stuff on us, but when it comes to the decent ones we can’t tell which way is up.” She resituated Maya, cradling her on her lap while she slipped back into slumber. The baby’s dark eyelashes fluttered and then stilled, coming to rest on pale peaches and cream skin. “Don’t let that stop you from dating him, though,” she continued, not pulling her eyes from her daughter’s face.

“I said no such thing,” Darcy protested, folding her arms over her chest and glaring at the fighting on the screen. “How long have they been fighting these oil monsters anyway?”

“You didn’t have to. I will say this however: don’t even think you’re not good enough for him. Because you totally are. And I’ll bet anything that he thinks he’s not good enough for you either, so you’re evenly matched.”

“That’s a bit presumptuous to say.” Especially since she didn’t know Steve from a hole in the wall. Daisy may have known who Captain America was, but Darcy would bet good money that most of her knowledge came from the old comic books that, once upon a time, Daisy had sworn up and down weren’t hers but that she was just holding them for the neighbor boy (it turned out they were swapping issues to read as much as possible, but that’s another story for another time). “He does have his insecure moments; I’ll give you that.” She chewed at her lip, watching a bolt of lightning crackle against the top of a smokestack. Guess Mew-Mew came out to play too, she figured. “Is it bad of me to think the insecurity makes him even cuter?”

“As long as that’s not the only part of him you like then you’re okay.”

“Yeah, him having an ass you could bounce quarters off of doesn’t hurt either.”

The twin cries of “Ugh, brain bleach!” and “Oh, gross!” came up from the other side of the couch.

Darcy pointed a finger at her brothers, jabbing in their direction. “You say that now, but just wait.”

Nico shook his head, still grimacing. “Yeah, no. I’m gonna watch the heroes instead.”

Darcy squeezed her eyes shut, yet again wondering how this had become her life.

Still, she leaned her head on her sister’s shoulder and gazed down at Maya, reveling in the small normalcy that the baby brought for the moment. “When the hell did you get to be so smart, Daisy?” she asked softly, too many thoughts whirling around in her brain.

“Mother’s intuition,” she murmured with a grin, low enough so that only Darcy could hear her. “When the kid’s not sucking it out through my tits it’s a surprisingly useful thing I’m finding.”
Daisy stretched her neck from side to side, and Darcy could hear the small pops of her joints and bones loosening up. “Okay, I’m going to attempt to get her in the crib as my arms are about to fall off. She pushed herself off of the couch and looked back down at her sister. “Your boy’s going to be fine so don’t waste your night watching the disaster.”

‘For all your intuition you don’t know that for sure,’ Darcy thought, dragging her eyes back to the fiery scene playing out in front of her. Two minutes worth of hand-wringing later she pulled her phone out of her pocket and shot off a quick text message to Steve: black oil monsters. Really?? Short and simple, and not revealing anything about just how nervous and worried she was. When she slipped the phone back into her pocket she heard it clink against the new pocket watch, a small comfort while watching the fight.

Laura dragged Darcy upstairs around eleven-thirty and she lingered through the countdown, watching a somewhat subdued crowd in Times Square on the major networks. Three glasses of champagne later she was back in the basement, eyes trained on the news stations that were reporting from refinery central. Now, at least, it looked like some S.H.I.E.L.D. response squads were on the scene as well, so at least the Avengers weren’t the only ones having to handle the creatures from the tar pits. Not long after that Darcy fell asleep, curled up underneath a blanket on the couch with her phone clutched tightly in her hand and the television blaring the latest and greatest updates as to what was happening in New Jersey.

Sometime later, (possibly around three-thirty but she couldn’t be sure as the glasses had long since been removed and her night vision sucked big time) the sound of her ringtone going off startled Darcy out of sleep. She blindly clicked her phone on, more by instinct than anything else at that point. “Jane? What’s on the fritz?” she mumbled, pressing the phone practically into her face.

“Oh, actually it’s Steve.”

While her eyes didn’t open Darcy’s body tensed up, as if ready to move at a moment’s notice. “Are you okay?” she asked, her voice sounding a lot more awake than the rest of her. “You guys are all over the news because of the oil monsters.”

She heard him exhale roughly over the speaker, and could imagine him slumping against the wall in exhaustion. “Yeah, we’re fine. A bit grimy, but otherwise okay. I didn’t wake you up?”

“Meh, I get midnight calls from Jane all the time because something went funny in the lab and she needs some emergency data correlation. So don’t worry about it.” Okay, admittedly the midnight calls were an infrequent occurrence, and had rarely happened since they had moved to New York, but Steve didn’t need to know that. “So are you all done with the creatures from the black lagoon?”

“No idea. There are reports coming in from Louisiana that the supply down there may be tainted, but nothing certain. We’re headed back to the helicarrier now to get more intel.”

“Well whatever happens you stay safe, you hear me? And then…” Darcy gripped her phone even tighter, reminding herself one last time that she wasn’t making a misstep, that this was the logical progression of things, and hoping like hell that Steve could read in between the lines of what she was saying and see what she was really asking. “Then when you get back we’ll go out and spend the day doing something silly, like trying out all of the best pizza places in Brooklyn, or going to the aquarium, or… I don’t know, something fun. And then we’ll see where things go from there?” Darcy let her voice trail off, rich with implications.

There seemed to be no hesitation in Steve’s response, which was a positive sign that settled warmly in the depths of her chest. “That sounds great. We’ll figure it out as we go along, I
presume?” She could hear the smile in his voice, and she knew that she’d made the right move.

“I can totally work with that. Sounds like what we’ve been doing anyway.” Darcy muffled a yawn, her body demanding sleep even though her brain wanted to stay awake and indulge in some giddiness.

“Yeah. Sometimes it’s nice to not have to be the man with a plan, and just take what happens as it comes. And I can’t wait to see what you’re going to do.”

“Do you doubt my abilities?” She yawned again, and had the sinking feeling that Steve could hear it on his side.

“Never. But you may want to get some sleep before you try to take over the world.”

“Yes sir, Captain Pinky.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Random pop culture references don’t work as well on two hours of sleep.”

“Darcy.”

“I know, sleepy time now. So you stay safe, and I’ll see you when you get back.”

Darcy yawned once more as Steve’s good night echoed in her ears. She could still feel the warmth in his voice as she quickly fell back asleep.

*                      *                      *

Steve clicked his phone off and slipped it back into one of his pockets. Thank goodness for sturdily made technology that could handle being knocked about into things. While Tony Stark could get under his skin like nobody else, he had to admit that he made some damn good devices. Especially when compared to the communicator ear pieces from S.H.I.E.L.D. that had shorted out once they got covered in the oil. He slid the phone back into one of the pouches attached to his belt, and slumped against the wall, feeling the weight of the battle suddenly hit him all at once. The refinery wasn’t quite falling to bits, but the component structures were leaning at odd angles, smoke was coming from places it shouldn’t, and an eerie glow lit up the night sky. The battle noises had died down, leaving the quiet crackling of the flames and warping metal behind. The clanking sound echoing down the corridor could only mean one other thing, however. Steve rolled his head to the side, catching sight of Tony tromping down the hall, the mask of the Iron Man suit raised up and exposing his face to the night air.

“You know, a phone call like that can mean only one thing,” Tony said, resting against the wall next to him with a knowing smirk on his face.

Yeah, this was the last conversation Steve wanted to have right now, not when he was beyond exhausted and stinking of various oils and other fluids he really didn’t want to think about. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, rubbing his hand over his eyes and feeling his glove catch on the grime lingering on the cowl.

“Uh-huh. Sure. Sounds to me like Cap’s got a girlfriend.”

Steve just shook his head. “Just a friend,” he said, even though the word ‘friend’ was a poor word to describe just what Darcy meant. And as the girlfriend thing wasn’t true – yet, he reminded himself – he wasn’t lying.
Tony shook his head, snickering under his breath. “Try saying that again, maybe I’ll believe you next time.”

“Stark, what do you want?” Steve asked, his voice sounding as exasperated as he felt.

“The choppers are ready to bring us back to the helicarrier. So much for getting back to your first 21st century New Year’s Eve blowout.”

Steve nodded and pushed himself off the wall. “Let’s go then.”

Tony clapped an armored hand on his shoulder as they moved down the corridor toward the cleared out spaces that had been deemed landing pads. “Seriously though, let me know if you want me to give this mystery girl the ‘if you hurt him I will break you’ talk. It’ll be fun to play big brother and give that talk for once.”

Steve huffed under his breath, almost laughing. “Do I want to know?”

“No, probably not. Suffice to say I have a long and rather colorful history, the details of which can be found on a variety of websites. Clothing optional, of course.” The whirring sound of helicopter blades became louder as they moved closer to the vehicles.

“Now why doesn’t that surprise me one bit?”

“Yeah, on second thought, you may not want to look that up. Anyway, tell me more about the girl who stole our dear Captain America’s heart.”

Steve shot Tony a look. Sure, Tony could be an annoying ass at times, but there was something verging on affection in the teasing, and it was a bit of a comfort to him. We few, we happy few, we band of brothers and all that, he supposed. “There’s no girl,” he insisted, although the protest may have been a bit half-hearted and there just may have been a little smirk on Steve’s face as well.

“I will get the details out of you eventually, you know. I can be a persistent bastard when I need to.”

“You’re welcome to keep trying.”

Chapter End Notes

*glares at 4500 word count* Okay, seriously, what happened to short scenes? Damn plot getting in the way… And Tony just couldn’t seem to keep his mouth shut here either, but as I adore the Tony and Steve dynamic (read: bromance) I’m so running with it. As for the next part, I’ve got it generally plotted out but nothing written yet, so I can’t give any guarantees as to when it’ll be out. It may take even longer than normal as I’ve actually been doing some paid work lately (I’ll take whatever employment I can get these days), but I can state with certainty that there will be some payoff in there for sticking with this ride for this one. I’ll say this as well – don’t expect that aquarium date either; things are going to get a bit stranger than that for Steve and Darcy. I’m sci-fi/fantasy author at heart; I need a little bit of weirdness amidst all of these feels. But there will be kissing, and that’s all I’m saying. I’ll cut myself off here as I’m starting to ramble badly, and conclude with thank you very much for sticking with the story and
leaving comments (and you know who you are!). It’s great hearing that you’re enjoying the tale! And tomorrow morning after I’ve slept a bit, I’ll start responding to the backlog of comments I know are waiting. Thanks again. :)
Chapter Summary

Kinesthesioception = sense of acceleration. In both a physical and emotional sense. Finally.

Chapter Notes

This is actually part one of the overall chapter. Why is that? Because it took about 6400 words just to get to what I had initially envisioned as the scene for this bit, and that’s turning out to be the midpoint of the entire chapter. I’m at 8400 words now, so of course I lose the plot a bit and am having trouble figuring out how to wrap things up and get our heroes out of the mess they’re currently in. *headdesk* So as my tumblr is still pretty much inactive (I do have one that I’m going to start posting this story at tonight. The address is http://aenariasbookshelf.tumblr.com/, come stop by and let me know which other tumbrls I should be following!) and my cat is starting to give me death glares when I ask her fic related questions, I’m giving this part of the chapter a test run here. There’ll probably be two more parts posted after this to bring the story up to what I’ve currently got written. Any comments you could offer up to help fight the writer’s block would be most appreciated. :)

This chapter was partially inspired by this http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ek0SgwWmF9w video. While the lyrics have absolutely nothing to do with the chapter, the scenery and the background music helped to set the feel for the scene, especially when I kept blasting the song while walking through the same subway station I warped for this bit.

It was one of the constants in her life that Darcy clung to: that when you really, really want something to happen a monkey wrench is going to get tossed into the works and there was going to be an issue. Sometimes it worked out for the better, like taking a certain astrophysics internship because she had put off the six credit requirement until the very last moment and that one was the only one left. Other times, like the incident with her father’s car back when she was in high school, didn’t go quite as well (they swore never to speak of it again, and she was able to work off the repair bill eventually). So it only stood to reason that trying to find a time that worked for both she and Steve to finally go out on that promised date was fraught with complications. Between the damned oil monsters in the south keeping Steve out of town for a good few weeks, and a spur of the moment business trip to Norway on her part because Jane found some readings that could not be ignored, it wasn’t until the beginning of February that they were even in the same state. Text messages and phone calls could only go so far.

At the rate Darcy was going, she couldn’t promise that she wouldn’t jump Steve the next time she saw him. When the temptation was that close, yet so far out of touch, who could blame her?
Of course, the next time she did see Steve? Yeah, kissing him was the last thing on her mind.

The New York subway system is a complicated labyrinth of corridors, tracks, platforms, stairwells, bricks, metal, tiles, and turnstiles filled to the brim with millions of people every single day. That explanation is a bit simplistic for such an expansive system, but you get the gist of it. It’s constantly overcrowded, you run the risk of getting eviscerated being pushed up against a support pole in one of the cars because of the crush of people during rush hour, and sometimes there’s just an odd smell in the air too. But as it’s been one of the easiest ways to get around New York City for the last hundred plus years, residents and tourists accept the subway and all its foibles. However, when the train that Darcy was in deep below Manhattan began to disintegrate into clouds of metallic dust that twinkled like distant starlight and streaks of jagged blue that resembled electricity but were entirely unlike electricity darted across the walls right in front of her and the other passengers on there, she was ready to swear off the subway for good.

But that was the good thing about having a number of superheroes living right in her city, that they could be on the scene in a matter of minutes to help evacuate the scared and worried passengers. The electric blue streaks stopped the heroes from getting the doors to the car open, but they’d managed to bring the train to a stop in one of the stations and were evacuating passengers through a hatch in the roof. It was a lucky coincidence that her two favorite heroes, Thor and Captain America, were assigned to her car to get all the people out.

They had already evacuated the children, their parents, and the elderly, and were in the process of getting the rest of the adults out. Steve was inside the car handing passengers up through the hatch to Thor, but beyond that Darcy couldn’t see the rest of the deal. She was sure that S.H.I.E.L.D. had come up with some precise method for evacuating everyone, and was quite eager to experience it firsthand. Still, Darcy had moved to the back of the crowd and was helping to get everyone gathered under the trap door and out to safety. It wasn’t even a conscious action; she just knew that she had to make sure they were safe before she was. At least she had her Taser on hand.

They were down to three passengers, Darcy, and Steve when things started to go really wrong. The disintegration at the other end of the car had been holding steady for a while, but without warning the dust and starlight crackles began to expand, surging up the sides and making the car list dangerously. Darcy grabbed at the closest metal bar as she felt her feet begin to slide out from under her. Steve was able to reach for the person closest to him and keep her nearby, but the two other passengers tumbled further down into the tipping car.

By this time Thor’s entire torso was inside of the cab, arms outstretched and reaching towards Steve. “Captain, bring them here!” he yelled out, hair and cape spreading out around him, barely heard over the electric crackles that just seemed to be getting louder and louder.

Steve looked down to the far end of the car, where the final two passengers were clinging onto whatever they could reach. Then his eyes landed on Darcy. And while she was scared shitless at this point (she could admit that to herself at least) she nodded at him, trying to tell him that she’d follow his lead, whatever he decided. Finally, Darcy watched as he glanced up at Thor, and said, “All right, here goes nothing.”

Before Darcy could see what Steve did, the crackling streaks on the wall flashed and pulsed a bright blue, and the floor tilted even further. She gripped her bar as hard as she could as the world faded away in a blast of harsh, white light.
Darcy wasn’t sure how much time had passed from when she had lost consciousness to when she woke up with a rough gasp. In those first few seconds, however, she realized three things: that she was still in the train car flat on her back on the incredibly dirty floor, that the electric crackling stuff had been replaced with a dim, eerie blue-green-grey light coming in through the windows, and that there was a very heavy, unconscious super soldier currently laying on top of her legs. She winced and then wiggled her legs, hoping like hell that it would be enough to wake him up.

Thankfully, it worked. Within a few seconds she felt Steve tense up, then push himself up on his arms. His blue eyes, almost inhuman in the cold green-grey light and slightly shadowed by the cowl of the uniform, flicked around the car, taking things in at a rapid rate. He looked down at Darcy, who was attempting to push herself to her feet. “What the hell was that?” she asked, wincing at the sharp pain that lanced through the muscles in her lower back.

Steve scrambled to his feet and reached down to help Darcy up. “I have no idea.” He looked around the car again, finding that the structure had seemed to almost miraculously rebuild itself after that final flash of light. “But I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.”

“You can say that again.”

They heard some small scrabbling sounds, and looked around to see the other three passengers picking themselves up from around the car. Darcy could see Steve straighten up and adjust the shield that was slung over his back. “Everyone all right?” he called out. When he got a general affirmative coming from all corners he nodded and smacked his hands together once. “All right. Let’s pool our resources and we’ll figure out where to go from there.”

There weren’t a lot of supplies to be had from the bags and packages people had left on the train car before they were evacuated, but there was some food and some water at least. It was enough to be carried between the five of them, which led to the next question. “Do we stay here, or do we try to find a way out?” the Captain asked. “Whatever we do, we do by consensus.”

From her perch on one of the long bench seats Darcy looked out the window. The platform outside was suffused with that blue-green-grey light, with the internal scaffolding of the station casting deep shadows over the tracks and bouncing off of the grimy tiled walls. What was disturbing her more than anything else was the utter silence in the station. In all the time Darcy had lived in New York City, she’d never seen the subway that empty. Not even at one thirty in the morning when she was stumbling back from a party half buzzed; it was almost a guarantee that there was someone more trashed than she was on the route. Day or night, there was always someone else on the train with her. But now? The only people were the five of them on that train car, and there was utter and total silence all around them.

Even the background noise wasn’t present. There was no ambient hum of electricity coming from the third rail, no small water trickles dripping from splits in concrete or ancient, one-hundred year old pipes unable to cope with their load anymore, no chattering of people off in the distance, no wind rushing through the tunnels from escape vents or passing trains, and no sounds of the clicking of various types of heels on concrete and metal floors. For some reason, out of all of the strange things that had happened in the last hour, that bothered Darcy the most. She’d never done well with silence (even growing up in the middle of the woods like she did there were always background sounds. At least in New Mexico she had her iPod as constant companion to keep away the quiet), and she clicked her fingernails on the scratched up windows just to hear the noise echo throughout the car.

One of the other passengers, a tall woman a few years older than Darcy and dressed in heavy
riding boots and a puffy down jacket, peered out of the window next to her. “Do you think anyone knows we’re here?” she asked.

Darcy shrugged. “I don’t even know where here is. It didn’t feel – or look - like we went anywhere, but…”

“Yeah, I don’t know either.”

“Which brings us to the next question.” Darcy sighed, and ran a hand through hair that had been tangled from being knocked about so badly.

“Stay or go,” the other woman agreed. She twisted around to look back inside the train car. “What are your thoughts, Captain?” she asked.

Steve blew out a rough breath, and looked over at the final two passengers in the car. The boy and girl were probably even younger than Darcy, and she suspected that they were college students. She’d become good at spotting college students lately, especially now that she’d been living with them for over a year. They were huddled together on the opposite bench, arms wrapped tightly around each other. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked back at the other two. “We’re safe here,” he said. “We can bar the doors, unhook the car from the others to give us an extra level of protection. But that shouldn’t stop us from exploring, to figure out what else is around here that we could use to our advantage.”

“And possibly search for a way out?” Darcy suggested.

“Getting out of here should be our first priority,” Steve agreed.

The woman standing next to Darcy looked around, turning her eyes out the window once more. “If we’re in the same place we were before. Maybe I’m just being paranoid but something feels off about this.”

“It’s too quiet,” the boy chimed in, speaking up for the first time. “I haven’t been here all that long, but this can’t be right.”

“I’ve never seen lights like this in the subway either,” Darcy said.

“And if it’s this weird down here, what’s it going to be like out on the streets?” the girl asked.

“First things first,” Steve broke in, “let’s find out more information about where we are before even thinking about heading up to the surface. We’ll explore in groups.” He pointed at Darcy and the woman next to her. “You two stick together and I’ll go with these two.” Darcy nodded and grabbed her bag, pulling her Taser out of its convenient front pocket. As quiet as it was, it didn’t hurt to be prepared for any unexpected guests. “We stay within shouting distance,” Steve continued. “It’s quiet in here, so our voices will carry pretty well. First sign of trouble, you call for help and, if it’s safe, retreat back here.”

“We’ll have to scream for it,” the girl said, waving her cellphone in the air. “Signal’s totally gone.”

The woman rolled her eyes. “Isn’t that a given anyway in the subway?”

“Hey, some phones can still get some sort of connection down here.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Steve broke in again, making Darcy suspect that he could see the potential fight brewing just as well as she could and knew it would be a bad, bad idea to let it go any
further. “Yell, scream, sing a song. Just do whatever you need to so that we’ll come running.” He turned his eyes over to Darcy. “What about clocks, or watches? Are they working?”

Darcy knew that the question was directed towards her, even though Steve was doing very well at giving the impression that they’d never met before in their lives until this day. It wasn’t true, but feeding the rumor mill was the last thing needed at that moment. She pulled the pocket watch out from where it was clipped to a hidden loop inside her bag and clicked the lid open. The second hand ticked ahead at a steady pace but it seemed slower, more sluggish than the normal pace of a second. “It’s working, but really slowly. If you’ll pardon the pun, the timing’s off. Maybe because it’s a wind up one?”

“What about your phone? What’s the readout on there say?” Steve asked, turning back to the girl.

The girl snorted and shook her head, a look of resignation spreading across her face. “It keeps blinking 12:00. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a smartphone do that before.”

The boy, who Darcy assumed was her boyfriend by the way he was hovering, squinted down at the phone. “What about the stopwatch function on there though? If that’s still working we might at least be able to count off chunks of time.”

“Good idea,” said Steve. “Does one of you ladies have a phone that can do the same?” They nodded. “All right, we’ll set the timers for twenty minutes. As soon as that bell goes off, you get back here as quick as you can.”

With that they split off, with Darcy and the woman heading up the creaking metal stairs to the upper level while Steve and the teenagers explored around the platform. The light seeped in through vents and cracks, providing an ambient glow that let them make their way around without stumbling into garbage cans and whatever other detritus was scattered around the place. White tile had crumbled off of the walls to create little mounds of dust and debris heaped on the floor, leaving exposed brickwork behind. Some of the metal bars that looked down to their platform below were bent and rusted, even though they could feel no moisture in the air.

“You know,” Darcy said, unbuttoning her coat as they walked up a small concrete slope, “it feels downright balmy in here. Usually you can feel that it’s thirty-five and raining inside.”

“And you’ll feel it when it’s a hundred degrees out too,” she agreed, looking upwards at the walls as they continued their walk. “Right now it just feels…temperate, I guess. I’ve been riding the subway my entire life. You get to know how it behaves, even when shit goes wrong.”

“Like the water main break last week jamming up some of the lines for hours.”

“Exactly. Pain in the ass, but not out of the ordinary at all. The way the station feels right now, however? Alice down the rabbit hole. If my feet weren’t solidly on the ground I wouldn’t even be able to tell which way is up.”

Darcy looked over at the woman, who was brushing some long, auburn hair away from her face. “What’s your name, by the way? If we’re going to be exploring buddies down here we should probably get to know each other.”

“Tallie. You?”

“Darcy. Good to meet you, Tallie.”
Chapter Summary

In which things in the subway get a little bit stranger...

Chapter Notes

Before we start, I just want to say thank you to everyone who responded to the last part! Your words and suggestions really helped me out. Between that and a couple of trips on the subway I think I figured out the best way to wrap this part up. To thank you as well, this chapter has something that I think you've been waiting for... ;)

“It looks like we’re in the 14th Street Union Square station,” the boy, whose name turned out to be Jayden, said once they had met back up in the train car. “The shape seems right, the sign labels, and the plaques you said you saw upstairs with the numbers on them are right too. But the signs out there on the platform,” he waved a hand towards the windows, “they’re way out of date. Fifties, sixties maybe.”

“I’m impressed,” Tallie said.

“I like the subway. I grew up out in the Midwest sticks; we’ve got nothing like this out there. It’s made college interesting, for sure.”

His girlfriend, Mei, chimed in. “It’s also good because I live way down in south Brooklyn and it takes a while on the trains for him to get there too.”

“I know that feeling,” Darcy groused, thinking of her own daily subway route and wishing it was shorter. At least it was a Friday and she had been heading home for the night. There had also been a potential for a date on Saturday as she and Steve had finally been in the same state at the same time. Well, they were together now, but the environment wasn’t exactly how she had pictured their ideal first date going. And while she knew just how good he looked in his uniform, she would have preferred he wore something that had easier access overall. “You know what was weird?”

“Aside from the lack of noise?” Mei said.

“There’s also a startling lack of exits. We should have come across one within five minutes of being on that level. Nothing.”

“No stairwells or doorways to an upper floor?” Steve asked.

Tallie shook her head and shifted slightly on the hard benches. “We poked our heads up one of the staircases we saw, but I couldn’t tell you how many feet that thing stretched up without seeing any daylight.”

“The corridors upstairs also seemed to be a lot longer than they should have been too,” Darcy
continued. “But I don’t know the whole layout so I couldn’t tell you anything for sure.”

“The proportions did feel off,” Tallie agreed. “I repeat my down the rabbit hole statement.”

They all fell silent. Darcy closed her eyes, wishing that she could turn her brain off for just a moment to try and figure out what the hell was going on.

“So what do we do now, Captain?” Mei asked.

Steve just sighed and rubbed a hand over his jaw.

After what they guessed was a couple of hours without any sign of rescue (“Without any sign of anything,” Jayden couldn’t help but point out,) they turned the phones off. No one was calling and as the lack of a signal kept draining the power, they figured it would be best to save up the batteries for emergencies. Darcy kept the pocket watch wound up and moving. Even if it was slow it was the only way they could judge time. All the while, the blue-green-grey light held steady without wavering or flickering.

A few hours after that the group had migrated to separate corners of the train car. Jayden and Mei were stretched out on one of the benches, talking in low voices that barely carried. Tallie was in a seat on the far opposite side, focused on the knitting she had pulled out of one of the bags she was carrying. Darcy was somewhere between them, fiddling with her hands and ready to jump out of her skin. She had never been good with waiting, and that whole patience thing was difficult for her. Instead, she walked out onto the platform where Steve was keeping watch.

His shield was propped in front of him, with his hand resting on the edge of it and his chin balanced on that. The cowl was still firmly in place, even though there were streaks of grime lingering on the edges. While all Darcy wanted to do was curl up next to him and bury her head in his shoulder to make the world go away, she didn’t know who was watching. It would be better to keep a respectable, safe distance. She sat down next to him, making sure there was some space there.

“How are you holding up?” Steve asked, eyes constantly scanning the platform for anything out of the ordinary.

Darcy just groaned.

“Yeah, I know the feeling.”

“So, we’ve been here about five hours so far.” She pulled the watch out of her jeans pocket, staring down at the enameled cover.

Steve pursed his lips and looked over at her. “Is that real time or watch time?”

“According to the watch. Which means it’s probably a lot more than that.” Darcy looked up at him, her eyes betraying just how worried she was. “Have you felt hungry at all? Or thirsty?”

Steve’s face was blank for a moment, as if it hadn’t even occurred to him to think about it. Then he shrugged, as if brushing it off. “It’s what happens in the middle of a battle. Those needs get pushed to the side until you’ve got the time to deal with them.”
“Which would make sense if we were running from something. But we’ve spent more time sitting around than anything else.” Darcy leaned in close. “So why aren’t any of us even wishing we had a burger right about now? Or how about a bottle of water? I’ve seen your metabolism in action. The only time you’ve ever gone for six hours without eating is when you’re asleep.”

“I, I have no idea. But you’re right; we should all want to eat by now.” Steve sighed, and rested his forehead against the shield. “Is it bad of me to wish that Tony or Bruce was here right now to figure out what the hell is going on?”

“God, no. Let’s just hope that they’re working on the issue on the surface and we’ll see their bright, shining faces sooner rather than later to get us out of here.”

“Maybe we could play a game,” Mei suggested sometime later when all of them, Steve included, were sitting on the floor in a circle. Steve hadn’t wanted to relinquish his post, but as nothing had changed since they got there, they were able to sway him inside and relax for a little bit. “Like truth or dare, or I never.”

Darcy shook her head, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. “That only works when you’ve got a lot of alcohol. And while my skills are many, I haven’t figured out how to build a homemade still yet.”

“Anyone got a deck of cards?” Steve suggested.

“Solitaire on my phone.”

“Not exactly a team game, that.”

Tallie kicked at one of her bags. “I could teach all of you to knit?”

“You know, I had a date tonight,” Darcy muttered to Tallie when they had decided to poke around one of the platforms for a different train line, looking for anything that could help them find a way out. “Tonight, tomorrow night, whenever. First date, too. I was hoping for something epic. Being stuck in the subway from hell is not quite the epic I was looking for.”

Tallie laughed, shoving her hands in her jeans pockets. “Oh, the innocence of young love.”

Darcy shot her a look over the top of her glasses. “You’re not that much older than I am, so that reasoning doesn’t work.”

“Yeah, after you’ve got a divorce under your belt nothing ever looks that innocent again.”

“Cynical much?”

She snorted, kicking some rubble over the side of the platform to clatter on the train tracks below. “I call it survival instinct.” She glanced at Darcy, who was now attempting to open up an access door beneath a staircase. “You think whoever you’re going on a date with will be willing to reschedule once he realizes you won’t turn up?”

Darcy gave the lock on the door a final kick, to no avail. “I know he will,” she said, not willing to mention that the guy she was supposed to be going out with was about one platform over and stuck in the same mess that she was. She grabbed the lock and tried to pull it off, however lack
of super strength made that as futile as the kicking.

“You’re more hopeful than I would be, that’s for sure.”

About twenty-four hours (by pocket watch time, at least. No one knew how long it was in real world time) after they had woken up in the empty subway station was when they first started seeing the ghosts. They came without warning, as if a switch had been flicked giving them permission to come in. There was a certain transparency and luminescence to the figures that made the platform the brightest they’d seen yet. The ghosts didn’t say a single word, even though they could see their lips moving as if they were talking to the person next to them.

“What the fuck?” Jayden said, eyes wide as he stared around the suddenly full platform.

Steve just shook his head, having no idea how to explain this one. He could see men in suits and heavy overcoats, hats pulled low over hunched heads. The women wore long skirts and gloves and draping scarves while others had short dresses laden with beaded fringe and the tightly lacquered curls to match. Instead of thinking about it too much he reached out a gloved hand, hoping that maybe he could stop one of the passersby and ask them where exactly they were going. His hand slipped right through the man’s arm, clenching into a useless fist and sending a jolt of cold up his arm and down his back. “I haven’t seen clothes like this since I was a kid,” he said quietly.

Jayden cut his eyes over to Steve, a thoughtful look stealing across his face. “Well, that answers one of my questions.”

“What?”

Before Steve could demand some clarification as to what exactly Jayden was thinking, the shrill whistle of a train echoed throughout the platform. A few seconds after that a transparent train pulled into the station, obscuring parts of the very solid train they knew was there. The ghost train had some features that felt very familiar to Steve, dragged up from his childhood memories and relived with unusual clarity. He spotted things like squared off windows lining the length of the car, stenciled name and number plates, and single doors on the side that were sliding open.

It was from one of these doors that Darcy and Mei came tearing out of, not stopping until they were practically on top of the boys. “Are you okay?” Steve asked.

Mei nodded, taking a moment to catch her breath. “Yeah.” She turned back to look at the tracks. “Ghost train. Really?”

“At least it’s not aliens,” said Darcy, staring around the platform wide-eyed. “I don’t think these guys are going to blow anything up or try to take over the world.”

They watched as the silent ghosts flooded onto the train, hustling, jostling, and pushing just like any other straphanger. Soon, only the four of them were left on the platform. The train whistled once more and it began to pull away, leaving the modern metal cars on the tracks behind and letting the ever-present background light shine through once more.

The oppressive silence was broken up by Tallie calling out from one of the metal stairways to the upper halls. “Please tell me you saw that!”

Later on in the day, after they had all calmed down and there were no other signs of the
ghosts, Darcy said to Steve, “I’ve seen some weird things in my life, and I have to say that was one of the truly weirdest.” The group had split up to do some more rooting around the other train cars for additional supplies (it was more like an excuse to keep them busy and not dwelling on all of the oddness they’d seen), so they had a few minutes to talk amongst themselves without having to worry about what anyone else heard.

Steve reached into a cutout and pulled out a fire extinguisher. “Nothing about this situation is normal, but I agree. Ghost trains are strange no matter where you are. Think we can use this?” He hefted the fire extinguisher in his hand, looking at it thoughtfully.

“It can’t hurt. I don’t think it’ll scare ghosts off though. But that wasn’t what I was talking about.” She looked up at him, biting her lip nervously. “Do you know how fucking weird it feels to have a ghost train run right through your body? There wasn’t even any time to do anything, it just—” Darcy motioned with her hands, attempting to convey the feeling of hundreds of feet of intangible train passing right through her body. “Anyway.” She shook her head, and then ran her hands through her hair and down her arms. “At least now we know that we can walk right through the ghosts and not suffer any ill effects. I just want to warm up a bit.”

Without saying anything, Steve put the fire extinguisher down on the floor and stripped off one of his gloves. He reached over and grasped the hand that was closest to him, squeezing tightly. Steve’s hand was warm and dry and Darcy clutched at it, grateful for the simple touch.

After the ghosts’ second appearance (thirty-six hours pocket watch time, though Darcy hadn’t been as diligent about marking down the time as she should have been so the actual time could have been anywhere from…aw, hell, she didn’t know at all anymore) the five of them were more than a bit on edge. “We have got to find a way out of here,” Tallie said, kicking at one of the doors to the train car. “I’m not usually a violent person, and even I’m ready to shoot something.”

“I’ll loan you my Taser,” Darcy said from where she was walking a path on top of the benches, arms held out to the sides for balance. “You know, it’s surprisingly satisfying to use.”

“No tasing anyone,” Steve called out from another bench where he was polishing his shield with someone’s discarded scarf. Not like it had been used for much more than a door prop since they’d been here, but at least he could keep it clean and ready to go. “It’s a good idea, however,” he continued, standing up and stretching a bit, “keeping up the search for the way out. We’re not going to learn anything about where we are if we stay here. We get a better idea of the layout we may just find an exit.”

“Especially since it seems like rescuers aren’t coming anytime soon,” Darcy blurted out. None of them had wanted to say it, but it was never far from their minds. The two youngsters were still holding out hope that the other Avengers would show up, and the other three didn’t want to wreck that illusion for them.

Steve nodded, tapping a gloved finger over the earpiece of the cowl (which he hadn’t removed since they’d been there, making Darcy wonder just how comfortable or uncomfortable the thing was for him to wear). “I’ve kept the comm open the entire time we’ve been here so they can reach us. There hasn’t been word one from the team.”

“So it’s going to be up to us then.” Darcy grinned. “Please let it be noted that if I’m going to be a superhero I want a fancy costume of my own. I can totally rock the spandex.” Steve resisted the urge to roll his eyes, though the thought of Darcy in spandex was an…interesting vision that he’d have to return to when they weren’t in the middle of a crisis.
“All we need now is how we’re going to get out of here,” Tallie broke in.

“Do you still have all that yarn?” Steve asked.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Did you ever read the story of Theseus and the minotaur?”

The skeins of yarn (and there had been quite a few of them as Tallie had been planning a number of projects) ran out before the corridors and stairwells did, leading to the group knotting all of the strands together to create one long rope. They explored the offshoots methodically, following the threads as far as they would go and then marking off the entry way with Sharpie when finished. After some length of time and countless stairwells and halls they started to notice an odd side effect.

“Does anyone else feel really tired all of a sudden?” Mei asked, slumping against the cinderblock wall and blinking rapidly, as if it were a struggle just to keep her eyes open.

Jayden clutched at the railing, practically falling right into Steve’s side. Steve pulled him upright by the back of his sweater, but the younger man was still having trouble keeping his feet under him. “More like I’ve been kicked in the head,” he said.

“It could be some kind of force field,” Darcy suggested, craning her neck upwards to see how much further the stairwell went. Like all of the others, it stretched on and on without any sort of terminus in sight. “Maybe this place is designed to stop us and make us turn back when we reach a certain point.”

“Or it could also be the fact that we’ve been here for what seems like days without sleeping and the exhaustion has finally caught up to us,” Steve offered, shaking his head to try and clear the metaphorical cobwebs out of it. He was about to run a hand over his face, then he realized that the hand that wasn’t holding Jayden upright was filled with the ball of yarn they were using as a guide.

Tallie turned and walked back down the stairs, a couple of fingers trailing behind on the multicolored yarn. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m making a strategic retreat and getting some shut-eye.”

Darcy looked at Steve and shrugged, then motioned to the two teenagers who looked about ready to fall over. Truth be told she wasn’t feeling that great herself all of a sudden, but she was determined to hold it together until they at least made it back to the train car. “They don’t look like they’re going to be good for anything until they get some sleep,” she said. She recognized the set of Steve’s jaw, however, which told her that he was going to try and push ahead regardless of how much he was being affected by this sudden sleepy spell. What the hell, Darcy thought, time to fight dirty. She let her lips fall into a bit of a pout, and she widened her eyes. “Come to think of it, I’m not feeling all that awake myself right now.” Darcy carefully chewed on one corner of her mouth, pulling her lips into an exaggerated curve. “If we’re feeling tired, we might as well rest before we push forward.”

She could tell the exact moment Steve caved, with his shoulders dropping slightly and his gaze softening just a little bit. Darcy resisted the urge to gloat about her abilities. “It’s probably not a bad idea,” he conceded.

“Come on,” she said, peeling a sleepy Mei off of the wall and guiding her back down the stairwell where they came from. “We’ll figure out where to go next after we’ve got a solid eight
hours of sleep.”

Of course, Darcy thought when she’d woken up for the third time in as many hours, eight
hours was probably wishful thinking. She twisted on her bench and bunched up the coat she was
using as a pillow, thinking that maybe that would help somewhat with the sleeping thing. She closed
her eyes, and debated if counting sheep or little flying Iron Men would be a better method of getting
herself to fall asleep quicker.

Five minutes later her eyes opened again, and she knew that sleep wasn’t going to happen
anytime soon. She could always pull out her phone and play some Tetris, but that would drain the
battery even faster. They’d taken to only turning the phones on for a few seconds at a time in order
to keep as much power in them as possible. Darcy pushed herself to a sitting position and peered
into the train car, suffused with that blue-green-grey light as the only illumination. Her eyes had
become used to the eerie light by this point (it was the only light around as the typical electrical
fixtures seemed to have been permanently disabled) and she could make out her companions easily.

Tallie was on the bench opposite her, arms pillowing her head and utterly dead to the world.
Her torso rose and fell steadily, like a metronome made flesh. Further up in the car Mei was
sprawled across Jayden’s chest, her black hair a silky curtain that covered her face and trailed over
onto Jayden’s pale skin. Darcy twisted to look behind her, but instead of seeing Steve there was just
an empty spot.

Now, she knew he had fallen asleep because she’d been awake to see it. But somewhere in
the middle of her sleeping and waking fits he must have snuck out. Darcy ground her teeth, pushing
back the urge to swear. They weren’t going to be any good if their leader looked like one of the
walking dead because he was too stubborn to get some sleep. She rolled off of the bench and went
to the door that they had been using as the entry and exit (all of the rest of them had been barred off
using some of the metal posts Steve had ripped out of the interior of the cars) and peered out.

The platform outside was empty, same as it usually was. If this was an Old West sort of
subway she would have expected to see the stereotypical tumbleweed rolling across the concrete.
This being New York, there wasn’t even some extraordinarily brave rat scurrying by. Darcy pursed
her lips, getting the sneaking suspicion that Steve had decided to do a little exploration on his own,
despite the fact that they had agreed that no one go wandering anywhere by their lonesome. Darcy
ran back inside the car, quickly pulled her boots on, and scrambled up the nearest staircase to the
next level.

The upper corridor was equally as empty, with the white tiled walls bleeding blue-green
through cracks in the mortar. What was different up here was the multicolored yarn that had been
looped and knotted around one of the metal bars that overlooked the lower platform. The yarn was
pulled taut, and ran parallel to the floor until it disappeared around a corner. Well, at least Steve
hadn’t wandered off without leaving a way to reach him, Darcy thought, following the path the yarn
laid out.

Darcy moved up gently sloping corridors and through hairpin turns, past the rectangular
columns with the tops missing standing freely in the middle of a clearing. She could feel she was
heading upwards, and it couldn’t have been all that far because the yarn was still leading her
forwards. The further up she went, the more degraded the corridors became, with the wall tiles long
lost and worn and crumbling brick on the walls instead. The directional signs had been reduced to
broken down mosaics that were a jumble of muted colors and arrows pointing in directions that were
impossible to follow.

Eventually the yarn came to a stop, tied around a metal pipe that was sticking up from the
cracked floor. Directly ahead of her was what appeared to be a giant hole in the wall. It may have been a balcony or an observation deck at some point, but any sort of barrier was long gone, leaving a wide open stretched that overlooked the sprawling mezzanine below. Steve had one shoulder propped against the wall, his back towards her, and he was still as a statue. His shield lay against the opposite wall, a bright splash of color in a sorely dull palette. “This area shouldn’t be here,” Steve said, not turning around but acknowledging her presence anyway. “Look up when you’re downstairs and there’s a ceiling right above your head.”

Darcy walked up next to him, peeking over the ledge. The drop wasn’t far, but it was enough to make her stomach clench just slightly with nerves. “And yet from up here there’s this mysterious corridor that has seemingly appeared out of nowhere.” She looked up at Steve, who was scrubbing a hand over his eyes. The gloves had been removed and were tucked into his belt, but he still hadn’t pulled that damn cowl off. “Isn’t your face itchy by now from wearing that?” she blurted out.

Steve shrugged. “It doesn’t feel terrible. I think this suit could start walking on its own soon, though.” He rubbed his hand over the part of his face exposed by the mask. “I should have needed to shave a few times by now, come to think of it.”

“I would kill for a long, hot bath,” Darcy sighed, then wrinkled her nose. Her bathroom in the boarding house only had a shower stall which was perfectly serviceable, yet a bit lacking when it came to a nice, relaxing soak. But that wasn’t why she came up here, and she turned her mind back to the task at hand. “More importantly though, shouldn’t you be sleeping? Because I could have sworn you were going to sleep just like the rest of us.”

“I don’t need as much sleep because of the serum,” Steve said, his eyes still looking somewhere off in the distance.

Darcy snorted. “Yeah, if you think I’m going to buy that right now then there’s a bridge that’s not too far from here I could probably get you a great deal on.”

“Oh, just drop it.”

“What, am I supposed to stop worrying about you when you look like you’re about to fall over out of sheer exhaustion?” She frowned and crossed her arms over her chest, shooting a glare up at him and hoping it would at least get him to look in her direction.

Finally, Steve looked over at her, his eyes hard and his jaw set in a firm, stubborn line. “Darcy, I’m in charge of this team here. If I can’t figure out how to get us out of this mess we’re going to be in serious trouble.”

If Darcy was an animal, she would have growled. Stupid, stubborn boys… “You think we’re not in trouble already, Steve?”

“I, I never said that.”

She blew right past his words, building up a good head of steam. Days of inaction must have been weighing on her, surfacing to explode at the nearest target. Darcy suspected Steve could handle it, at least. “None of us have any clue whatsoever as to what’s happening here! We’re all lost together with no way out, and if you fall apart because you’re too fucking stubborn to sleep, we’re even more screwed than I thought we were.”

“What happens if I miss something?” Steve shot back, spinning to look directly at her. “What if we’re all asleep and that train starts moving, or one of those ghosts sweeps someone off and we’ve
got no clue where they end up?"

“Then we take shifts,” Darcy said, tossing her hands in the air. Really, was it that hard to figure that one out? She walked over to lean against the wall, finding it easier to keep moving rather than stand still for this conversation. Steve spun around, keeping his eyes on her all the time. “Some of us sleep while the others stay awake. Kind of like we’re doing now, really.”

Steve crossed his arms over his chest. She suspected he was trying to look stern, but there was a certain level of strain around his eyes that spoke of exhaustion. “Those are civilians down there who have no knowledge about how to react if they were attacked.”

Darcy rolled her eyes, angrily tugging at the hem of her shirt for lack of anything else to do with her hands. “What do you think I am?”

“I trust you to know how to handle yourself if you’re attacked, unlike the group of untrained people down there that are currently in our care. One, you’re armed with that Taser. Two, I know you’ve dealt with an unusual crisis before. Three…” he trailed off, looking around and avoiding her eyes. “I know you, and I know you’ll do the right thing regardless of what happens.”

Darcy was taken aback at that one, and she blinked rapidly behind her glasses. “Oh. Thank you,” she said.

Steve just sighed, a small grin stealing over his face. Then the grin faded, and he just looked tired once more. “I hate not knowing what’s going on,” he said. “It’s easier when there’s someone or something tangible to fight; when I know who the bad guy is I’m supposed to punch out. Right now I just feel…lost in the woods.”

Darcy reached out and tapped a finger in the center of the star on his chest. “As long as you remember that no matter what happens down here, I’m gonna be right by your side trying to get us out of this mess too.”

One of Steve’s hands stole up, cupping her face with his thumb stroking gently over the upward curve of her cheekbone. Darcy allowed her eyes to fall closed and she leaned into his hand, feeling at ease for the first time since they’d woken up in this place. And then…

Then Steve leaned down and pressed his lips firmly to hers. Darcy’s mouth opened on an exhale, giving her the opportunity to stroke his lower lip with her tongue. He groaned softly, mouth opening beneath hers as his hand wove into the mess of curls and waves her hair had become. Her other hand, the one that wasn’t resting over the center of his chest, ran up his arm and wrapped around the back of his neck, pulling him even closer.

She could feel the hard lines of his body pressed against her own, and even though Darcy rationally knew that Steve was covered in some body armor, it was still an intoxicating sensation. Steve moved in closer, and then the wall was flush against her back, making Darcy crane her neck to keep her lips firmly attached to his. When the angle got to be too much, he grabbed her hip and tugged her upwards. To make it easier on Steve, or at least that’s what the part of her brain that hadn’t taken a holiday rationalized, Darcy stretched upward and wrapped her legs around his waist to help provide him with just enough leverage to get into a comfortable position.

Her arms draped over his shoulders, sliding over the smooth blue fabric that covered up muscles that were flexing slightly with every small movement. They were practically of a height now, and it was easy for Steve’s tongue to dart in and out of her mouth. Darcy whimpered when his tongue stroked a sensitive patch of skin at the corner of her lips. Steve pulled away, just slightly, and whispered practically against her mouth, “I had planned on waiting until our date to do that, but I don’t want to
lose any more chances.”

Darcy grinned and kissed him quickly. “Oh, that’s just going to keep me fighting, knowing what I’ve got to look forward to.”

“Spirited. I like that.”

She leaned forward to kiss Steve again, and it was all too easy to get lost in the moment. The feel of his lips under hers, the sensation of his fingertips trailing up and down her sides, the blood rushing through her veins with every small touch, those were the things that mattered then and there. Darcy arched her back off the wall, unconsciously pushing her hips into his and making him groan into her mouth once more.

Steve tore his mouth away and took deep, gasping breaths while Darcy’s head fell back against the wall. It felt like her head was spinning and her body was fully of bubbles that were trying to escape, quite the contrast between the dour setting they were currently in. “We should probably head back,” Steve sighed.

“I don’t wanna,” Darcy whined.

“Do you really want them to catch you like this?”

“What, and give them the impression that Captain America is just as human as the rest of us? Who’d have thunk it?” she smirked. Still, Darcy untangled her legs from Steve’s waist and slid down to the ground. When her feet hit the floor her knees buckled, and it was only Steve’s sudden hold around her waist that kept her upright. “You see what you do to me?” Darcy muttered.

Steve repressed a grin, though she could still see the spark in his eyes. “I should be upset about that,” he said.

“I think it’s okay if you gloat about that one,” Darcy said. She certainly wasn’t complaining about it. Still, they held hands all the way back to the train with the excuse that it would help Darcy keep her balance.

“Now sleep,” she said, pushing Steve down onto the bench he’d claimed as his. “I’ll stay up and keep watch over this crowd.”

“Pushy,” he muttered, even though he was smiling and shifting around to make himself as comfortable as possible on the hard plastic seats.

“You know it,” Darcy grinned, resting a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll see you in a few hours.”
Kinesthesioception, part three

Chapter Summary

In which our troupe comes up with a plan. It's not the best plan in the world, but it's all they've got to work with right now…

Chapter Notes

This chapter isn’t anywhere near as long as the prior one, but I kind of like where this one ends (don’t shoot me…) so I decided to cut it off here instead of posting a longer chunk. This also means that I’ve got as of this moment at least thirteen more pages in the hole to provide you with sooner rather than later once I give them a good look-over. Okay, on with the show…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You still keeping watch?” Tallie said as she walked over to where Darcy was perched on one of the stairs with her Taser held firmly in her hands.

She shrugged, looking all over the platform in the process. “I said I would.” Darcy jerked her head at the train car. “It’s the only way our superhero in there is going to get any sleep, apparently.”

“He’s been asleep for a while now, hasn’t he?” Tallie frowned, and looked over at Jayden and Mei further down the platform. Mei was attempting to turn a broken up chunk of rock into a piece of chalk so that she could draw a hopscotch board on the floor. The scratching sounds were loud and a bit annoying, but it was still better than the silence.

Darcy shrugged again. Even though she genuinely liked Tallie she wasn’t willing to give away some of her secrets just yet. The only one who really knew anything concrete about the relationship between her and Steve was Jane (who at least knew who exactly the guy in question was, which was more than her mother and sister did), and even she didn’t know the whole story. “Beats me how our superheroes operate.”

More electric green-blue figures suddenly appeared on the platform, sending up a collective groan. What did it say about them that they had become used to the appearance of the specters so quickly, Darcy wondered. “Here we go again!” Jayden called out, straightening up from his crouch on the floor.

The most common ghosts that they’d seen so far were the people from the roaring twenties in all their glory, though there had been a few instances of women in 1960s prim and polished dresses, and the awesome yet awful designs that populated the 1980s. What they had in common was that they were all nameless faces, one of the billions of people who’d taken the New York Subway countless times over the hundred plus years of its existence. This time, however, there were only three ghosts, they were highly recognizable, and given that they most likely weren’t dead, probably couldn’t be called ghosts anymore. “Is that Iron Man?” Tallie asked, mouth dropping open.
And Dr. Banner, Darcy thought, having recognized his face from a couple of instances when he had dropped by S.H.I.E.L.D.’s labs to consult with Jane. And that may have just been Thor prowling around nearby them; no one else she knew had a cape quite like that. “Oh my God,” she breathed.

“Hey!” Mei yelled, jumping up and waving her arms in the air. Jayden did one better, scooping up the chalk rock and hurling it directly at the three luminescent figures. The rock sailed right through them, scattering the image briefly and solidifying after it. It did, however, cause Iron Man to twist and look in the general direction of where the rock landed on the far side of the platform.

Tallie looked over at Darcy, eyes wide and wild. “Can they hear us?”

“No idea, but keep yelling, maybe we can get their attention,” she said, pushing herself off the stairs. Darcy shoved her fingers in her mouth, letting loose a shrill whistle that could have shaken teeth loose if given half a chance. Jayden kept banging rocks and other debris off of the metal scaffolding, clanging and dinging in the still air. The other two called out and hollered, attempting as hard as they could to get any sort of attention. It was a noise loud enough to wake people all the way on the other side of the world. The crowning achievement was when the shield suddenly sailed through the air, ricocheting off of the scaffolding and pipes and making an almighty, reverberating racket in the process.

The shield sailed directly through the ghost-like figures in the middle of the platform. Right after that the three disappeared, fading out and vanishing with a twinkle. The group watched as Steve, standing stock still in the doorway of the train car, caught the shield with an unreadable look on his face. “I’ve got an idea,” he said.

“Is it going to get us out of here?” Darcy called back. They were all ready to leave, and Darcy was particularly eager to take what had happened in the corridor upstairs even further. ‘Focus,’ she berated herself. ‘You’ll have time when this is all done.’

“It’s a start,” Steve said, moving to the center of the platform. He looked over at Jayden. “How sure are you that this is the 14th Street station?”

Jayden looked quickly around the platform. “I’d put good money on it,” he concluded.

Steve nodded, and then glanced along one of the tracks, staring into the darkness that encroached on the light bleeding through the chinks in the wall. “Because if I’m remembering the map right, if we follow that,” he pointed down one of the curving corridors, “tunnel for a bit we’ll hit Grand Central.” He looked back at the group, tense and waiting to hear what he would say. “Stark Tower is right behind the terminal. If we can see Iron Man down here, I’d bet we’d have an even better chance of making contact right in his building.”

Tallie folded her arms over her chest and tapped her fingers quickly, nervously. “We’d also be able to find some computers there probably.” She glanced around the group and arched her eyebrows. “Get me to a computer and I might be able to program some sort of a signal to get attention. At the very least I’ll be able to find us a web connection.”

Darcy met her look. “You that sure of your computer skills?”

“Oh yeah. One of the reasons my ex is so bitter is because I liked my computers more than I liked him. Of course, he was an utter d—“

“All right,” Steve broke in. “Does anyone have a problem with us leaving the train car behind?” he asked.
“What do we gain by staying here?” said Mei.

No one had an answer for that one.

Darcy clapped her hands together once, breaking the stillness that had settled after the question. “That settles it then,” she said. “Let’s get our shit together and get moving.”

“Necessary items only,” Steve said as they headed into the train car to collect their goods. “Stick to the things that are for survival.”

“That pipe’s coming with me,” Mei retorted. “It’ll make a good club to beat the crap out of things.”

In a hushed whisper, her voice kept so low that only Steve would be able to hear her, Darcy said, “What happens when we get there and we can’t get to the surface? Or worse, what if we can get into Stark Tower but there’s nothing we can do there?”

Steve shrugged. “Then we keep going until we find something. The plan’s not much, but it’s what we’ve got.”

The island of Manhattan is not a big one, less than fourteen miles from tip to tip. On a normal day when the trains are running as they should (and the words ‘train traffic up ahead’ aren’t uttered by an electronic voice that most straphangers would like to tase just to shut up) the ride between the 14th Street Station and Grand Central Terminal should take about ten, fifteen minutes at the absolute most. But when the trip has to be made on foot, climbing over poorly lit tracks and wooden ties that could buckle under an ill-placed footstep, that short ride becomes a much longer haul.

Steve was at the front of the small group, leading the way with the shield held in front of him. Darcy brought up the rear, although it was really more like the four of them walking along in a clustered mass between the two metal rails. “We should be really thankful that the tracks aren’t electrified at the moment,” Tallie said, gingerly hopping between some of the wooden ties.

“Please don’t say that,” Mei whined. “Now I’m going to have visions of being barbequed like a hot dog.”

“None of the normal rules seem to apply right now,” Darcy chimed in, “so I think the last thing to worry about is an electrified track.”

The lights were a little brighter up ahead, and it looked like the corridor was opening up a bit wider. Jayden broke away from the pack and trotted forward, stopping once he was satisfied. “28th Street,” he called back. “Two stops ’til we hit Grand Central.”

“I thought we’d be farther along.” Darcy sighed, and twisted her hair into a knot on the back of her head. She was working up a sweat, and kept having fantasies about hot showers and long baths once more. The tunnels weren’t anything remotely resembling clean, but usually they were separated from it by the solid bulk of the train car. Having to walk directly down the tunnel (being the quickest path between two points, of course) left her feeling grimy, disgusting, and barely human.

She glanced over at Steve, who wasn’t looking any better. He did look the most composed out of all of them, however. Darcy suspected that out of all the situations he’d been through in his life, this one was probably fairly mild in the grand scheme of things. But it didn’t change the fact that he was
also in charge of taking care of four other untrained civilians who were barely holding it together as well. “All right, let’s take a breather,” Steve said, slinging his shield over his back.

While the rest of the group scrambled up onto the platform to rest their legs for a few moments, Steve pulled a length of yarn from one of his belt pockets and tied it around one of the lights tacked into the wall. Just in case they needed to find their way back.

“Okay, this is officially the freakiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

The group stood in the atrium of Grand Central Terminal, staring utterly gobsmacked at the scene around them. Normally the terminal was a well-polished masterwork, with gleaming beige marble columns and floors and the constellations scattered on the ceiling above them. Where they were now had the same bones of the original terminal, however it looked as if it hadn’t been cared for since it had been built. The columns were missing chunks here and there, looking as if someone had been taking potshots at them. A good part of the mural was missing from the ceiling, leaving the framework exposed to the open air. The gilded information booth in the center of the main floor was reduced to a lopsided pile of pipes, with the famous clock missing a couple of faces and spilling internal gears and wiring onto the heap. Most of the glass was missing from the arching windows, exposing a dark and heavy grey sky beyond.

“This is just sad,” Tallie said, her boots making a crunching noise as she walked further into the atrium.

“It didn’t even look this bad after…” Jayden’s voice trailed off and he shot a guilty look at Steve, who waved him off. “Small price to pay, I guess,” Jayden concluded, shrugging helplessly.

Darcy crossed her arms over her chest and chewed on her lower lip. “The real question is if this damage is just normal wear and tear for this place, or if something caused it.”

“The damage in here looks old,” Steve said, eyes quickly scanning the room. “You’d be able to tell if it were newer.” He shook his head. “This looks like it happened decades ago. We can’t drop our guard though.”

“Can we look for a way out at least?” Mei asked, practically jogging in place with the urge to keep moving.

“Anyone feel like taking a break?”

The answer was a resounding ‘no’ that echoed throughout the atrium. Steve just grinned slightly. “Let’s see what we’ve got here, then.”

The five of them spread out, wanting to cover as much ground as possible in one go. This turned into them wanting to find out as much as they could before the sudden sleepy spell overtook them again. It seemed that every time they began to approach where one of the exits would have been the dizziness began and the choice became either fall down or run away. “I hate this,” Darcy muttered as she stomped over to where Tallie was fiddling around with the wires from inside the dismantled clock. She slumped against what looked like a long length of brass siding, tarnished and dulled with time.

Tallie smirked, not removing her eyes from the tangle of wires in front of her. “And you were bitching about the Captain not getting enough sleep last night. How much did you get again?”

“Not enough, apparently.” She waved a hand at the clock’s guts. “How goes the electronics?”
Tallie blew a raspberry in the clock’s direction.

“That good, huh?” Darcy looked out across the atrium, spotting Steve staring hard down one of the corridors that branched off from the big room. She was about to call out to him, when he looked up and caught her eye. He jerked his head, silently beckoning her over his way.

Darcy frowned, tapping Tallie’s shoulder. When Tallie looked up she motioned at Steve, who was now waving at them with a motion that clearly said ‘come quickly’. “That can’t be good,” Tallie said in a low voice. They got up and made their way over, meeting up with the other two and ushering them into a group at the base of one of the large staircases that adorned the atrium.

“What’s going on?” Mei asked when they got there.

Steve motioned once more for quiet. “Do you hear that?” he said, voice barely above a whisper. He pulled his shield in front of him, securing it on his arm.

“Hear what?” Darcy whispered back. Steve didn’t answer, just waved the four of them behind him to form a compact group huddled against the wall.

In just a few seconds, the rest of them could hear it as well, a soft, rhythmic clunking echoing out of one of the corridors. Without really thinking about it Darcy dug a hand into the back of Steve’s belt, grabbing hold as hard as she could. If anyone else noticed, they didn’t say anything.

The noise came closer and closer, getting slightly louder with every repetition. Darcy frowned, the noise sounding suddenly quite familiar. “Is that…?”

Steve nodded his head once, jerkily. “Footsteps,” he whispered back.

From their position they were able to spot a light coming around a bend in the corridor. Unlike the rest of the place the light was a warm and inviting gold, easily filling the corridor and spreading outwards. The light looked to be coming from an old fashioned lantern, held high in the air by a man walking steadily in their direction. Steve hoisted his shield into place once more. He stood tall and straight, putting himself in between the civilians and the unknown quantity heading towards them.

“I thought I heard someone in here,” the man called out when he was about thirty or so feet away. The voice was clearly accented, coming from deep in one of the boroughs, but Darcy couldn’t tell which one it was. The man himself was of average height and probably somewhere in his mid-fifties, the sides of his hair having gone totally white over time and a slight paunch around his middle. All in all he was a decidedly average looking fellow. The man came a little closer and then paused, staring intently at them. “That’s an…interesting outfit,” he said, nodding at Steve.

Steve just hoisted his shield even closer. “Can we help you?” he asked.

“My name’s Dennis,” he said, inching forward a few more steps. “I’m a caretaker of sorts around here. Every so often I do a patrol around the stations to see if there are any newcomers like yourselves lost down here.” He spoke calmly, as if he were trying to talk down a bunch of wild, high-strung animals.

“So there have been others who have been – transported to wherever we are now?” Steve said, asking the question that all of them had just thought of.

Dennis nodded. “Every so often people find themselves ending up in this place. No real rhyme or reason behind it, but they do. It’s my duty to help the newcomers get out of the tunnels and to safety.”
“Does that mean you can get us home?” Jayden blurted out. Mei dug her elbow into his stomach, trying to get him to be quiet and jostling Darcy in the process.

His face grew solemn, and the lantern dipped a few inches. “I can lead you out of the tunnels, but once you’re in this place there’s no way back. I’m sorry, but you can’t go home.”

Chapter End Notes

Come check out my tumblr: http://aenariasbookshelf.tumblr.com. I’m always looking for suggestions for future scenes and other tumblrs to follow, so stop by and drop me a line!
Chapter Summary

In this chapter we move forward a bit more, though it’s plain to our heroes that they’re still undoubtedly lost, and getting home is looking less and less likely. At least, that’s what they’re being told.

Chapter Notes

I feel like it’s been forever and a day since I’ve posted, even though I rationally know it’s been nowhere near as long as other stories of mine have been (I qualify for one of the world’s slowest updaters, without a doubt). It’s been a busy few weeks in the household anyway, between holidays, birthdays (one of which was mine…I’m getting f’ing old…), and prepping for a vacation and back to back Muse concerts in a couple of weeks (omg yay cannot wait…and I sound like a fifteen year old once more). Anyway, presenting another chapter for my dear readers. I’ve been dallying a bit in releasing it to the world, but I think it’s time to let it stand on its own.

Dennis ushered the group through the wide, sloping halls and back down to one of the subway platforms. No one really protested, the man’s statement weighing heavily on their minds. Jayden had an arm wrapped tightly around Mei’s waist, while Tallie clutched convulsively at Darcy’s hand. Steve marched at the lead of the small group, eyes straight ahead and face unreadable. “This way,” Dennis said, leading them down a flight of stairs to a darkened track.

Sitting on the tracks was a boxy locomotive car that was mostly engine and painted in a dull yellow and black color scheme. The locomotive was pulling a car that consisted mostly of a wooden flatbed that looked to be on the verge of falling apart. Steve paused, with the others coming to a sudden, crashing halt behind him. “Before we go in there,” he said, raising a hand to get Dennis’ attention, “tell us again why exactly we should follow you. For all we know you could be leading us into a trap.”

Darcy, pretty much smashed up against Steve’s back, began to fumble subtly through her bag with her free hand to get her Taser. She could probably reach the other guy from her position if she had to. No one would blame her, right? At least, she hoped.

“It’s no trap,” Dennis said, unlocking the door to the small cab at the front of the locomotive. “These tunnels and stations are a bit odd. You can be wandering around here for a hundred years with the door to outside in sight but you still won’t make it out. And eventually, you won’t be able to take it anymore. I’ve seen too many people crack up wandering around the system. Not to mention your bodies won’t be able to handle it either. I can get you out of here and into the fresh air, get you to a place where you can move on and set up a new life.”

“It’s a nice gesture, but what we’d really like is to go home,” Steve said, using what Darcy
always thought of as his Captain voice. It was hard to ignore a voice like that, but Dennis was doing a good job of it. Maybe it was easier to ignore the command when one was making an honest statement.

“And I’m telling you that’s an impossibility.” Dennis paused, and then nodded once. “But there is someone where we’re going who you can talk to who can fill you in on the more scientific details.”

Darcy poked Steve in the back. “We should take the risk,” she whispered. “He’s not wrong about us cracking up if we stay here.” There was a general chorus of agreement from behind her, and so Steve nodded. It was a rock and a hard place sort of a situation, and either way they were going to lose. At least this way they could get out of the subway system.

Dennis guided them into the cab, somehow managing to fit all six of them into the compact space. He fired up the engine with a loud, chugging roar, the most noise any of them had heard since they’d been there. Slowly but steadily the locomotive began to move down the tracks, the white lights at the front cutting easily through the darkness.

“How are you taking us?” Steve asked, pushing his way to the front.

Dennis slowed the train down, moving it onto a different track and taking another darkened corridor. “The end of the line,” he said.

“Oh my God.”

The small engine ran up an inclined track and burst out into what was nominally daylight. It certainly wasn’t sunshine, however. The view that they could see through the supports and cables of the Manhattan Bridge barely resembled the skyline they were familiar with. The Brooklyn Bridge was there on one side, but large chunks of brick and mortar were missing from the towers and a few cables dangled from the sides where they had snapped in half from decay. The city was spread out on either side of the river, looking even more decayed than the bridge did. Skyscrapers looked like they had been broken down and put back together by someone with a glue stick and no sense of scale, with jagged profiles standing darkly against the sky. Here and there a gleaming, mirrored building stood out from the rest, reflecting the odd, cold light back in sharp spikes. The river below was choppy, and the breezes buffeted the train as it steadily continued on into Brooklyn.

The Brooklyn side of the river was looking equally bad, with some buildings reduced to scaffolding and girders. A wooden water tower lay on its side on top of one of the buildings, any water inside long dried up. Another large building, a former warehouse perhaps, with a grimy and chipped exterior featured a clock tower at the top with a missing glass face, a gaping hole leaving the inside of the tower open to the elements. What looked like twisted and gnarled dead tree branches broke through the top of the building and poked through the leftover metal pieces that made up what remained of the clock face. The elevated highways that could be seen from the bridge were unnervingly empty from their usual bumper to bumper traffic. There were deep pot holes littering the concrete and exposing the streets below. The one bright spot was that off in the distance there were possibly small signs of life. Darcy hoped that the little plumes were coming from smokestacks and processing plants rather than out of control building fires.

This new view only lasted a few minutes before the train dipped underground once more but it was enough to rattle even the Captain (it was easier to think of him as the Captain right now when they were in the middle of this mess. Steve was the man who curled up with her bleary-eyed on the couch, watching bad late night television to distract her from the worrisome thoughts that ran through
Darcy frowned, teeth worrying her lip. “What if they decide to, I don’t know, meet us with pitchforks and torches with the intent of turning us into very large shish kabobs?”

Steve’s hand lifted a little bit and wavered, as if he were unsure where to put it. He seemed to come to a decision quickly, though, and the hand moved to carefully stroke up and down her back. Darcy closed her eyes and leaned into the touch, practically slumping against his side. At that moment she didn’t really care if she looked overly familiar with someone she had supposedly just met; it was just nice to be touched. “I think I can handle a horde of angry villagers,” he said, smirking slightly.

They passed by the Atlantic Avenue station and spotted another cluster of the glowing ghosts on the platform, milling about and getting onto a transparent train on the opposite tracks. This time the outfits seemed to come right out of a 1940s newsreel, and she could feel Steve’s fingers tense up on her lower back.

Tallie shuffled over to them, making the small space feel even more cramped. Darcy tensed up, ready to put an appropriate distance between herself and Steve (because really, pretending that they didn’t know each other was just as tiring as the rest of the ordeal). Steve, however, didn’t seem inclined to move his hand from where it had taken up residence on her lower back, so she sure as hell wasn’t going to move. “For the record,” Tallie said, “I wanna go home.” She paused, then squeezed her eyes shut and sighed, her chin dropping towards her chest. “Dammit. Usually when people say something like that it works.”

“It’s a nice thought,” Darcy said, with a grin she hoped was encouraging as she wasn’t feeling all that positive at the moment. “If I had my ruby slippers I’d give them to you right now.”

The small train emerged outside once more, taking an elevated line that carried them over the streets of south Brooklyn. And while the view from the bridge was off in the distance, far away enough that they could have been watching a movie if they pretended hard enough, the train tracks that practically scraped the sides of the buildings that lined the street provided an up close and personal look at the strangeness. Decaying wood framed cracked windows, some of which had the glass held together with dirty bits of tape while others were missing their panes entirely. When they could get glimpses into the rooms inside, which was easy to do on those buildings where some of the walls were missing, all they could see was more damage and detritus, remnants of a life from once upon a time. Roofs sagged and crinkled, leaving gaping holes lined with jagged shingles and bits of roofing tar. Moldings on the tops of buildings that might have been decorative at some point in time were missing paint and curlicues, rotting away faster than the underlying brick did. The parts of the buildings that weren’t falling down were covered in graffiti that differed from the normal splashes of colorful art, harsh, distorted words and images that were hard for their eyes to understand.

“Home sweet home,” Mei said, shaking her head sadly and then letting out a string of words
in Cantonese that, while they couldn’t understand the exact words, was quite clear in their angry tone. Jayden kissed the side of her head, and she leaned in as close to him as she could get.

“Won’t be long now,” Dennis called out to the group. “Maybe another ten minutes.”

“Coney Island.”

Darcy and Tallie glanced over at Steve, who was staring intently out the window once more.

“What was that?”

“That’s where this line ends, right?” he asked, even though he was pretty certain of the answer. “It’s been that way as long as I can remember, at least.”

“Yeah,” Mei agreed, still snuggled into Jayden’s side.

The train passed through areas of the city that looked like a bomb had hit it, the only thing around being rusted out and half drowned train cars amidst scrub and thorny plants that were choking the landscape. The buildings became even more crumbled, with larger condos and apartment buildings looking just as wrecked as the smaller row homes.

However, when they pulled into the Coney Island station things became a bit weirder. Darcy looked up at the roof of the platform as she stumbled out of the train and onto the concrete. “This looks surprisingly new,” she said, staring at the arching metal beams high above her head.

“Yeah, we can’t explain it either,” Dennis said, leading them down a ramp and deeper into the station. “Went home one night and it was a crumbling old wreck, came back the next morning to find this shiny new building here.”

“Does that happen often?” Tallie asked.

“Occasionally. Least that we’ve seen.”

While there was a layer of grime coating everything, it was still far less dirty than any other place they had seen yet. The terracotta colored tiles on the floor were mostly whole and didn’t crack underneath their feet, and the painted metal beams and railings inside the building were smooth to the touch. They passed by ramps and stairways that led up to another set of platforms on the other side of the station, past a cloudy glass wall that had more incomprehensible art work on there though the paintings were far more colorful than any others they’d seen. The light wasn’t strong, but it was a fluorescent white rather than eerie green and it gave a warm, normal look to the entire place. Shortly, they came to a stop on the ground floor of the station, which looked less like a train station and a lot more like a low-rent version of a mad scientist’s laboratory.

“Is that a Commodore 64?”

Long tables set up on one side of the room held a variety of computer equipment, out of date printers and fax machines, boxy beige monitors with scrolling green text, and some more modern flat panel designs that showcased lines that jumped up and down like an EKG readout. Set up by some doors leading to the outside was what looked like a makeshift chemistry lab, full of glass jars turned into beakers and multicolored fluids moving back and forth between them. Next to that was a desk, stacked high with folders and notebooks. Strangest of all, in the middle of the floor was another large table that was laid out with a veritable feast’s worth of food.

“Is it just me, or is this like one of those Twilight Zone episodes where it’s not until the humans get to the table that they find out they’re on the dinner menu?” Darcy asked, crossing her arms over her chest and feeling more than a bit put out. She felt twitchy, like she was gearing up for
a fight, and it’d be a lot more satisfying to punch someone in the face rather than be killed with kindness. The smells coming from table and the platter were tempting, however, and it was getting harder to resist the call of dinner. Considering that it was the first time in she didn’t know how many days she actually felt hungry, it was almost a welcome sensation.

A man walked out of one of the side rooms lining the main floor with a large metal platter in his hands. He was youngish (well, younger than Dennis but definitely older than Darcy was), and his clothes were a bit out of date, even though Darcy could have sworn she saw more than one guy wearing something similar right outside work the other day. “It’s not a trap, I swear,” he said, echoing Dennis’ earlier statement as he thumped the platter down on the table. “We’ve discovered that most people find that their appetites come roaring back after they get out of the subway system from hell.” He shoved his glasses up his nose and smiled at the group. “I’m Tom Kinsella. Welcome to my lab. Now please, sit and take a load off. Questions are better answered on a full stomach anyway.”

“It’s okay if you want to take the mask off, you know,” Tom said from his position at the head of the table. “We’re all friendly here.” He passed a tray full of rolls to Tallie, who shrugged and dropped one onto her plate.

“I’m fine, thanks,” Steve said, leaning back in his chair. “Why don’t you start by telling us what this place is, because I think we all want to know where exactly we’ve landed?”

Tom nodded and reached for the slices of chicken next. “Well, I’ve got two working theories. They are just theories as I’m not the type of scientist who usually deals with this sort of stuff.”

“What type of scientist are you then?” Darcy asked.

He looked over at her. “Chemistry. Medicines, primarily. Had a nice, cushy job at a pharmaceutical company before I got sucked here. Them’s the breaks, huh? You’re walking down the subway one day, take a wrong turn, and hey, what’s this door here, you say to yourself.”

“Focus,” Steve said, tapping on the table with a finger to bring Tom’s attention back his way.

Tom’s head snapped back around. “Right, theories. First one is that this is a parallel or a pocket universe. No concrete proof of this, but the New York out there isn’t the one that everybody else knows, no matter what time period they’re from.”

“What period?”

“Okay, backing up a step here.” Tom took a deep breath to compose himself, sipped delicately at his water, and then continued. Dennis just pinched the bridge of his nose; he was used to the slightly scatterbrained babble, Darcy suspected. “The other people who have come here, who have made it out of the subways, all come from different time periods. Now, we’re not talking Neanderthal time periods here. It’s all twentieth century folk, so to speak, from the 1900s and forward.”

Jayden leaned forward, bracing his elbows on the table. “That’s around the time when the subway system – the actual underground part – started up, right?”

“Bingo. That’s a rather impressive display of knowledge, not many people know those things off -”
“Why do certain people get pulled in and not others?” Steve broke in, pulling the conversation back round once more. It wasn’t the first time he’d had to corral the attention of easily distracted scientists.

Tom leapt out of his chair and went over to the bank of computers. “I don’t think it’s the people themselves that determine it,” he called back to them. “It’s more like, right place, right time.”

“Wrong place, wrong time,” Tallie fired back, forking up a bite of pasta and chewing it viciously, as if it had personally offended her.

“Semantics.” He rushed back to the table and dropped a couple of binders down, nearly landing in the chicken platter and sending a couple of utensils flying. Mei quickly ducked out of the way of a flying spoon. “We used to have an electrical engineer or something like that around here, and I got him to design a crapton of sensors for me.”

Darcy arched her eyebrows and spun her fork between her fingers, feeling like she wanted to look threatening and knowing that was the last thing she looked like. “‘Used to have?’”

“Lost him in the system down there. It’s a very tra….actually, we don’t know what the hell happened, so don’t ask. In any case these sensors he made track unusual electrical readings down in the tunnels. Every so often, there’s a big spasm, surge, something like that. And not long after the surge, we’ll find some new folk such as yourself wandering around down there looking like little lost sheep.”

Steve and Darcy traded a look, and she bit her lip. “Those blue crackles, right before we were all knocked out,” Steve said. “It looked electrical, even though it didn’t feel like it.”

Darcy nodded, thoughtfully. “If the electricity was coming from the other side maybe there was enough insulation, so to speak, that we didn’t end up getting barbequed. But if something like that happened with any sort of frequency, we’d have heard about it by now. Don’t you think they’d be putting signs up everywhere saying to watch out for the flashy blue lights along with the gap? That’s what they did after all those people got pushed onto the tracks a few months ago.”

“Maybe we got pushed onto the tracks, and now we’re dead, and this is the afterlife,” Jayden said, fork making random patterns on the tablecloth.

“We were already in a train car,” Mei hissed at him. “And be nice, that’s not something to joke about.” Jayden just raised his hands in the air in the classic ‘don’t shoot’ move.

“Can I see the readings when we’re done with dinner?” Darcy asked quickly, speaking loud enough to block out any potential brewing arguments from the other side of the table. What the question did earn her were quite a few skeptical glances from most of the people at the table, with the exception of Steve. “What?” she shrugged. “I’m a lab assistant to a doctor who specializes in wormhole research; I’ve picked up a few things in my time.”

She saw Steve’s lips pressed firmly together and knew that he was repressing a grin, which made her feel nicely warm inside.


Darcy smirked. There was something quite satisfying about surprising people. “You should have seen what we did in New Mexico,” she said, pointing across the table with a piece of chicken.

“The more the merrier,” Tom said. “We can always use some extra help around here.”
Darcy froze, and shot him a glare. “This isn’t a permanent gig here, mister. As soon as we find the way out, we’re going home.”

Tom frowned, and pushed his glasses up once more. “If you say so. No one’s been able to deliberately get out of here yet, so I wouldn’t hold your breath.”

“What the hell do you mean by ‘deliberately’?”

Steve broke in once more, leaning forward to look Tom in the eye as much as possible. “And what’s the other theory, Mr. Kinsella?”

“Magic,” Tom said with a nonchalant shrug.

“Oh God, it really is like New Mexico all over again.”

Chapter End Notes

If any readers are familiar with the NYC subway system, you’ll notice that the train route the crew takes doesn’t exactly make sense, which was a deliberate choice on my part. It’s achievable via a few transfers but there’s no direct line from Grand Central to Coney Island that takes them down the specific line I imagine them on (I may have ridden the D train a few times for research purposes. I plead the fifth). On a more serious note, I need a beta reader for the next part, which is almost complete. I’m having a bit of trouble with the tone of the chapter, and I could definitely use another set of eyes on it to make sure there’s some consistency and coherency. If anyone is up for the job, please let me know through a message, whether it’s here or on my tumblr (http://aenariasbookshelf.tumblr.com). Thanks for reading!
Chapter Summary

I'll repeat the summary from the first part of this section because it seems especially appropriate now:

Kinesthesioception = sense of acceleration. In both a physical and emotional sense. Finally.

Chapter Notes

Please note the rating change for this chapter. Also the biggest thanks ever to eyebrowsofjustice for her amazing beta job.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tallie dropped down on the couch with a thud, nearly sending Darcy up into the air with the movement. Darcy pulled her eyes away from the binder full of papers that was spread across her lap and sent a weak glare Tallie’s way. “A little warning would have been nice.”

Tallie shrugged and settled back into the cushions with a wiggle. “I'm refreshed and wired; bouncing seemed like a good idea at the time.”

After dinner was finished Tom had tried to pack them off with Dennis, who was heading out to his home and his wife at the compound in Far Rockaway. He said he knew where there was a rec center/motel sort of place where the newcomers could bunk down for the night. The protests against that idea were vehement; they were staying right where they were until they found a way home. It was hard for Tom to insist that they leave when Steve gave him that special sort of look of his (made especially effective by a subtle hoisting of the shield in the middle of the conversation). Instead, he showed them to a small cluster of rooms down a hallway off the main area where there were some couches, tables, a few narrow camp beds, and, most exciting out of all of them, a shower stall with enough hot water to last them for hours.

Tallie had taken the first round in the bathroom, practically running for the thing as fast as she could, with Jayden and Mei sneaking in after (“makeup sex for that little tiff at the table before?” Darcy suggested at the time). Darcy was holed up on a couch in what she suspected was at one time a Subway restaurant going by the color scheme, but had been adapted into a sort of lounge area for when Tom wasn’t staring at his screens or playing with his chemistry set. Apparently he spent most of his time in this lab rather than at his home in the compound, which was something Darcy was all too familiar with.

“Whatevs. Did you learn anything more about how this place is so well stocked with goodies?” Darcy asked her. They had decided that Tallie would accompany them as Tom gave Steve the tour of the station and all of its security features, at Steve’s insistence of course. And if Tallie could get any further information out of him, all the better.
Tallie pushed some still damp hair back behind her ears, leaving wet trails down the side of her neck. From somewhere she had scrounged up a clean-ish t-shirt, and she was walking around in her stocking feet. “Well, what I could understand through the babble – because it seems that Tom’s mental filters are a bit loose – things just sort of pop up. People misplace things on the subway all the time, and they often end up here. That’s also the point of the sweeps. Dennis and Tom and a few others collect whatever they think is useful. Aside from that, they scavenged a lot from the surrounding city, and they’ve managed to get some working farms for food further out on the island as well.” She shook her head and rubbed her hands over her arms, as if she was trying to ward off a sudden chill. “These people have been here for decades, living and thriving. They’ve given up and are just…content to be stuck here in this broken down world that doesn’t seem to exist past Long Island.”

Darcy looked over her way, and clapped a hand on her shoulder. “I’m betting that no one down there in that compound is quite like we are. We’re stubborn fuckers, and I mean that in the nicest way. If anyone’s going to find a way to get home, it’s going to be us.”

“True. We do also have a genuine superhero on our side too. How many of them can say that?” Tallie grinned, nodding her head quickly.

“Very good point.” Darcy leaned forward and grabbed one of the other binders off the coffee table in front of her. “In the meantime, you can start taking a look at these readings and see if you can spot anything useful. Maybe a second set of eyes on them will help.”

“I doubt that,” Tallie said, but took the book anyway.

“You can’t do any worse than I am,” Darcy snorted, giving the lines of numbers on the page the dirtiest look she could muster. “Whatever’s on the page doesn’t bear much resemblance to the pictures of outer space I’m used to staring at. Right now I’m just looking for patterns and repetitions.”

“A good place to start.” Tallie flipped the cover open and set herself to the task.

About fifteen minutes later Steve entered the lounge, pulling Darcy and Tallie away from the binders that they wanted to use as firewood the more and more practically incoherent pages they read. He dropped onto the couch on Darcy’s other side and lifted his booted feet onto the table, looking incredibly exhausted underneath the mask. Darcy looked over at him as his head lolled against the cushions. “Well, you look like shit,” she said, making Steve roll his eyes.

“Gee, thanks.”

Tallie shook her head and tossed her binder back onto the table. “It is so weird to hear Captain America, of all people, being that sarcastic.” Steve lifted his head off of the back of the couch to shoot Tallie a glare, although it was tempered around the edges with utter exhaustion. “I’m just saying,” she continued. “The news always likes to portray you as this apple pie, farm boy, sort of…Boy Scout kind of hero.”

“To be fair,” Darcy interjected, having visions of all the nasty turns the conversation could possibly take and feeling glad that she was providing a bit of a buffer zone between the two of them, “the news and the paparazzi aren’t exactly credible sources on what people are really like.”

“I know! It’s just weird after years of comic books and movies and all of that.” She took a deep breath and ran her hands back through her damp hair. “Never mind me. I’ll deal with my sudden disillusionment. Too much adrenaline makes me a bit loopy.”
Steve looked over at Tallie once more, then over to Darcy. Darcy just shrugged, not quite sure what he was expecting her to say, or if he was expecting her to say anything at all. Eventually Steve straightened up, seeming to come to a decision. “What the all the news and comics forget,” he said as he began to unhook the clasps and straps on his gloves, tossing them on the table, “is that underneath everything,” he pushed the cowl back, revealing a face that looked just as worn and tired as Darcy had suspected, “I’m just a guy.”

Tallie studied him thoughtfully, a finger tapping at her lower lip. “You’re younger than I thought you’d be,” she said. “Captain America is younger than I am...”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment or an insult?” Steve asked, his brow wrinkling in confusion. Darcy could feel his leg twitch next to hers; the couch was small enough that having three full grown adults on there was a bit of a tight squeeze. Not that she was complaining. It made a good cover for snuggling, after all.

“Just an observation.”

Steve reached down to start undoing all of the buckles on his boots. “I can tell you this, at least,” he said. “I’m going to try as hard as I can to get us all home safe and sound. I can promise you that.”

“Thank you,” Tallie said with full sincerity.

“We kind of knew that already,” Darcy said with a grin, “but it’s always nice to get reassurance.” She chucked her binder onto the table, resisting the urge to kick it the rest of the way across the room. “I don’t know about you, but I think I’m about to go cross-eyed from looking at these.” She pulled her glasses off and rubbed tiredly at her eyes. The absurd thought that she was glad her mascara had worn off long ago flitted through her head; otherwise she’d end up looking like even more of a zombie than she already felt.

“You should really get some rest,” Tallie pointed out, pushing herself off the couch and stretching out her back in the process.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

“Sleep,” Tallie reiterated, waving a finger in her direction. “In the meantime I’m going to go see if I can work my own brand of magic on those computers Tom’s got out there. Though I’m pretty sure I haven’t used an Apple IIe since I was in grammar school.”

“Oh, and for the record?” Steve called after her as she began to walk out of the room, making her pause and turn back to them. “I didn’t grow up anywhere near a farm.” Tallie just smirked, tossed off a sloppy salute, and continued on her way.

“What happened to keeping your mask on this whole time?” Darcy said, trying to keep her voice as nonchalant as possible. She didn’t have any grounds for protesting or objecting to his declaration, she just wanted to understand the rationale as to why.

He looked over at Darcy, face drawn and solemn. “Right now I am just too tired to give a shit about hiding, to put it bluntly.”

Darcy nodded once, her head coming to rest on his shoulder. Steve moved his arm so that it was draped around her own shoulders, fingers combing carefully through her hair. “I really want to go home,” she whispered.

“Me too.”
Darcy’s head dropped forward, practically brushing against Steve’s chest. Then she nodded, pushing herself to her feet. “I’m going to take a shower, I think,” she said, bracing her hands on her lower back as she tried to stretch out some of the muscles that were still aching from the initial event. She paused, staring ahead and coming to a sudden decision. Before she could stop herself she turned back to Steve, and held a hand out to him. “Come on,” she said.

Steve looked up at her, curious. “Come with me,” she said again, her hand steady. “Isn’t that what you said, life’s too short to lose any more chances? And we’ve got no clue what’s going to happen tomorrow, especially if we believe that whack job outside who says we’re never going to get home.” Darcy beckoned him over with her hand, the invitation clear.

He glanced down at the floor, making Darcy wonder what was going through his head. Sometimes she could read every expression and emotion that flew across his face, so clear for all the world to see. Other times he was like a damned sphinx, ageless and unreadable. Even though it was only a few seconds before Steve looked back up at her, the wait felt interminable and she was sure she didn’t breathe until his eyes met hers. His face was still calm and quiet, but his eyes were gleaming. He wrapped his hand around hers, lacing their fingers together.

Darcy tugged at his hand, pulling Steve off the couch. “Let’s go,” he said.

It wasn’t until Darcy was adjusting the small cube of a shower stall to the right temperature (read: one shade short of blisteringly hot) did she realize the one flaw in her plan. “Shit,” she hissed out through clenched teeth, resting her head against the white tiled wall. “Shit, shit, shit.”

“What is it?” Steve asked, his hands playing with the hem of his bright blue undershirt.

Darcy looked over her shoulder at him, her eyes rueful and her mouth pursed. “No birth control,” she muttered.

“Ah.” She wasn’t sure if the slight flush on Steve’s face was from the subject matter or because the bathroom was quickly filling up with steam. Any other time her birth control pills would have easily resolved the issue for her. But as far as Darcy knew they’d been down there for days (weeks? months? who the hell knew anymore?) and she’d missed more than a few doses. She could clearly see the pill case in her head, sitting on her nightstand and mocking her pain. “Well,” Steve continued, bringing her runaway thoughts back down to Earth, “I’d always kind of hoped our first time would be someplace a little more romantic than a train station shower stall,” he said, then grinned.

And that was why she loved him. Darcy turned around fully and smirked back. “The anticipation will be fun. In the meantime…” She pushed herself off of the wall and practically sauntered over to him. When she was close enough she ran a finger up his chest, not stopping until it rested in the hollow at the base of his throat. “There is still other fun to be had that doesn’t require any additional…accessories.” She could feel him swallow roughly beneath her fingertip.

Steve reached out and pulled her close, skating his hands up and down her sides. “You gonna teach me what some of these fun things are?” he asked, making Darcy look up at him. He had the wide-eyed innocent look going on, but there was something else there. It could have been a glint in his eye, a slight tightness in the corner of his mouth, or the way his fingers were still making tracks over her skin. Or maybe it was just one of those little things lurking right below the surface. Whatever it was, he wasn’t fooling her.

“Wow, everyone who thinks you’re this good little altar boy who’s naïve to the ways of the
world got it all wrong, didn’t they?” Darcy said. She watched the innocent grin slide into one far more unholy, and she resisted the urge to squeeze her legs together to ease the rapidly building tension. ‘Patience,’ she reminded herself. ‘Savor it.’

“I don’t kiss and tell,” Steve whispered, bending down until his mouth was a scant few inches above hers. “And if that gives people a certain impression, I’m not going to correct them.”

“Were you always this sneaky?” She was so close to Steve now she could see just how long his eyelashes were. The brief moment of envy passed as soon as his fingers hit an especially sensitive spot right below the waistband of her jeans.

“It’s a special talent. So…” Whatever else he was going to say was lost as Darcy pulled him down by the shirt and kissed him deeply, opening her mouth to invite him in. Steve’s tongue stroked along hers, the simple pressure making her pull him even closer. She ran her hands down his chest, carefully tracing the ridges of muscles. They came to rest on the fastening to his pants, and she began to work them open.

Okay, patience was definitely not the right way to go then.

Steve’s hands weren’t idle either. They swept over her sides, moving around to her back. One large hand pulled Darcy close, pressing their chests together. She moaned softly into his mouth, reaching around his neck to bring him even nearer to her. Darcy could feel her nipples tightening, rubbing against the fabric of her bra and Steve’s chest and sending a shiver down her spine. That could also have been because of his fingers sneaking underneath her shirt and stroking, making electric sparks skitter all over her skin.

She tore her mouth away from his, breathing deeply. “We should get in the shower,” Darcy said, tugging at the collar of his shirt as she pressed her nose up against his neck.

“Yeah…”

It became a bit of a race then, to see who could strip out of their clothing the fastest. Darcy won, if only because Steve’s combat pants had a few extra buckles. They crammed into the shower stall, taking a moment to let the steaming water run over them and soak into her skin. Darcy moaned, tipping her head back to feel the water on her face. “So good,” she sighed. She felt more than heard Steve chuckle behind her. “Something funny?” she asked, shooting a look over her shoulder at him. His face was a little bit blurry (wearing glasses in the shower was so not practical) but she could clearly see the wide grin there.

“You’re cute,” Steve said. His arm stretched over her head and grabbed the bar of soap from the basket hanging off of the shower head. “Here. You’ve been talking about this for days, might as well take advantage.” He handed the soap to Darcy. It was a fairly basic bar with a generic soap scent, nothing at all like the products she hoarded at her apartment (some of which might have been stolen from her mother, but as Laura had enough stuff to open her own boutique she wasn’t going to miss any of it), but right now it felt like the most divine thing in the world.

Darcy scrubbed the bar over her arms and torso, feeling the bubbles slick over her skin and wash away all of the grime and dirt and other things left behind by the tunnels. She passed the bar back to Steve, who set to work at cleaning himself up. She looked at the basket again, wincing when she saw that the only thing that resembled hair care was one of those two-in-one products that never had enough conditioner in the mix and always turned her hair to straw. Still, better than bar soap for the hair, so she lathered up quickly.

It was kind of comedic, she thought, as she pulled down a washcloth and scrubbed at her face. The
shower was a little too small for the two of them, at least when one of them was Steve’s not insubstantial size, and maneuvering in the space was a bit…tricky. She was sure she’d elbowed Steve in the gut more than once, and it was certainly an accident that she’d been kicked in the calf. But for all the bumps and bruises there were still the delightful moments when skin brushed up against skin, and Darcy could feel her blood rush and spark with what was coming.

She peeked over her shoulder and found Steve’s back to her, shoulders flexing as he washed himself up. ‘And isn’t that a delightful sight,’ Darcy thought as she turned around fully. Acres of smooth skin speckled with a few birthmarks here and there stretched over the corded muscles of his back. Her eyes dipped down, taking in the curve of his ass and the tight muscles in his legs. Even his feet were moving slightly, toes stretching and flexing against the smooth tiled floor. She bit back a giggle, and reached out a finger. There was a brief moment of hesitation, but then she realized that, especially at this point in the game, there was no real reason to hold back anymore.

Darcy ran the tip of her finger down his spine, coming to rest in one of the indentations at his waist. She saw his back stiffen, the hands pausing in their washing up. Steve glanced over his shoulder, his eyebrow arching and a knowing smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. “Yeah?”

“Hi,” she grinned.

Steve just shook his head and turned around fully. His grin softened as his eyes swept over her figure, taking her in with wide eyes that shone in the dim lighting of the bathroom. “Hi,” he responded, leaning forward to rest his forehead against hers.

She wrapped her arms around his waist, holding him close. His skin was slick with water and remnants of soap, and she was sure that every deep breath she was taking kept pushing her breasts right up against him. Steve’s hands landed firmly on her hips, pressing in just slightly. Then, the tips of his fingers stroked carefully over her skin, heading down to the tops of her legs and coming back up again, skimming along her bottom with every pass.

Darcy tipped her head up, her nose rubbing against his as her eyes fluttered shut. Finally, after what seemed like an agonizing wait (it really wasn’t, but if there was ever a time to get poetic and melodramatic this was it), Steve’s mouth landed on hers. The kiss was bruising, tongues clashing and teeth nipping at lips. She ran her hands through his hair, her thumbs stroking the soft skin behind his ears. The moan he let forth at that was positively wanton, a sound Darcy had never imagined he could make even in some of her wildest and dirtiest dreams. Steve’s hands clenched around her hips once more and pulled her tightly into him. And she was pretty damn sure by that point that wasn’t his service weapon nudging up against her stomach. The part of her brain that could still come up with coherent thought – a small part by that point – determined that some further investigation would be a lovely thing.

She felt Steve gasp against her mouth as she closed her hand around his cock, a sharp exhalation that was noticeable even with the water pouring over them. His eyes opened wide, staring down at her with a look that was…hell, Darcy didn’t know quite how to describe it. No one had ever looked at her quite like that before. But it settled in her stomach like something warm and bright, and part of her wanted to curl up against him and make herself at home. This was the time for action, though, so she stroked him a few times and felt the shudders run through his body.

Steve bent forward, resting his cheek against the top of her head as his chest heaved, like he could barely take enough air in. Darcy circled her thumb around the head, spreading around the leaking fluid and mixing it in with the pouring water. He moaned again, a hot rush of air against her head. “Keep doing that and this won’t last long,” he said lowly.

“That’s the point,” she said back, squeezing tightly and giving him a long stroke from root to
His cock really was a gorgeous specimen, Darcy thought, taking in the sight before her. Nicely shaped, definitely nicely sized, flushed with blood, and firm against her palm. She couldn’t wait to feel it inside her, but Darcy supposed the anticipation would make it even more worth it when the time was right. And when they had a little more room to work with than a shower stall that could barely fit the two of them in there. Her setting of choice was a bed, but she would be willing to work with many other horizontal surfaces.

“Christ, Darcy.” She could feel his hands clench repeatedly around her waist, and had the sudden suspicion that he was a lot closer to the edge than he had previously let on. Darcy looked up at Steve to find him looking back down at her, dark lashes spiked with water droplets and white teeth digging into a kiss-swollen lower lip. While there were aspects of him that she knew she’d have to share with the world, this Steve right here, lust-drunk and holding onto her like she was the only thing anchoring him to the planet, that was hers and hers alone. And wasn’t that a heady thought?

“Let go,” she whispered, leaning forward and nibbling at his collarbone, following teeth with tongue and laving at the skin. The hand that wasn’t wrapped around his cock traced a line up the center of his back, giving a slight scrape on the down stroke.

That seemed to do the trick. Steve’s hand shot out, fingertips practically digging into the tile while his mouth pressed against her temple, moaning into her skin. His other arm pulled Darcy’s body into his, close enough that she could feel his release hot and slick against her stomach. A shudder ran through him, and she kept stroking until his body was calm once more, though it seemed that the only things keeping him upright at the moment were her arm around his waist and the hand braced on the wall that had nearly cracked the tile.

Darcy pressed a kiss on the shoulder that was closest to her. She held onto him until his breathing evened out, until his pulse stopped racing in his veins. Steve bent down and captured her lips with his, a long and leisurely kiss that just seemed to ratchet up the heat in her.

Before she could think or comment, however, Steve spun around and bodily pressed her into the wall. He swallowed her gasp down as he pushed his leg in between hers, settling her against his thigh. The pressure was just enough and Darcy ground her hips down hard, bracing her hands on his broad shoulders. If Steve had been close before then she imagined she was like a rocket, ready to shoot off into orbit at the slightest touch. And oh, was she ready to fly. “Don’t stop,” she said, her lips a hair’s breath away from his.

“You got it.” Darcy felt his fingers run a careful circle around her nipple, then slide down her stomach to bury themselves between her legs. One, then two slid inside her, and her back arched off the wall, trying to feel as much of them as possible. They were thick enough that she felt full, and flexible enough that they were stroking her in just the right spots. She grabbed the back of Steve’s neck, digging her nails in until his eyes met hers. Then he grinned and moved his thumb until it pressed against her clit, moving quickly with short, firm strokes.

That was all it took to set Darcy off, her inner walls clenching at his fingers as the waves flooded every inch of her body until she was sure she was floating somewhere off in the clouds. Steve’s hands were always there, though, coaxing and stroking and easing her until she slumped against his chest, exhausted and blissed out. “Oh my god,” she mumbled, her hand clutching at his bicep as if it was the only thing keeping her tethered to Earth. “Imagine when we can do that properly,” she continued, then resisted the urge to slap her hand over her mouth. She knew she had a tendency to babble after sex, and it didn’t always make sense.

Luckily, Steve seemed to find it amusing as she felt him drop a kiss on the top of her head, the lips
spreading into a grin. “Consider it a sneak preview.”

“Now I really can’t wait for opening day.”

By the time they emerged from their cocoon in the bathroom, the station was almost entirely shut down for the night. The students seemed to have locked themselves in the room with the cots, and Tallie had taken off to who only knew where. “So how does the couch sound to you?” Darcy asked, pulling a particularly ugly afghan blanket off of the back.

“I think it’ll be a tight squeeze,” Steve said, sitting down on the couch. He looked up at her, and Darcy thought that getting laid – or at least close to it – was a good look on him. “But I think we can make it work.” He spun so that he lay lengthwise and pulled Darcy down on top of him, rearranging the blanket once he was done. It wasn’t an ideal sleeping situation, but sandwiched between the blanket and Steve’s warm body wasn’t at all a bad place to be.

“Hey.” Darcy propped her chin on Steve’s chest, staring him straight in the eye. “Whatever happens from here on out,” she said, “we go together. We can’t split up or one of us stays behind just because it’s safer.” There was the lingering, sneaking suspicion that Steve would pull something like that, not out of anything malicious but Darcy knew he was the type to put his own safety aside for everyone else’s. Maybe she was overreacting by trying to draw such a statement out of him, but then again nothing about the present situation counted as rational.

Steve lifted a hand and cupped the side of her face. “I can’t promise something like that if it’s going to put you in harm’s way,” he said, stroking a thumb along her cheekbone.

“Then stick me behind the shield while you fight the ghosts in front of me.” She placed a hand on his chest, feeling the steady heartbeat beneath her fingers.

“Is it so bad that I want to keep you safe?”

“Don’t forget about my Taser, buddy.”

“Never.” Steve’s hand carded back through her still damp hair, and Darcy’s eyes fluttered shut. “All right. Together,” he conceded in a soft voice. “It’s most likely going to be dangerous, you realize that.”

“Duh.” Darcy pushed herself upwards and planted a hard, quick kiss on his lips. “Danger is my middle name,” she muttered against his mouth.

“I thought you said it was Sophia,” he muttered right back.

“Wise-ass.”

Steve just laughed.

Chapter End Notes

And the record for world’s slowest updater is *insert drumroll here*. I am pleased with how this chapter came out, though, so I hope you enjoy it as well. Thanks for reading!
A vague giggling sound broke through Darcy’s bubble of sleep, rousing her just slightly. It didn’t sound malicious, however, at least not that she could tell. So she rolled her head, pushing her face into the scratchy upholstery of the couch, and tugged her blanket a little closer to her.

Maybe not quite a blanket, her sleepy mind supplied as she wrapped her arms around Steve’s broad shoulders. They must have switched positions in the night; leaving Steve draped over her front, arms bracketing her on the couch, with his nose pressed into the curve of her neck. So warm, she thought contentedly, drifting back into sleep once more.

But not five minutes later (at least by her mostly asleep internal clock) the disruptions came back, and Darcy felt a hand landing on her shoulder and shaking her carefully. “Darcy, wake up,” Tallie said in a low voice. Darcy just winced, and groaned, squeezing her eyes shut.

“What is it?” Steve asked, pushing himself upright and taking away that delectable warmth. Darcy forced herself awake and saw Tallie crouched on the floor next to them, Mei perched on the table, and Steve sitting up between her legs. Bad brain, she chided herself. This wasn’t the time to get distracted, not when the two women looked incredibly serious and determined.

“But Dennis is back,” Tallie said, shooting a nervous glance over at Jayden, who was keeping watch at the door to the lounge. “And he keeps making noise about how he’s going to take us out to the compound today.”
Mei nodded, wringing her hands together. “And we can’t help but think that if we end up going all
the way out there we’re never going to be able to get home,” she added.

“We’ve got to stall them, then,” Steve said, reaching out to help pull Darcy upright. Ugh, she was
sure that damn couch was going to leave a knot in her shoulders all day, and she reached around to
dig her fist into the small of her back. She scrubbed her hands back through her hair and over her
face, trying to get her brain into the action.

“Do you guys have a plan?” Darcy asked, rolling her neck from side to side. She saw Steve’s hand
twitch, as if he was about to reach out for her and rub her neck for her, but he tamped down the
movement quickly, clenched fist coming to rest on his thigh instead.

“Why do you think we came to get you?” Tallie fired back and shooting an especially pointed glance
in Steve’s direction.

Steve was silent for a few moments, and he tapped a finger on his lips. “There’s not much that we
can actually do here in the station, right?”

A bitter look crossed Tallie’s face, like she suddenly took a bite out of a lemon. “Aside from looking
at test results that make no sense? No. Dennis has got his own guards too to keep an eye on the
outside, so they don’t exactly need your bodyguard skills either.”

“But we need things from them.” Steve glanced first at Mei, then over at Darcy. “There’re some
things left behind on that train car at Union Square that we could still use, right?”

Darcy frowned, trying to think of what was left behind by people in the wake of the hasty
evacuation. “Not really. Not unless you count a few winter coats and some grocery bags.”

“They don’t know that though, do they?”

“Back into the tunnels, then?” Darcy asked, and winced at the mere thought of schlepping all the
way back into Manhattan.

Steve nodded. He leaned over the edge of the couch and grabbed his boots, beginning the process of
strapping his feet into them. “Yesterday’s trip took a lot longer than normal to get down here. If
they have to take us there and back, it’ll suck up most of the day by my best estimate. And then we
can say we don’t want to travel out to Far Rockaway in the dark. Have to see our new surroundings
in the daylight, you know.”

“There’s a lot of variables there,” Darcy said, grimacing. “So many things could go wrong.”

“What other choice do we have?” Steve couldn’t meet her eyes then, focusing on putting his boots to
rights instead. “If we get stuck, we’re...we’re - “

“Fucked,” Tallie filled in with a sharp nod.

Darcy leaned into Steve’s side, nudging her shoulder against his. It was a subtle move, just enough
to let him know that she was there with him (all right, it’s not like they hadn’t been caught in a kind
of compromising position just a few minutes before, but why give people any more ammo than
necessary?). “Rock and a hard place, huh?” she murmured, just low enough for him to hear it.

A small grin twisted the corner of Steve’s mouth. “Just the way I like it.” He stood up, reached
over, and grabbed the top armor from the table, slipping it on over the underarmor and strapping that
on as well. Then he swung his helmet onto his head, buckling it into place easily. The last thing on
was the leather utility belt, completing the transformation from sleepy Steve into take no shit Captain
America. “Let’s get this over with.” Without looking back Steve walked out of the little lounge and into the main area, Jayden and Mei trailing after him like ducklings, Darcy couldn’t help but think.

She was about to follow them, when Tallie barred her way out of the door. “So what happened to you having a date to look forward to, hmm?” Tallie asked, eyebrows arching high enough that they looked like they were about to run off of her face.

“What about it?” Darcy said as she fought back the instinctive ‘oh, shit,’ panic reaction. Not that she was embarrassed getting caught snuggling, not by far, but talking about it wasn’t something she wanted to really do. Not just yet, while things were still so brand new.

“You’ve got to admit, snuggling up with an attractive young superhero in the middle of a crisis is pretty much movie magic right there,” Tallie continued. She jerked her chin quickly in Steve’s general direction, and finally it kicked in with Darcy. For the briefest moment there she had forgotten that these people weren’t aware that Captain America was also a guy named Steve that she hung out with frequently and bribed with take-out and movies to help her assemble cheap Swedish furniture. But it was all too easy to fall into a disaster bond with this crew here, she thought ruefully. Nicer people than she’d ever expected to find in the middle of hell, and, and…

‘Dammit, it was the dog in New Mexico all over again.’

Darcy grinned, even though it felt a little strained around the edges - at least in her mind. “Yeah, but this isn’t the movies, as weird as it is. Real life is even more screwed up. And gossipy, apparently.”

Whatever Tallie was about to say next was cut off quickly by the sound of slightly raised voices and a general scuffle coming from the main area of the station. Darcy frowned, turning her head to try and see what was going on, but all she could make out was a cluster of people there. “That can’t be good,” Darcy said, brushing past Tallie and heading out to find out what exactly was going on.

Darcy noticed Dennis first, standing on the wide bank of stairs that led up to where the turnstiles would have been. He looked a bit stern, arms crossed over his chest and a firm look on his face. Flanking him were any number of what Darcy could only describe as goons - lots of big, strong guys carrying an assortment of blunt objects that would make fine weapons in a pinch. There was something kind of unnerving about them, like they were all a little too uniformly made, similar muscles, similar hair, similar slightly grey cast to their skin. “And now we’re in a zombie movie?” Darcy thought sourly, feeling her patience get that much closer to non-existent.

Steve stood opposite Dennis, standing tall enough to let it be clear that he wasn’t intimidated by whatever show of aggression he was attempting. Even from a distance away Darcy saw his jaw was clenched, and he had a death grip on the straps of his shield, held tight to his side. Jayden and Mei were standing on the floor with Tom, just watching everything unfold in front of them, though Jayden’s move to push Mei behind him clearly said they weren’t as calm as they looked.

Dennis raised his hands in the air, the expression on his face morphing into a more concerned look. “Look, son,” he said, making Steve clench his hand on the shield strap once more, “I’m not saying you can’t arm yourself, but we don’t hold truck with secret identities here. It’s not a good way to keep calm in a place. So all I’m asking is that you remove the helmet before we go. No more, no less.”

‘Don’t be stubborn, Steve,’ Darcy thought as she inched forward, taking slow enough steps that all of the goons surrounding Dennis could clearly see every move she was making. Tallie followed her slowly, boots clacking on the tiled floor.

“As long as you hold to your promise of taking us back to Union Square to get the rest of our stuff,
I’ll remove the helmet,” Steve said, jaw clenched tight enough to chip stone.

Dennis nodded. “Fair enough.”

Steve nodded once, sharply, then reached up to undo the latch and take the helmet off, buckling the strap around his utility belt instead. While Steve was doing this, Darcy watched the crowd. SHIELD had kept Steve’s identity firmly locked down, which was great for letting him have some sort of a private life. But there were any number of rumors out there that kept posing whether this new version of Captain America was in fact the same one as the original version, because if a guy could save the world in a metal suit and aliens could attack, well, why couldn’t by some miracle the original Cap be back?

Dennis’s face was impassive, showing no sign of recognition of Steve’s face whatsoever, but Darcy saw a couple of the goons trade a look, then glance back at Steve with what could only be nervousness. ‘Good,’ she thought.

“Thank you,” Dennis said with a nod. “All right, Captain, you and those two ladies behind you will ride in the same cab as me and my crew. The two youngsters over there,” he waved a hand at Jayden and Mei, “will go with my second in command. He’ll take good care of them, I promise.”

“Why can’t we all travel together?” Darcy blurted out, eyes whipping back and forth between Dennis and Jayden, who suddenly looked just that much more nervous than before.

“It’s a space issue,” Dennis said, looking entirely at ease with Darcy’s question, which just made her feel even more nervous than before. “Our equipment takes up a good amount of room in the cabs, and it’s easier to split up into two groups instead of everyone being all uncomfortable in one.”

Before Darcy could ask any more questions - because she had a ton of them, for sure - they were skillfully maneuvered into their two groups, and ushered back up to the train platforms. Instead of piling everyone into the cabs of the engines, like they’d been when they were first shown down to Coney Island, the two engines had small, open air trailers behind them instead. True to Dennis’ word the trailers were already half filled with heavy equipment, drills and wheelbarrows and sturdy construction type tools. There was probably only room for maybe six people in each trailer, and given the size of the pack they were currently being herded by, there was no way they’d all be able to even squeeze into a single trailer. And even then there was a separation between them and their bodyguards - two of them scrambled up over the equipment to settle near the front of the trailer, closer to the engine, while the three of them with their own bodyguard were settled down at the back of the trailer, uncomfortably close to the edge, especially when the train would begin to pick up speed.

“Divide and conquer,” Steve muttered, just loud enough that Darcy was the only one to hear it. Still, she reached out and squeezed his hand in a quiet acknowledgement. ‘Ears and eyes open,’ she reminded herself.

The next surprise came when the train and trailer carrying Jayden and Mei starts to move down the tracks, leaving them behind and splitting off onto another set of tracks to take them even further away, fading off into the distance. “Hey, what the hell?” Tallie cried out.

“More safety precautions,” the closest thug to her said, checking some of the screws that held the blade of his shovel firmly attached to the shaft. “It attracts less attention if we split up and take different lines to get underground.” He nodded once at his shovel, the wood of the handle looking dark against his pale, slightly greyish hand.

“What do we have to be cautious about?” Steve asked, trying to give the thug his best ‘Captain
America is judging you,’ look.

The thug just shrugged, and turned his gaze outward at the overarching metal framework of the terminal as their engine began to leave. The engine moved slowly, steadily over the tracks, over what was ostensibly a creek lined by rusted out equipment poking out of grimly murky water. Instead of taking the same track that they did when they arrived at Coney Island, this track descended slightly downward instead, into a bit of a trench-like open cut with slightly sloping concrete walls rising up on either side of them.

“Why did they- “ Darcy began to whisper to Steve, only to be cut off by a sharp shake of his head. “Okay, no talking,” she mumbled, looking out at the tangled, spindly vines that crawled over the edges of the concrete walls and waved down at them like they had some sort of sentience about them. But then Steve reached out and took her hand in his, squeezing once, firmly, just to let her know that he was there next to her.

She squeezed back tightly and settled back into her corner, watching the walls go by. Every so often they saw an abandoned station, full of peeling paint and pockmarked platforms, looking like they’d been through armageddon and barely came out the other side. There didn’t seem to be any urgency to the train, and it kept chugging along slowly, steadily, crawling up the track towards its inevitable destination.

“How much longer are we going to be?” Steve asked the thug, who’d finished tweaking up his weapon and was lounging in one corner of the car, looking a lot more relaxed than anyone else around them seemed to feel right then. “Because at this rate it’s going to take us forever to get back to Manhattan.”

The thug just shrugged again and pulled a pair of sunglasses down over his eyes, slumping over to the point where Darcy was convinced he was too busy sleeping than he was guarding them. “So much for bodyguards,” Tallie groused.

“Might as well get comfortable,” Darcy said, leaning into Steve’s side. Steve didn’t reply, but just continued looking around, staying more on guard than anyone else there.

Eventually the track started to descend slowly downward, with rusted and windworn overpasses of a long disused highway stretching above them, with more of that grey, cloudy sky peeking out through the cracks and jagged holes in the metal. Then the sky faded away, replaced with the all-consuming blackness of the tunnel which then bled into those same strange green lights that shone through the walls every now and then. The air was positively stifling in there, Darcy noticed, stale and uncomfortable, like she was trying to breathe on a too warm day and every breath was an effort to suck into the lungs. ‘Maybe if we go faster, it’ll kick up a breeze,’ Darcy thought, wishing for another train to pass by at speed if only to bring a little wind into the tunnel.

The noise from the engine should have practically blown out their eardrums, Darcy knew. But it didn’t, and they just kept going forward, adding to the entire unreality of the place. ‘I want to go home,’ she thought, not for the first time since this whole thing had started.

Still, the train kept plugging along, the only noise in the tunnel the loud clatter of the engine and the rattle of the wheels on the tracks. Somewhere a little past the 59th Street station, however, the train ground to a halt, a rough stop that nearly knocked all of them flat to the ground. “What’s going on?” Steve asked once he’d pulled himself together, quicker than the rest of them. He got to his feet, craning his neck to try and see past the large engine in front of them. Not that they could see much in general, the bulk of the engine filled up most of the tunnel, and there was enough glare from those odd lights that it made seeing clearly even more difficult.
“No idea,” the thug replied, getting to his feet also. There was a sudden, sharp crackle that came from his pocket, and he reached inside to pull out a walkie talkie. The words that came out of the small speaker were garbled and unclear, so Darcy focused on the thug’s face instead, watching as it went stony and cold, followed up quickly by a sharp nod. “Yes, sir,” he said, then shoved the handset back in his pocket. “We’re going back,” he said, hefting his shovel in his hand. “Sit down, it’s going to be rough going in reverse.”

“Why are we going back?” Steve asked, staying on his feet until the shovel was waved in a vaguely threatening fashion in his face. “Look, we’ve gone along very patiently so far,” Steve said, brushing the shovel aside and sending it clattering to the tracks below, “but if you want us to keep being patient you need to give us some answers.”

The other man paused there, flicking his eyes behind him towards where the other guards were still on the other side of the equipment, possibly debating what his chances were of actually managing to take down Steve singlehandedly, Darcy thought. Finally he looked back at them, nodded, and pulled the walkie talkie back out of his pocket again. “Could I get a status report?” he asked.

Before he could get an answer the train began to reverse down the tracks, picking up speed a lot faster than it did previously. It was enough to make Darcy and Tallie crouch down, using the wall of the trailer to try and provide some sort of a barrier against the sudden wind that made their eyes water and their breath catch in their lungs. “Anything?” Steve asked the thug as they rocketed back out of the tunnel into whatever passed as daylight once more.

“Some sort of an accident with the other train,” the thug replied with a casual shrug. “Wouldn’t be the first time it’s happened.” He brushed past Steve and grabbed the poles of the access ladder to hoist himself up, looking out over the tracks in front of him. “All clear,” he said into the walkie talkie, obviously done with Steve. “Switches are in position, so we should have a clear shot back.”

Steve just shook his head and settled back on the floor, bringing his shield around so he could at least attempt to use it as a windbreak for the three of them. “Well, that was helpful,” he grumbled to the women.

Darcy just sighed miserably and slumped forward, resting her head on her knees.

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“What do you mean they disappeared?” Darcy yelled, stomping over to Dennis in the main area of the terminal where everyone had gathered once the trains had arrived back in Coney Island. Well, the trains had made it back at least, not all of the passengers did, however. Specifically, Jayden and Mei. They went into one of the underpass tunnels on that track, apparently, but when they’d emerged out of it again, the two of them were nowhere to be seen. And the tunnels themselves were far too narrow for someone to be able to jump out of them and not be noticed. “Where the hell did they go?”

It unnerved the hell out of Darcy, seeing that Dennis wasn’t anywhere near as bothered about the disappearance of two people under his care as any normal person would be.

“What strange things happen in the tunnels,” Dennis said, looking down at a clipboard and making marks on the papers there instead of actually bothering to look at Darcy. “This is why we usually don’t let civilians such as you and your friends to come with us on our expeditions. We made an exception today, and now you’re paying the price.”

“I’ll give you paying the price you sanctimonious asshole,” Darcy spat out, right before she lunged for him, ripping the clipboard out of his hands and raising her arm up to throw it at him. The only
thing that stopped her was Tallie’s grip on her fist, pulling her hand down firmly to her side.

“You might want to control your woman there, Captain,” is all Dennis said, giving Steve a glance.

Steve just crossed his arms over his chest, that little vein in his jaw pulsing as he clenched his teeth, and said, “I think I’d rather join her if you can’t give us some real answers.”

“I’m not looking for a fight,” Dennis said carefully, gingerly reaching out to take his clipboard back from Darcy, “but I don’t have solid answers for you yet. There are a lot of mysteries down there in the subway system. We’ve been studying them for years and we’ve only scratched the tip of the iceberg. I have every intention of investigating further, but it’s going to take some time.” His face went complacent, trying to look calm instead of the indifference from earlier. “So how about we get you set up someplace a little more comfortable while my boys and I take a look, and we’ll let you know what we find.”

Steve glanced over at Darcy quickly, but it’s enough time for him to clearly tell that she had no intention of going anywhere until they know what happened or they get their companions back.

“Yeah, we’re staying put,” Steve said.

“Suit yourselves,” Dennis mumbled, shaking his head dismissively.

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The terminal was a hive of activity, between Dennis holding court over his clipboards and his boys running back and forth between the trains and down to him with the various papers he was looking at. As a civilian, Tallie knew she was a third wheel in this situation. Hell, she was so far beyond a third wheel she wasn’t even on the tracks. So she just stood back and watched instead. She wasn’t half bad at that.

Across the big hall, she saw that the Captain was watching things too, eyes rapidly flicking around the action and trying to absorb everything. He was probably more observant than she was, she figured, so it was good that someone was keeping an eye on things. Darcy was perched next to him on one of the steps that lead up towards the second level and platform access. They’re closer than they want us to think, Tallie realized, though they had plenty of other things to focus on then and there instead of gossiping about who’s screwing who.

Something’s a little off, though, Tallie thought, some singular spot of stillness within the craziness that she couldn’t quite find. But then she spotted Tom, sitting amidst his computers, poking away at a keyboard and looking supremely frustrated. Well, she was a civilian, which meant that none of the natives of the place were actually going to notice her as she slowly and steadily walked over to Tom.

Tom had a frown on his face that was probably strong enough to light the station for a couple of days, and if he jabbed at the keyboard any harder he was probably going to end up driving a hole right in it. “You look like you’re about to shoot something,” she said to him.

Tom dragged his hands back through his hair, making it stick up in ragged tufts. “I love it when they linger in my station,” he said, almost growling. “They stomp around like they rule the place, mess up all of my experiments, and then treat me like I’m not even here. Yeah, I love it so much. So, so much.”

“Ahhh, I gotcha. But something tells me that’s not the whole story either,” Tallie said, leaning back against the table and looking down at him.

“You have no idea,” he mumbled down towards his keyboard. “They’ll be gone by tonight; they
hate sleeping here because staying too close to the trains freaks them the hell out. Once they’re gone, get your friends together and we’ll talk.”

“Don’t make me regret this.”

“Trust me, you won’t.”

Chapter End Notes

Don’t worry, Mei and Jayden aren’t gone for good. We’ll see them again, I promise. ;)

Come bother me over at my tumblr: aenariasbookshelf.tumblr.com. It's a bit random, but it's great for inspirational pictures. For a given value of inspiration, of course. ;)

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