A Cup of Cheer

by themonkeycabal

Summary

A Run 'Verse Christmas

AKA - Bucky gets his bar. Finally. And a dance. Finally.

Notes

It's a little late, but I wanted to write you all a gift fic for being so wonderful, so patient with my erratic posting schedule, so supportive, and just overall, so completely awesome. Thank you.

I hope you all had a wonderful Christmas, the happiest of holidays, and may you have a bright and joyful New Year.

(this takes place during the Christmas post-Age of Ultron, post-Bid Time Return)

(oh, and in case you missed it, blackglass posted a podfic for "We'll Run Like We're Awesome". It's like Christmas)

There was music drifting past the door when she knocked. Straining to pick it out, she winced a little
when she recognized Bing Crosby's 'I'll Be Home for Christmas'. Was he brooding? Was he reflective? Was he feeling nostalgic? Was it all of the above? So … did she go in with Stark obnoxiousness on full to josh him out of a mood? Or did she try Lewis tact and let him have his space and quiet? Or a little of both until she could figure out the best way to approach him?

The chain rattled, the bolts clicked back, and Bucky opened his door, gazing at her with a puzzled frown on his face. "Darcy?"

"Merry Christmas, Bucky," she greeted with a grin, hefting the green and red bags in her arms. "Can I come in?"

"Oh, yeah, sure," he muttered, stepping back. He remembered his manners while she dumped her gifts on the coffee table. "Merry Christmas. I thought we weren't doing dinner for another couple hours?"

"Change of plans." She shrugged out of her coat and smiled when the next song was 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas'. Well, at least he was trying for the Christmas spirit. That would make this easier. "Also, I sent you a text like an hour ago that I was coming over. Check your messages."

He looked over at his phone, but didn't take it out of the dock, letting the music continue. "Must have missed it."

"Hope you don't mind I came over, then."

He smiled and shook his head. "I never mind seeing you, doll."

Darcy dropped down onto his couch and watched him. He seemed pensive, but not really broody. "How was midnight mass?"

"Okay. I forgot a lot of it," he said with a shrug, sitting down next to her. "I saw Murdock there."

"Oh yeah? How was he?"

Bucky frowned and scratched at his jaw. "Looked like he went a couple rounds with me."

"Really?"

"Yeah. His face was busted up pretty good. Said he got mugged."

"Damn," she breathed out with a wince and a twist of sadness in her gut. She liked Matt okay; he was hard to get a read on and a little weird, but she had a collection of weirdos already, so what was one more? "That sucks."

"Yeah," Bucky said, but his tone was quiet, thoughtful.

Darcy raised an eyebrow at him. "You think he didn't?"

"I don't know. His knuckles were torn up, too, so he got in a couple licks himself, if he was mugged. Not bad for a blind guy."

"Foggy told me Matt's dad was a prize fighter."

"Oh, that makes sense." He nodded, accepting that, then he waved a hand at the coffee table. "What's this?"

"These are Christmas presents." Darcy sat forward and picked up the big green bag and tossed it at
him. "Open it up."

He looked uncomfortable and handled the package gingerly, like it might actually be a bomb. "I didn't get you anything."

"Oh, don't worry," she said with a smirk, "I'll get my gift later."

His eyebrow shot up. "Is that right?"

"I feel pretty confident." She bit her bottom lip and wagged her eyebrows at him until he huffed a laugh and looked down at the bag.

"Open it, open it, open it," she chanted when he continued to stare.

Shoving aside tissue paper, he pulled out a soft, bright red sweater. Unfolding it, his mouth dropped open in shock, maybe, or possibly horror. "What the fuck is this?"

"It's an ugly sweater." It was also, in Darcy's opinion, magnificent, with repeating patterns of reindeer, candy canes, snowflakes, wreaths, sleighs, stockings, bells, and stars.

"Yeah," he agreed, and kept staring at it. "Why?"

"Because it's the obnoxious thing of the moment," Darcy assured him. "It's kitschy and harkens back to the days when grandma would hand-knit you something you absolutely hated but you had to wear anyway. It's an irritating and horrifying trend and I love it so much, you don't even know. Mostly, I just really enjoy dressing up beautiful people in ugly sweaters. It's charming. You should've seen the look on Steve's face."

She snickered at the memory for a second, until the thought brought to mind the other beautiful people she'd dressed up, and then she frowned a little. "Except, somehow Natasha makes hers look elegant. I don't know how she does it. It's like some weird sort of magic only she's mastered. I even got her the ugliest one I could find this year, with eight tacky, sequined reindeer that light up. And, damned if she didn't rock the hell out of it."

"People actually wear these?" He asked, still awestruck by the hideous grandeur of his sweater.

"Yes." Darcy tugged at her own sweater, a cardigan that was half red and half green with a giant Santa head on one side and a tree decorated with actual tiny ornaments on the other.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "No."

"Yes," Darcy pressed, cackling at his horror. "You should totally put it on now."

"No."

"Steve put his on." After absolutely refusing until Natasha guilted him into it. And then he took it off and 'lost' it an hour later. Oh well, she had a picture. And Bucky didn't need to know all that.

"Steve's an idiot."

"Come on, Bucky. It's a Christmas tradition."

"I'll skip that one," he said, jaw set stubbornly.

"Fine, grumpy soldier," Darcy sighed and picked up the large red bag, shoving it at him. "Not an ugly sweater, I promise."
He opened this one up with even more caution than the first, despite her promise, and pulled out a thick, black coat. "Huh."

"I'd be willing to bet it's warmer than the one you have now," Darcy explained. "It's lined with a nano-weave body-armor fabric dad developed. It won't stop a bullet, but it'll stop a knife, most shrapnel, stuff like that. And, the left sleeve is detachable. Just for you."

He nodded and ran his hands down the garment, testing the pockets and feeling the inside. "It's light."

"Yeah. Clint's got one sort of like it, made of the same material. He says it's got great movement, and he gets way fussy about how much range he has with his arms, so I figured he'd know, right?"

His lips ticked up in a small smile and he set the coat aside. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." She reached over and grabbed the last package. It was wrapped in silver paper, and while it was smaller than the other two packages, it was also much heavier. She hefted it into his lap.

"Darcy, come on," Bucky groaned with a pout, "this is too much."

"No, it's not. Look, just open it. If you don't like it, I can ... I don't know. Do something with them." She held up a finger and narrowed her eyes at him. "Not the sweater, you're stuck with the sweater. And you will wear the sweater."

Shaking his head he picked up the last package and unwrapped it, revealing a black, wood case. He set it on the table and flipped up the pair of latches, lifting the lid. And then his breath caught.

"They're made of a ceramic composite material SI's been developing," Darcy said, gazing down at the lethal collection of black-bladed knives — ten of them, ranging in size from a 3-inch push blade, to a wicked 9-inch bayonet blade. Every one of them extremely dangerous, laser-honed to scalpel sharpness, and pretty much totally illegal. "They, quote, hold an edge for-fucking-ever, unquote."

Bucky plucked a stiletto out of the case and twirled it through his fingers, before testing the edge against his metal thumb. "They're beautiful, doll," he said, his voice soft but sincere.

"Yeah? You like 'em?" She'd been back and forth on what to get the nearly 100-year old assassin for Christmas, until Tony'd groaned, tired of hearing her talk about it, and said 'weapons'. Because, yes, of course. Still, it wasn't exactly a Christmassy gift, but he seemed happy with them.

"They're great." Putting the stiletto back in its case, he looked over at her and smiled. A genuine, warm smile. It crinkled the corners of his eyes and lit up the cool blue. "Thanks, Darce."

"Oh, that's present number one for me."

"Huh?"

"The smile. A real smile." She leaned forward and kissed his cheek, before standing up and tossing him his ugly sweater. "Okay, the last present is kind of a lot bigger and we've got to go to Brooklyn for it. So, bundle up, Barnes, 'cause baby, it's cold outside."

He didn't move, just sat there watching her warily. "No."

"Yes. Come on, Bucky," she wheedled, reaching down to tug at his arm. He stayed as immovable as a boulder. "You'll like this one, too, I promise."
"You didn't have to get me anything."

"I know I didn't. And if it makes you feel better, this one is not entirely for you and isn't entirely from me. Other people had a hand."

He stared at her for a long second before he finally stood up, too. "Other people who?"

She ignored his question and pointed at his sweater again. "Put on your sweater and your new coat. I wasn't kidding about it being cold outside." It was late afternoon and the winter sun was already a fading memory. The temperatures plummeted with the dying light. And that wasn't just her thin, Southern California blood talking, either. She'd run into Bucky's super on the way in and he'd grumbled something about it being colder than frog's ass at the bottom of a well. Which was weirdly specific, but seemed to imply he thought it was really damned cold, too.

"I'm the Winter Soldier," he pointed out, giving her an amused little smile.

"And that just makes me think of you being cold for decades," she replied, giving him a sad face, lower lip jutting out. "Put on the sweater and be warm, Bucky. For me."

He looked at the sweater with a grimace before tugging it over his head. Crossing his arms over his chest, he gave her an irritable, mulish look. "You fight dirty. Happy?"

"Oh my God," she laughed, "you look adorable. Yes, I'm totally happy. Now, come on." She started for the door but stopped when she didn't hear him move. Turning back around she frowned at him. "What?"

"Where are we going?"

"Brooklyn, I told you."

"Where in Brooklyn?" He asked, suspicion heavy in his voice.

"Bucky, trust me," she whined, tossing her head back petulantly.

He smirked. "I trust you with my life; I don't trust you not to mess with me."

"Ouch. But, fair." She walked back over to him, considered the logistics of their heights, then stepped up onto the coffee table so she could comfortably loop her arms around his neck and enjoy being slightly taller than him. "It's Christmas. I put a moratorium on shenanigans during Christmas unless I know for sure the shenanigans will make the other person happy. So, trust me. You'll like this one, I promise. Even more than the knives."

Leaning against him, Darcy brushed her lips across his in a light kiss. Being free to kiss him so casually, so easily, without some sort of life-threatening situation blowing up around them, was still something of a novelty, but if it might wear down his resistance, ah well, she'd just have to make the tough call and do it. Plus, she really, really liked kissing him.

"Don't know how you could top the knives," he chuckled, and slid his arm around her waist, giving her a teasing little tug.

"It wasn't easy," she said with a nod. "But, like I said, it wasn't just me on this one."

"Who else?" Bucky asked again, looking like he was ready to dig his heels in and not move if she didn't tell him.
"Steve was a big part, Jane and Pepper pitched in, Barton, too. Even Coulson."

That surprised him and his eyebrows rose. "Really?"

"Really. Now, trust me." She kissed him again and then broke away to jump down off the coffee table.

He grabbed his phone, tucked his Glock into his belt under the sweater, pulled on his new jacket, plucked one of his new daggers from the case, settled it in its sheath, and slid it into an inside pocket. Then he took a deep breath and, with a sharp nod, said, "Okay, let's do it."

"It's a Christmas present, you're not going off to war, Buck," Darcy told him, but she eased the teasing edge out of her voice, and slid her hand down his arm to give his hand a squeeze.

He crooked a smile at her and dipped his chin. "I've known you long enough to know how trouble finds you. Better be prepared."

Rolling her eyes, she turned away from him and strode out the door, pausing only while he locked up his apartment. Then she threaded her arm through his and tugged him down the stairs; she didn't think he'd bolt, but she'd make sure he couldn't.

"How's your Christmas been?" Bucky asked as they settled themselves in the car.

"Pretty nice. I mean, dad called at 4 a.m. because he refuses to acknowledge that time zones exist, and he wanted to gloat about holidaying in Italy," she snorted and rolled her eyes. "Like I've never been, and like I'd want to third-wheel him and Pepper. Mainly I think he just wanted to be the first with the Merry Christmases because he's always got to win. I had a nice breakfast with some of the others a reasonable, humane hour. Then Clint and I watched "A Christmas Story". I called my parents, then did a skype present exchange with Rico. And then I came over here."

"Is he still on the fence?"

"Rico? Nah. He's on his way. He just hasn't said it yet."

Their job offer to Rico was still pending, he hadn't signed anything yet, or made any sort of verbal commitment. But, since SHIELD, via an SI scholarship, was paying for his classes at Columbia, she'd been the one to receive the information from the school with the next semester's fees. That meant he'd sent in the transfer information and signed up for his program. She figured that meant he was probably just still working through the last bits of it in his head, and he'd given himself a buffer to be able to change his mind. But, Darcy felt confident if he'd gone far enough to actually go through with the paperwork crap, that he had one foot in New York already. He'd better get a move on telling her, though, because he was running out of time if he didn't want to end up living in the Tower with Tony for a few months.

"Good," Bucky said. He seemed to like Rico, and Rico seemed to like him, even if they were each a little puzzled by the other. Darcy could deal with them not quite understanding each other, but she really needed her boys to at least get along. She honestly didn't know what she'd do if they couldn't. It would absolutely break her heart.

"I told him he could tell his mom about Tony being my dad," she said. "Did I tell you that? I guess she wasn't surprised."

"I think anybody who's known you for a while wouldn't be surprised," he murmured.

"I know, right?" She glanced at him with a lifted eyebrow and a smirk. "We just like, radiate pure,
awesome Starkness. It's okay to be a little overwhelmed."

Bucky guffawed for a block, then chuckled for another. And that was present number two for her.

It wasn't that Bucky was forever sullen anymore. He smiled, he laughed, he joked and relaxed, but he also had moments when the past froze the breath in his lungs and the nightmares could take days to shake. Anytime she could add to the good moments, she felt like she was stealing time from the bad. Always worth it, and always a gift.

Darcy drove them into Williamsburg. Just up from the river lay the new home of SHIELD's New York headquarters. Or rather, the massive construction project that would become the new HQ. Though, Fury's contractors and Tony's money had worked freaking miracles over the last few months — the demolition of two buildings, the digging of an underground parking garage, the massive, hidden excavation below even that, and the gutting and refinishing of the three other buildings on the lot. They'd be able to start up some of the basic SHIELD operations by spring, moving them out of the Tower and out of the training facility in Newark.

She would never entirely forgive Tony for the price of the property, but it did seem to suit everybody's needs, and she supposed she'd get over it if she could convince her thrifty Lewis side to shut up. Besides, her 100% legitimate property development company's partnership with SI, and its immense resources, meant that control of the property would stay firmly in her hands; even after the SHIELD facility below came online. She didn't trust that another real SHIELD scenario wouldn't crop up at some point. Neither did Tony, and their contract with SHIELD was rigid and unforgiving. Phil'd acquiesced with some stipulations, even while Fury grumbled — not that that stopped him from throwing in his opinions on design, security, and giving her endless lectures on running a base.

"What are we doing here?" Bucky asked, as she pulled up to the curb in front of the construction site.

"We're visiting your bar, obviously." Bucky's bar occupied the prime corner and ground floor of a five-story brick apartment building. The four stories above it would become SHIELD living quarters — smaller-roomed temporary barracks on the second floor, and larger semi-permanent above, plus Bucky's apartment. He'd already picked it out.

"Our bar," he corrected, always stubborn on that point.

Darcy snorted and shrugged. "Have you come up with a name yet? Foggy needs one for the 'petition to serve alcohol' paperwork."

"It's gotta be right."

"Yeah, well, you've got two weeks and then it becomes The Crow Bar."

"That's the stupidest name," he grumbled, but couldn't keep the laugh out of his voice.

"It's the best name," Darcy countered and shoved open her door, "But if you don't like it, then you need to come up with something else."

"You and Barton don't get to name the bar."

"Then snap to it," Darcy tossed over her shoulder as she tugged open the gate on the construction fence that circled the whole block. She called out a "Merry Christmas" to the security guard — one of Fury's — and made her way to the bar.

Pausing at the gate over the door, she looked back at him, and bit her lip. She was confident he'd like
part one of the big present, but less confident about how he'd feel about part two. She'd been serious about no shenanigans, but she had also promised him that since this was his first true Christmas in decades, they'd do the holiday up right this year, and that meant more than just new knives. So … "Close your eyes."

"No," he said, smirking back at her.

With a huff, she pulled out the keys and opened up the gate, muttering to herself, "Grumpy Soldier. That's what I'm going to call you. People will be all 'ahhhh, it's the Winter Soldier!' and I'll be all 'nahhh, it's the Grumpy Soldier.'"

She heard him chuckling behind her, and then felt him step up, crowding her against the door. "I'm not grumpy, but I can tell you're up to something. And I don't like surprises."

"It's not a surprise," she said and tried to shove him back. He didn't move.

"Uh, yeah, it is?"

"But not a bad surprise. Not a jump out at you surprise, because I'm not stupid." She turned to face him and he crowded closer. Her breath stuttered and her heart sped up. They may have been something more than partners for a few months now, but that hadn't done anything to blunt the edge of how unbelievably, stupidly attracted to him she was. If anything, it only made it worse, because she was a big, huge fan of the casual affection from the stupidly attractive assassin.

"Okay, wow, to the invasion of personal space," she choked out, putting a hand on his chest, intending to give him a little shove, but her traitor hand decided it would rather just rest there.

"You don't even know what personal space is," he told her and bent down to give her a little peck on the corner of her mouth. "Open the door, and let's get this over with."

"Grumpy soldier," she said, catching her breath and finally giving him a nudge so he'd at least step back enough for her to open the door.

The bar was dark and chilled, the bitterness of winter creeping in. And while it was empty and smelled of sawdust, brick, wood stain, and drywall, it wasn't too far from being ready. There was still plenty to do to get it square with the borough and the city in order to open up, but, that was all in the works. Foggy cheerfully embraced the challenge of whipping the slow and grinding wheels of regulation and bureaucracy into some sort of movement. Darcy made sure Nelson & Murdock got a nice Christmas bonus, yes she did.

"What the …" Bucky muttered as he stepped in behind her and his eyes landed on, and fixed on, the actual bar part of his bar. Even in the gloom, it was a massive and impressive structure of solid oak, stained a rich brown so dark it was almost black, and its bright brass foot rails and fittings gleamed in the pale half-light. Getting the thing made and installed took a couple months, and many hands, but Darcy thought the results were, frankly, spectacular.

She grinned and hit the switch next to the door, turning on a string of construction lights — the fixtures weren't installed yet — so he could get a better look. "Merry Christmas."

"When did …" The words died in his throat and he openly gaped.

The bar space was pretty good-sized, with enough room for the pool tables and dartboards Bucky insisted were necessary. It was longer than it was wide, with the entrance on the short side, and the original layout called for the bar to sit in the back half of the room, facing the door. A smaller, more private room would lay behind it with the door to the kitchen and storage. But Clint, who was
probably more excited about the bar project than any of them, pointed out that, while this would be open to the public, it would also be frequented by spies — mostly him — and they’d be twitchy about sitting at the bar with their backs to the door — still mostly him.

Moving the bar to sit along the length of the space, meant a redesign from the architect, who was plenty happy to keep getting paid. It also required a great deal of chicanery to keep Bucky out of the loop for weeks. Because, at some point, Darcy'd decided that this should be a surprise. She couldn't say why she thought it ought to be, except that maybe she just liked the idea of giving Bucky a good surprise after all the moderately shitty ones they'd had over the last year. Steve and Jane joined in the conspiracy, offering distractions when they could, and Clint happily set about helping Darcy pound out the details of the redesign.

"You did this?" Bucky asked, still shocked, but there was a smile on his lips and it was growing. Darcy was immeasurably proud of herself for having kept this secret from the super spy assassin who also happened to be her nosy partner.

"I had a lot of help," Darcy admitted as she walked around the room turning on a handful of space heaters to take the nip out of the air. "Pepper found the cabinet-maker, a family company in Ireland who've been making these things for like two hundred years. Jane was their contact in the UK for design approvals and all that. Then they shipped it to Steve and sent along a couple of their guys. And Steve, Clint, and Sam Wilson helped them put it in over the last week."

Bucky nodded slowly, his smile turning into an actual grin. "And Coulson sent us to Japan."

"Wasn't that nice of him?" Darcy laughed.

"I wondered what he needed us for," he said, his tone distracted as he walked up to the bar and ran a hand down the smooth wood. "It was pretty much just a hand-off."

"He was going to send Hunter, but when I asked if he had anything that would get us out of town for a week, he tossed it our way."

His eyes did the crinkling thing again, and his nose even scrunched up a bit, then he laughed. "You are something else, doll."

"So …" she said, wandering back his way. "Tell me you like it."

He bit his lower lip and gave her a disbelieving look. "Are you kidding?" Gathering her into a sudden bear hug, laughing when she squeaked in surprise, he lifted her toes off the ground and pressed a bristly kiss to her cheek. Yeah, she was a big fan of the casual affection.

Setting her down, he gave her a quick squeeze, and let go to head off and start his exploration of his fancy new playground. He circled around behind the bar and methodically made his way down its length. There was an equally long run of matching cabinets and shelves along the wall behind the bar, and Bucky took his time making an examination of every bit of it. He opened every cabinet, looked at the cut-outs where the taps would fit, considered the placement of the plumbing fittings, poked into the drawers, and smiled the whole time.

"Damn, doll," he said when he'd gotten back to his feet after looking down the trapdoor to the keg mounts in the basement, "we've got us a bar."

While he was exploring, Darcy was content to lean against the bar and enjoy his child-like curiosity and happiness. "Feels real now, huh?"

"Yeah it does." He braced his hands on the smooth wood and looked out across the space. "This is
going to be great. I mean, I always thought it was a good idea, but …” he laughed.

"So,” she said, cocking an eyebrow at him. "Good surprise?"

"The best," he laughed again. "Gotta say, the absolute best."

"See how you should have trusted me all along?"

"I trusted you," he protested, "I just didn't know what you were up to."

"Only good things, Barnes," she sniffed, but couldn't help her own happy laugh. He looked so delighted. Success, Lewis!

Pushing away from the bar, she walked down to the end and grabbed up an outlet box and held up a loose cord, shaking it at him. "Now, because it's actually Christmas, we've got to do this right." She plugged in the cord and smiled in satisfaction when the Christmas lights over the bar lit up. "There."

He blinked up at the colorful lights and gave her a bemused look. "How long have you been planning this?"

"We weren't sure the bar would be done in time to get it installed for Christmas. So, this part, not so long. But, I can hang some lights; that was hardly a thing." Next, she plugged a music dock into the box and set up her phone, calling up the Christmas playlist she'd made.

She waggled her eyebrows and asked, "Want to dance, soldier?"

"Depends, am I still the grumpy soldier?" He said with a wry smirk, working his way back around the bar towards her.

"You look pretty happy from here. But, I can call you the handsome soldier, the charming soldier, the adorable in his ugly sweater soldier, if you like any of those better." She held out her hand to him.

He frowned for a second and looked down at his chest and the bright red yarn peeking from his jacket. "Damn it, I forgot I was wearing this thing."

Darcy laughed and waved him on. "Ignore the sweater. Come dance with me."

Pulling her to him in a spin, he started them swaying to 'Winter Wonderland'. "You don't have to only play the songs from my day, you know."

"Believe it or not, these are still crazy popular." Lifting a hand to his face, she brushed her thumb along the side of his jaw, enjoying the scratch of his stubble. Her life was crazy enough that this was her second Christmas in six months. She'd spent the first one missing the hell out of everybody, but hurting for Bucky in particular. It was hard to be full of good cheer when you knew you had to leave your partner alone on a long, dark road.

Maybe she'd needed to do this Christmas right as much for herself as for him. Somehow, they'd both made it, and she wanted to acknowledge that, appreciate it, and dance with her soldier.

"When I was with Howard, it was actually really nice to have something that was so familiar," she explained. "Bing Crosby, the Andrews Sisters, Nat King Cole. I grew up listening to all this, so it felt like home. I didn't feel so fish-out-of-water, you know."

"I can't imagine you feeling out of place anywhere."
"I'm just good at hiding it," she said with a genuinely modest, self-effacing laugh. "It took me weeks to figure out how to do my hair by myself. I forgot bus tokens were a thing until I wanted to take the bus somewhere, and then I couldn't figure out where the hell you got them from. I couldn't remember a phone number to save my life. The automats were a mystery; Peggy laughed at me a lot for that. The grocery store was nothing but baffling; if it came in a box or a can I didn't know what it was half the time — could have been laundry soap, could have been cake mix, hell if I knew. I think I spent three months looking like the stupidest person around."

"I don't believe that," he chided.

"You should. It was true."

"Nah, you figured it all out lickety-split," he said, absolute in his certainty. "I know you."

She shrugged that off, because at no point did anything in 1946 feel that easy. "It's the little things, isn't it? Not the big stuff; you expect the big stuff, you're ready for it. It's the tiny little things you never think about thattrip you up in the end."

"I guess so. Maybe it's better all feels so far away for me. Not forever, but distant," he mused, and she felt him playing with the ends of her hair against her back. "Must be hell on Steve."

"I think it was," she agreed softly. "I could tell it was getting easier for him, though, when he started bitching about everything. When you can bitch, you're not drowning, you know?"

Bucky chuckled and pulled her closer to his chest. "I like how you think, doll."

"Well, it's true," she grumbled.

"Nah, I believe you, that's what I mean," he smiled at her. "You're right. If you can complain about it, those little things, then they're not choking you."

"Exactly," she grinned up at him as 'The Christmas Song' came up next on the playlist, Nat King Cole washing over them, warming up the room far better than the space heaters.

"When did you know it was getting easier for me?" He asked.

Darcy pursed her lips. That was such an odd question from him; he didn't usually ask that sort of reflective, analytical question — not about himself, anyway. And it wasn't an easy question to answer. His transition to the 21st century wasn't nearly as abrupt as Steve's; Bucky's culture shock was of a different sort, complicated by decades of mental conditioning and controls. Still, she had thought about it, and she wouldn't exactly say things were easier for him. It was more that he didn't notice the little things so much; they'd been stripped away from him along with everything else.

"Probably when you started griping about what things are called," she said after a moment, offering him an observation she did have. "That bugs you more than it bugs Steve. Steve gets surly over the price of things, or how he can't find things he used to have. Boy, was he happy with that 5 pound box of vintage candy I got him. And boy were half of those things too disgusting for me."

"Not big on the licorice laces?" Bucky laughed. "He always liked those. And the, uh, what were they? The banana taffy, yeah. He liked that, too."

"It was the weird maple bun bar thing that was a bridge too far for me. Also, what the hell is a chick-o-stick, Bucky? What the hell?" She grabbed the front of his jacket and gave him a light but pleading shake.
"But, he was happy," she concluded. "And he's probably hitting a sugar rush about now. How much sugar does a super soldier have to consume to hit a sugar rush? And how long does it last? Too bad Bruce took off; it could have been a worthy study."

Bucky brushed a finger across her cheek in a gentle, comforting gesture, and hooked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "He'll be back."

"Yeah, maybe," she muttered. "That was all really bad. I can't blame him for needing to get away."

"Any idea where he is?"

She shrugged. "Honestly, I haven't looked. If he wants to disappear for a while, I'm okay with giving that to him."

"I'd bet SHIELD doesn't feel the same way," he commented mildly.

"If Phil knows where he is, that's Phil's business," she said, unconcerned. "He hasn't asked me to look, so I'm staying out of it."

"If he does ask you?"

The subject of Bruce made her a little edgy, and the complication with her SHIELD position only added to that. And she'd rather not spoil Christmas by dwelling on it. "I'll cross that bridge when I come to it, okay?"

"Alright," he said easily. They resumed their dance to 'White Christmas'.

"This," Darcy said, leaning her chin against Bucky's chest, "is the number one song ever recorded. Not the number one Christmas song, but the number one song ever."

"Really?" Bucky asked, sounding actually sort of astonished by that piece of information.

"Mmmhmm," she turned her head and rested her cheek against him. He was so solid, so warm, and even at his most dangerous, he felt like one of the safest places she'd ever been. "Good ol' Bing."

He chuckled and wrapped her more tightly in his arms. "I guess so. Good for him, huh?"

Snorting, she nodded, "I'm sure his descendants are thrilled."

"I saw him at a show in, uh, I think it was England. Not bad, and boy, the ladies sure liked him." He tugged at her hair, and she looked at him. Bearing his teeth in a leering grin, he bent down to whisper in her ear, "Always got them in the mood to dance. Good for morale, you know."

Darcy burst into laughter and gave his shoulder a shove. "So how's your morale, grumpy soldier?"

He gave her a pout and wrinkled his nose. "I thought I was the handsome soldier now."

"I guess it —" Darcy was cut off by a loud bang coming from the kitchen. Bucky spun out of her arms so quickly she stumbled and had to lunge to grab his elbow. "It's okay."

He had his Glock in his hand and was stalking towards the back, Darcy pulled along in his wake as she tried to get him to stop. "Really, Bucky, I swear. It's okay. It's probably just an idiot," she shouted the last towards the door.

"Sorry," a voice called back. "It wasn't my fault."
Bucky froze and frowned. "Is that Barton?"

"Yes," Darcy breathed out in relief when he lowered his gun. "Like I said, just an idiot." She ran a hand down his back in apology. "I didn't mean this part to be that much of a surprise. I lost track of time."

Bucky raised an eyebrow and narrowed his eyes. "What's this part?"

"Dinner, of course."

"With Barton?" He asked with a bark of skeptical laughter.

"Hey, guys," Clint said, sticking his head around the kitchen door at the end of the bar. He grinned at Bucky. "Like it?"

Bucky blinked, looked down at Darcy, and then back at Clint. "Yeah. It's great. I, uh, heard you helped. Thanks."

"Sure, no problem." He jerked and stumbled forward when Jane pushed past him.

"Oh wow," Jane said on a long breath as she took in the new cabinetry. "I only saw drawings and the mock-up. Wow, this is beautiful." She wandered down behind the bar as an increasingly bewildered Bucky watched the newcomers.

"You wouldn't come to breakfast," Darcy murmured, continuing to rub her hand along the tense line of his back, "and Christmas is time for family, weird as they may be."

"Yes, exactly," Jane exclaimed. "Merry Christmas, Bucky."

"Merry Christmas," he responded automatically, still seeming a little dazed. "Uh, how are you?"

"Good," she grinned at him, then she turned the grin on Darcy. "Really good."

"Clint, a hand here, geez," Steve called out and Clint let out a long breath.

"He's been twitchy for the last hour," Clint grumbled as he disappeared back into the kitchen.

Jane grimaced. "He kind of has been. Did you set up the table?"

Darcy nodded back and pointed over the half-wall that separated the barroom from the smaller dining room — or as Clint called it, the serious drinking room. Bucky'd been so caught by the bar, he hadn't looked through the rest of the place, missing the table and chairs set up in the darkened corner.

He gave her an odd look — not angry, not surprised, not confused, just odd — and walked off to look over the wall. "When did you do this?"

Darcy and Jane trailed along behind him. "Remember how I said my dad woke me up at four?"

"You came out here then?"

"Well, not at four, but pretty early. It was still dark, and shit, it was cold, oh my God," she groaned and wrapped her arms around herself at the remembered sharp bite in the morning air. "But, no traffic, at all. Because, of course, every sensible person who didn't absolutely have to be out at that hour was asleep. My dad's a jerk."

Jane laughed and brushed past the pair of them, pulling out a packet of matches to light the candles
on the table. "Looks nice, Darcy."

"Thanks." She bent down and picked up another loose cord and plugged it into an outlet box. "I did some Christmas lights in here, too."

"Oh, and a little tree," Jane said, pleased when the twinkling lights came up, revealing the half-sized Christmas tree in front of the windows. "Where'd you get the tree?"

"That was me," Clint said, pushing into the room from the kitchen's side door, grunting under the weight of a huge tray, which he slid onto the table. "I found the little tree."

"He means he brought the Charlie Brown tree from his apartment," Darcy said as she straightened the star on top of the scraggly fir.

"So?"

"It's a nice tree, Clint," Jane praised, giving Darcy a flat, slightly judgmental look for teasing Clint about his tree.

"Thanks, Doc," he told her, with a saccharine, little boy grin.

"So, is Steve going to hide in the kitchen all night, or what?" Darcy asked, looking towards the kitchen door.

Steve backed into the room, carrying another large tray. "You ordered enough for an army, Darce."

"Or, I ordered enough for you and Bucky and hopefully there'll be some left over for the non-super soldiers present."

"There'd be enough even if Thor was here," Steve said, as he set the tray down, then he looked up at Bucky and grinned. "Merry Christmas, Buck."

"Merry Christmas," Bucky replied, his incredulity was wearing off and he was on the edge of actually smiling again.

"Did you give the security guards their dinner?" Darcy asked as she walked over to the table and started pulling covered dishes off the trays.

"Yeah," Steve said, lending a hand to set the table. "They appreciated it. And they want you to know you're their favorite boss."

"Yeah, because, hello, prime rib," Clint said. "Nobody ever gave me prime rib on guard duty. You know how to bribe, Darce."

"Feel free to head on out there, Barton," Steve laughed, waving his hand at the front of the building.

"No. It's cold. And I get prime rib in here, too. So … pass."

"Technically," Darcy put in, "they still work for Fury."

"Yeah, but Fury didn't buy them a Christmas dinner," Clint pointed out.

"Well, but, they've got to work on Christmas," Darcy argued back. "That sucks. I mean, I know they volunteered, and they get you know, holiday overtime for it and all, but still."

"Softy," Bucky muttered under his breath, but his smile had finally broken through.
"Don't let it out," she grumbled, while Jane snickered at her and Steve grinned.

"Let's eat," Clint called, waving them all to the table and the plates set around it. Veggie lasagna for Jane, and prime rib for the rest of them, and, yes, probably enough side dishes to feed an army.

Before they could eat, Steve insisted on saying grace. It was Christmas, after all, he argued, and for this one meal, at least, they ought to say grace. Nobody argued. In fact, Darcy was warm and happy with the spirit of the season, and as she looked around the table at her friends, she felt profoundly grateful, as well.

They weren't all there, of course — Natasha was still far too uncomfortable around Bucky, so she begged off, claiming plans with Maria Hill. Sam Wilson was visiting family, Tony needed to get away as much as Bruce had, Thor was on Asgard, Rico hadn't gotten his ass in gear for the move to New York yet, Rhodey was keeping watch, and Erik was in Stockholm spending the holiday with a niece. And this felt like too personal a meal for the newest members of the team (though, Darcy had invited them to breakfast).

But even with the absent friends, there was still plenty to be grateful for from those present. Jane had come to New York specifically to spend time with Darcy over the holiday, and that had been a pretty awesome gift. With Barton salivating over his prime rib, she knew he wasn't alone in his apartment wondering if the dodgy Chinese food in the back of his fridge was still edible, and he was great at keeping any situation from becoming too tense. And there were Steve and Bucky, two men she adored, together again after so much loss and pain. Their relationship hadn't entirely mended, but Bucky stopped running, and Steve stopped looking so devastated, and they could sit next to each other at a table for Christmas dinner.

Yes, this was what joy and goodwill felt like.

"Aren't you going to take your coat off?" Jane asked Bucky as she handed him a platter of steamed vegetables.

"No," he said, his tone flat.

"Are you sure?" She squinted at him. "It's getting pretty warm in here."

"No," he repeated.

Darcy snickered and told her, "He doesn't like his ugly sweater."

Clint looked away from busily doctoring his baked potato and frowned. "What's not to like?" He leaned back, puffing up his chest to show off his garish purple sweater with its festive holiday bears. "Fashion, man."

Jane nodded and tugged at her own sparkling, candy cane-bedecked garment. "It's completely stupid, but, Darcy whines so much if I don't wear it. And, you know, it's harmless and kind of fun if we all wear them."

Bucky's eyes slid to Steve, who was wearing a sedate, unadorned blue sweater. "What about that guy?"

"Oh," Jane said, her spine going straight as she was struck by a thought. "I forgot." She left the room and came back with her bag. Pulling out a green sweater, she dropped it into Steve's lap. "Look what I found on the balcony."

"Uh. Great." Steve forced a smile. "I wondered what happened to it." Wow, was Captain America a
terrible, terrible liar.

"Darcy figured it didn't get far, and asked if I'd keep an eye out once you lost it," Jane said, showing a lot of teeth when she smiled back at him.

"I'm sure she did," Steve grumbled, shooting Darcy a betrayed look. She smirked at him, a little wicked satisfaction in it. She had far more right to feel betrayed than he did; she'd bought the sweater, after all.

Darcy leaned towards Bucky and whispered in a low, urgent voice, like a trainer riling up her fighter between rounds, "Show him up. Show him you fear no knitted terror. Show him he's being a great big baby about a stupid sweater. Kick his ass, Buck."

Bucky shoulders rose and fell as he heaved a resigned breath. "Fine."

Standing up, he gave Steve a challenging look, and shucked his coat. Jane snorted a laugh, and tried to muffle it by stuffing a piece of bread in her mouth. Clint tossed Bucky a thumbs up.

Hanging his coat on the back of his chair, Bucky retook his seat with as much dignity as a man in a sweater that ugly could. He kept up the challenging stare at Steve.

"I'm not putting on the sweater," Steve said defiantly. "I'm already wearing one. There's no point changing; we're right in the middle of dinner."

"Chicken," Bucky commented in a quiet but damning voice, and resumed eating his meal. Darcy rewarded him with a kiss on the cheek.

Steve grumbled to himself, looking put-upon, and hunching his shoulders over his plate as he speared a carrot with more force than it probably deserved.

"Alright, alright," Darcy laughed. "It's Christmas, I'll stop teasing you."

"Does that mean I can take off mine?" Bucky asked, looking hopeful.

Darcy huffed, took her turn at stabbing a helpless vegetable. "You guys are no fun."

"I like my sweater," Clint said loyally, giving Bucky a look of deep and bitter disappointment when the other man stood up to strip off his sweater.

"I love you, Clint," Darcy sighed, smiling fondly at him.

"Backatcha. Nat likes hers, too. She wore it out with Hill." He laughed and took a sip of his wine. "I wished I'd taken a picture of Maria's face."

Clint launched into a list of the top five Maria Hill faces, and what he'd done to deserve them, and dinner passed companionably. Jane and Darcy took their turn to share some of their more memorable tales of academia — which would seem like a boring topic, but only if you weren't familiar with Jane's academic bloodlust and refusal to back down ever — Clint looked impressed, and Steve looked a little scared. As for Steve, he warmed up after the sweater situation, and offered some stories of his own of Christmases past, with Bucky making sotto voce color commentary, usually centered around Steve's gift for getting himself into trouble.

After dinner, and before Darcy could get up to get the desserts and coffee, Clint clapped his hands together and grinned.
"Time for presents?" He asked and bounced his eyebrows.

"Yeah," Steve chimed in. "I'll get 'em." He shot up out of his chair and ran to the kitchen, reappearing a minute later with three boxes. He cleared Bucky's plate and set them down in front of his friend. "Open 'em up."

Bucky pursed his lips and shifted in his chair, uncomfortable. Eying the boxes warily, he reached out only enough to nudge them away. "I didn't get—"

"Buck, that's not …" Steve ran his hand over his face and looked at Darcy.

Darcy grimace and shrugged back at him. While she'd spent more than a year with him, some things were still a little beyond her, and getting Bucky comfortable with other people caring about him wasn't easy. And the truth was, Steve was trying too hard to be gentle and not pressure him. Which Darcy understood. But Bucky was his oldest friend, and he wasn't going to bolt. Steve could fix this better and quicker than she could.

Taking a breath, she looked at Jane, who was looking thoughtful, trying to sort out how to proceed herself. Clint was watching, as Clint did; but Darcy couldn't read his opinion.

"Look, Bucky," Steve tried again as Bucky crossed his arms and chewed on his bottom lip. "We're just …" The words died and Steve frowned in consternation — whether at himself or the situation, it wasn't clear.

Darcy cleared her throat and decided if Steve couldn't get the words out, she'd just have to feel her way through and hope the others followed. "You're my partner. I don't know why you wanted to partner with somebody who was pretty much a rookie. But, I've been grateful every day that you did. So … thank you."

Bucky looked at her, readying himself to say something, but Jane interrupted any protest he would make.

"You look after my intern and—"

"I'm not your intern anymore," Darcy exclaimed.

"You look after my intern," Jane repeated in a louder voice. "And you keep her safe. Thank you." She glanced at Clint and gave him a nudge with her elbow.

The archer blinked lazily and waved a hand at the room around them. "I know this bar/base thing was your idea. And it is freaking genius. Forget Cap; I'm pretty sure you're my hero."

The three of them then turned to Steve, waiting to see how he might chip away the last piece of awkwardness that had fallen over their party. He stared at Bucky for a long moment, before he stepped forward and hauled his friend to his feet. Then he drew him into a tight hug.

"You came home," he said. "Thank you."

Bucky hugged him back, letting it go on for a second or two longer than Darcy would have guessed. When he'd endured it as long as he could, he huffed and thumped Steve's back, saying, "Alright, alright. Get offa me, jerk."

"You're the jerk," Steve laughed, stepping back, but he reached up and gave Bucky's head a shove. With a mock glare, trying to hide the smile on his lips, Bucky batted Steve's hand away and sat down again.
Clint leaned across the table and pushed the presents back at Bucky. "Open them up already."

"I thought you guys all got me the bar," he said, fingering the ribbon on Jane's present.

"Oh my God," Clint groaned, dropping his chin into his hand and giving Bucky a despairing look.

Darcy shared the sentiment and rolled her eyes. "For the love of baby Jesus, just open the freaking presents, Barnes."

Less irritated by Jane than the rest of them, Bucky favored her by opening her gift first. His eyebrows shot up in amusement when he found a black, wooden case under the wrapping. "Gee, hope you both didn't get me the same thing," he said to Darcy with a chuckle.

"How embarrassing," Darcy replied flatly while Jane rolled her eyes.

Bucky opened the case to find a lovely and sturdy looking set of bartender's tools. He thanked Jane sincerely, and moved on to the box from Clint. Predictably, but to Bucky's delight, it held a professional dart board.

Clint let him admire it for a nanosecond before grabbing the box out of his hands. "I'll set it up." He scrambled out into the barroom, picking the most likely wall for the game.

"Great," Darcy murmured. "How many holes are you putting in our walls, Clint?"

"Just the ones we need," he called back, and she winced at the pounding.

Steve's box was next, smaller than the other two, and lighter. Bucky raised an eyebrow at him, but Steve just smiled back, amusement lighting his eyes. When Bucky lifted the lid off the cardboard box, he laughed. A true, deep, rumbling laugh.

"Christ, Steve. Where did you get this?" He pulled a tattered, old magazine out of the box. Darcy leaned over to get a look at the lurid cover — a pulp magazine promising thrilling detective tales. Though, Darcy was pretty sure it wasn't the stories, but the woman holding a revolver in nothing but her very skimpy lingerie on the cover that was the real feature of the rag.

"I found it at this shop that was selling old magazines and records and stuff," Steve said, chuckling. "You remember that one?"

"Remember it? I think I can still feel where my ma grabbed my ear and dragged me off to Father Mullins." Bucky rubbed at the injured ear.

"Gee," Darcy said, giving the cover a good look over. "She seems to be having a problem with her bra."

"Yeah, she is," Bucky agreed, giving her a lascivious grin.

"Boys," Darcy groaned and rolled her eyes. "How old were you?"

"Don't remember," Bucky muttered, thumbing through the magazine. "Kids."

"About twelve or thirteen, I guess," Steve filled in. "Timmy Delany's brother worked at the newstand. He'd slip us these sometimes. Usually, uh, not that racy," he admitted, scratching the back of his neck. "Oh, geez, I swear I heard the hollering from a block away when your mom found it."

"I'd put it in one of my schoolbooks, I think. Guess she got the urge to check on my work, or
something. Boy, she gave me a whooping,” he laughed and shook his head.

Putting a hand on Bucky's shoulder, Darcy rose from her seat. "I'll let you boys reminisce. Jane, come help me make coffee."

"I'm pretty sure you know how to make coffee," Jane said, but she stood and followed Darcy.

"I could have forgotten. You don't know," Darcy shot back. "Dad's stuff is all super automated, I just got a regular one for this. Show me the way, Jane. Help me unravel the mystery of the magic bean juice."

Jane put a hand on Darcy's back, pushing her into the kitchen, laughing as they went.

The rest of the evening was spent on a round-robin dart tournament. Jane bowed out saying it wasn't her game when she couldn't put somebody's picture on the board, and Darcy maintained she liked holding onto the dignity she did have. Watching two snipers and Captain America try to one up each other was more fun than her humiliation at a game she'd never actually played before. This new fact about Darcy absolutely horrified Clint, who promised to teach her and he apologized profusely for having fallen down on her training in such a valuable, tactically-vital skill.

It was past ten when the party finally broke up, and Darcy was feeling the effects of a long, full day. Not even the coffee was enough to drive off the yawning. With hugs all around — even Bucky couldn't escape a few more — Steve and Jane promised to clean up and lock up, and Clint promised to make sure the rest of the pie didn't go to waste, and they waved Bucky and Darcy out the door. Bucky mugged her when they hit the sidewalk, stealing her keys and ignoring her protests. She was asleep before they even made it to the bridge.

A sharp swirl of frigid air and the heavy thunk of the car door roused her. Another blast sent a chill across her skin when her door opened and Bucky reached across her to undo her seatbelt.

"Come on, baby doll," he murmured. "Let's get you to bed."

Yawning, she stumbled out of the car with him and looked up to see Bucky's apartment building. "This isn't the Tower."

"Uh, yeah, hope you don't mind. I don't know about that new AI of yours."

She sighed and leaned against him. "I don't mind. I hope we get Jarvis back online soon, though."

"Yeah."

"But, I'm not that tired," she said. "Besides, even if I was, if Friday wouldn't have let you up, Vision would have come down."

"Yeah, not real sure about him either," Bucky said with an uncomfortable roll of his shoulders. "I've had enough of robots for a while."

"Technically he's not a robot." He gave her a face that said she was being pedantic and he wasn't falling for it. She sighed again. "I'm never getting a sister, am I?"

Chuckling, he led her up the steps and into the slightly warmer building. "Don't stop dreaming, doll."

In his apartment he got her a too-large t-shirt and a too-large pair of shorts and pointed her to the bathroom while he pulled out his bed. When she emerged he was in sweatpants and a t-shirt and was laying out a blanket and pillow on the couch. He caught her elbow when she headed for the couch,
and redirected her to the bed.

"Do we have to do this?" she groaned as she crawled into the bed. "I'm too tired to play the who sleeps where game."

"You're already in bed, what are you talking about?"

"I know the couch is awesome, because I bought it, but you're too tall to sleep on it. Come on." She lifted the covers and waved him over.

"Darce."

"Buck."

He stood in the middle of the room, trying to stare her down, his arms crossed sternly.

"Okay, if you don't want to. But, if you're going to cram yourself on the couch just because you feel like that's what I want, you should know you'll be denying me snuggles. Which, was going to be one of my Christmas presents," she said with a sorrowful frown, laying back and dropping her arm over her eyes, playing up the drama of her disappointment. "I mean, I got some smiles, some laughs, you growling hilariously at Steve when he kissed my cheek. That was way adorable, by the way. Don't ever do it again, because, seriously, jackass. But —"

"God, stop talking," Bucky grumbled, but she could hear the smile in his voice. The mattress dipped and she lifted her arm to watch him swing his legs into bed and settle the blankets over them both.

"Happy?"

"Excellent." Darcy smiled and rolled onto her side to rest her head on his shoulder. "Did you have a nice Christmas?"

He put his arm around her back and tugged her closer. "Best one I've had in a long time. Before the war, even, I mean."

"Good." She slid her arm across his chest and let out a long breath, relaxing into his warmth.

"How about you?"

"Best one in a while, too," she murmured, sleep tugging at her once more. "Last one … I missed you."

"You missed everybody."

"Yeah, but I didn't have to leave—"

"Hey. No," Bucky chided, his voice hushed but insistent. "We're here now. We had a good Christmas. That's all that matters now."

"Yeah." She lifted her head enough to kiss him, letting her lips linger on his for a couple heartbeats. "Merry Christmas, Bucky."

"Merry Christmas, Darcy."

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