White Flag (I Will Not Put My Hands Up in Surrender)

by Livvy1800

Summary

If Bucky Barnes couldn't have Steve Rogers for a soulmate, well then he didn't need one. And after HYDRA's machinations, taking him apart and stripping him of everything decent and good, he decided he sure as hell didn't WANT one either. Having a soulmate made him vulnerable, and Bucky didn't do vulnerable anymore.

Darcy Lewis was really sort of FINE with being Markless. She'd built herself a damn good life, and didn't need a soulmate to complete it. So when "Whoa, I got you, doll" shows up on her back a month after her 25th birthday, she just shrugs and goes back to Scientist Wrangling. After all, she lives with the freaking Avengers, dude. Who could compete with THAT...?

Notes

Welp. I had this idea (jumping on the soulmate fic train), it was light and fluffy and funny. But then Recovering Bucky happens, AS HE ALWAYS DOES, and now this is pretty freaking dark. At least sooty ashes grey, edging toward charcoal. I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED.

Anyway. It will get lighter! I promise!
TRIGGER WARNING: quick mentions of previous thoughts of suicide.

(Also, all the chapter headers are named for the songs in the playlist I'm listening to while writing this.)

See the end of the work for more notes.
If James Buchanan Barnes was disappointed that Steve Rogers didn't say his words the day they met, he could be forgiven. Words or not, Steve was always gonna have a claim on his soul. Other than his family, there was no one in the world Bucky loved better, or with more honesty. Though it had never quite wandered into romantic territory, they flirted along the edges of the idea for so long, he couldn't imagine spending his life with anyone other than Steve by his side. His soulmate would just have to get used to sharing, because him and Steve? They were together 'til the end of the line, one way or another.

_Holy shitkittens, did I win the soulmate lotto or what?_

The words had appeared on Bucky's twelfth birthday, scrawled across his ribs in loopy, swirling writing. He took a lot of guff from Steve and the other Commandos for the cute little heart under the question mark. Pretty Bucky, they teased, Bucky the ladies man. Despite the ribbing, he was secretly pleased by the words, the admiration in them. When he was alone, he'd draw his shirt up over his stomach and stare at it, sometimes brushing his fingers over the thin black marks. The incongruity of the creative cussing and the sweet, tiny heart intrigued him. He guessed, if there had to be someone else out there with his words other than Steve, it was good that at least it would be someone interesting.

At least it wasn't as confusing as Steve's _Don't you say it, don't you say it!_ His soulmark could be taken several ways depending on inflection, most of them not... great. Bucky knew his friend worried over the blocky typeset marching down his forearm, especially once the Howling Commandos were formed. He was always uneasy around the new guys until they'd exchanged their first greetings. During the war, Steve always made a point of only taking guys he already knew into battle, nervous his brush with fate would happen on some battlefield, his soulmate bleeding out in his arms.

So when Bucky recovered his memories after the events in DC and came to live at the Avengers Tower, it was with relieved amusement that he listened to Steve tell the story of how he and Sam met. And if there was a little jealousy burning deep inside at the warm glances the two men exchanged, sitting so close on the couch in Steve's quarters that their sneakers touched, he could again be forgiven.

All through the decades, as Bucky and as the Asset, he'd never heard his words.

Before HYDRA, the situation was frustrating, an itch he wanted to scratch and couldn't. But after the ice, he realized he didn't want to hear them anymore. With his scars, blackened past, and snarly head, there was no way what he'd thought would be admiration wasn't actually going to be horrified sarcasm. No sane person would want to be tied to a man like him for life. There was only so much disgust and terror a person could take, and he could take a _lot_, but hearing it in the words meant to change his life would be too much even for the man who used to be the Winter Soldier. The fated other half of his soul could destroy him in ways HYDRA only dreamed of.
He'd rather take a knife to the gut than meet his soulmate now.

"Yo, Bucky, hellowoo." Sam snapped his fingers in front of his face, concern wrinkling his brow. Bucky blinked, refocusing on the pair in front of him. Steve had that pinched expression on his mug, the one that said Bucky had drifted off in the middle of a conversation again.

"Sorry. Guess I'm more tired than I thought," Bucky mumbled, rubbing one hand across his forehead. It had been a long day; a flight at dawn, a mandatory medical check-up by the Avenger's doc on call, Helen Cho, intense meetings with Stark and then several members of his staff. And a hurried lunch somewhere in the middle of all of it, but that had been a long time ago, his stomach reminded him.

Steve laughed at the rumbling sound, pushing off the couch to tower over them.

"Hungry too, looks like. That we can fix, at least."

"Chinese, Thai, or pizza?" Sam asked, pulling out his phone. They settled on pizza, though Bucky wasn't sure anything would be able to compete with the memory of the place around the corner from his and Steve's Brooklyn apartment.

All in all, it turned out to be not half bad. He liked the invention of stuffed crust. One thing about Americans, no one could say they weren't up for adventure, especially on the culinary front. His furtive visit to the state fair last month taught him that. Bacon cheeseburger donuts, Jesus H Christ.

Full of pizza, Bucky crawled into the bed in Steve's guestroom and tried not to think anymore. He was so tired. Tired from all the months spent running, spent hunting, spent struggling to stay awake because the nightmares wouldn't leave him alone. Tired of trying to keep himself apart from Steve, so he wouldn't tarnish the amazing thing his childhood friend had going here, running with the Avengers.

Tired of pretending he could fix himself.

It wasn't a matter of time and sleep, or recovering his memories. When HYDRA molded him into the Winter Soldier, they broke something vital. His belief, or faith, or hope. Whatever it was called. They stripped it from him, slowly and painfully, like peeling away his skin. They took it from him, so smug and pleased with themselves, because it made him a more efficient killer. Merciless. Unfeeling.

When Steve stood on that bridge in DC and said his name, the rush of emotion in that moment had nearly driven him to his knees. It was like a limb that had been deadened and started to tingle awake, except the tingles were stabbing knives made of molten metal centered on his brain.

Everything that came after, the fight on the helicarrier, dragging Steve out of the Potomac, the disappearing act... He'd ridden it out on a wave of emotion after emotion. Crashing over him. Knocking him off his feet. Pushing through him, filling him. Drowning him. He had no control over it, when it came, and when it drained away.

He'd thought about eating the barrel of his gun more than once, in those early days. Every day was spent in a state of terror, afraid of the emotions that ravaged him. Afraid that he'd stop feeling them again. Didn't make no damn sense, but there it was. Those early suicidal urges were something he'd never tell Steve, his friend was already carrying the unnecessary guilt over not finding Bucky before HYDRA had. But it was a safe bet Sam, the PTSD counselor, somehow saw it in him, the way he watched him out of the corner of his eye. Bucky didn't know his friend's boyfriend well, but he knew enough to trust it wouldn't be something that came up during cuddle time.
Punching his pillow, he shifted on the too-soft mattress, trying to block out the thoughts tumbling around in his fucked up brain and get some sleep. But the more he tried to settle, the tighter he wound, until his muscles were all clenched into tight knots.

"Screw it."

Throwing the covers off, Bucky hopped out of bed and yanked on a pair of loose sweat pants. Shrugging into a wrinkled, sleeveless tee, he slipped through the apartment, closing the door behind him with care not to disturb Steve and Sam. They probably weren't sleeping, it was only 10pm, but he didn't wanna talk. He just wanted to go down a couple floors to that gym they'd passed through earlier on his Welcome to the Tower tour, and punch the shit out of some hanging bags.

He went through three of the sturdy canvas bags before the tension finally drained from his muscles. Eyeing the pile of sand at his feet from the busted bags, he debated going for a fourth but the dull, almost pleasurable ache of his exhausted body was enough for the night. Maybe he'd sleep now, for a few hours.

Shaking out his shoulders, Bucky stepped back and unwrapped the hand he'd taped before beginning. The metal hand didn't need wrapping, even though it was almost as sensitive as his flesh one. The upside to having an arm made of vibranium was that he was a hellavuh lot more likely to split a bag than his knuckles.

Sweat dripped into his eyes and he shoved back the damp locks of tangled hair that nearly reached his shoulders. Pain in the ass to keep out of his face, he was gonna have to do something about that soon. He wasn't ready for the full 1940s Ladies Man Bucky treatment yet, but he sure as shit didn't love the homeless bridge troll look he was sporting at the moment either. Long hair was one thing, and kinda okay, but this mop was somethin' different.

Maybe he did still have a little sliver of vanity somewhere, deep down.

Rubbing a towel over his head as he left the gym, earbuds still in, Avenged Sevenfold screaming from the iPod Steve had given him, Bucky walked straight into a wall.

"Wait. Not a wall."

Walls didn't smell like sugar cookies. Walls didn't have gorgeous green eyes, widening with shock. Walls didn't drop a pile of paperback books on the floor, windmill their arms, and trip backwards over their own slippers.

Yanking out his earbuds with one hand, Bucky jumped forward and slid his other hand behind the girl's back to steady her on her feet. The move brought him close enough to hear the soft inhalation of her breath, to feel the warmth of her pajama clad body, and revel in the scent of sweet baked goods that seemed to emanate from her.

"Whoa, I got you, doll."

Her eyes widened even more, hands coming up to grip his shoulders as he steadied her. Lush lips parted, and he couldn't be blamed for dropping his gaze to them, for just a second. They were lovely, all pink and plump, as if just waiting to be kissed.

"Holy shitkittens, did I win the soulmate lotto or what?"

Every muscle in Bucky's body froze, seizing up as the girl's words registered. His words. The words he'd thought, he'd hoped, he'd prayed, he'd never hear. With startling speed, he jerked back,
yanking his hand from the small of her back as if she were a burning hot coal he'd accidentally touched. Her hands dropped from his shoulders as he separated their bodies, fingers trailing down and catching on his tee shirt as though reluctant to let go, but that was a laugh. There was no way she didn't see the arm, with his sleeveless tee. No way she didn't know who he was, the entire employee roster had been informed he was arriving today. For his privacy, Steve had insisted, but Bucky was aware it was also for their safety. No one seemed to trust he wouldn't snap and go all Winter Soldier again, himself included, if he was being honest.

He couldn't look at the girl, his breathing fractured, heart slamming in his chest. He didn't want to see her face as she looked at him. She moved a little, the soft sound of her flannel pajama material rubbing against itself loud in the empty hallway. Muscles locked up and twitching, Bucky didn't wait to see if she was shifting toward him, or away.

"Don't worry. Never gonna happen, the soulmate thing." The words came out harsher than he meant, but his throat was raw, on fire with all the things he wished he could say instead. "I won't get in your way, you don't get in mine. 'S not a problem."

She drew in a sharp breath, but said nothing in response, just crouched and started to gather her fallen novels. His heart clenched in his chest. He'd though he'd be prepared for this, but damn it all to hell, he was wrong. It was even worse than he'd imagined.

He'd have preferred the knife to the gut.

Looking somewhere in the vicinity of her kneeling form, ignoring the perfect heart shape of her face and tumble of dark, silken curls, Bucky nodded once, then turned on heel and walked away.
Chapter Notes

This chapter came quickly to me, but I don't know that the next few will, so be patient! As always, I super appreciate all the comments you guys leave. *frantically blows kisses*

(Also, IDK why their marks didn't show up around the same time, why Darcy's was late. That's just the way it happened. Maybe it will get explained. Maybe you'll just have to take it on faith. XO!)

"The Lightning Strike" -Snow Patrol

Of all the ways Darcy Lewis imagined she'd hear her soulmate's first words to her, the way it actually happened was not even close to her daydreams.

"Whoa, I got you, doll."

So romantic, she'd thought. Swoony, even. Delicious, with the addition of the old fashioned endearment. She'd memorized every curve and swoop of the lazy scrawl that flowed across the skin just over the swell of her ass, in love with the inky words.

After all, she hadn't ever expected to have a soulmate. Some people, like Darcy, didn't get their words on their twelfth birthday. Some people never got any words, and when she'd turned eighteen with nothing appearing to mark her skin, she'd thought herself among them. It stung. Okay, it hurt like hell.

But she was Darcy Motherfuckin' Lewis and the lack of a soulmate mark was not going to rule her life.

So when the words had flared into being on her lower back about 10 months prior, she'd been pleased and excited, but knew if she never met her soulmate, she'd still be okay. She'd built a great life, dating other markless people, and working for her best friend. After helping her BFF save the world from Alien Dudes with Anger Issues not once, but twice, Darcy felt she'd more than earned her place as official Scientist Wrangler, working for the Avengers and living in the Tower in the middle of the best city in the world. It was pretty damn plush. She was getting paid, having fun, and brushing elbows (sometimes with her tazer) with superheroes.

Not bad for a girl who only took Jane up on her offer of an unpaid internship four years ago for a lowly six college credits.

So she was blindsided when James "Bucky" Buchanan Barnes, former HYDRA assassin, Captain America's childhood bestie, Howling Commando hottie, and current Avengers newb, nearly ran her over outside the gym, dumped her romance novels everywhere, and said the words that would supposedly change her life. Then looked at her like she'd done something vile to him when she said
hers back, like poop on his sneakers, told her he didn't want anything to do with her, and ran away.

Okay, he'd walked. But quickly. With purpose. Like he couldn't get away fast enough. He couldn't have knocked the breath from her harder if he'd actually kicked her in the chest.

*This. Is. Your. Soooooooulmate!*

Darcy sucked in a deep breath and banged her forehead on the lab table in front of her. Her first words to him had been sort of dopey. Mortifying, especially in the face of his clear disinterest. Revulsion, even. In her defense, though, she'd just been saved from falling on her ass by one hard muscled arm, then held against his hard muscled body.

And the silver arm was sexy as fuck.

As were the brooding dark eyes peering out from under a tangle of hair, and he had the sweetest little butt chin, and day old stubble, and...

She was so screwed.

Or not screwed, really. Because he didn't want her. It hurt more than she'd thought, all things considered. A man she'd met for one minute, the night before, should not have the power to move her, soulmate or not. It kinda pissed her off that his snarling words had felt like a slap, one she couldn't seem to shake.

"Jane, do you think my tazer would affect a super soldier?" Darcy lifted her head to look over at her best friend, who was tinkering around with another one of her homemade machines that had been giving her fits again. Sure, she could have ordered anything she wanted, equipment wise, or Darcy could have. But they both agreed it was worth the effort to keep up the old stuff just to drive Tony crazy. Man, did he hate the decrepit machines, held together by duct tape and prayers.

It was the *best*.

"Hmm?"

"My tazer, Jane, would it take down, say, Rogers? Or should I up the voltage? I really want it to fucking sting."

Jane finally looked over at her, her eyebrows drawing together in confusion. "I can't believe Steve would do anything bad enough to warrant being tazed. He's always so sweet to you."

"Yeah, but he has shitty taste in friends," Darcy announced, heaving herself out of her chair and marching over to the coffee maker. She aggressively brewed a new pot. "I met his asshole war buddy James Barnes last night and I really don't think I made the impression I should have. That's where my tazer comes in."

Jane dropped her screwdriver on the table, leaning forward and placing her chin in her hands. She grinned, not even looking a little guilty about drooling over a guy who wasn't a huge blond Asgardian. "Bucky Barnes? *You met Bucky Barnes?* Is he as gorgeous as the pictures?"

Darcy rolled her eyes, trying to ignore the stab in her chest at the memory of his large hand splayed across her back. He'd been unaware that his palm was covering the exact location of his words. It should have been romantic, the jerk.

"Pffft. He's not the same guy from the history books, Jane. He's not nice, or charming." Darcy sat
on the stool across from her friend, crossing her arms over her chest in frustration. "And he looks more like that angry hobo down on Sixth who spits on you if you look sideways at him, than the suave hottie who had girls from Brussels to Bath dropping their panties."

A choking noise had both women's heads whipping toward the doorway, where Steve Rogers and his hobo buddy BFF stood. Steve's blue eyes were accusing as he stared her down, but Barnes just leaned against the doorway, looking bored. The way icebergs looked bored. Icily. His dark blue gaze was frozen and empty as it swept past her as if she was just another piece of machinery in the lab. Ohhhh, no he didn't get to just ignore her now.

Darcy held out her hand to her friend without looking. "Jane. Tazer."

One dark brow lifted as his gaze came back to her, the corner of his mouth twitching into the faintest sardonic smirk.

Darcy wiggled her fingers harder.

"No, Darce." Jane's whisper was mortified. She cleared her throat, standing up and smoothing down the front of her lab coat. "Ah. What can we help you with, Captain?"

"I'd wanted to introduce you ladies to Bucky, but... apparently he's already met Miss Lewis." Steve glanced over at Darcy again, then at his friend, his expression confused. Barnes never broke eye contact, and she quickly realized they'd somehow gotten into a staring contest of some sort. Well, she'd be damned if she was going to lose.

His eyes narrowed slightly as she just stared at him, but he didn't move out of his slouch. Darcy shifted on her stool, slowly crossing on leg over the other. It would have worked better with a skirt instead of worn out jeans, but she had to work with what she had. The skin around Barnes's eyes tightened, but he gave no other indication he'd noticed her Fatal Attraction move.

"Umm. Guys? You are being weird. Even for you, Darcy."

Darcy could hear the exasperation in Jane's voice, but she was not looking away first. Nope. She pointed one finger at Barnes dramatically.

"He started it."

"Darcy, he just looked at you."

"Noooo." She drew the word out, eyes narrowing as he straightened, muscles tensing. The clenching of his jaw told her that he hadn't informed Steve that he'd found his soulmate last night. Found, and rejected. He didn't want her to say it. Well, wasn't that too bad?

People didn't always get what they wanted.

"I mean, he started it last night. When he said my words. Then informed me he had no intention of being anything to me, especially not my soulmate, and bolted."

A pin could have dropped in Asgard and they would have heard it, so complete was the silence.

"Buck, is this true?"

Barnes finally tore his gaze from Darcy's at his friend's wounded question. (She won!) He ran an agitated hand through his hair, making even more of a mess of it. It was really annoying how cute he looked in that moment. Really annoying.
"Yeah."

"What the hell, Bucky?"

"She caught me off guard." He glanced over at Darcy again as he said it, something flickering in the depths of his gaze, brows drawn together.

"I don't... Darcy, are you saying he's your soulmate?" Jane grabbed her by the elbow, mouth dropping open. Darcy reached up and gently closed it.

"Lucky me, right? Smokin' hot legendary super soldier with the sort of skill set that guarantees I'll never have to suffer some gross rando staring at my amazing tits at a bar ever again, and the hardware to open any jar I throw at him. Not to mention, his BFF is Captain America! I could not be more blessed."

Steve snorted loudly, but Barnes was staring again, this time like he was trying to dissect her for biology class. Ugh, she'd had enough. Darcy slid off her stool and tossed her iPod, phone, and notebook into her messenger bag, then slung it over her shoulders. She strode across the room, pausing as she came abreast of Barnes, and glared up at him.

"Too bad he's such a flaming asshole."

Then she bared her teeth in something almost resembling a smile, kicked him in the shins as hard as possible when wearing Chucks (hey, her tazer was probably at the bottom of her bag), and flounced out of the room.

It was a good exit.
Wow, you guys are amazing and leaving me the BEST comments. I swear, I'm not evilly cackling as I write this fic... Okay, maybe a little bit.

XOXO!

"Where The Devil Don't Go" ~ Elle King
"You Know I'm No Good" ~ Amy Winehouse

After three weeks of increasingly tense team movie nights and group dinners full of stilted conversation and abrupt departures, Darcy found herself locked in Tony's office with him, Pepper, and the Bane of Her Existence.

"You are being so unfair, tin man!"

"Look, pipsqueak—"

"Don't talk to her like that, unless you wanna find out what life's like without a tongue."

"Oh, what do you care, Robocop? You can't even speak to her without snarling and snapping."

"Alright, enough!" Pepper smacked her palm on Tony's desk, cutting him off, and giving Bucky a stern look until he sat back down. He'd started out of his seat at Tony's words, metal fist balled up in anger, and she'd be damned if she was cleaning blood out of the carpet again. "We didn't call you two in to this meeting for a fight."

Darcy flipped her hair over one shoulder, and Pepper couldn't help but notice the way Bucky's eyes tracked the movement. He was clearly aware of her, the lines of his body tense, and just as clearly determined not to be affected by her nearness. Poor fool. He was fighting this so hard. And losing. Gracelessly.

"Look, I'm just trying to do my job and stay out of McGrumpy's way, like he wants."

Tony rolled his eyes, fingers drumming on the desk. "I don't know if rigging Bucky's bedroom vents to blow glitter in the shape of donkeys, or replacing his chocolate milk in the communal fridge with chocolate flavored Kefer, is really the way to stay on the DL, Lewis."

"You can't prove it was me."

Bucky curled his lip, dark eyes cutting toward her for the first time since entering the room. "Right. Maybe it was Dr. Banner. Seems his MO, definitely."

"Maybe it was." Darcy smirked at him, folding her arms over her chest. "He doesn't like you much
right now, you know. Neither does his big green friend."

Now it was Bucky's turn to roll his eyes.

"Regardless," Pepper took control of the conversation again before it could devolve into name
calling and hair snatching. These two truly did deserve each other. "You both need to work this out.
No one says you have to accept your soul marks, but you must learn to be civil to each other. These
past few weeks, living in the Tower has become unbearable."

Darcy bit her lip, for the first time looking guilty. "I'm sorry, Pepper. I didn't mean... I just..."

"I know," said Pepper, gentling her tone. It wasn't that she didn't have sympathy for the younger
woman. God knows Tony had made their own bonding as difficult as possible, with the drinking
and the reckless, careless "heroism". But once they'd worked out the kinks, their relationship had
evolved into a smooth, equally symbiotic partnership that she couldn't imagine living without now.

"To help you two crazy kids get your shit together, Pep and I decided on a twofold plan." Tony
stopped drumming his fingers on the desk and leaned forward, pinning them with his intense stare.
The one that meant he was done fooling around and meant business, the one that never failed to
give Pepper the shivers. She loved this man.

"Barnes, you're going to train Shortstack here to adequately defend herself. As your soulmate,
whether you want her or not, she's vulnerable to your enemies, and that's unacceptable. We kinda
love her around here and want to keep her in one piece."

Bucky's flinch was barely discernable, but she saw the way his gaze flicked to Darcy before
skittering away. As if he was afraid of what he'd see in her expression if he looked her full in the
face for once. Pepper felt a pang of sympathy for the man, knowing he was fighting a host of
internal demons along with his own inclination to deny accepting his soulmate.

Tony swiveled in his chair to face Darcy now, pointing his finger at her.

"And you will teach the old man how to navigate modern culture without embarrassing the rest of
us. After spending more time in a freezer than a Thanksgiving turkey, I'm sure Barnes could use a
lesson or two on the basics, like the Internet, microwave popcorn, and K-Pop." 

Darcy's mouth fell open. "You must be shitting me. I am not surfing the net for Lol gifs with him. I
can be nice, I'll even stop glitter bombing his apartment—"

"So you do admit it—"

"And I'm definitely not training with him!"

"Yes, you are." Tony glared back at her.

"Why can't Steve train her?"

Tony glanced over at Bucky, his mouth twisted up in a smirk. "She'll make poor Cap cry."

"That was once! He said to kick him as hard as I could. He just didn't specify where."

Bucky hastily covered his mouth with one hand, looking up at the ceiling. Even Pepper couldn't
hold back her own small snort of laughter. After a moment, he cleared his throat, and looked down
at Tony again.
"Natasha?"

"She put Darcy in a sleeper hold just to stop her complaining."

"Sam?"

"Cited psychological trauma after two sessions."

Darcy hrummped from her seat but neither man looked her way. Pepper just leaned back on the desk, amused. Darcy was a handful, and that's what they loved best about her. Bucky would too, if he could just let himself.

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "Thor can't do it? He's a warrior, right? And he lives with her best friend."

"You know, guys, I am right here."

"Yeah, nope. The Big Guy said one taste of her tazer was all he needed. He's not as dumb as he looks."

"Fine, then let Clint do it." Bucky bared his teeth, shoulders tightening. "They're always together anyway. Shouldn't be an issue to add training to... whatever else it is they do."

There was an undeniable note of jealousy in his voice, sending a thrill of glee through Pepper. Despite what she'd said earlier about no one expecting them to embrace their soul marks, she was hoping shoving them together would force them to face their fears and acknowledge how perfect they were for each other. It was either that, or only one of them would survive the next month.

She put the odds on the short, curvy scientist wrangler.

"Clint refuses to train me," Darcy put in grumpily, slouching in her seat. "He says that I'm dangerous enough with a Nerf gun and isn't teaching me to handle any real weapons out of fear I'll decide to take over the world."

Bucky slowly turned and looked at her.

She shrugged one shoulder. "Well. He's not wrong. I could probably do it."

These two would dance around each other all day if Pepper didn't step in.

"So it's settled then." She stood, clapping her hands together in resolution. The pair looked up at her, expressions full of protest, but she cut them off with a slash of her hand. "No. It's settled. You will work this out, so it doesn't start to bleeding over into the team. There's no room for fractures and dissention among Level One and the support staff."

She walked around the desk to place one hand on Tony's shoulder in a gesture of solidarity. He immediately turned his head and kissed her fingertips.

"And it's not good for the family we've created here, either. A family you're both now a part of, made up of people who care for you both deeply." Bucky's head jerked up at her soft words, looking stricken as he stared at her and Tony. Darcy just bit her lip again, fingers playing with the hem of her sweater. Pepper wasn't above using guilt to get her way, if that's what the situation called for. "So please at least make an effort to work through this and find a peaceful solution. For yourselves, but also for the rest of us."
Nodding mutely, looking chastened, the pair got up and filed out of the office.

After a moment of silence, Tony tilted his head back and smiled up at her. "Have I told you lately how much I love you, Ms. Potts? You are a force of nature, woman."

"Mmm, I think that's why I run your empire while you tinker in the basement with your toys, isn't it?"

"The penthouse, but okay." The smile turned into a full out grin. He snagged her wrist and used it to pull her into his lap, his other hand sliding around to grip one thigh under the edge of her prim knee length skirt.

"Tony! The door—"

"JARVIS, lock it down, privacy mode activated."

"Done, sir."

Shaking her head, Pepper laughed and threaded her fingers through his hair as he dropped kisses along her collarbone.

"A lot more grey in here since we first met."

He drew back, indignant. "Silver, not grey, for Christ's sake. Grey is for old men. I'm gonna be a silver fox."

She snorted as his fingers found the zipper of her dress, and arched to allow him more access.

"Anyway, it's people like Lewis and Barnes who are giving me all that silver hair to begin with," he mumbled against the lace of her bra and she shrugged out of the top portion of her dress. He pulled back, eyebrows drawn down in a frown. "Think our little plan will work? They sure are a fucking mess."

"Tony." Pepper cradled his face in her palms, stroking the soft, short beard he wore because she liked it. "Have you ever known one of my plans to fail?"

"Good point."

"Now get over here and stop thinking so hard."

"Yes, President Potts. Anything you say, President Potts."

"Tony."

"Oh, I like the sound of that. I'm going to have to hear that again. JARVIS, engage soundproofing as well as the privacy locks."

"Already done, sir."
Again, I had every intention of this being a physical pratfall jokes and silly stuff type chapter, but... Damn you, Bucky. The next chapter is going to be pure FUN and SEXUAL TENSION, though, so hang on.

(Comments are appreciated, as always. I don't get to answer every one, but I read them ALL. XOXO!)

"Poor Twisted Me" ~ Metallica

"Sweet Child O' Mine" ~ Guns N' Roses

Bucky braced his hands on the wall and leaned forward on one leg, stretching his calf muscles. There wasn't time to stretch in the field, but when training, loosening the muscles beforehand could make the difference between an okay workout and a productive one. Depending on one's training partner, of course.

He slanted a glance to his left where Darcy made a grumpy, halfhearted attempt to reach her toes. "I think that's enough."

She looked up, face brightening, until she saw the boxing tape in his hands. Blowing out a long breath, she hauled herself to her feet and yanked her ponytail tighter.

Folding her arms over her chest, she eyed the tape he continued to hold out. "Boxing, really? I mean, it's not like HYDRA's going to go a round or two with me in the ring. I can't get into a punching match with some goon twice my size, which most agents are, let's be honest."

She didn't look in him in the eye as she spoke, directing her comments somewhere over his shoulder as her gaze wandered the room. He didn't like it. Despite the things he'd said, the misgivings he had about having a soulmate, Bucky couldn't help but want her attention on him. It was stupid and self-destructive. Gluttony for punishment.

He wanted it anyway.

"I'm not teaching you to box, Lewis. What am I, an amateur? In a straight fight, you'd be out in 20." He sent her a crooked smile. "Seconds, not minutes."

"Thanks for the confidence." She pursed her lips sourly.

"Not saying anything you didn't say first." He shrugged, reaching out to grab one of her hands.
Biting off a length of tape, he started wrapping it, doing his best to ignore the smoothness of her skin under his callused fingers. "I'm gonna be honest, people will always underestimate you. They're gonna look at you, with the pin-up figure, easy laugh, the big, beautiful eyes, and think soft. Weak. Vulnerable. They're gonna be wrong."

She finally looked at him then, her gaze flashing up to meet his. There was something in her expression, something like surprise. Maybe gratitude. He figured not many people saw the core of steel under the bright, energetic fluff. But he did, he saw everything. Or the Winter Soldier did.

Sometimes there were parts of his conditioning that came in handy.

"I can teach you to beat guys twice your size, like Natalia does. To take them down while they're still dazed by your pretty smile." Reaching for her other hand, he shrugged one shoulder, restless under her intense scrutiny.

"I could never do what she does with her body. I'm not even sure she has actual bones."

The memory of pinning Natalia to a practice mat, the ghostly sound of the crack of her wrist as he wrenched her arm back, had him wincing. The Red Room was brutal. It scarred both trainer and trainee, in so many ways.

"Trust me, she does," he mumbled, concentrating on making sure the wrap was even around her hand. "I'm going to teach you how to take an agent by surprise and incapacitate him so you can run, and find somewhere to hide until I... until the team comes for you."

"Okaaaay." Both hands wrapped, Darcy took a step back and slapped them together, swinging her arms back and forth like a prize fighter. With a sudden grin, she crouched a little and stuck both fists up in front of her face. "Do your vorst, comrade."

"Your Russian accent sounds like a ten penny Dracula, Lewis."

She hopped around and stuck her tongue out, more adorable than any grown woman of twenty-five had a right to look. "Bring it, Bucko. I can take you."

Jesus, she was killing him.

Grabbing both of her fists in one of his own, he leaned in as she froze, stopping only inches from her face. Gratified by the way her breath stuttered, heat crawling through him as her gaze dropped to his lips, he smiled slowly.

"Not yet, you can't."

Dropping her hands, Bucky moved away with purpose, headed for the boxing ring. Climbing up, he ducked under the ropes and gestured to her. She followed, muttering under her breath, and they moved into the center of the ring.

"Rule number one, never drop your guard—"

"Ha, yeah."

"Rule number two, always be on the lookout for your opponent's weaknesses."

Darcy cocked one eyebrow and opened her mouth, but he slitted his gaze in warning and she shut it again with a snap.
"Rule number three, and this is the most important one, so pay attention..." He locked eyes with her, willing her to read how serious he was. "Do whatever the fuck you need to do to stay alive until help comes. Bite, kick, gouge someone's eyes out. Light them on fire. You do what you need to, to protect yourself."

She swallowed, looking away. "I don't know if I can do that."

"You can, and you will." Something a lot like fear flashed through him at the thought of her dying at the hands of HYDRA, because of him. Bucky squared his shoulders, stepping forward until he could lift her chin with his fingers, to face him. Studying her, seeing the nerves she was battling, he deliberately let one side of his mouth slide up into a smirk. "You can and you will, Lewis. Because if you don't, I swear to Christ, I will follow you into Hell just to kick your ass."

Darcy's mouth dropped open and she pulled away, punching him in the chest.

"Who says I'm going to Hell?!"

"Donkey glitter says so. And that punch was weak." He blocked the next one she threw, grabbed her wrist, twisted her around, and shoved her across the ring. "See how easy that was for me? That's why I'm not teaching you boxing."

"Uhh, hello, super soldier! Unfair advantage much?"

He ignored her. "I've put together a regimen of good old fashioned Brooklyn back alley fighting combined with Система I picked up during my time in the Motherland."

"Sis...wazzit?"

"Spetsnaz training. Russian martial arts."

"Oh, goody. I'm going to die today, aren't I?"

"Only if you keep interrupting."

That garnered him a rude noise, and a hand gesture as popular during his time in the Army as it was now. Damn. If he wasn't careful, he was going to fall in love with this woman. She had to be the only person on the planet to give the Winter Soldier the bird and live to tell the tale.

Shaking his head, Bucky slid into a slight crouch, one hand in fist near his hip and the other raised mid chest level.

"Now to begin..."

Two hours later, he was ready to punch the wall. Never in all his years of teaching baby assassins to fight had he had a more frustrating student.

She went left when he said to go right.

She dropped her guard constantly.

She had no breath.

She cried when he knocked her down, for Christ's sake. Only one tear, on her fifth fall, but he fucking saw it. He loathed that it made him feel like the world's lowest scum. Fighting the guilt, Bucky let familiar anger wash through him instead.
"There's no crying in Systema!" he roared, towering over Darcy where she sat sprawled on the mat, rubbing her elbow.

Stopping mid-sniffle, she shot him a suspicious glare. When he merely crossed his arms and glared back, she jumped to her feet, bruised elbow forgotten.

"You know what, Sergeant Barnes? You can take your training and shove it right up your ass. I've done everything you asked and all you've done is yell at me!"

"You're not even trying."

"I am trying!" Now she was shouting back at him, stepping right up into his personal space, her face flushed. One hand shot out, shoving him hard right in the middle of his chest. Not hard enough to move him, but harder than she'd been hitting all afternoon, he noted smugly. "I've been trying for hours, and you're not interested in anything but forcing me to become some watered down version of Natasha. I'm not her, James, I never will be! I'm not her, I'm not Steve, I can't be like them. Sorry to be such a disappointment, but I'm done."

Wait, were they still talking about training? It didn't feel like it.

Spinning on her heel, Darcy was out of the ring and halfway across the gym before Bucky realized she was actually leaving. He'd never had a student walk out on him before. Mostly because they had been afraid he would gut them if they'd dared, and they'd have been right.

Well... shit. Maybe he had come down on her too hard. But he needed her to be able to defend herself from the dangers just being connected to him would bring. Losing her because he'd failed to train her properly was unacceptable. Losing her at all was unacceptable.

"Wait!" Bucky jogged across the room, catching her by the arm before she could walk out the door. Rubbing one hand over the back of his neck, he softened his gaze, trying for an apologetic smile. It was a little shaky from disuse, but he managed. "I'm sorry. You're right."

Darcy's eyes went wide, eyebrows shooting up to meet her hairline.

"Excuse me, what? Say that again."

"You were right." She no longer seemed in danger of running away, so he let go of her elbow, shoving both hands into the pockets of his sweats. He could eat a little crow, even if it choked going down. "I was pushing too hard. I've only ever trained Red Room candidates and Steve. I might have, um, expected too much from you on your first day."

"Ya think?"

Darcy's gorgeous green eyes were still wary but she smiled at him, just the slightest bit. Slowly Bucky let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He hadn't completely fucked it up. Okay. He could work with this. He could fix it.

He'd promised Pepper he would. They would. And... he wanted to. He didn't want this anger and frustration between them any longer. It wasn't the fun sort of fighting.

"Listen, I think I owe you a drink. Or three." Reaching out, he gave into the urge to see if her hair was silky as it looked, and tugged a wayward lock behind her ear. She startled at the contact, but didn't move away. "Lemme buy you a drink, Lewis, to show you how sorry I am I beat you up on your first day."
Her mouth twitched, as if she was biting back a smile. "You are such an asshole."

"Yeah, but I'm your asshole."

Well, fuck him, what the fuck had just come out of his mouth? Darcy stilled, staring up at him, her lips parted. It took everything in his power not to crush his mouth to hers, to find out if she was feeling the same electric buzz he was in that moment. This was getting out of hand.

Stepping back, he cleared his throat. "Meet me in the lobby in half an hour. Shots and chicken wings, I'm buying."

"I want beer."

"I'll buy you a pitcher, just get your ass moving. I'm starving."

Darcy snorted, waving her hand over her shoulder as she strode from the room. "Ten bucks says I'll be ready before you are, pretty boy."

She'd probably win that bet, considering the long cold shower he was gonna need before hitting the bars with her.

Get a grip, jackass, get a fucking grip. This muzzy headed feeling was exactly why he couldn't give in to the soulmate thing. She was a distraction he couldn't afford, not like that. Keep it on solid, friendly ground.

Easy. Sure. No problem at all.
They were both late, but Darcy was pleased to see she'd still beat James to the lobby. That ten dollars was hers, baby. A quick shower, yanking on skinny jeans, a spaghetti strapped tank, and her favorite heeled sandals had only taken a few minutes. It was curling her hair into a wavy cloud that flowed down her back and putting on careful make-up that put her behind. What was James doing that could possibly take so long, polishing his arm?

She smoothed one hand down the front of her silky, pink top, pressing her palm to her stomach as a sudden bout of nerves hit. It was silly to get all fluttery and weird just because he wanted to take her out for a drink, but she'd been riding on nerves since leaving the gym. He'd been more than clear that first night on how he felt about having a soulmate, and she wasn't desperate, for God's sake. So what if she occasionally (all the time) fantasized about licking her way down his abs?

James was probably only taking her out because he felt bad for making her cry.

Not that she had been actually crying. What was she, a big ol' baby? Nope. What she was, though, was a really good actress. Darcy grinned at the memory of his slightly panicked expression when he saw the lone tear she'd let trickle down one cheek. Sucker! But it had gotten her out of practice and an invite for a night out with her soulmate, so she wasn't sorry at all.

But she also wasn't a fool, she knew she wouldn't make it through a solo evening with him without doing something inappropriate that would probably make him uncomfortable, so she'd invited the rest of the team as a buffer.

Darcy looked up as James entered the lobby, Steve and Sam on his heels. He nodded at her, silent again, looking disgruntled as the other men leaned over and greeted her with kisses on both sides of her cheeks.

"Thanks for the invite, Darcy," Steve said, dropping his arm around Sam's shoulders and drawing the shorter man into the crook of his embrace. "We were in danger of being serious couch potatoes. It's good to get out once in a while."
"Thank your BFF, it was his idea." Darcy sent James a twinkling smile that he answered with the wry quirk of his lips. "Also, he insisted on buying. Isn't that sweet?"

"Yeah." Sam shot James a skeptical grin, when the other man just groaned. "That's Barnes all over. Sweet as cherry pie."

"Alright, can we go now?" James rolled his eyes and gestured to the door. Natasha and Clint walked into the lobby as he was talking, and Darcy rushed over to grab the archer in a rib cracking hug. He grunted hard as Nat just stood back and looked amused.

"Jesus, Darce. You been working out?"

"Not if I can help it." She tucked her arms in both assassins' elbows and smiled. "Now we can go. Tony, Jane, and Thor are meeting us there. Pepper's out of town again, and Bruce stammered something about crowd anxiety and Karaoke trauma before running away."

"What a baby," muttered Natasha as she allowed herself to be towed out the door toward the big, black SUV idling at the curb. "That was one time. And I went easy on him, believe me."

Filled with energy and nerves, hyper aware of James's gaze on her, Darcy filled the ride to the bar with bright chatter. Not that it was unusual for her to keep the conversation flowing, but tonight, something was pushing her to laugh a little louder, talk a little faster, flirt a little harder.

Her clothes felt restrictive, abrading her heated skin.

The bar was kinda a dive, but then most of the places the team went on a night out were. Despite Tony's pleading, no one wanted to visit the popular night clubs or restaurants littered with paparazzi and celebs. A pitcher of beer, terrible bar food, a small dance floor, and a couple pool tables made for happy Avengers. Especially Clint, if he could sucker someone into a game of darts.

Pushing two big tables together, the group settled in with overflowing baskets of chili cheese fries and glasses of beer. Except Tony, who insisted on drinking his beer from a bottle.

"God knows where those cups have been."

Wedged between Clint and Jane, Darcy keep glancing over at where James had kicked back next to Steve. Long legs encased in denim, heavy black boots, a soft looking, long-sleeved grey tee shirt and one black glove completed his outfit. It was a good look. She couldn't imagine him in a suit, or his Army dress uniform, but he probably wore those well too. The man looked hot in just about anything, in her expert opinion. Too bad she only got to look, and not touch. Darcy rubbed her lips together and ran one finger down the side of her glass, watching him from under her lashes.

But... maybe he'd rethought his no-touching policy? The way he'd acted that afternoon was confusing. Talk about throwing off mixed signals. One minute he'd be shouting, the next sliding his hand down to grip her hip as he "adjusted her stance". Half of her mistakes were because she'd been so distracted that she couldn't concentrate on his instructions. She wasn't desperate, dammit.

Just going through a dry spell. A very long, very dry, very frustrating spell.

They needed shots. Shiiiiit, she needed shots.

Darcy jumped up at that thought, heading to the bar with a wide grin on her face. Half of the people around the table couldn't get drunk, or even buzzed, off of regular old tequila. But she wasn't one of them, and she didn't like to drink alone.
A few minutes later, she smacked a tray in the middle of one of the tables, loaded with shots, salt shakers, and lemons.

"Whooo, Lewis is here to get this party started!" Tony gave her a high five and started passing around the shots. Steve and Thor dutifully took theirs, Sam shaking his head with a grin as he accepted his.

"I'm going to regret this, aren't I?"

"Don't worry, I'll carry you home." Steve smirked at him, trailing the back of his hand down Sam's forearm.

"No, don't drink that дерьмо," said Natasha, blocking James from picking one up. She disappeared, coming back a moment later with a bottle of Stoli and two shot glasses. "We are Russian—"

"He was American first, born and bred," protested Steve, his Brooklyn accent thickening, looking offended.

Natasha ignored him, pouring James a shot and clinking hers against it. "We are Russian and have standards."

"Well, I don't have standards," muttered Clint, sliding both his and Natasha's abandoned tequila in front of him. After a second thought, he added James's shot too.

"That's not news to us, birdboy." Tony snorted, holding up his shot in a salute before tossing it back.

Darcy locked eyes with James as he silently raised his vodka and tossed it back, strong throat muscles working as he swallowed. She wanted to climb into his lap and kiss her way down the long line of his neck, leaving her mark for everyone to see. To mark him again, this time with her mouth. She wanted to strip him, until she found her words, and bite him there, as he begged for more.

God, she was in such trouble.

Blowing out a breath, skin prickling as he watched her with a little smirk on his face, as if he could hear her thoughts, Darcy threw back her tequila. The bite and burn worked its way down, setting her body on fire. Laughing, she kept her eyes on James's as she licked her wrist and threw salt on it. Licked it again, dragging her tongue over the area slowly. Watched him bite his lip as she sank her teeth into the lemon, his eyes dropping to her mouth.

Oh yeah, she was in trouble. If she was lucky.

One of her favorite songs came on over the speakers, loud and thumping. Dropping the lemon on the table, Darcy jumped up and held out a hand to Clint.

"Dance with me."


"Your love's got me lookin' so crazy right now..."

"Dance, Clinton. Now."
With a long suffering sigh, he followed Darcy to the middle of the floor, sliding around the few patrons who had started dancing to join her. Very aware of James's gaze, she started moving, shimmying with her arms over her head and snapping her hips. After a minute, Clint loosened up, laughing with her as they bumped and moved. He was her favorite Avenger to dance with, always so much fun, not afraid to be silly. And Nat never minded lending out her soulmate, since the only dances she would agree to partner him on were the slow, sexy ones.

But Darcy definitely felt like tonight she was playing a dangerous game, as she caught James's gaze. His eyes were heated, watching her, one hand gripping the arm of his chair like it was the only thing keeping him in his seat.

She raised one eyebrow, a slow grin sliding over her face, swinging her hips as she spun around to the music.

"I hope you're prepared to deal with the fallout from this."

Clint's voice was low in her ear, as he grabbed her waist, amusement threading through his comment.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Bullshit, Lewis. You are torturing that man." He grinned his approval, as the music changed to something slower, more dreamy. Spinning her out with one hand, he reeled her in with a flourish. As his arms went around her back loosely, she saw James's eyes narrow, sending a little thrill went through her. Darcy shrugged at Clint, trying not to laugh.

"Maybe a little."

Clint shook his head and opened his mouth to say something more, but didn't get the chance as a hand came down on his shoulder, separating him from Darcy.

"I'm cutting in."

It wasn't a question. Clint just smiled devilishly at her before stepping away and replying, "She's all yours, Barnes. Watch your toes."

"Hey!"

Not acknowledging the archer, James moved in close to Darcy, crowding her, his presence stealing the air from her body. Wide hands settled on her hips, pulling her close enough that their thighs touched as they swayed to the music, the heat radiating from his body warming her.

"This good?" His voice was low, rough, his breath whispering over the shell of her ear. Darcy swallowed, fighting the urge to shiver, and nodded.

So absorbed in his nearness, it took her a moment to realize he was expertly leading her around the floor. He had some good moves. Nothing flashy, but smooth, not just the swaying in place thing she did with Clint.

Damn, was there nothing he didn't do well?

A flash of what he would look like in her bed, sliding down her body with that knowing smirk, had Darcy going weak in the knees. She'd bet he did that well too. Better than well.

"You okay, doll?" James peered at her, pulling back to study her face.
She bit her lip, willing the delicious, dirty thoughts away. "Yeah, I'm, um, good."

She must not have totally succeeded, however, because his hands tightened on her hips. He drew in a sharp breath, hips bumping against hers, and she thought she'd go up in flames.

"Keep looking at me like that, and this night out is gonna get cut real short."

"What? I'm not... Okay, I am. I can't help it. You have to know what you do to a girl," Darcy grumbled, her cheeks heating at getting caught out. She was probably bright red, damn it.

"I don't care about what I do to other girls." He leaned forward, growling in her ear, one palm sliding under the loose top to caress the bare skin of her back. The contact made them both gasp a little. "What do I do to you?"

She drew back, skin tight and tingling, every nerve focused on that one spot he was touching. "Why don't you take me home and find out?"

He went still, staring at her, gaze focused and intent for one long moment. Whatever he read in her eyes must have convinced him she was absolutely serious, because the next thing she knew, he'd grabbed her jacket from the table, made their hasty goodbyes, and was hustling her out the door.

Her laugh was breathless as he hailed a cab and shoved her into it, snapping out the Tower's address.

"Geez, Barnes, real smooth. Give a girl a min—"

The rest of her words were lost as he turned to her with a snarl, hauling her into his lap and crushing his mouth to hers. The kiss was everything she'd hoped it would be, had daydreamed it could be. His lips moved over hers nipping and sucking, his tongue licking into her mouth, until she was gasping for air.

Instead of pushing him away, she just locked her fingers in his tee shirt and reeled him in closer, pressing her aching breasts against his solid chest. He groaned and gripped her ass with both hands, holding her in place as his hips hitched up.

The cab pulled to the curb in front of the Tower too soon, both of them overheated and disheveled as they stumbled out. James tossed the driver a couple twenties, definitely overpaid, but didn't wait for change. Darcy hurried alongside him, giggling, not willing to be dragged as his long legs ate up the distance to the private elevator in seconds.

As soon as the doors closed, he was on her again, pushing her up against one wall. Darcy moaned as he gripped her behind her thighs, lifting her and wrapping her legs around his hips. Trusting him not to drop her, she wove her fingers through his hair, yanking out the elastic band he'd used to pull it back, and flinging it away. As the long locks fell around his face, she tangled her hands in them, tugging his mouth away from her throat.

"James, James, what are we doing?" Her voice was weak, as her body trembled in his grip.

"Fucking, I hope." His pupils were blown wide from passion, the black drowning out the vivid blue, his lips swollen and wet from her kisses. His words hit hard, slamming into the heat centered in the vee of her body. "Do you want to stop?"

"No. God, no," she whispered, loosening her grip on his hair and he went back to licking his way down her throat as the elevator dinged. Refusing to set her on her feet, he carried her down the hall to his apartment, face buried her hair. Using his hips and one hand to anchor her to the wall,
making her moan from the pressure, he quickly dealt with the door code.

The door slammed behind them and Darcy finally pushed away, forcing him to drop her on her feet. She put out one hand, holding him off, pressing against his chest.

"I just... I don't want you to regret this. Us. Being together." She bit her lip, wanting nothing more than to tear his clothes off, but needing to be sure his head was clear enough to make the right choice. "I know how you feel about having a soulmate."

"What about you? I'm not the only one here. How are you going to feel, being bound to a man like me? If we do this, there's no going back." His expression was unreadable in the dim light of the unlit hallway.

A shaky smile came over her face as Darcy stepped forward, closing the space between them and sliding her hand up to grip the back of his neck. "I'm not bonding with a man like you, James. I'm completing the soul bond with you. And I want it, more than anything I've ever wanted before."

His grip was iron, holding her where he wanted her as he lowered his head and ravaged her mouth, tongues and lips tangling. Electricity slammed through her body, lighting her nerves on fire. His hard body rubbed on hers, her nipples peaking at the contact, sensitive against the lace of her bra. They needed to get these damn clothes off now. Just when she thought she couldn't stand any more, he drew back, licking his lips.

"I want you, Darcy. I need you. Tonight."

Pure joy burst through her at his words, and she didn't bother to stop the grin that spread over her face. Threading her fingers through his hand, she towed him down the hall toward his bedroom.

"Then what are we waiting for?"

Chapter End Notes

Okay, don't kill me.
I swear, there will be smut. NEXT chapter! This one was getting out of control, it was so long. But don't worry, I won't you leave y'all out in the dark, in front of a closed door.
And again, thank you for all your comments. They give me life, haha! XOXO
Bucky paused in the doorway of his bedroom to watch Darcy. She moved with confidence to the center of the room, stopping next to his bed and throwing him a mischievous smile over her shoulder. Bending at the waist, which did amazing things for her ass in those painted on jeans, she placed one hand on his bed and pushed.

"Mmm, firm." Her lips curved upward in a naughty smile as her eyes promised him hours of pleasure.

She had no idea what firm meant. His dick was so hard it ached, pushing against the fly of his jeans, begging for her touch. He couldn't believe he had her here, in his apartment, about to have her in his bed. The night had started with good intentions, his resolution starting to unravel at the first sight of her in the lobby. All creamy, smooth skin, rosy lips, and bright eyes. His desire had leapt and snapped within him like a feral dog, straining to be let loose.

It had made him feel clumsy, smooth words disappearing. He'd fallen back, watching Darcy from the edges of the group, a place he was more comfortable with still than being the center of attention. Once she'd started dancing, and sending him those smiles, the ones she only gave to him, it had been impossible to maintain his distance any longer.

Bucky had only intended to take her out for a couple beers, make peace, and drop her at her door with the ease of friendship between them. Plenty of soulmates were platonic, there wasn't any rule that said they had to be lovers. Everything would be easier that way. It should have been a simple thing, getting through the night without touching her. Without giving into the urge to kiss her senseless. He was the Winter Soldier, for Chrissakes, the epitome of cold resolve.

But nothing was simple around Darcy.

"Are you just going to stand there and watch me?"

His attention refocused on her, as she kicked off her heels, shaking back her hair. Heat balled in his stomach, watching the long strands slip over her shoulders. Wanting to know what they'd feel like wrapped in his fist.

"Thinking 'bout it. It's a nice view." He sent her a wicked smile.
"Just nice?" she asked, unsnapping her jeans, then shimmying out of them. Laughing, she tossed them aside without looking. "I thought you were the smooth one, soldier. All you got for me is nice?"

Bucky's mouth went dry at the sight of her gorgeous legs, but he didn't move from his slouch against the doorframe. Truth be told, he was nervous. More than a little mortifying, and mixed with a bad case of raging lust, it was tying him up in knots.

Breathing deep, he folded his arms over his chest, arching one eyebrow. "What I have for you isn't nice, doll."

"Why don't you show me, then?" He straightened as she whipped off her top, revealing a matching set of midnight blue lace panties and bra. "I'm practically naked and you're fully clothed. Doesn't seem fair."

"Let's see what we can do about evening that out."

Gripping the hem of his shirt, he pulled it up and over his head in one fluid motion. For a moment, he kept his eyes closed, nerving stretching as she got her first look at his chest and arm, and the mess of scarred tissue.

Cool fingertips against his skin made him jump, as she brushed them over his pec, ghosting toward his metal shoulder. Opening his eyes, Bucky captured her hand in his, their gazes locking.

"Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes." There were days when the scar tissue burned, red and ugly, and he hated it. Other days, he hardly noticed it was there.

"Will it bother you if I touch it?"

Bucky swallowed, his throat tight. She wanted to touch it. It didn't disgust her? But the only emotion he could read on her face was curiosity. When he didn't reply, Darcy glanced up, her wide mouth serious for once.

"I'm sorry, I don't have to—"

"No," he interrupted, his voice hoarse, pressing the hand he held to his chest. "I... I want you to, if you want to."

"Are you kidding?" Her grin was saucy, as she traced the scars with a feather light touch. "Your metal arm, and the scars, and the muscles, and every-damn-thing about your body is so sexy."

Then she leaned over and fucking kissed the spot where his prosthetic arm had been joined with his shoulder, her lips soft and warm. He gasped, his other hand going to the back of her head, cradling the base of her skull, to press her against him.

"Hmm, you like that, huh?" Her lips curved against his skin as she made her way across his chest, her mouth dropping hot little kisses in a trail toward his nipple. When her teeth scraped over him, his whole body jerked, making her laugh. "Oh, James. This is going to be so much fun."

"Do you ever stop talking?" Finally he got his hands in her hair, tangling the strands in his fist.

"Let's put that to the test, shall we?"
Darcy dropped her knees, snapping the button on his jeans and yanking down the zipper before he realized what she was going for. Impatient hands tugged his jeans off his hips as he stared down at the crown of her dark head, sagging against the wall next to the doorway.

"You don't have to... this is... ugunff—"

Slender fingers yanked down his boxer briefs and wrapped around his hard cock as it sprang free.

"I know I don't have to, but I want to. Is that okay with you?" Darcy's smile told him she knew he wasn't going to protest, as she idly stroked him, the pressure making him groan.

"More than okay. Jesus."

The words were hardly out before she was taking him into her mouth. Wet heat enveloped his dick as she laved her tongue down his length, then sucked as she slid back. A shudder wracked him as he stared down at Darcy, perfect rose colored lips wrapped around his cock as she moved up and down it.

He was going to embarrass himself if he didn't stop her soon, he wouldn't last long enough to get her horizontal.

But it felt so fucking good.

She did something with her tongue then that had Bucky seeing stars, sure he was going to black out from the pleasure. "Oh, baby, yes, that's... that's, oh my God, yes..." She was sucking his brain out through his dick, he couldn't even form a coherent sentence anymore, for fuck's sake.

With a gasp, Bucky pulled her away, her lips making the most insane popping noise as she separated from him.

"Hey, I was in the middle of something, ya know—"

"And it was beautiful, Lewis, but now we're moving on." Scooping Darcy into his arms, Bucky carried her to the bed and dropped her onto the mattress, laughing as she bounced. She just grinned and shot him the bird.

God, she was somethin' else. Lying there with all that silky hair tumbled everywhere, legs splayed open and lips swollen from sucking his dick. His stomach muscles clenched as he drank the sight in, marveling again at having this woman in his bed. Not just willing, but eager.

Crawling forward until he'd caged her in, his hips resting between her legs, Bucky bent down and kissed her. Just the lightest brush of his lips over hers, back and forth, rubbing and tasting until she moaned. Her fingers pressed into the muscles of his shoulders, trying to draw him down into her body. But he resisted, slowly pressing kisses on the sides of her mouth, down her throat, along the swell of her breasts.

"This is crime, hiding these beauties away from me," he murmured against her skin as he flicked open the front clasp of her bra, releasing the lush bounty from their encasement. Pretty dark pink nipples, surrounded by pale, satin skin. Drawing one into his mouth, he sucked, loving the way she gasped and clutched at his head. Smothering a laugh at her indignant noise when he released it, he moved to the other tight peak and gave it the same treatment.

Darcy's hips bucked against him, pressing on his erection, and he moaned into her skin. Sliding one hand down between their bodies, he slipped his fingers under the edge of her panties. Finding just what he was looking for, he plunged two fingers inside her, stroking the lubricous wet heat.
"James, oh God, yes!"

Panting, his mouth still pressed to her breast, he could only concentrate on moving his fingers in and out of her in a steady motion. Her legs fell open, allowing him more access, her fingernails digging into his back. His thumb found the hard nub of her clit, and he flicked it back and forth as he plunged into her. A moment later, he was rewarded with a gasping moan as her pussy tightened around his fingers, throbbing as she came.

The sounds she made, the slippery wetness coating his fingers, the musky, sweet smell of her release. If he didn't get inside her soon, he would go mad.

Fumbling for his discarded jeans, Bucky pulled a condom out of the back pocket. After yanking her panties off and throwing them over his shoulder, he ripped the condom open with his teeth. Darcy watched him from heavy lidded eyes, sprawled out under him, and laughed.

"Oh, you had a plan tonight, huh?"

He grinned as he worked the condom over his throbbing cock, pumping it a few times. "Nah. But it never hurts to be prepared."

"You're a regular Boy Sco—oohhhhh."

In one smooth motion, he thrust into Darcy's wet folds, pushing in until she took him to the hilt. It felt better than he could have every imagined, and yet, not good enough. He needed to move. He needed friction.

Something bloomed within him, snapping along his nerves, every sense heightened to an almost unbearable height for a moment. Staring into Darcy's wide eyes, he knew she felt it too, the soul bond, as it sealed them together. Connected them, on a wider emotional band then anything he'd ever experienced. Then the pressure in his mind eased, and he came back to himself, his senses furling inward again.

Slowly, Bucky began to rock back and forth, pulling her tight against him by her hips. Her body felt so good, her pleasure moving through the newly forged soulbond to wash over him, raising the hairs along his forearms, setting his skin prickling. If this was sex now... he never wanted to stop. Darcy wrapped her legs around his back, encouraging him to move faster, to push deeper, by digging her heels into his ass.

He grunted, slamming into her. "Bossy."

"You love it," she gasped, running her hands all over his chest and stomach, nails leaving little red marks. She was right. He did love it. Everything she did, it made him happy. The way she sassed him, the way she handled everything thrown at her with aplomb, the way she looked in his bed while he fucked her. Darcy bit her lip, staring up at him with shining eyes, and he knew she felt what he did in that moment.

Leaning down, he kissed her, desperate for the connection as he drew close to the edge. Her lips were eager, pressing against his, sucking in his lower lip, moaning as he moved in her. The pleasure built, the pressure, thrumming through him.

"Yes, right... right there, I'm going to, oh my God, I'm..." Darcy came apart in his arms, shaking as her second orgasm hit. It was too much, the way her pussy clenched around his dick, wet and so soft. The way her emotions spilled over him, bright and jumbled. Overwhelmed by the rawness of his senses, James thrust into her over and over, growling as he came. His release rode him hard as
he shuddered, his hips still jerking, hands fisted in her hair.

They lay together like that for a long minute, him slumped over her prone body, both of them sweaty and sticky. Then Darcy tried to turn her head to kiss his shoulder, wincing as she was held in place by his grip on her hair.

"Ouch. Babe, you gotta let go. Also? I can't breathe."

So they weren't going to talk about the soulbond right now. He was okay with that. It could wait. With a satisfied grin, Bucky rolled over, flopping onto his back. "Who needs breathing? Breathing is overrated."

"Says the dude who can probably hold his breath underwater for, like, five minutes." Darcy rolled out of bed, taking the sheet with her. "Gotta pee, be out in a sec."

"So romantic, Lewis," he called as she disappeared into his bathroom.

Her head popped back out, giving him a Look. "I am a goddamn treasure, Bucko, don't you forget it."

She really was.

He grabbed the box of tissues off his nightstand to deal with the mess of the condom, as the door closed, since she'd shut him out of his own bathroom. After getting cleaned up, he pulled his boxers back on and laid on the bed to wait for her, one arm pillowed under his head.

Finally, Darcy emerged with the sheet still wrapped around her, her hair silky and untangled again where it fell down her back. She must of found the hairbrush he always forgot to use.

She arched a brow, looking him over. "Your body should be illegal."

"I'm pretty sure it still is, in most countries."

She snorted, shaking her head and climbing back into bed. He drew her down into his arms, until her cheek rested on his chest, arms around his waist. He was one lucky bastard to have a woman like her in his life. After all he'd done, no matter what Steve said about his past, Bucky wasn't sure he deserved her. He would try his best not to fuck it up, knowing there was no way the universe would be so generous a second time.

He stroked a hand down her hair, his callused fingers catching on the fine strands, until her breathing evened out. Soon, delicate little snores started, her rosy lips parted in an O, a chuckle rumbling through his chest. It figured. Didn't matter, it wasn't going to bother him. He'd slept through worse, that was for sure.

But this was nice, holding her in his arms as she slept. Nice was something he'd had short supply of over the last seventy years.

Bucky drifted off to sleep then, dreaming of sugar cookies and wandering lips.
I hope that worked. I think it did. I wanted to incorporate their bonding into the sex, but not make it overly intrusive. It's more a sensitivity to one's soulmate's emotions. I feel like it's something that could be strengthened and fine tuned over time, given practice and exposure. IDK. Just spit-balling here. ;D
There's more to come... Poor Bucky and Darcy, happy endings are so hard to come by. You really gotta fight for them, you know?
Chapter Summary

For one brief moment, Darcy has everything she's always wanted. And then it slowly falls apart in her hands.

Chapter Notes

I'm SO sorry I haven't posted another chapter on this fic in forever. I think I've got the swing of the rest of it, if you'll all bear with me a little longer. Thanks to everyone reading this, for sticking around. XOXO...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Skinny Love ~Birdy
Let It Go ~James Bay
Blackbird (remastered) ~The Beatles

Something heavy was pinning Darcy to the bed. Cracking open one eye, she was nearly blinded by the reflection of the morning sun glinting off of metal.

Oh. Right. James, in her bed.

Ohhhhh, right.

Turning her head, she blew a hank of wildly curling hair off her face. She could just make out the slope of his nose, parted rose tinted lips, and stubbled cheek, the rest of his face hidden by his tangled hair. Lying on his stomach, his prosthetic arm was thrown over her chest, heavy but oddly pleasurable.

She didn't want to wake him.

"I can feel you staring, Lewis."

Wiggling around until she was on her side and cuddled into the crook of his arm, Darcy reached out and poked him under the armpit. Swearing, James jerked his arm back and glared at her from under the hank of hair covering his eyes, making her giggle.

"Dammit, woman. No one tickles the Winter Soldier and survives." Growling, he shoved her backward, rolling over to pin her to the mattress. "You really wanna start this war?"
He looked so good, soft morning sun shining on the crown of his head, kissing the planes of his face. Lighter than she'd ever seen him, playfully caging her under his body.

*Happy.*

That made her happy.

He made her happy, beyond anything she'd felt before, and it scared the beejezus out of her. Because, at best, he had gone into this reluctantly. How much of last night was the pull of the bond, the sexual tension between them, and how much was something he actually wanted? What if he regretted jumping in impulsively, while both of them were slightly impaired from liquor? Especially since he'd fought it so hard. She had to admit, she hadn't played very fair.

The new lingerie set was dirty pool and she knew it.

But she'd craved him in her bed, next to her, holding her hand, touching her face, since he nearly knocked her down in the hallway outside of the gym. Even when he made her angry, and he did a lot, there was never a moment where she wasn't at least a tiny bit bereft without his company. Surely he had to feel the same, in some small measure. Surely.

Shaking off the lingering unease, Darcy arched up, linking her fingers behind his head as she sent him a long, slow smile. "If 'start a war' is another way to say 'fuck you senseless', then yes."

His eyes darkened, and suddenly he rolled them, positioning her so she straddled his hips. Long and hard, his erection pressed against her, sending a fission of heat shooting through her lower half. God, the sex. It was... outstanding. Amazing. Stupefying. It had to be the soulbond, but everything he did, any way he touched her, felt ten times better than any sex she'd had before.

Tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, Darcy undulated on his lap, the roll of her hips drawing a gasp from parted lips. "Do you think the bond is a tool of higher evolutionary breeding? Like, it finds the two people whose genes will create the most perfect match possible, and then makes the sex and emotional satisfaction so good, they never want to look elsewhere?"

"Are you asking me?"

She made a show of widening her eyes and looking around. "Is there anyone else here?"

"I think," he replied, brushing her nipples with the rough pads of his thumbs, his mouth twisting into a smirk when she moaned. "I think that you should save the scientific questions for Jane. I think you should probably stop thinking altogether, doll."

"I think you should try to make me." Placing both hands on his chest, she leaned down with an answering smirk, hair falling in a curtain around them. "First one to reduce the other person to wordless moans wins. Well, I guess we'd both win then."

"The things you say. You make me crazy. I'll never not want you," he murmured, gaze locking with hers. Her fear came back in a rush, the guilt hitting her hard. He said that now as they naked in bed, but later, once he'd had time to think? Biting her lip, Darcy looked away, the details of the room blurring a little.

The soul bond flared open, the whirling kaleidoscope of emotion, both his and hers, rushing out to envelope them. Blinking, she shook her head once, struggling not to drown in it. By his sudden stillness, she knew James was dealing with it too, fingers digging into her hips as his chest rose and fell with shallow breaths. It was a lot to get used to, a lot to process. It was... a lot.
"His head jerked up, searing blue eyes narrowing. "You don't think I'm going to stick, do you? You think I'm going to run?"

"No—"

"I can feel your doubt," James said, lifting her off his lap and rolling off the mattress. "Don't bother lying. It won't work on me anymore."

He sat up, grabbing his jeans from the night before, and yanked them on. Darcy wrapped the sheet around her, a sense of panic started to clog her throat as he moved to the closet and pulled out a shirt at random. He threw it over his head without looking at it, like it didn't matter what the hell he put on, because he couldn't wait to not be in the same room as her.

"James, please. You can't act like I don't have reason to doubt, even a little bit." Darcy snatched up her own clothes, but just held them to her chest. She wasn't about to drop the sheet, even to get dressed. There was something about this moment that made her not want the vulnerability of being naked in front of him right now. Stretching out one hand, palm up, she tried to make him understand.

His jaw clenched. "I think I was pretty clear that I'd changed my mind."

"You don't know what it's like," she said, all her frustrations and fears boiling over. His eyes widened and he took a step back as the soul bond flooded with the flurry of sensation. "I didn't think I had a soulmate, James. For almost my whole life! And then suddenly I do, and then I meet him... he doesn't want me."

"That's not—"

"Yeah," she said, flatly. "It is. You didn't want the bond, you didn't want your soulmate. Now after one night of amazing sex, you decide, oh maybe you do, and I'm just supposed to be totally cool with it? Not question it, not worry, not even wonder a little bit?"

"Darcy—"

"No, I don't need you to talk right now." Screw it, she thought, and dropped her sheet in favor of yanking on her jeans and tank. Balling up her underwear, she shoved them into her pocket, and pushed past him to look for her shoes. "I don't think you're being fair. You can't hold me at arm's length for weeks, then as soon as you decide everything will work out the way you'd like, I'm just supposed to fall into line?"

Darcy found her heels finally, having to half crawl under the sofa for one. She emerged, blowing her hair from her eyes, and rose to her feet, cramming the wayward shoe on. James stood in the middle of the living room, his tee shirt on inside out, long hair still tangled from bed. She faced him, missing a bra, panties in her pocket, and her heart feeling like someone had used one of those Jaws of Life things to crack it wide open. His confusion and frustration echoed down the bond to her, and she understood why most soulmates still elected to date before committing to each other, just like the markless did.

Just because a person was fated to be with another didn't mean they were a good fit. It wasn't always a Happily Ever After, no matter what the storybooks said. She'd hoped...

But maybe this was just how it was for her.

"I'm going now." Darcy rubbed one hand over her forehead, pushing at the pain brewing there. "I need some air, and some time alone."
"Are you leaving the Tower?" His expression was unreadable, but his prosthetic hand clenched at his side. "Because if you are, your travel and destination need to be cleared. With Tony, at least, if you don't want to tell me or Steve. I understand the need for distance, but we did complete the soulbond."

"Meaning I'm now a possible weapon against the Winter Soldier," Darcy said, shaking her head. The bond was as new to him as to her, but somehow he'd managed to close himself and she couldn't tell if he felt as detached as he looked. His face could have been hewn from ice, it was that cold and uncaring. "Don't worry. When I said I wanted to be alone, I just meant not around you."

It was ugly and petty and mean, but she couldn't help the little jagged shard of relief to see him flinch, ever so slightly.

Grabbing her purse of the small table near the door, Darcy turned for one last look. James stood very still in the middle of the room, his gaze on her, jaw clenched tight. It amazed her that she felt nothing from him, nothing in the bond. Was he just that good at turning off his emotions, or were they just that easily brushed aside?

"For what it's worth," she said quietly as the door to the hallway slid open. "I don't think you would have run. Even if you regretted the bond, even if it killed you bit by bit, and me along with it, you would have stayed. And that's why I'm walking away, until we can figure out if this is really what we both want."

Darcy was halfway down the corridor when the first crash came from behind his closed apartment door. She swallowed and kept moving, not stopping until she could press the elevator button with one trembling finger. It sounded like he was breaking every piece of furniture he owned.

Tony was going to be pissed.

A short laugh pushed itself out as she stepped into the elevator, blinking back tears. Nope. She wasn't about to start that crying shit now. No way. Darcy Lewis was the Winter Soldier's soulmate, and by God, she was going to act like it. Taking a deep breath, she pressed the floor number for R&D and ran her fingers through her hair. Time to get back to work.

Chapter End Notes

There's nothing more painfully satisfying for a writer than shattering their favorite characters' hearts and stomping all over the broken bits. A couple of rough chapters here, but there's always sun behind the clouds. <3
All Time Low

Chapter Summary

Bucky struggles with his anger and frustration as Darcy continues to avoid him, and nothing is resolved between them. He contemplates leaving the team and working on his own when disaster strikes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

All Time Low ~Jon Bellion
Heathens ~Twenty One Pilots
The Devil's Backbone ~The Civil Wars

"What's next?"

"Buck—"

"What's next, Steve?" Bucky stared straight ahead, fists clenched at his side as the Avenger's doc-on-call stitched the angry gash running diagonal across his chest closed. "What's the next mission? I overheard Hill radioing something to Barton about an AIM experiment gone bad down in South America. I want in."

"Listen, bud. Maybe sit this one out," Steve said, leaning his shield against the wall and moving closer to where Bucky was sitting on the gurney in the Tower's medical emergency room. Seeing that they only treated Avengers and Level One Shield agents, it wasn't cordoned off into cubes or rooms, just by curtains. Everyone knew to leave his open. Enclosing Bucky in small spaces never worked out well for anyone. Today, the volume of activity, coming off a complicated mission, was making him a little twitchy.

Well, if he was being truthful, he had been more than a little twitchy before he walked into the room. But then Steve's finally reply sunk in, and he went from irritable to pissed.

"No, I'm not sitting this one out," he growled, shoving the doctor's hands away. The man immediately stepped back, hands up, letting the thread and needle dangle from Bucky's pec as he pushed off the gurney to face Steve. "What's the next thing?"

"You're exhausted. You've bullied your way onto one mission after another for the last two weeks, hardly stopping to sleep or eat. I'm going to have to put my foot down this time and say no." Steve narrowed his eyes, voice deepening into that authoritative tone that had everyone towing the line.

Well, it wasn't gonna work with Bucky Barnes. He knew Steve back when he was a little dipshit from Brooklyn, and just 'cause he was a bigger dipshit now with fancy tights didn't mean he got
give Bucky orders.

He was feeling irritable enough not to acknowledge that nearly every day Steve did, in fact, give him orders, and he followed them. *This* was different.

"I'm fine. Think I'm old enough to know when I've hit my limits, Rogers. I don't need you babysittin' me."

"Apparently you do."

"Screw you."

"Very mature." Steve folded his arms, a look of exasperation on his face. "Why don't you let the doctor finish stitching you up, then go grab a shower and a bite to eat. Rest. Maybe get your head out of your ass and go talk to Dar—"

All the frustrations, anger, and hurt from the last two weeks, since Darcy walked out of his apartment door without a backwards glance, boiled up and over. With a roar, Bucky lashed out, catching the metal instrument tray with his fist and punching it across the room, where it lodged in the wall, quivering. The scalpels scattered over the floor, one of them stuck into the middle of a retro SHIELD recruiting poster on the wall. The entire room went silent, everyone turning to stare at him. Clenching his teeth, trying to push the rage back down and not having a whole lot of success, Bucky glared at Steve.

"No. I don't need sleep or food or gym time or fucking chitchat. I don't need Darcy, 'cause it's pretty damn clear she doesn't need me. What. Is. Next. The next mission, the next thing, that's all there is right now, Stevie."

Striding up to Steve, he grabbed him by the front of his uniform, bringing his friend in close, and glared into his calm blue eyes.

"What's next?"

"Nothing," Steve said, his voice cool and steady, as if his best friend wasn't half-strangling him with a feral snarl on his face. "I won't give you another assignment, Agent Barnes. As of this moment, you're on paid leave, one week. Enjoy your time off."

For one long moment, the entire room held its breath, no one daring to move. Then Bucky shoved him away, disgusted with both Steve and himself, and headed for the door, snapping off the needle and thread as he went and tossing them aside. Fine. Screw this. He didn't need to run with the Avengers. It was never gonna last anyway, he knew it, everyone did. There was plenty trouble out there, and he always knew where to find a fight. He used to be good at being on his own. Could be good at it again.

"Whoa there, big guy." Tony appeared in the doorway, suit still on, sans helmet, his expression serious for once. "There's something you need to hear before you run off to journal your feelings or whatever you fellas do."

"Fuck off."

"Tempting, but kind of hard to get in the mood when my best candidate for lab manager has been kidnapped. I was going to offer her some serious upward career mobility this afternoon, and she had to go and get snatched off the street."

The air went out of Bucky's lungs as he slowly turned to look at Tony. "What?"
"Look, the kid can't work as an intern forever. She's smart as whip and I-

"Not that part. The part where she was on the street. Outside. Alone. Explain that part."

"Yeah, about that." Tony looked uncomfortable, scratching the back of his neck. "I, uh, sent her on a quick coffee run while I figured out how to best word the job offer. I knew it would have to be a sweet deal for her to leave Jane's lab. In my defense, it's been a quiet few weeks downtown, all the action's been well out of state. There hasn't been any movement that would indicate anyone suspected you acquired a soulmate, not even a whiff of a rumor. The shop's literally two blocks away and she's been going stir crazy."

"She's been staying close for a reason. I can't believe you were so careless," Steve said, moving up to stand next to Bucky, putting one hand on his arm. He knew his friend could feel the tension in his muscles, that he was about one and half seconds from ripping Tony's arms off and beating him to death with them.

"I know! I fucked up, I get it, Cap."

She must be terrified.

"Do you, Tony? Do you understand what could happen now?"

If they hurt her...

Bucky swallowed against the pounding of his own frantic pulse in his ears. Something occurred to him then, and he interrupted the two men arguing, "I didn't feel anything. I didn't feel them take her. Shouldn't there have been something?"

Fingers flicking over his watch, Tony pulled up a projection of video feed from the incident. His mouth pulled down at the corners as Darcy came into veiw, a tray of coffees in one hand, rubbing her forehead with the other.

"They took her from behind on the street, knocked her out with a hit to the back of the head. Street cam shows it all," he said, then backed up when Bucky threw the standing exam light against the wall as fury surged up again, smashing it to pieces. "Can you stop breaking things? Or better, let's look at what FRIDAY has on Lewis's tracker, then you can break some of other people's stuff."

"Move faster," Bucky snarled, stalking forward. Tony took one look at him and moved out the door and down the hall quickly, the two super soldiers hot on his heels. They crowded into the elevator, bodies tense and stiff. Bucky just concentrated on keeping himself from lashing out again, not putting Tony's face through the metal wall. Not now, not while he needed him, but he was keeping his options open for after they found Darcy and brought her home.

He told Darcy he would come for her if she ever needed him, and he sure as hell wasn't going to break that promise, no matter how they left their... relationship. The idea of her in pain, or worse, made his stomach cramp. Letting his head thump back against the wall of the elevator, he stared at Tony and Steve, who had been quietly talking. There was a numbness taking over, a familiar icy feeling that he welcomed. It was going to help him destroy anyone who had laid even one finger on his soulmate.

Tony glanced up, catching his gaze, and cleared his throat. "FRIDAY, are you done running the trace?"

"Yes, sir. It looks like they took her north out of the city, then west. But the signal abruptly drops off there. Looks like they found her tracker."
"Well, that's not good."

"My thoughts, boss. Either they found a way to dampen the signal or they removed the tracker."

"Where is her tracker?" Bucky asked, keeping his eyes on Tony. Steve shifted as if he was going to cross the elevator to him, then stilled.

The older man looked back at him steadily. "We implanted it in the flesh under her right breast. Her suggestion. She felt it was less likely to be looked for there, and SHIELD agreed."

Swearing viciously, Bucky shoved past them both as the doors opened, headed straight for the weapons room. Natasha and Clint were there already, geared up and ready. The redhead silently handed him a fresh tac suit. While he and Steve changed, Clint and Tony left to get the Quinjet started up. Steve murmured something to Natasha, then followed them, giving Bucky one last sympathetic glance over his shoulder that he ignored.

This wasn't about him right now. Couldn't let his feelings for her interfere. He needed to go into this like it was any other mission, any other job. Get in, extract the prisoner, and take as many out along the way as possible on the way. But goddamn it was hard to do. He felt like he was nothing but emotions right now, burning white hot. Snapping the last buckle together, he turned to find Natasha holding out an array of matte black knives for him. He started tucking them away in his holsters, then carefully began to select the guns he would bring.

"I'm not going to comfort you and say I'm sure she's fine. We both know there's every chance she's not." Natasha leaned against the wall to watch him finish loading up. "But I will say that it wasn't your fault, James. It might not have even been about you."

He shot her a dirty look.

"Hey, she's worked closely with Jane for years and spends time in the labs with both Tony and Bruce. You're not the only game in town."

"I don't understand how they took her so fast." He savagely twisted his hair back into a queue, movements made jerky with anger. Several strands ripped off in his fingers, but the pain barely registered. "I missed something. She shoulde been able to fight back, I missed something when I trained her. I—"

"First, you hardly had any time to work with her, so stop that right now," Natasha interrupted. "Second, even I can't fight something I don't see coming. You looked at the video. They hit her from behind while she was distracted."

"Yeah," he said despair moving through his veins like poison, as they left the room and moved down the hall at a quick clip. "She did look distracted. Like her head hurt. That was just about the time I was losin' my shit at Steve, wasn't it?"

She didn't have to say anything, because they both knew the timing fit. Maybe if he had kept his emotions in check, maybe Darcy would have heard her attackers approach. Maybe she would have had a chance to fight them off. Maybe they weren't after her because of him, but maybe they were able to take her because of him. Or... maybe they would have taken her anyway. He was still letting his emotions chase him, and now they were fucking him up. Some days he almost wanted to say it was better back when he wasn't allowed any, but he knew that wasn't true. Easier, but not better.

Natasha turned to him as they reached the Quinjet, her expression unreadable. "You want to make
it up to her? Get your ass on board and focus on the plan. Get her out and leave the rest to us."

Bucky started to shake his head.

"I mean it." She narrowed her eyes. "You're the best one for a successful extraction, for her extraction. Trust us to deal with her kidnappers."

He stared at her for a long moment. It went against everything in his gut to let the team rain down destruction on the people who took Darcy, but he wanted her back more than he wanted to personally lay hands on them. Just barely, but it was enough.

"Once I have her, it all goes, Nat. Every brick, every paper, every computer, every man and woman who even looked at her sideways."

"Steve won't like it."

"I don't care."

"You got it."

By the time they all made it on board and settled in, FRIDAY had mapped out logical destinations using the direction they'd taken Darcy in, then narrowed it to three locations via satellite.

The first two were a bust, but they hit pay dirt on the third.

The last guard crumpled, gurgling as he slid down the wall of the corridor outside the cell FRIDAY had determined they were keeping Darcy in. Bucky stepped over him, ignoring the blood he tracked on the floor as he approached the thick metal door at the end of the hall.

She was there. Inside. He knew it.

He could feel her, **finally**, but so faint.

Clenching his jaw, he kicked the door, once, twice. He couldn't leave her in there one more minute, needed to see her face. Hold her in his arms. Watch her breathe. The third kick busted the door in with a loud, metallic scream, half the cinderblock wall it was anchored to coming down with it. Climbing over the crumbled stone, his gaze searched the cell through a cloud of dust and grit. His chest clutched as he found a huddled shape, pressed against the far wall, wrists bound tightly before her.

Bucky was at her side in seconds, speaking into the comm on his wrist unit.

"Found her. Bringing her out now, be ready. She'd gonna need a medic."

The sound of Clint's vicious swearing was his only answer, but he knew the team heard and would be waiting for them. Bucky dropped his knees, his heart squeezing at the sight of Darcy slumped against the side of the bed. He hesitated, not sure if she was passed out or just unwilling to open her eyes, then laid one hand on her shoulder as lightly as possible. Her head lolled back, the glint from under her lids showing she was barely conscious. *Shit.* Was she drugged or... He didn't want to think about or. There was no visible blood, cuts, or other sign of torture. Thank Christ. He knew there was plenty they could do that wouldn't leave a mark, but he'd take this at least.

Somewhere deep in the facility, there was the distant sound of gunfire and screaming. The team was providing cover, but it wasn't going to last forever. They needed to move. He'd hoped she'd walk out under her own power, but clearly that wasn't gonna happen.
Her eyelids fluttered as she lay boneless, slumped against the wall.

"Hey doll, hey, hey... Stay with me, Darce," he said softly, shoving his gun into his hostler and gathering her into his arms. Her breathing was erratic, and when she whimpered, as if it hurt just to move, panic careened through him. What had those fuckers done to her? *Shut it down, shut it out.* Time to work now, get her the hell out of this place. Later, he would rage.

Her eyelids fluttered open, a weak smile curving those perfect lips.

"When you can't run, you crawl..."

"When you can't do that, you find someone to carry you. You and that show. You're obsessed." God, he loved this woman with everything he had. What he'd ever done to deserve her, he sure as hell didn't know. But he wasn't giving her up without a fight, not this time. When she healed, *and she would*, he would make sure she knew it. "If you can help me out here, babe, just for a few minutes, I'll watch the whole series with you when we get home."

"And the movie?"

"Whatever you want, Darcy. Anything you want. Just... can you put your arm around me?"

"Dunno. Feel funny."

"Shit," Bucky muttered, as they carefully moved out into the corridor. There was no movement, but he knew their window was closing. "Don't worry 'bout it. I got you."

"That's what it says on my ass."

"There's my girl."

"Am I? Your girl?" Darcy sighed, pressing her cheek against the rough material of his tac jacket. He risked a glance down, his gut twisting at the sight of tears streaking her cheeks. "Doesn't feel like it. Can't feel you. Can't feel the bond. Can't feel anything."

Alarmed, Bucky picked up the pace, his heart slamming in his chest. *What* had they done to her? The acrid taste of fear, knowing there were so many possibilities and not one of them good, was a sour sting in his mouth. "You'll always be my girl, bond or no bond. I don't need that to know you and me belong together." As her head lolled back, eyes closed again, he swore under his breath, ducking around a corner. They were almost to the outside door, if his memory was right. He prayed to whatever gods might be listening that it was. Two more right turns and they'd be free.

That's when the building exploded.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry. Evil author is still evil, I guess. *evil smile*
Skin and Bones

Chapter Summary

Darcy finds herself alone in the aftermath of what was supposed to be her rescue from the hands of her kidnappers, but it turned into her worst nightmare instead. (The second half of the chapter is a bit lighter, being a flashback to the first evening she spent teaching James about modern pop culture and "Daaaaaaamn, Daniel!")

Chapter Notes

Y'all. I'm SO sorry that I haven't updated in so long. I had every intention of banging out the last few chapters months ago. Then I had a long stretch of time where my chronic pain illness made it nearly impossible to focus and write. I want to say that I've only got another two or three chapters to go here, but I can't promise that I'll have them all posted quickly. I'm HOPING, tho. I seem to be in a good stretch right now.

Thanks to everyone who's hung in there, waiting patiently for this, and to all of you who left comments and messaged me to encourage me to keep posting. It means EVERYTHING. <3

(Also? I feel like I missed an opportunity to add "Steal my Girl" by One Direction to the playlist for Chapter Eight. Terrible.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

S.O.B. ~ Nathaniel Ratcliff & The Night Sweats
Skin and Bones ~ The Wind and The Wave
Old Before Your Time ~ Ray LaMontagne
Head Full of Doubt/Road Full of Promise ~ The Avett Brothers

The world comes rushing back all at once. Darcy struggles upright with a gasp, wincing as each breath she drags in pinches her sore ribs. Everything hurts and she doesn't feel... right. Something is off. She feels oddly numb, even though every cut and bruise is making itself known. Injuries put there by men in white coats and latex gloves. She looks around wildly as the memories of how
they hurt her flood back, but she's alone in the ruined hallway. A broken light fixture swinging from what was left of the ceiling making shadows dance across the stone rubble. Her head hurts, almost as much as her chest. Coughing on the dust and smoke laden air, she scrambles to put her back against the wall.

Another memory flashes through her, her muscles seizing with fear. James. He was here. He came to rescue her. But then... Using a chunk of broken wall next to her, Darcy drags herself to her knees, ignoring her protesting injuries.

"James! J—" She starts coughing again, harder, unable to catch her breath. God, this air. It was choking her. Covering her mouth the best she can with one hand, she tries again. "James? Can you hear me?"

There's no reply, the only noise from outside the wreckage she woke up in. Distant shouting, vehicle noise, something that sounds maybe like air support. Please Jesus, let it be a Quinjet and the rest of the team. Trying not to panic, she reaches down, deep inside, searching for the soulbond that links her to James. Maybe he's passed out. Or on the other side of the piled cement wreckage that cleaved the corridor into two sections. If she can tap into the bond, at least they can gauge each other's conditions. It's something, anyway.

But only echoing silence meets her efforts.

No. No, no, no, no.

Darcy's breath comes faster now, in heaving gasps, as she claws at the broken wall to keep her upright. It doesn't make sense. Everyone knows the bond can't be broken or blocked. The only reason she wouldn't be able to feel him anymore would be if... She can't even think it. They'd only just found each other, really. They'd been so stupid, full of pride and stubbornness. This couldn't be how it ended. It just couldn't.

The distant shouting became clearer, Clint's voice recognizable in the forefront, jolting Darcy into action. She threw herself against the opposite wall, pressing her face to the crack that let in a dribble of fresh air, and screamed for help. Soon, his grey eyes were looking back at her from the other side, causing her breath to hiccup as she struggled not to let loose the flood of tears building.

"Oh, thank God. Hey, Darce, hey. You okay, kid?" Clint shoved his fingers into the crack, blocking his face from sight. She grabbed them with a grateful sob, gripping tight.

"I don't know. I can't... I can't feel James."

"Feel...? He's not with you?"

The worry in his voice sent another flash of panic through her. Letting go of Clint's fingers, she turned and did a slow scan of the room, willing her heart to calm. She wasn't going to do him any good in hysterics. The light was dim and the air thick with dust and smoke, but she didn't see any sign of him in the rubble.

Wait.

Something glinted at the edge of the massive pile of rubble. Dropping to her knees, she frantically dug away rock and dirt to reveal the hilt of a shattered knife. Hands shaking, she wrapped her fingers around it, clutching it close to her chest as she backed up, bumping into the wall as she stared at the jumbled stones.

"Darce? Babe, answer me. You still okay in there?"
"I... No. I don't think I am," she replied, her voice broken. "Clint, I think he's under a pile of rock. I think the building fell on him."

There was a moment of silence, then vicious swearing. Darcy didn't move, didn't speak again, didn't take her eyes off the rubble, as the noise outside grew louder. More shouting, the sound of something big rumbled close, Clint's pleas for her to move as far away from the wall as possible. She ignored it all, her eyes dry and clear, fingers biting into the hard metal of the broken knife hilt in her fist. Even the sudden wrenching of bricks next to her, part of the wall being yanked outward, didn't do much more than make her flinch.

It wasn't until Sam grasped her by the shoulders and slowly pulled her into his arms, breaking her line of vision with the rubble, that she let go. Wailing, she buried her face in his chest, pressing her cheek hard against the metal armor. Dimly, she was aware of being lifted and removed from the wreckage. Brought aboard a Quinjet, laid in one of the bunks. When someone gently attempted to pry open her fingers, tried to see what she was holding, she shoved them away, holding the hilt even closer to her chest, unwilling to let them take it from her.

It was all she had left.

Shifting to face the wall, curling her body up tight, she was vaguely aware of someone's presence, a hand rough with calluses brushing over her hair. The quiet settling again as the others went back to the wreckage to... to dig out James. Despite the tearing pain of loss in her chest, and cold emptiness where the soulbond used to be inside her, Darcy found herself losing the battle against her exhaustion. Her body ached, her mind was in shock, and her heart was broken. Broken. An understatement. It felt like her heart had been ripped from her body.

It was easy to give everything up to the rolling blackness.

***FOUR WEEKS EARLIER***

The door closed behind James as they left Tony's office and he paused, opening his mouth like he would say something, but nothing came out. A muscle in his cheek bunched as he grit his teeth, staring just past her left shoulder.

Darcy raised one eyebrow slowly, wondering if he would actually deign to speak to her or if he was just going to snarl and glower and stomp off like he usually did when she entered a room. She couldn't pretend it didn't hurt, but she sure as hell wasn't going to let him know that.

"I do have other things on the agenda today, Barnes. Spit it out."

Ahh, there were those baby blues. Well, if the possessor of the eyes in question was a foul-tempered, foul-mouthed, little murder baby. Yeesh. She turned on heel, moving toward the elevators in a rare fit of self-preservation. Drawing a long breath in through his nose, James fell into step next to her, his long legs easily keeping pace.

"I have a couple free hours tonight, if you want to get started on that pop culture bullshit Stark was goin' on about," he ground out finally, looking as though he'd rather be shot than spend an evening with her. Darcy rolled her eyes as she stabbed at the elevator button, hitching her bag up on her shoulder.

"I don't know. I was going to clean my toilets," she said, stepping into the car when the doors
opened, crossing her arms and leaning back against the wall as he followed her. "Not sure which evening holds less appeal right now."

James stiffened, his already rigid muscles locking into place. After a moment, he looked down at his boots, shaggy hair sliding forward to cover his face.

"I'm not..." He lifted one shoulder, then dropped it again, body coiled tight with tension. "I'm not like Stark or Barton. Not easy with words... anymore. Seems HYDRA didn't think social skills were real high on the list of things I needed."

His eyes flicked to meet hers, then dropped away again. "Sometimes I forget... forget how I probably come across. Stevie doesn't care. He wouldn't give a shit if I painted myself blue and ran around the Tower naked. I used to think it was a guilt thing, but I'm starting to realize he just always likes having a buddy to get into trouble with. I guess Wilson has his limits. Believe it or not."

She caught an amused glint of blue through the tangle of hair, and her mouth went dry. God, it was so easy for him to slip under her skin. But what really did her in was when the side of his mouth quirked up in a lopsided grin, the first real smile he'd ever directed her way.

"In case you hadn't noticed, Stevie ain't much for holding back," he said, scrubbing one hand through his hair.

Darcy rubbed her lips together and stared at the climbing floor numbers, stalling to give herself time to get her brain back in working order. It took a moment too long apparently, because when she turned back, his smile had faded, the tension returned to his shoulders.

"He's better since you got back. Or worse, depending on who you ask, considering that he's unbent enough now to participate in Clint's never ending prank war," she replied, pushing the conversation along, annoyed with herself for not wanting to see him close off again. What did it matter to her? Nothing. It mattered not a bit to her. "He used to just be Captain Rogers to most of us, even after he bonded with Sam. Never really let his guard down, didn't hang out with the team, you know?"

James snorted, shaking his head as he waved her out of the elevator ahead of them when they reached the Avengers common area level.

"Captain Tightass was Dugan's nickname for when he wanted to rip on him, back in the day. Sometimes Rogers needs to... what's Barton's favorite expression?"

"Chill the fuck out?"

He threw her that devastating half grin again. "Yeah, that."

She was going to regret this, Darcy could feel it in her bones. But she turned to James and grabbed his hand, the flesh one, and pulled it close. His whole body went rigid again, but he allowed her touch. Mouth pressed into a line to stifle the softening feeling toward him, she whipped out her pen and scribbled a series of numbers and letters over his palm.

"My door code. Come by at about seven, bring brownies or something else with chocolate, and we'll start your first lesson. Might as well get it over with."

James stared down at the inky scrawl across his hand. "Your door code? You'd trust me with that?"

How was she going to do this? Be distant and cool, keep her heart safe and whole, when he kept showing her these flashes of painful vulnerability. It reminded her that, while she'd been hurt by his
rejection, maybe, just maybe, he had a good reason for freaking out over the sudden appearance of his soulmate. She didn't want this burgeoning sympathy growing within her, this ache to gather him into her arms and hold him tight until his eyes lost that bruised, lost look.

The elevator dinged, saving Darcy from herself.

Backing out onto her floor, she forced a smile. "Just don't be late. And don't forget the brownies."

He wasn't late.

"I wasn't sure what was good. Hope this is okay," James said when Darcy opened the door, thrusting a cardboard bakery box at her. She glanced down at the plastic window, eyes widening at the variety of brownies and cookie bars inside. Was that a S'mores brownie...? She almost forgave him for any transgressions right then and there.

"Yes, yessss, my young padawan. You learn quickly." She smirked as his expression wrinkled in confusion, waving him into the living room where she'd set up her laptop, iPod, and had a stack of DVDs waiting to go next to the TV remote. "We have so much to catch you up on."

"Great," he muttered, taking a seat on one end of her couch, his back so straight it didn't even touch the pillow shaped like a taco behind him.

"We'll get through this. Well, I will. Your head might explode, old timer." Darcy plopped down on the couch, placing the treats box on the side of the table farthest from him. "So what do you want to start with?" She gestured to the large piece of paper she'd taped to the wall next to them, categories of modern pop culture listed on it.

James squinted at the paper. "What the hell is a me-me?"

"Internet it is," she said with a shark-like grin, and opened her laptop.

A hour later, James sat back, rubbing his forehead like he was in pain. She noticed he'd lost most of the stiffness that had gripped him when he'd shown up at her door, now slumping back against the cushions, squishing both the taco pillow and a Hello Kitty one. "Listen. Can we... I don't know, take a break? I feel like my brain is gonna melt out my ears."

"For now," she said, aiming for an ominous tone. The unimpressed look her sent her said it didn't work. "C'mon Barnes, don't play coy. You almost smiled at, like, six Vines. Plus, I totally saw you relax for a full quarter of a minute when we were watching those baby pandas harassing their handler in the zoo. Admit it. The Internet isn't totally terrible."

"I like the ones where they put music to punching that Nazi guy. Gotta show those to Stevie, he'd get a kick out 'em."

"Punching Nazis," Darcy sighed. "Figures that's the one you'd single out."

"What, like watching a Nazi get punched didn't make you smile?" James arched one eyebrow in disbelief. "Don't even try to deny it, Lewis. I saw that smirk."

"I'll own that one, not even a little ashamed of it." Feeling a little sleepy from the amount of brownies she'd consumed, she closed the laptop and stretched. Music education didn't feel quite right tonight, so maybe a movie. That way they didn't have to make conversation or eye contact or anything. Which would help her keep to her resolve not to rub up against him like a cat in heat.

Aww hell, why'd she even have to think it?
Sighing, Darcy dropped out of her stretch and turned to ask James if he'd rather watch Star Wars or The Princess Bride, just in time to catch him wrenching his eyes away from her, a flush washing across his cheeks. Her gaze snagged his, and the flash of brilliant blue snatched away her words. Breath stalled in her throat as she struggled to bring her thoughts back online, the flesh on her arms prickling.

Then he glanced away, his face falling into its customary blank lines, taking all the heat that ran along her skin with it.

"I think... I think we should call it a night," Darcy stuttered, her pride (not her heart, never her heart) bruised again by the easy way he agreed. She got up to show him out, her movement stilted, unaccountably irritable. She didn't like this man, she reminded herself. There was no reason to be upset he looked relieved to escape her presence.

"Is tomorrow good to start your training? Mornings are best for me, before Avengers training begins for the day, but I can work around whatever you got goin' on."

Darcy swung open the door and leaned on it, telling herself to relax. "I've got an 8am breakfast meeting with Jane and Pepper downtown with some congressmen who think they want to stick their noses into Janey's sciencing. We're going to suggest gently that they just not."

"Good luck... to them. I don't like their odds." James sent her that lopsided smile again, but this time she didn't smile back. This was not friendship they had going on, or anything else. This was a truce for the sake of the team. As long as they both remembered that, things would go smoothly.

He cocked his head to the side, eyes narrowing slightly as he studied her, smile fading. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No." Darcy pushed off the door and stepped backward into her apartment, letting her hand rest on the doorknob. The brownies laid heavy in her stomach, and her eyes were burning all of a sudden. "I'm tired. Can we talk about the schedule tomorrow when I get back to the Tower?"

"Sure. Just have Jarvis alert me," he said, his gaze still a little too searching for her liking. "Darcy..."

"Good night, Barnes." She shut the door before he could say anything else.

This was hard. So hard. Harder than anything she'd ever done, being around her soulmate but not being with him. If she was going to survive it, she had to keep her anger alive. Otherwise, she'd crumble faster than a cracker in Hulk's fist.

If only he wasn't so easy to like, when he let his guards down.

And wounded.

And sexy.

Ugh. She was in such trouble.

Chapter End Notes
I'm working on the next chapter now, so cross your fingers I can get it up soon!
XOXO
Stay Alive

Chapter Summary

Darcy finds that maybe, just maybe, not all hope is lost after all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stay Alive ~ Jose Gonzalez

Stubborn Love ~ The Lumineers

Mountain Falls for the Sea ~ Findlay Brown

It had been hours and no one was telling her anything and the soulbond was still empty and she was going to lose her shit on the next nurse or doctor or whoever that told her to try to get some rest.

As if she could relax, not knowing if James was still alive.

Darcy grit her teeth, ignoring the pain from various small injuries accrued when the building came down, and swung her bruised legs over the side of the hospital bed. She tucked the broken end of the knife hilt that she'd refused to let anyone take from her, even during her examination, into the pocket of the thin cotton pajamas she'd been given. By the time she shuffled her way to the end of the bed, she was sweating, trembling with exertion. Maybe it was the head wound, maybe it was the stuff her captors had shot her up with in between beatings, whatever it was, she felt drained and on the verge of throwing up.

"This sucks," she muttered, concentrating on putting one foot in front of another, eyes glued to the door. "This sucks, it's bullshit, I want to go home, I want us to go home—"

Funny how everything seemed to drop away, all the petty arguments, the anger, the hurt, when you're faced with losing the one person you can't live without. James had seemed so invincible to her, she'd taken for granted that he'd be there when she decided to forgive him and let him back into her life. Because she'd known, even as she got in that elevator, it wasn't over between them. There was anger and hurt, and mistrust, but they weren't done. She'd assumed they'd have plenty of time to work it out, to fix what went wrong.

Despite the vast echo chamber of their soulbond, Darcy still hoped there was.

Her head jerked up as the door to the room swung open. Crap. Caught before she even made it into the hallway. Warily, she gripped the metal bar of at the end of her bed, trying to look like her knees weren't wobbly and her head swimming.
"I'm going to see him. You can't stop me."

Clint stepped forward and shrugged out of his hoodie to reveal a uniform of pale green scrubs, then tugged it up her arms, securing the zipper under her chin. Relief swamped Darcy as he pulled a pair of slippers out of his back pocket and bent down to stick her feet in them.

"Who said I was stopping you?" Straightening, he slid his arm around her waist, taking most of the weight of her bruised legs. "C'mon, I'm busting you out, even though I'll probably catch hell with Pepper for this. Nat's covering for us, but we gotta move."

Cracking open the door, Clint stuck his head out. A resounding crash down the hall, accompanied by a loud argument, had him sending her a grin. He arranged her hair to fall over the left side of her face, then maneuvered them swiftly into the corridor, letting the door to her room softly fall closed.

"That's our cue. Keep your face tilted away, toward the wall."

Clint casually tucked her arm through his, keeping his body between her and anyone who happened to pass them, and escorted her in the opposite direction of the commotion. After a few turns, they came upon a bank of elevators, and he jabbed the Up button, rocking back on his heels as they waited.

Darcy finally let out the breath she was holding. "Why aren't we at the Tower? I thought Tony said he could do anything a hospital could, but better."

"Yeah, well. You know Stark. He's always got big plans. Then Pepper streamlines them into something a little more realistic." Clint glanced at her, his brown eyes reassuring. "They're not set up for the level of trauma Barnes sustained, but they are here."

Darcy stared straight ahead at the elevator doors blurring in front of them, her free hand pressing against her chest involuntarily, as if to contain the sudden thumping of her heart.

"Is he..."

"Alive? Last I knew, which was an hour ago, so probably?" Clint squeezed her fingers where they gripped his arm. "Docs seem to think he's got a pretty decent chance at recovery. He's a fighter, we all know that."

On a sob, Darcy's legs finally gave out, and Clint scooped her into his arms as the elevator dinged open. Thank God it was empty, letting her freely bury her face in his shirt and just cry. *James was alive.* His chances were good. Maybe, just maybe, now she could allow herself a little bit of hope. Sniffling, she lifted her head and wiggled a bit, feeling stronger than she had since she'd woken up in that rubble heap.

"I'm okay, I'm okay now. I won't faint, you can put me down."

Clint raised an eyebrow. "You sure? If you fall, Nat and James will take turns kicking my ass."

"I promise I won't collapse, and if I do, I'll sign a waiver first absolving you of all blame."

"My ass is in your hands, sweetheart."

"Gross, Barton."

Chuckling, he swung her down again just as they reached their floor, steadying her with one hand as they stepped out into the hallway. As they moved toward the door guarded by four SHIELD
agents, Darcy caught sight of Steve slumped in a chair nearby, his head resting on the wall. He looked as exhausted as she felt, but only shook his head they approached, his smile resigned.

"You should be resting." He slowly stood, wincing as he straightened.

"Said the kettle," Darcy replied, rolling her eyes. She wasn't going to lose her shit on Steve, the poor guy looked like a stiff breeze would knock him over at this point. She was too anxious to visit James to bother, anyway. "I want to see him."

Steve hesitated, his eyes darting to Clint. "I don't know if that's a good idea, Darce."

She licked her lips, insides fluttering with panic at the idea they might turn her away. "Look, I... I know we've had rocky start, James and I, but he's my soulmate. I need to see him."

She still hadn't told anyone that she still couldn't feel James in the soulbond. They probably all assumed it was a temporary thing, maybe stress from the shock, because no one asked about it during her check-up. And she'd damn sure had enough testing already, what with them trying to figure out what shit her captors had pumped into her body. Who was to say it wouldn't come back on its own, anyway? It could. It could happen.

"Darcy, it's not that. I would never— you have to know I would never refuse you a visitation because you guys were fighting before you were kidnapped. I know how he feels about you, he'd never forgive me for turning you away," Steve said.

Steve knew? How James felt about her? Well, that was nice, since Darcy wasn't entirely sure herself. There had been words exchanged when he'd busted into her cell, but... it was all a little hazy and she certainly wasn't going to trust memories she could only recall in bits.

Steve ran a hand through his hair, making it stick up in disarray. His expression was distant, worried. "The thing is, he's not in good shape right now. It's not pretty. They had to put him under heavy for surgery and he hasn't come out yet, he's all hooked up to these tubes and wires. I just don't know how he'd feel about you seeing him like this."

Darcy pulled away from Clint on shaky legs, and stepped around Steve, heading determinedly for the door to James's room. "Well, if he doesn't want me in there, he's going to wake up and kick me out himself."

The SHIELD agents stepped aside as she approached, either because of a nod from Steve somewhere behind her, or they saw in her face that she meant business. Breath caught in her throat, Darcy pushed down on the door handle and slipped into the room.

James lay on the lone bed in the room, surrounded by softly beeping monitors. Everything was sterile white, the sharp smell of antiseptic stinging her nostrils. Everything was white except James, she saw as she drew closer to the bed. His flesh shoulder was bruised dark purple, as were the blotches that dotted the expanse of bare chest that rose above the neatly tucked sheet. One side of his beautiful face was swollen, jaw shattered, left eye closed in a puffy black eye. A swath of white bandages covered the entire top of his head, the color contrasting sharply with the tanned skin of his forehead.

His hair was gone.

Or most of it, anyway. There was the shadow of a buzz cut, so soft looking it made her fingers itch to stroke it. They must have had to shave his head for surgery. Pressing her lips together at the sudden urge to cry again, Darcy slowly lowered herself into the chair at his bedside. The room was
silent, except for the machines and the sound of James's breathing. Letting out a shuddering sigh, she reached out and took his flesh hand, squeezing it with care.

"This seems wrong," Darcy said, her voice loud in the quiet room, startling her. Shifting in her chair, she tried again. "You there, me here. It's not supposed to work this way. You're the super soldier. I didn't think anything could take you down."

His fingers remained limp in hers.

"I'm sorry we fought. I'm sorry I left and I didn't come back soon enough. I'm sorry we didn't get to deal with our, I don't know, our shit." Darcy rubbed at her eyes. God, this hurt. "Um. I don't really know what to say. This is so weird. I feel like I've known you forever and we hardly had any time together."

She sat in silence for another moment before blurring out, "But I think I love you. I think I fell in love with you before I even met you, the moment your words appeared. And you hurt me so bad, James. When you rejected me, I didn't know what to do, I guess I just lashed out to protect myself. Then when I finally let you in, when we completed the bond, I couldn't let myself trust you not to do it again."

And had maybe ruined everything.

"I wish we'd started differently."

This was beginning to feel ridiculous, like she was talking to herself. Everyone always said talking to people in comas (although she didn't know if being knocked out from surgery really counted the same thing) was good, it helped anchor them back into reality or whatever. But she felt like a dumbass, sitting here and blabbing at him when he was unconscious.

"Steve's really worried. You know how he gets, he probably won't be moved from his chair by the door until he's satisfied you're on the mend. Satisfied by his lofty standards, you better believe."

Darcy played with James's fingers, running hers up and down between the digits, tracing the scars that littered the skin across the back of his hand. "Which means, my friend, that you are definitely on Sam's shit list right about now. You do not want to know what that looks like. So I would hurry up and get yourself awake as quick as possible."

His fingers convulsed on hers, startling Darcy into nearly falling out of her chair. She jerked her gaze up to search his face, pulse slamming in her throat. Sure enough, James's lids fluttered, his mouth twisting as he let out a soft groan.

"Oh my God, holy shit," she whispered, tears of relief flooding her eyes as the monitors beeping changed, the door to the room opening to admit one nurse, a wide-eyed Steve, and two agents. "I think he's coming around. I think—he grabbed my fingers, I don't know, maybe—"

"Okay, honey, just back up a little so I can have a quick look-see." The nurse bustled up, Steve coming around the opposite side of the bed, his hand pressing against James's metal shoulder in a reassuring grip. Darcy rose, stumbling back out of her chair, to watch as her soulmate struggled to open his eyes, peering up at his old friend blearily.

"Wha' happen?" he slurred around the broken jaw, face contorting in pain as he fought to speak coherently. "Darce?"

"She's fine, Buck, relax. She's here, she's good. Let the nurse do her thing, then you can visit."

James ignored that, being the headstrong idiot he was, and tried to lift his head off the pillow to
search the room for her. Had he never in his life not fought against someone telling him what to do? Biting her lip hard to get a handle on her urge to laugh and cry at the same time, Darcy stepped up to the end of the bed and gripped his toes through the thin blanket. Probably the only part of his body not busted up, due to those big, black shitkickers he wore all the time.

"Right here, tough guy," she said as lightly as she could, smiling as he dropped his head back onto the pillow with a sigh of relief, his one good eye locked on her like a lifeline. "Good to know a chunk of ceiling didn't take out the infamous Winter Soldier. Could you imagine the indignity of it all? You'd have been the shame of the assassin community."

His mouth started to curl into a familiar grin, but it faltered on a wince of pain. The metal hand came up, gingerly probing at the bandages around his head.

"Excuse me." The nurse gently swatted his hand away, not giving even one solitary fuck about the bionic arm that gave most people a fit. Clearly a veteran nurse, and one who'd seen everything, she didn't seem the type to scare easily. "Do not touch your bandages, young man. They're there for a reason. Accelerated healing or not, right now you are one hot mess, and if you don't want to stay that way, I would advise you to leave them alone and get some more rest."

"Res' when 'm dead."

Her eyebrow arched. "I'd have thought a man with a jaw broken in two places would talk less. Are you always this argumentative?"

"Yes," chorused Darcy and Steve, prompting James to narrow his good eye at them in mock censorship. A move that made Darcy's heart sing. He couldn't be that badly off, if he was already joking, right? Everything would be okay. She would keep telling herself that until she believed it.

The nurse just sighed at their antics and shook her head, scribbling a few notes on his chart before dropping it back on its holder at the end of his bed.

"I know your kind, Mr. Barnes, you are trouble. But since I'm headed off shift now, you aren't my trouble anymore. One of you needs to make sure he stays in bed." She pointed at Darcy and Steve, expression exasperated. "For resting."

Steve snorted out a laugh as the door closed on her, snickering at Darcy's flushed face.

"Geez, what does she think, I'm going to molest an injured man?"

"What am I, wallpaper? Maybe she was talking to me."

Something that might have been a laugh escaped James's swollen lips, the corner of his good eye crinkling in amusement. A faint echo of warmth wound its way through the soulbond, winding around Darcy, leaving her lightheaded. She... she could feel him. Not much, but enough. Enough for hope. Concentrating, she sent back a wave of everything she was feeling; Love and fear and joy and relief, all tumbling around, splashing into one another.

"Darce. Doll." James's strained voice was a reverent whisper that had Steve going pink and shooing the still present agents out of the room, closing the door firmly behind them all.

His fingers twitched, beckoning her closer, and she moved forward to capture them in her own, collapsing down into the chair by his bed again. She brought his scraped hand to her lips, pressing her mouth against his knuckles, bowing her head as his trembling metal hand smoothed over her hair.
"I don't know what they did to me." She needed to be honest. "I don't even know who they were, the fuckers. There wasn't any evil informational monologuing, like in the movies. They hurt me and they injected me with something, and that's it. That's all I remember. I don't even know why they hurt me. I didn't resist. I knew I wasn't going to win, so it seemed stupid to try. But they hurt me anyway."

"You okay?"

Darcy lifted one shoulder, not feeling quite as casual as she looked. "I've felt better, but I think so? The doctors took blood, they're running tests. I guess we'll find out."

He looked worried, as much as he could with a broken face. "Not just body, doll."

"Look at you, speaking clearer already! Pretty good for a guy who was mostly dead all day."

"Darcy."

"Alright, alright... I knew what you meant. Listen," she said, leaning in and tucking the hand she was holding close to her heart, and mustered all the reassurance she could put into her voice. Not just for him, but for herself as well. "I've got Tony and Jane and Bruce and all these awesome doctors here at Trinity, and I've got you. I'll be fine. We'll be fine."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

He studied her for another moment, then relaxed against the bed, his eyelids drooping. "Kay. I'm gonna sleep now."

Within seconds, James was almost out, his grip loosening on her fingers, the lines of pain in his face easing. Whoa. That must have been some heavy stuff the nurse pumped into his drip. Just when Darcy thought he was out, he opened his eyes again, finding her gaze unerringly.

"Love you."

Darcy's heart stuttered at the warm throb of emotion that pulsed through the bond. Before she could reply, James's eyes closed again on a long sigh, his breath evening out almost instantly.

"James? Are you awake?" She blinked, hand hovering over his shoulder, knowing she couldn't shake him, but Jesus wept. Did he really just tell her he loved her, for the first time, then fall asleep? Darcy bit her lip, trying to hold back the gigglesnort fighting to get out. That rat bastard. He was so going to make up for this.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, this fic is coming slowly. I'm sorry about that, friends. I think I have one, MAYBE two more chapters left in this beast, then we're done. Whew! <3
Feel It Still

Chapter Summary

James is recovering from his injuries when some information about why Darcy was kidnapped comes to light, changing everything yet again. Chapter warnings: Clint makes bad jokes, Steve tries to play Switzerland, Darcy kicks ass, and somehow no one strangles Tony.

Chapter Notes

This is the end, my friends.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Feel It Still ~ Portugal. The Man

It took two days of hospital food, slow shuffles down to the nurses' station and back, and a whole lot of mumbled bitching on James's part, before the doctor released him into the Avengers' care. He wasn't thrilled when they brought him home and straight to bed, but since he didn't have the energy to fight them on it, the decision stood. After three days of excellent food from Tony's personal chef, multiple games of Mario Kart, and James's increasingly grumpy attitude at his enforced bed rest, Darcy was relieved when Tony called a team meeting.

James leaned back against his headboard, looking annoyed. "I still don't think this was necessary. For Chrissakes, I coulda made it to the common room. First time I've ever conducted a meeting from my bed."

"Not me." Tony raised his hand distractedly, looking for a place to sit. But Thor had gingerly taken the only other chair in the room besides the one Darcy practically lived in nowadays at James's bedside. Tony sighed and leaned against the wall.

"Shocking," said Steve, then waved his hand in a "go ahead" motion. "Let's get this show on the road, Tony. You have something for us?"

Darcy tried to sit very still, hoping they'd forgotten she was in the room. She didn't have the clearance level for Avengers business, but this was her business too and she wanted to be there. Natasha slid her a glance, corner of her mouth quirked, but said nothing as Tony threw the holo files up into the center of the room.

"Yeah, yeah, don't get your underoos in a bunch." Tony quickly sorted through the information, until he came to the file he wanted, enlarging it so all could read the typed notes. "Here we are. Turns out this was a little more complicated than a standard grab and poke for info. The people
who kidnapped our illustrious former-intern-now-most-beloved-and-feared-lab-manager are a splinter group from A.I.M. I say splinter because Hammer seems to have fired each of them sometime in the last two years."

He snorted, rapidly sorting through the electronic files again."For incompetence, if you can believe it. Guess it takes one to know one."

"So what was their, uhh, aim?"

Everyone shot Clint a dirty look, but he just shrugged helplessly and went back to chewing on his beef jerky rope.

"Apparently someone is not only the soulmate of our world infamous assassin here, yes they had that information, no I don't know how but I will get it, but also has some very interesting genes that make her a delightful playground for sociopath scientists." Tony turned and speared Darcy with a look that had her shrinking into her seat. She had no clue what he was talking about and the way everyone was staring at her like a bug under a microscope made her nervous as hell.

"Hey, this is news to me. You all know if I could have done any fun party tricks, I definitely would have done them long ago, for entertainment value alone," she said, letting James unclench her fingers from his bedsheets, holding on as he closed his hand around hers. Tony looked at her speculatively for another moment, then turned back to the holo files.

"Anyhoo, as best as we can tell from our own tests, Lewis here is some flavor of mutant. Her powers don't seem to have manifested, although they should have by now. Most hit at puberty, which seems a real dick move on Mother Nature's part, you know? Seems the group that grabbed her was trying to jumpstart them. As to why, best guess... They'd planned to turn her and her new powers against us. Somehow."

Mutant? There were no mutants in her family... or were there? It really put her grandmother's uncanny knowledge of the precise moment Darcy and her cousins got into trouble into a whole new sort of perspective. Still stunned, she just sat silently as the room broke out into argument.

"That's the stupidest shit I've ever heard. They didn't even know what she could do! What if her power was chatting up small woodland creatures like a Disney princess?"

"You know better than most, Hawkguy, that there's always a way to make a small power into something devastating. Darcy is clever, she could have worked with it."

"No way, no how, Nat. HYDRA's brainwashing process was scrubbed for good when Bucky and I wiped out their bases, I made sure. Jarvis made sure. And Darcy would never betray us on her own."

"I agree with Steven," rumbled Thor. "But HYDRA were not the only ones to discover the usefulness of wiping a warrior's memories. On Asgard, we do this upon request, if the memory is too painful to carry any longer, putting the warrior's life at risk. But only then, and never with evil intent. Still, it is a process well known to our doctors there."

James fingers tightened on Darcy's, and she swallowed hard, fighting to maintain her calm breathing, then gave a short laugh. "Okay, but that's a ridiculous plan on their part. I can't fight. I don't know things. Even with suspected mutant powers, I'm not a great candidate for super spy assassin or whatever."

Tony shrugged. "You have the access and the ability to wreck havoc using your personal
knowledge of the team. If they were going for distraction, it would have worked. There have been worse plans. If we'd had to take you out..."

"It would have torn the team apart." James had been staring straight ahead, his gaze fixed on the building across the street as everyone talked around him, but now he turned to look at her. "It would have torn me apart. I would have been vulnerable, crazy with grief and rage... and to be honest, I don't know if I would have the will to fight anymore if you were dead. It would be an easy capture, if they were looking for a new asset."

Darcy didn't know what to say to that, her heart cracking a little at the bleak look in his eyes. She squeezed his hand back, pushing love and reassurance through the soulbond.

The room was quiet for a moment as they stared at each other, then Tony broke.

"As disgustingly sweet as this is, I'm not done." To Darcy's relief, the team turned their attention back to him, as he sorted through his files yet again. "Okay, this is what I was looking for: the test results for prettier half of the Lewis/Barnes duo."

Bruce finally stepped away from his place by the door, expression curious as he studied the data. It was gibberish to Darcy, Jane's science being a totally different beast altogether, so she watched him like hawk. But he had a hell of a poker face, causing her to fidget in her seat for a couple minutes before bursting out,

"Oh my God, someone tell me something! Am I going to start setting things on fire with my mind or lifting trucks or shapeshifting into a wolf on the full moon or what?"

"Not exactly." Bruce sent her a reassuring glance, then tapped his finger against the side of his nose. "But shapeshifting is a close guess. Or mimicking, rather. Not your body or appearance so much as your abilities, best I can tell, from the data we have and no real world practical application? Your power is to mimic others gifts for brief periods of time."

"Wait. As in, she can read minds if Charles Xavier, what, touches her? What about non-mutant powers? Can she take on the Hulk's strength and rage, or Barnes's stealth and skill with a knife?"

Bruce took off his glasses and polished them on the hem of his untucked shirt. "As I said, with no hard data, it's difficult to say. Her power doesn't seem to have manifested at this time, although the group that took her did manage to start the ball rolling with that cocktail of chemicals they pumped into her, combined with the... physical ill-treatment."

He looked uncomfortable. "It seems that many mutants manifest powers for the first time under great stress. Perhaps that's what they were hoping to accomplish."

Darcy was suddenly aware of every lingering bruise and healing cut, grateful beyond measure that they hadn't been able to achieve their goal.

Nat cleared her throat, everyone's gaze swinging her way. "I have to ask, is it borrowing the power or stealing it?"

"Again, with the data I have..." Bruce lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "My educated guess is borrowing. But I'd like to run field tests with Darcy when her power fully manifests. If she's agreeable, of course."

Darcy nodded quickly as the team's attention shifted back to her. "What now?"

"We wait." Tony raised an eyebrow. "Unless you want to try to speed the process along, which I
wouldn't recommend, but—"

"No, no, I'm okay with letting it happen naturally," Darcy said hastily.

"Probably a good decision. As for the group that took you, that we can do something about. Jarvis and I took the liberty of tracking these morons down, and the ones that didn't die when they blew their own damn base last time, conveniently set up shop across the river. In Jersey, of all places."

"Hey, I like New Jersey." Steve said mildly.

"Yeah, you would." Tony rolled his eyes.

"It's very picturesque."

"Well, it won't be after we're done with it. Or this small little corner, anyway." Tony gestured to the surveillance photos he'd pulled up. The team started making a plan to go in the next few days, after Clint did a little retcon work to make sure they didn't have any surprises planned for the Avengers. They had to know, after losing Darcy, that retribution would be coming. Or maybe they thought they'd hidden themselves well enough to stay under the radar. Clint would scout, then they'd go in and make Darcy's kidnappers regret being born.

She supposed she felt a little better, knowing this.

"Hey Full Metal Jacket, you want in?"

"You know I do."

This had Darcy narrowing her eyes. "He's not healed enough to go on a mission."

"I'm healed enough," James said with a shrug. "Been mostly hanging around so you don't worry, but babe, I worked in worse condition before."

"But this isn't before and you don't have to now. Right, Cap?"

The big blond traitor just held up his hands like he didn't want to get involved.

"We won't be leaving for another two or three days," Tony interjected as he headed for the door, the team trailing him. "Nothing needs to be decided today."

They all filed out, clapping James on the shoulder and giving Darcy sympathetic looks as they went. She argued but in the end he hauled himself out of bed and got back into the training room. It took everything in her to let it go, trusting that he knew his own body. Didn't stop her from monitoring the soulbond closely, of course, because hello, he almost died.

Two days later, the team went to New Jersey.

It took three hours for them to retrieve her file, four other potential mutant prisoners, and leave the building a smoking hole in the ground. After Tony uploaded the files for Bruce to study, James presented them to Darcy with a steaming hot latte and a "forgive me?" smile. Which she did, allowing him to make it up to her with multiple orgasms.

Climbing back into bed after their shower, legs still shaking from keeping them wrapped around his head for the last twenty minutes, Darcy collapsed on his chest. She placed a gentle kiss on his shoulder, then snuggled in, nudging his metal arm up and around her.

The waves of sleepy contentment rolling through the soulbond made her happy.
"You know I love you, right?" Darcy tucked a lock of damp hair behind her ear, propping her chin on his chest and looking at him steadily.

James went very still, his gaze darting down to meet hers.

"You know, don't you? I'm not just saying it because you did, or because you rescued me, or anything except that you're amazing and sexy and really just good at heart," she said.

His laugh sounded rusty. "Don't go exaggerating my good points."

"I'm not. Don't forget, bud, I can see into you. I see what others don't. I know you, and I love you for what you are."

His arms tightened around her, his lips pressing against the crown of her head. "I don't know how I got so damn lucky. I love you too. And I'm not lettin' go this time, not walkin' away, not givin' up on us. Ever."

"Well, that makes two of us, then. Two of us, from here on out," Darcy said, and kissed him, the soulbond flaring with passion and love, rolling them under, taking them deep. They didn't talk anymore that night, not in words, moving together until the dawn light crept through the blinds.

And every night after.

One year later...

James spun around to block a hit from the large man attacking him, feeling the shock of electricity from the man's hands all the way to his toes. Gritting his teeth, he punched him, taking another eye-bulging zap to the side of his face for his trouble.

"Fuck! Wilson, where the hell are you with my present?" James growled into his comm, moving out of touching range, ignoring his foe's cackle of triumphant at his retreat. Asshole wouldn't be laughing for long, though.

"Hold onto your panties, Barnes, this ain't exactly a cakewalk," crackled Sam's voice over the comms. "Echo, incoming."

There was a flash of metal wings, the roar of Sam's jetpack, and then something hurtled out of the sky toward the rooftop. The man James's had been fighting stumbled, falling forward onto his face as Darcy used him for a landing pad. With a fistpump and grin, she squeezed the back of the stunned man's neck lightly with one hand. Leaping off him, she rolled a few feet away before climbing to her feet, and brushed off gravel off her black catsuit.

"Hey babe."

"Doll."

"I heard you needed rescuing."

He rolled his eyes, but waved her on, toward the man rising from the roof with an enraged
expression and hands crackling with energy. Darcy cocked one eyebrow, stepping forward, then snapped her fingers theatrically. White lightening cracked, flaring to life, surrounding her palms, creeping up towards her elbows.

With a sharp grin, she threw one hand forward, using the line of blue fire as a whip. It boomed like thunder as it connected with the hasty shield of energy her opponent made. Darcy circled him, her face a mask of concentration as she flicked her energy out, testing his defenses. Just like James's had taught her, except they'd used wooden knives and braided rope. He was near bustin' with pride, watching his girl slowly take her foe apart. Less than a year of training with the gift that had emerged, and Darcy had taken to it like a duck to water. It wasn't something either of them had expected, but she'd rolled with it. The team had accepted her on a probationary period the month before, partnering her with James. They worked together so smooth, it was like they had always done so. That was all her, though, he knew. She always seemed to anticipate what he needed, on the field and off. It was that innate talent, morphed now into something more, that had made her such a great scientist wrangler and personal assistant.

But she'd been born to do this.

After about ten minutes of testing her opponent, maneuvering him just where she wanted him, Darcy made a sudden move that threw him off-guard. She threw her arm out again with a sharp motion, white hot energy snapping in a long line. A shield bloomed out in front of her foe again, poised to take the hit that never came. Instead, the line whipped around his lower legs, cinching tight. Closing her fist, Darcy jerked the line. The energy rolled up tight, winding up the man's legs like a winch as he got dragged across the roof toward her.

James's delicately stepped out of the way of the struggling man as he slid by, legs and arms now secured by the fiery line. With one foot, Darcy stopped the glowing bundle's progress, looking down at the man cursing her.

"Wow, okay. You kiss your mother with that mouth?" She touched a finger to the comm in her ear. "Hawkeye, Winter Soldier and Echo here. We need trash pick-up."

James stepped behind them as the man at Darcy's feet geared up to spit on her. He fixed him with his best dead-eyed stare. "I wouldn't do that, if I were you."

The man swallowed, the whites of his eyes showing.

Once they got the prisoner loaded onto Barton's Quinjet, Darcy flicked open the top tab of her high-necked suit with a sigh. "Time for an upgrade. This thing's going to cut off my air supply one of these times."

"Hey, you're the one who told Stark no bustiers," James said, leaning back against the low brick wall along the edge of the roof.

"Okay, but I think he can find a middle ground." Darcy stepped between his spread knees and ran her hands through his hair. He just barely managed not to purr like a housecat, because damn, she had magic fingers. "Are we still on for tonight?"

He tilted his head back with a wry smile, resting both hands on her hips. "I've read the books, doll, when they came out. I don't know why I have to watch all the movies too."

"Because you just do," she said, rolling her eyes. "Can we go home now? I need a shower and hot chocolate like nobody's business. Then Thai food with Steve and Sam, then the movies. You're gonna love them, I promise."
James stood, letting his hand slip into hers, basking in the playful warmth of her love filling their soulbond. Two years ago, he was wondering how he was even going to make it through the night to see the sun come up. Now he couldn't wait for each day to dawn, with this amazing woman, his soulmate, at his side. Looking down at her upturned, smiling face, he brushed his fingers along her cheekbone, still marveling she was his. And he was hers.

"Yeah." He pressed his lips against Darcy's, reveling in the soft sound of desire she made as she stretched up on her toes for a second kiss. "Let's go home."

Chapter End Notes

Holy crap, I can't believe this fic is done. I hope the final chapter (or any in between) didn't disappoint. This fic, despite my long stretches between posting chapters, has kept me going during a really rough year, health-wise. There were days when I thought I might never write again, between depression and the pain from my chronic illness. But there hasn't been a day where I didn't get a kudo or a comment on this fic, reminding me that there's a reason worth struggling towards the end. I appreciate each and every one of you who stuck it out with me.

This is the best fandom around. Love you guys!

End Notes

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