Like the Pharaohs of Old

by shakespeareinthepark

Summary

A team of archaeologists from England travel to Egypt and meet an arrogant team of Americans after the same thing they are. Soon, both teams get caught up in a race against Hydra—a evil organization after the same treasure but for reasons much more sinister.
Chapter 1

Darcy Lewis was by all means extremely ordinary. Exceptionally lucky, that was for sure, but there really wasn't really anything about her that screamed unique or fascinating. Two months before, she had been accepted into a grad-student study-abroad program that let her work under Jane Foster at Cambridge University. That was incredibly lucky, even though she had worked her ass off to get there. Mostly luck was what got her everything awesome in her life.

"Good morning," Darcy said as she walked into the workshop. Jane was already hard at work studying an artifact that came in the day before, some kind of coin from ancient Rome or something like that.

Jane Foster was extremely intelligent when it came to her field of expertise, but beyond that she was very simple. She enjoyed her life being simple, nothing too exciting, just living with her boyfriend and working at the University and not much else. She was an American as well, getting her doctorate in archeology.

"Hey, come look at this. It's absolutely stunning." Jane said, not taking her eyes off the coin.

"I'll take your word for it. Has anything else come in?"

"Just the mail," Jane half-heartedly motioned toward her desk, where a fresh pile of mail sat, waiting for one of the two women to go through.

"Oh joy, bills," Darcy muttered, flipping through the various envelopes. She stopped at the last one: it was from someone else in their department, a professor she'd never heard of before.

"Hey Jane, who's Professor… Odinson? That's a dumb name. Do you know who that is?"

"Odinson? Like Thor?" Jane looked over at her with one eyebrow raised.

Darcy removed her foot from her mouth before answering. She had just called her boss's boyfriend's last name dumb. There was no way in hell that Thor Odinson was a professor of anything, but the name was the same and she had just called it dumb. Truthfully, it was a lame insult, but it would probably upset Jane.

"Yeah, except it says 'professor'. Do you know Professor Odinson?" Darcy decided to play it off.

"I can't say that I do. What is he or she the professor of?"

"Mythology. Can someone be a professor of that? Well, I guess they can, but—"

She was cut off by a sharp knocking on the door, followed by Thor Odinson himself sticking his head into the room.

"Jane!" he all but yelled, stepping through the door. Jane got up and ran over to him, greeting him with a full-on hug.

"My greeting was that friendly," Darcy commented with a smug smile as the two broke their embrace.

"Sorry, Darcy. And what did that letter say?" Jane asked, walking back over to the coin.

"I don't know; I haven't opened it yet. It says on the front though that it's from Professor Odinson."
"Ah, my brother, Loki," Thor said, smiling widely.

"You have a brother?" Jane asked, surprised. Darcy couldn't help smiling at that: these two have been dating for several months now and Jane didn't know something that huge about him. This would probably result in an argument which was usually very entertaining because of Thor's thick-headedness and Jane's use of big words when she's upset. Darcy sat down at her little desk in the corner, spinning slightly back and forth on the wheelie chair.

"Surely I have told you," he said unsurely, obviously just trying to avoid a fight.

"No, it must've slipped your mind."

Darcy then zoned out, opening the letter slowly to avoid making noise to distract Jane. When she was angry, she was in the zone. If Darcy took her attention, it may be the last thing she ever did.

The letter was addressed to both of them. Well, more like 'Jane Foster and assistant'. It basically said that Professor Odinson wanted their help looking at something and that he would be stopping by today to talk to them about it.

I hope he's hot, Darcy thought. Wait, what if it's a woman? No, Thor said brother. Loki. What kind of name is Loki? Then again, what kind of name is Thor? Or Darcy, for that matter? Digressing. Anyway: I hope he's really hot. If he's related to Thor, then he probably will be. Although, he is a professor, so he's obviously not like Thor in the intelligence department. Who knows—

Darcy was abruptly pulled out of her thoughts by another knock on the door. Jane stood and walked over, still fuming from her argument, and opened it. Darcy couldn't see the person from her angle, but Jane was looking up at them.

"Hello, my name is Professor Odinson, I—" The voice suddenly stopped. "Thor?"

"Brother," Thor called out, walking to the door as well. He was obviously going in for a hug, but stopped for some reason.

"It's been a while. How have you been?"

"Good. I have Jane now," Thor beamed, putting his arm around her.

"I see. I was wondering if I could speak to Ms. Foster for a moment, if she wouldn't mind," he asked ever so politely.

"Of course, come in," Jane said, turning around and walking back to her desk. Darcy wheeled over to sit beside the desk, finally getting a view of this Professor Odinson.

He was tall—even taller than Thor, and that was saying something—and that was where their similarities ended. Thor was blonde and built and had a big smile almost all of the time while Loki Odinson was black-haired, lanky while still being a little muscular, and this brother had a weird expression on his face. He seemed downright disturbed by the fact his brother was there. His eyes, though, were what drew Darcy: dark, observing, intelligence practically seeping out. Everything Thor's weren't. The fact these two were brothers was astounding. He was also surprisingly young for a professor, probably around thirty years old. Most professors here were past their forties, tenured, and well aged. But then again, he was new. Maybe he was freshly graduated or was super-smart and graduated college at fifteen or something.

"What is it that you need?" Jane asked Loki almost impatiently. Darcy could see that Loki caught that and ignored her rudeness, beginning his proposition.
"I have recently discovered a site in Egypt," he began, "that could possibly be a huge archeological find. It is believed to be the site of a large tomb to several different pharaohs, spanning before and during the Roman occupation. My proposition is that you and your assistant accompany me to Egypt to study the site for two weeks, and help me try to find an entrance to the tomb."

There was a moment of silence as everyone seemed to look to Jane, who was staring at Loki. She opened her mouth to say something but apparently decided against it, instead just biting her lip.

"I'm in," Darcy belted, grinning. Everyone turned to look at her. Jane looked shocked, Thor looked like he had forgotten she was there, but Loki's face drew a small smile. "It sounds like fun. I'd personally love to discover some mummies."

"Well, that's one of you. What do you say, Ms. Foster?" Loki said after a moment. Once again, all eyes were on Jane.

Jane seemed to be contemplating something. "Would the university—"

"I've already talked to them. They'd let us borrow the equipment we need, pay for transportation, and it'd even be a credit for Ms. Lewis. We don't have to worry about checking in with the university or anything; Doctor Sterns was very adamant in us not bothering him as much as possible during the trip."

Darcy was slightly surprised he knew her name. So far, he'd just called her 'Jane's assistant', which in all honesty what she was used to being referred to as.

"Would it be safe?" Jane asked.

"I have personally arranged for a man to accompany us. He's an old friend and a specialist. We'll be very safe." Loki assured her.

Jane contemplated for a moment. Darcy was really hoping she'd say yes; she wasn't sure if Loki would still bring her if Jane said no. She was, after all, just an assistant. Sure, she was knowledgeable on the subject, but Loki wanted a specialist and an assistant, not some grad-student who had just recently switched from political science because of her undying love of adventure movies.

"I'll do it," Jane said. "On one condition: Thor can come too."

At that, Loki's face drained as Thor's lit up. Darcy thought that request was kind of rude on Jane's part, but knowing Jane that was understandable. Those two were inseparable. Loki looked like someone just told him Christmas had been canceled.

"I suppose he can come, if you think he'll… help you." Loki muttered, obviously not excited about his brother coming with them on their big journey abroad.

Jane jumped up and went to hug Thor, obviously forgetting about their fight a few minutes ago. As it began to heat up, Darcy stood and faced Loki.

"Would you like to talk with me outside about some of the details?"

"Yes please," Loki said, and the two of them moved quickly for the door.

"Are they usually that… friendly?" Loki asked as the door shut behind him.

"Sometimes more. I've learned to zone out really easily." They were slowly walking down the long hallway, not really aiming to go anywhere.
"Sounds like a handy trait to have, working around Ms. Foster and Thor," The tone Loki had when talking about him, the way he looked at him, the expression he had when Jane said she wanted him to come, and simply the way he said his brother's name said so much about Loki's view on Thor.

"You don't like your brother?" Darcy asked.

"Um," Loki looked taken aback. Admittedly, that was kind of a random thing to say. It had little to do with what their conversation had just been, but Loki seemed to follow. "We don't usually get along. I haven't seen him in a while, is all."

"You know, Thor and Jane were just arguing because he had never mentioned you to her."

"He hadn't?" Loki asked. She could see he tried to say that impassively, but there was pain there.

"Sorry," she muttered.

"It's all right. I understand. I don't go telling many people about Thor, either," he said, smiling a little.

"Well that's understandable. His most shining achievement was being on a rugby team that didn't lose every game."

"Was?"

"Yeah, he didn't make it this year. He's just been living with Jane. I don't really know what he does all day, but it really doesn't take much to keep him entertained, you know?"

"Hmm," Loki murmured, trying to hide a smile. At that, Darcy started laughing.

Behind them, the door to the workshop busted open and Jane and Thor walked out, heading for the exit quickly.

"I guess Jane's calling it quits early today. Wow, before 10 AM. I think that's a new record for her."

"That is very impressive," Loki commented, watching them go as well.

"Well, I suppose I'll get to work. Study up some Egyptian. Send us the deets when you get the chance."

"I'll get right on that," Loki grinned at her word choice. She turned to go back into the workshop.

"See you later,"

"Goodbye, Ms. Lewis," Loki said.

Darcy turned back around to see Loki turning to leave, when she called out, "Darcy." He looked at her, raising an eyebrow. "My name's Darcy."

He smiled again. "Goodbye, Darcy."
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Ok, so: I've all ready written this story in its entirety. It's all up on ff.net. I've decided to put it up on here as well because apparently more people read this website? I don't know. I'll be posting a few chapters or so a day until I finish. Then, I'll start the sequel and go until I've caught up to where I am on ff.net, and then I'll just post chapters normally on both sites, bla bla bla. Exciting stuff, I know.

I am completely unexperienced in the ways of ao3, so sorry about that. I'm just trying to share the tasertricks love to as many as possible. So... enjoy!

After spending her entire day learning about Egyptian mythology and hieroglyphics and everything that those things led to, Darcy was beat. By the time she got home, she was almost too tired to do anything besides fall onto her bed and go to sleep. She decided to just check her email and do a couple little things around her apartment, then finally give in to sleep.

Amongst the junk mail and random crap, there was one from the university. Upon opening it, the first thing she saw was that it was from Loki.

She immediately froze, her heart stopping in her chest. Of course she was getting way too worked up over this. She had met him earlier that day and already she was getting caught up over just his name. What would it be like a week and a half into the trip?

Darcy got back to the email, powering though her ridiculous thoughts. It was all about the trip. Why would it be about anything else?

The biggest thing in the email was that they would be leaving in just under two weeks. She had twelve days to get her shit together. Besides that, everything else was just what she expected; where specifically in Egypt they were going, what she wasn't allowed to bring, and what she was basically expected to do. One other surprising thing was that they'd be going there by boat in order to take all the supplies they need easier.

Are we smugglers now or something? Are we really bringing so much equipment that we need to take a boat instead of an airplane? Well, they would need a bunch of stuff to survive in the desert for two weeks, plus all of their archaeological supplies. That brought up another question: how were they going to live in the desert that long? They could bring all the water they wanted, but that wouldn't change how mind-blowingly hot it was going to be. And how were they going to shower? Darcy had no desire to be around an unshowered Thor for fourteen days.

The email said it would take just over three days to travel by boat to Alexandria, and from there they would take another boat to Cairo. The second part of the journey would luckily only be for a few hours.

After rereading the email, Darcy immediately went to Google and spent two hours searching for anything and everything she may need on her trip. She would need to buy a large amount of sunscreen. That was for sure. She was— for the most part— going to avoid dressing like a stereotypical archaeologist, but where was the harm in bringing just one Indiana Jones inspired
The next few days passed quickly; Darcy and Jane were preparing the workshop for their absence, as well as packing up a few things to have with them. Jane was getting more and more excited each day, showing Darcy different things she had bought or telling her about the site they were going to (even though Darcy knew just as much about it, thanks to Google). Thor was dropping in every day now, making Jane that much giddier.

With only two days left until they were to get on the boat and most of the shopping and packing already done, Darcy had little to do in the workshop besides read about Egypt on the internet. Jane hadn't even come in today, leaving Darcy alone, which was usually how she preferred it.

That being said, she didn't like being alone right now. Recently when she was alone, she would find her mind wondering back to Loki, which was extremely distracting. Jane had caught her three times just staring off, and Jane never noticed anything.

Darcy was being ridiculous. She had met him once.

It's the cheekbones. It has to be. There is something not natural there. But then you throw in the eyes; that shade of green is borderline ridiculous. And his hair and height and face and-

Standing suddenly, Darcy walked over to the old CD player Jane kept in the workshop and put in a CD, not really paying attention to what it was. Her computer was ancient and didn't even have speakers, so this would have to do.

As she was walking back to her computer, "Crocodile Rock" started blasting. Not even thinking about it, Darcy started rocking out to it. For the first time in a while, she could successfully clear her mind. She had never been a talented dancer, but right now she was doing the closest thing to venting she could do, complete with singing the lyrics at the top of her lungs.

Turning around in what she believed to be a particularly awesome move, she froze in horror as she saw Loki standing in the doorway, hand outstretched to knock on the doorframe. He was wearing a (very well fitting) three-piece suit and the smallest of smiles.

"How long…?" was all Darcy could manage to say.

"Not long." He stepped into the workshop and leaned against one of the tables. "That twist at the end was impressive, though,"

"Do you dance?" As soon as she said it, she wanted to punch herself. What kind of question was that? Eloquent as ever, Darcy.

"Not really," he said, not missing a beat. He added a smile, probably seeing the shade of red her face was.

"That's a shame. You look like a great dancer." Darcy had no idea why she was saying what was coming out of her mouth. Sure, ninety percent of the time the filter in her mind was completely gone and it ended up being funny, but this was one of the times that fell into the ten percent that desperately needed her to not say things that made her look even dumber than she already felt.

For some reason, Loki smiled. He even chuckled a little before saying, "Well, thank you, I suppose. Your dance moves, however, were quite something."

"Yeah, I'm sure. I guess you're too polite to say I looked like a freak,"
"No, no; it was great. I like the song choice,"

"Oh, yeah. Elton is my man. I don't think this CD is just him, though. I forget what else is on this,"

The song ended, the next one taking a moment to start up. When it did, Darcy was pretty sure she could curl up in a ball and die right then and there.

"I've been really tryin', baby; tryin' to hold back this feeling for so long,"the song sang out. Of course it's one of the most sexual songs ever. This situation wasn't quite awkward enough.

Darcy stared wide-eyed at the floor, refusing to make eye contact with him.

"I'll just turn that off," she said, finally looking up after a moment. When she did look up, what she saw shocked her.

Loki was laughing his ass off. She couldn't help herself; watching him, Darcy started laughing too. Both of them laughed and laughed even harder at laughing, Darcy almost falling over from it. Loki began to step forward to help her, which only made her laugh more. She eventually made it over to the CD player, turning it off as "Let's Get It On" sang it's last chorus. She turned to face Loki.

"So, what did you need when you originally came down here?" she asked, successfully regaining her composure. She hoped that didn't sound rude. Overthinking, Darcy. Calm down.

"Well, I was coming down to see if you or Jane were here because my friend, the man coming with us, just got into town. I was hoping all of us could go out to dinner tonight to become better acquainted."

"Uh, yeah. That sounds good. I can text Jane, have her bring Thor as well," she added the last part as almost a question, knowing Loki's distaste for Thor.

Loki looked uneasy at the mention of his brother, but he smiled lightly and nodded.

"Where is this place?" she asked. He fed her the address of some place she'd never heard of and she typed it into her message to Jane.

"How fancy is this going to be?" Darcy asked as she finished and sent the text.

"It's fairly upscale,"

"So I guess I should dress up a little bit more than my t-shirt and jeans?"

"If you really want to. I think you look fine,"

"That's nice of you to say, but I don't want to have to wait outside because of not dressing up. My apartment's only a couple blocks from here." she said. "I can meet you at the restaurant."

"I can walk you," Loki offered. "It's after dark, and…" he trailed off, looking almost concerned. Darcy figured he was a gentleman, but damn.

"Sure, if you want to," she said, grabbing her bag.

As they walked out of the building, Loki held the door for her. Darcy couldn't help grinning after she walked past him. This was not helping her get her mind off him.

"You do realize that Cambridge is one of the safest cities in England, right?" Darcy said as they walked. Not only has she never heard of anyone getting mugged around here, but she lived very
close to the university and she always carried a taser with her just in case something were to happen. She had accidentally used it on Thor the first time she'd met him and she was sure Loki would love that story, but that was for another time.

"But it's still a city, and after dark. And you are-"

"A girl?"

"I was going to say a woman, but you get my drift."

Darcy murmured in agreement, not adding anything to that. She was sure that that conversation would end up getting even more awkward than before and that was not a path she wanted to go down again.

They arrived at her apartment a few minutes later. Loki waited in her small living room while Darcy went to change.

"So on a scale from three to seven, how fancy is this place?" Darcy called out as she was changing.

"Three to seven?"

"Regular scales are for weenies."

"Well, I'd say it's about a six."

"A six? Well I guess that calls for a dress. Or maybe a fancy-looking skirt,"

"Whatever you feel comfortable in,"

A few minutes later, Darcy was looking at herself in her full-length mirror. She had on one of her nicest dresses, a simple black flowy thing. Her hair was loosely pinned up and her makeup refreshed, but she still felt like something was missing.

She added a necklace— one of the nicest things she owned— and figured that would have to do. Wait! I got it! She went back over to her makeup and added the reddest lipstick she had, making her look that much more bangable. Success.

They were the first ones to get to the restaurant by a solid fifteen minutes. The time leading up to Loki's friend's and Jane and Thor's arrival was filled with small talk and Darcy drinking two glasses of wine. The waitress was filling up a third glass as Jane and Thor walked around the corner. Spotting them, Thor's face lit up as they approached the table. Jane, on the other hand, looked from Loki to Darcy, a look of suspicion on her face.

"What took you guys so long?" Darcy asked as they took their seats.

"Traffic was a mess. And we're not the last ones here anyway,"

At that, a man approached the table, Loki standing to greet him. He was a relatively short man; when Darcy stood to greet him, they were about the same height. Loki introduced him as Clint Barton and everyone shook his hand briefly before sitting back down.

The dinner wasn't overly weird, which Darcy was grateful for. She had had her fill of awkward with her dancing comments earlier.

After the plates from the main course were taken away, Jane excused herself to the bathroom and
dragged Darcy along with her.

"What?" Darcy asked a little harsher than she was intending.

"What's up with you two?" Jane asked with the most ridiculous look on her face. It took everything she had for Darcy not to just laugh at her.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play that with me. You and *Loki,*"

"Are we really having a bathroom conversation over boys?"

"Yes. Answer the question."

"We were sitting at the table. Was there anything else?"

"You were with him earlier, when you texted me. That means you were in the workshop, and you weren't in the workshop dressed like that."

"Your point being?"

"Was he in your apartment?"

"He might've been."

"He was in your apartment while you were changing,"

"How observant of you. What're you getting at?" Darcy was growing tired of Jane's assumptions, because every time Darcy even spoke to a man, even in the most platonic way, Jane would find out and assume they were sleeping together and planning on getting married.

"I don't think I've ever seen you in a dress," Jane commented, fixing her makeup in the mirror above the sink.

"It's a fancy restaurant. I was told to wear fancy clothes."

"I didn't know you even owned a dress,"

"I just don't wear them to the workshop," Darcy said, shrugging. She was going to add a comment on how Jane always came in wearing whatever she wanted, but even though she never acted like it, Jane was technically her boss. The three glasses of wine in her would start talking soon if Darcy wasn't careful.

"He's been looking at you all night," Jane added, finishing up her retouching.

"No he hasn't," Darcy quickly dismissed.

"He has been. It's adorable. And you know, he's not a bad looking guy."

"Adorable is a gross word. But we should get back, we've been gone a while," Darcy purposely ignored the later part of Jane's comment; that was not something she wanted to get into with Jane, especially when not completely sober.

"Fine, but this discussion is not over,"
"I wouldn't expect any less."

The rest of the night was fairly uneventful. Loki paid for all of their dinners; Darcy was too afraid of what the total would be to even see the check. After, Loki walked her home again. He was extremely nice and gentlemanly, which really fucking pissed her off. He was making this way too easy for her. She didn't want to keep thinking about him. How much he crossed her mind really bothered her, considering the amount of time they've spent together. This trip was going to be extremely difficult for her, with Thor and Jane going off by themselves and as Loki explained, Clint would be away from the group most of the time, leaving a lot of time with just her and Loki. If she was like this after just two times meeting, she would be destroyed after two weeks. Hopefully she'd stop making such an ass of herself at every turn, though.
Chapter 3

The day had finally come: the day they were to leave for Egypt. Darcy had managed to squeeze all the personal items she was bringing into a duffle bag and a backpack, with only a little trouble closing the duffle. She showed up to the meeting spot in a parking lot near the university ten minutes early, and that was with walking around her apartment a few times and stopping at a coffee shop on the way.

Clint and Loki were already there, their bags and all of the supplies packed away. They were taking two cars, which put Darcy in either the backseat of Jane and Thor's or with Clint and Loki. Darcy had immediately chosen the latter option.

Exactly fifteen minutes late, Jane and Thor finally rolled in. They transferred their bags from their car to the university van, and the five of them finally set out.

It took them just over an hour to get to Harwich, where the boat was already waiting. Upon getting out of the car, Darcy got her first look at the thing they were spending the next few days on. If it were possible for a freighter and a yacht to have a drunken one-night stand, this boat would be the love child from that. It had a rustic feel to it, in that it looked like it was built in the late 1800's.

"Are we going to Egypt or looking for Skull Island?" Darcy asked. Clint was the only one who caught that, smiling a little as he helped Loki unload the van.

A man walked down the platform from the boat and introduced himself as Captain Dugan. After a moment, a few other men came down and carried their supplies up onto the boat for them.

Once they were all on board, they were shown the dining hall, the lounge, and finally their rooms. There were specific times for meals and a strict lights out at eleven (most nights), but other than that they were allowed to do whatever they wanted. They were also instructed to come back up on to the main deck once they settled into their rooms. After the mini tour, Captain Dugan asked to briefly speak with Jane and Darcy alone.

"Ladies, I just want to express a word of warning. I hold the men on my ship to the highest of standards, but please exercise caution. I'd recommend not leaving this part of the ship without another person, just to be safe. Ok?"

Jane was all around shocked by what he had to say, so Darcy took over. "Aye aye, Captain," she said with a smile. He nodded to both of them, and then left them there.

"What the hell?" Jane said, genuinely very upset by what Dugan had said. "Is this actually like really unsafe? Are we both going to get raped? Darcy-"

"I think—" Darcy cut her off before she reached hysteria, "—that was like those warnings you get when you travel into a city, like it's safe, just don't be stupid."

"I didn't know walking around by myself on a boat I'm supposed to be living on for three days was considered stupid,"

"Were you planning on it anyway?" Darcy said, turning to go into her room. She knew Jane and Thor were going to be attached at the pelvis for most of this journey. If anything, Darcy should be the one upset about this, but it really wasn't extremely surprising when she thought about it. I'm sure most of them or maybe even all of them are respectable men, but you never know.
"Well, no, but-"

"I'll see you at lunch, Jane," she said upon entering her room. She closed the door before Jane could add anything to that.

Darcy's room was small— like the size of her apartment's bathroom small. There was a bed probably made for a nine year old, a little nightstand/dresser, a desk and chair, and a circular window with a great view of the side of the dock. She threw the duffle bag beside the bed and put her backpack on the desk chair, sliding out her laptop. She pulled her iPod and phone out of her pockets and then fished out her passport and extra money from her bag. She lifted the little mattress and slid her valuables under, hopefully hiding them well enough just in case anyone was to come in and snoop around.

After that, Darcy laid down on the bed. Her stash was at the end of the bed, so she wouldn't end up smashing her laptop while she slept. The bed was comfortable enough, so she rolled out and left her room to go to the main deck like the captain had instructed them to.

Upon opening the door, she literally walked right into something. Whatever it was, it was really big walking into it and even bigger falling on top of her.

"I'm so sorry," Of course what she walked into was Loki. Of course it would be him on top of her, alone in the hallway. He immediately shuffled almost gracefully off of her.

"It's fine," Darcy said as he helped her up.

"Are you all right?" He looked genuinely concerned, like he had just accidentally shot her.

"Yeah, I'm fine." A little stunned, but fine. "Are you going up now?"

"Yeah, I—" He was cut off by the boat jerking extremely hard, throwing Darcy against the wall and Loki against Darcy.

"I'm so sorry," was all he could say.

"You're fine," Darcy said. If the rest of the journey were like this, she'd probably die at some point from either hitting her head or from Loki's presence and closeness simply causing her to drop dead. The second choice, admittedly, was probably a much better yet painful way to go.

"Shall we?" he said, motioning down the hall toward the stairs. Loki looked extremely distressed over accidentally falling on/into her twice. Of course, she was completely on edge as well, but for a completely different reason.

"Yeah, sounds good," she said, taking the lead down the hall.

Up on deck, there were a few crewmen walking around, preparing the ship for open water. They were leaving the harbor already, heading down the Channel for the Atlantic.

Clint, Jane, and Thor were sitting at a table with two open spots, talking to the captain.

"What's wrong with you guys?" Thor asked, looking from Loki to Darcy.

"What do you mean?" Loki asked coolly, taking his seat. Darcy sat between Clint and Loki, putting Jane right across from her.

"Darcy, why's your face so red?" Jane asked. Suddenly her eyebrows shot up to her hairline as she
looked from Darcy to Loki and back again. Darcy quickly shook her head, knowing what Jane was thinking.

"It sure is a nice day," Clint said, looking out over the water. As everyone else dropped the conversation, Darcy looked over at him. He glanced over at her and winked. 'Thank you,' she mouthed. He nodded a little and then looked back out at the ocean.

For lunch, they were served fish that was actually very good. Afterwards, the captain said they could do whatever they wanted until dinnertime. Clint went back down to his room while the other four moved over to the lounge.

'The lounge' looked like it had once been a bathroom; discolored tile floors and odd pipes sticking randomly out of the walls gave it that classic old prison bathroom vibe. There were two couches, a poker table, a foosball table, and a small TV on a stand with a few old DVDs.

Darcy initially attempted to do something on her own; she had a book that was extremely dull and her iPod down in her room, but that was just really far away and she was actually feeling pretty lazy, so that option was out. Conversation would just have to do.

Even as Jane and Thor were talking across the room, Jane kept giving her and Loki weird looks, even when they weren't near each other. Aw, fuck it. Jane will get over it.

"Fancy seeing you here," Darcy said as she sat at the table Loki was at. He closed the book he was reading and smiled.

"Yeah, fancy that,"

"So," Darcy lowered her voice and leaned in a little. She was going to cut right to the chase, start a real conversation before she said anything awful. Being seen as a little random was infinitely better than a repeat of their previous encounters. "Would you like to hear about the time I tased your brother?"

Loki grinned. "I would love to,"

"Well, it was Jane, Dr. Selvig— the anthology professor— and I, out in the middle of nowhere. We were doing some field research. Anyway, we had finally made our big discovery that day and we were driving back into town that night, when Thor runs out into the road, half naked, completely wasted," she explained. "Jane, being the awful driver that she is, runs his drunken ass over. We all jump out of the car to see if he's ok, when all of a sudden he pops back up, completely fine. He's walking around, rambling on about nothing, when he turns to face me. He says something— I still don't know what— and I just tased him. He was freaking me out,"

"When was this?" Loki asked, trying his best to hold back laughter.

"A few months ago. But after we took him to the hospital and he kind of freaked out, one thing led to another and now Jane and Thor are… whatever they are now."

"This whole situation sounds exactly like Thor,"

"Oh yeah?"

From there, Loki and Darcy exchanged Thor stories, which led to just telling each other stories. Darcy was honestly surprised when the dinner bell rang that evening.

Dinner was much less awkward than lunch, but didn't taste quite as good. The captain ate with them
again, but the rest of the crew sat at different tables.

Loki and Clint went below deck after dinner, Clint saying he wanted to show him something he brought with him. It was about a half an hour after dinner had been cleaned up when in the dining hall, after the tables and chairs were folded up and put away, that some of the crew members started playing music. From the sound of it, they hadn't updated their music collection since the sixties. Darcy looked over and snorted when she saw they were using records.

A couple of the men started dancing, everyone else laughing along and clapping and singing. She was half expecting them to do a full reenactment of "Anything Goes." This entire ship has to be the weirdest thing I have ever experienced, Darcy thought.

Jane got Thor to dance, which really surprised Darcy. She didn't see Thor as the dancing type. Well, I guess it's a day of weird things.

Two of the crewmen came over to her and tried to get her to dance. She said no, but compromised with clapping along with the other non-dancers. A few songs later, Loki and Clint entered the hall, looks of confusion on both of their faces when they spotted the scene before them: Jane, Thor, and three of the crewmen were dancing some kind of jig to "The Twist" while Darcy and the remaining four crewmen present were sitting on a table they unfolded, laughing and joking.

Clint looked like he just wanted to turn around and go back the way he came, but Loki walked straight over to Darcy.

"Why aren't you dancing?" he asked, sitting beside her.

"I've already embarrassed myself through dance enough this week," she said, holding his hands out in front of him.

"That's funny," she said, looking from his open hands to his sincere eyes.

"Come on," he said, standing up again. He turned to her and smiled, holding his hands out in front of him.

"What?" she asked incredulously.

She decided in that moment— somewhat rashly— to just go with it. She'd already embarrassed herself beyond belief, and for some reason he was still talking to her.

It wasn't long after that that every person in the room was dancing, not in any way sexual or modern or even normal. Loki twirled Darcy a few times to the point she almost got dizzy, but that was about all the touching any of them were doing, even Jane and Thor.

Darcy wasn't sure how much time passed, but eventually she left the dining hall turned dance party to step into the kitchen to grab a drink of water. Jane followed her in as well, pouring herself a glass and leaning up against the counter to better face Darcy.

She knew what Jane was going to talk about: why are you hanging out with Loki? What happened earlier today? Are you fucking him? Before Darcy could even open her mouth to say anything, Jane started speaking. To Darcy's complete surprise, she didn't bring up Loki.

"How about you and I go for a walk?" she asked, sipping her drink.
"Where to?"

"Well, I'm getting pretty tired and I told Thor I was going to go back to the room. We could take the long way, then you could just come back up or go to your room or whatever after,"

"All right," Darcy said. As much as she hated Jane's constant prodding into what she did, she did enjoy talking to her about other things.

The two women strolled through the ship, talking about what they were going to study, what they thought Egypt was going to be like, and other completely normal non-man-related things. Darcy reveled in this feeling; this was extremely rare, especially since the introduction of Thor.

Eventually they reached Jane and Thor's room and they said goodnight and parted ways. Darcy began the trek back up to the dining hall.

It wasn't until this part of the plan that Darcy realized that she would be walking around the ship by herself, after the captain had specifically told her not to. Well, she rationalized, *I know my way there, it's not even a five minute walk, and it was a 'just in case' kind of warning anyway, right?*

It was when she was about halfway there when a man started walking behind her. It was some crewman she had seen earlier that day; a kind of shady looking guy who didn't really talk to the others as much. *I don't even have my cell phone or taser. Stupid!*

Panic swelled in her stomach, making her start walking a little faster. She was only a hallway, a turn, and a hallway from the dining hall, but that was still a pretty good distance to cover.

"Hey, are you lost?" the man asked. Darcy turned around to answer, but as she did he pushed her up against the wall.

"Stop! Get off—" Darcy tried pushing him off and scratching at him, but he was a big guy. Her efforts were futile. She started to yell for help, but he cut her off.

"I thought the captain warned you gals about walking around by yourselves,"

Instead of answering, Darcy let out a blood-curdling scream. She figured that would probably help her more than anything she could say to this lunatic.

"That's not going to help you," the man said, putting his large, dirty hand over her mouth, muffling her. He lowered his face close to hers. "You really are very beautiful,"

Darcy went into shutdown mode. She just closed her eyes and tried to crumple to the floor. She had read about it at some point; when people were trying to attack you like that, just slump to the ground. It probably wouldn't work, but it was better than nothing. Hopefully.

After a few seconds she actually did fall. Darcy simply wrapped her arms around her legs and hid her face between her knees. She could hear something going on around her, but she didn't look.

"Darcy?" She heard a familiar voice. There were weird noises going on around her, which led her to finally opening her eyes out of curiosity. Loki was in front of her, an extremely worried look on his face. Clint was standing against the wall behind him, his eyebrow furrowed. Down the hallway, two men were dragging an unconscious man away.

"What the hell happened?" she asked, looking from the man to Loki.

"Loki just beat the shit out of that guy," Clint said. Darcy raised an eyebrow, to which Loki
shrugged, almost embarrassed.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yeah. Nothing happened. He didn't get to... do anything." Darcy waved her hand around during the last part, as if that would help explain what she meant.

Loki helped her to her feet for the second time that day. Clint excused himself to go speak to the captain about what happened, leaving Darcy with Loki.

She looked up at him, hoping she wasn't sounded pathetic and her feminism was still holding true. "Would you mind too terribly walking me home again?"

It was the morning of the last day of their journey. In just a few hours, they'd be in Alexandria. The man who had snuck up on Darcy had been thrown into the brig (this ship actually had a brig!) and was to be taken back to England where he would receive some kind of legal punishment. Darcy was completely fine; in retrospect, she thought she should be reacting a lot worse than she was, but she just wasn't feeling it. Nothing too bad had happened, and besides being a little freaked out at first, she felt good. If anything, Jane was more freaked out by the whole thing than Darcy had been. She still hasn't left Thor's side.

When Darcy had screamed, the guys up in the dining hall had heard her and came running. Thor had seen Darcy by herself so he knew Jane was also alone, so he had immediately gone off to find her, leaving Loki, Clint, and two other men to deal with Darcy and her attacker.

Clint later explained to Darcy that when Loki had seen what was happening, he went full beast-mode and tackled the guy to the ground. The dude was actually knocked unconscious immediately from hitting his head off the floor. Clint had to pull Loki off of him because he was still trying to get at him even when he was unconscious. He had gotten in a few good hits before some of the other crewmen dragged the body away.

"I've never seen him like that," Clint had explained over breakfast the next day. "I didn't even know he was capable of something like that,"

"Am I supposed to be scared or impressed?" Darcy had asked as Loki walked into the dining hall, seeing her for the first time since he had walked her to her room.

"Both, I think," Clint said, leaving Darcy so she could talk to Loki alone.

Darcy and Loki weren't really in their awkward stage anymore. Darcy mostly felt gratitude toward him now, along with everything she felt before. She still had no idea what Loki thought of her, but she figured it was at least positive, considering what Clint had told Darcy about the way he reacted. Their discussion the day before after Clint had left basically consisted of Darcy thanking him and Loki telling her not worry about it.

But how can I not? He saved me. All I'm going to do is worry about it.

Now, Darcy was in her room, packing up everything to get off the boat in just a few hours. It almost worried her to say this, considering what happened, but she was almost going to miss the ship. All of the other men were nice and Captain Dugan was pretty awesome. The dance party they had the first night was the most fun Darcy's had in a while, and the food onboard was surprisingly excellent. All that being said, Darcy was extremely excited to get off and go study the site.

There was a knock on the door. Darcy was just finishing packing, so she just yelled, "Come in!"
"Hey," Loki said after opening the door and stepping in. "Jane and Thor went up already," Which meant that Jane had told Loki to stay with her, so she wouldn't be alone for even a second. Ever since Jane had found out what happened, she made sure that she and Darcy were never alone. The two of them were almost always with each other, if not Thor, Clint, or Loki.

"All right. I'm done now, so we can go up too," she said, putting on her backpack. Loki picked up her duffle bag and stepped back into the hallway, waiting for her to come too.

Up top, all of their personal bags were in pile in the lounge, ready for their departure.

They were served their last meal onboard and the men all said their goodbyes. More than several of the men apologized to Darcy for the one guy's actions the first night.

After breakfast, they went outside, where they could see the shoreline of Northern Africa off in the distance. They were to ride along the coast for the last leg of the journey. The crewmen were all off doing whatever it was they did, leaving the five travelers alone together. Loki asked to speak with just Darcy for a moment.

"What is it?" she asked once they were away from the others.

"I've been very rude, and for that I apologize. I should've asked you a while ago," He trailed off. Darcy had absolutely no idea where this was going. "Are you sure you want to continue with this? I mean, we could just end this now."

"What are you talking about?" Darcy furrowed her brow, giving him a weird look.

"All of this. We could get on a plane in Alexandria and fly back to England, have all the supplies go back with the ship."

"And why would we do that?"

"If you were in any way uncomfortable with continuing the trip with what happened…"

"Listen, you should be having this conversation with Jane. I, personally, am completely ok. Better than ok, actually. Jane's the one freaking out. She made me sit in the bathroom with her while she showered. But me? I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" he asked, his eyes shining. Ignore the eyes, Darcy. Ignore the eyes.

"Completely. I'm actually very excited to get to the site. Do you think we'll find any mummies?" she asked as she began to walk back to the group.

"Only if we're really lucky," he said, walking beside her.

Three hours later, all of their supplies and bags were loaded into a small truck and the group said goodbye to the ship's crew and captain for the last time.

A single bead of sweat went down her back, the heat already starting to get to her. Darcy had known she was going to Africa, but damn, it was hot. Not only that, it was incredibly humid. She was glad she had worn her hair up today. She and Jane both had to wear long, loose pants and long-sleeved shirts to travel in the city, Jane even going as far to wear a scarf around her neck. She and Darcy had done a bunch of research before leaving England about how women were to dress, and it all basically said to be fairly conservative and don't show cleavage. When they were at the dig site, though, they could thankfully wear whatever they wanted. Darcy knew she'd never last if she had to
wear long sleeves all day in the middle of the desert.

The group went from the dock on the ocean, through part of the city to a small dock on the outskirts with a much smaller boat already waiting for them. They all helped carry the supplies onboard and within a half an hour they were sailing down— well, technically up— the Nile.

The voyage didn't last very long; even with their clocks set forward one hour to account for their time zone jump, it was only two in the afternoon when they arrived in Cairo.

Another small truck was waiting for them at the dock, along with two jeeps. They transferred all of their stuff from the boat to the truck and set out on the last leg of their journey.

Clint volunteered to drive the mini-moving truck, which meant Darcy would be alone with Loki once again. It was getting to the point were she actually preferred being alone with Loki, as opposed to Jane or Thor being with them. She loved both of them to death— well, she loved Jane to death; Thor was more of an acquaintance at this point— but Loki was just someone Darcy felt very comfortable around. Had she said that five days before, she would've been lying out her ass. Now, after everything that happened, her conversations with Loki were borderline smooth.

After three and a half hours of driving through the city and then into the desert, Loki stopped the car and got out, Darcy quickly following suit.

"This is it," he said happily, walking out away from the car.

There wasn't much there, to be honest. The remains of two obelisks were all that were standing; there were a few blocks scattered around as well, but nothing else notable.

They unloaded all of their supplies and began setting up. They had a large tent for their archeological supplies, tents for sleeping, more water than they would ever need, a bunch of food, miscellaneous survival gear, and this portable toilet thing. Every other night would be spent in a hotel in Cairo, but Darcy was relieved when she saw they were bringing that.

They ate a small dinner, began setting up their supplies, and finished setting up their tents for the nights they weren't in town. As the sun was beginning to go down, Darcy noticed that something was missing from their supplies. She looked around and noticed something very wrong.

"Guys, are we missing a tent?" she called out.

"Didn't you bring one?" Jane said, setting up one of the three tents Darcy could see.

"You told me you bought a tent meant for two people,"

"I did," she said, glancing over at Thor. The three men were watching this unfold, none of them daring to speak up.

"I assumed that I'd be sharing with you," Darcy said, but she was realizing how foolish she was. Of course Jane would be sharing a tent with Thor. Why would she believe they'd be splitting up by gender, like this was some school trip?

"I'm sorry, Darcy," Jane offered, but it didn't mean much to Darcy. It didn't change anything. "Did you at least bring a sleeping bag and pillow?"

"Yes, I brought a sleeping bag and pillow," she shot sourly. "I thought we were sharing a tent, not sleeping together," Jane just gave her a sympathetic look and turned back to finish up her tent.
Darcy pulled out her sleeping bag from her bag and unrolled it, trying her best to mask her shame. Everyone else had finished setting up and was settling in for the night. As Darcy was walking around looking for a comfortable spot of sand, Loki approached her.

"You can't sleep outside,"

"Well, I don't exactly have a tent," she said a little too bitterly.

Loki took a moment to say anything. "You can share my tent,"

"You don't have to do that," Loki had already saved her once. She didn't need his help; this was her mistake and she'd pay for it.

"I really must insist. The desert is extremely dangerous at night, from the snakes to the scorpions to the possibility of sand storms."

"Fine." He had her at snakes. "But no funny business. I mean it." Darcy gathered her belongings in her arms and drudged over to his tent.

"Of course," he said, holding back the tent's flap for her as she climbed in.

Darcy kept all of her belongings in one little pile in the corner, trying to use as little space as possible. Loki entered the tent, zipping it up for the night.

The tent was small; Loki most likely wasn't planning on having another person in here, so it was meant for one person. The two of them rolled out their sleeping bags to discover they were overlapping by a few inches. Once Darcy got in, though, she turned on her side away from Loki and did her best to not be near him.

"Thank you, again," Darcy said quietly after taking off her glasses and tucking them in her bag above her head.

"No problem," Loki said in a low, sleepy voice from behind her.

Don't think. Don't you dare overthink. Just go to sleep. Go to sleep and don't think about him or his face or his anything.

Staring blankly at the side of the tent in front of her face, Darcy thought over the site, what they were to do tomorrow, and how she would have to spend a lot of time with Loki because Jane would be off with Thor and Clint would be by himself.

Dammit, stop thinking about him. You're being a creep, Darcy. Stop. Thinking. About. Him. Whatever I feel about him doesn't matter. It's not professional and there's no way in hell he feels the same way back. I'm just Jane's dumb assistant he keeps having to save.

Loki settled into sleep, sighing not quite silently, almost completely ruining Darcy's attempts to keep her mind from places she didn't want it to go. That was a slippery slope she didn't want to fall down.

It was surprisingly very cold, Darcy realized after a moment. She curled up into a little ball, attempting to warm herself. A thought about Loki being cold as well and the two of them getting a little closer crossed her mind for a split second, but she quickly took that dream and tossed it from her mind.

Darcy eventually slept fairly well, except for when she briefly woke up in the middle of the night to hear either Thor and Jane getting it on or Jane having a very wild dream. Eventually Darcy was able
to block *that* out and got back to sleep, though, sleeping extremely well and thankfully not dreaming — more specifically, not dreaming about Loki.
Darcy woke at the crack of Satan's ass, approximately, but surprisingly felt very well rested. She was much warmer now and not curled up in a ball anymore. There was something strange, though; something off. She could've sworn when she fell asleep the side of the tent was much closer to her face. Her nose had practically been up against the side, but now she was at least a full foot away from it. Also, there was something behind her, up against her back. Something warm and breathing and—

*Oh my god. Oh. My. God.*

They were spooning. Loki Odinson was spooning her. His arm was wrapped around her ribs and his hand was on her so lightly she could barely feel it. It was resting right below being extremely objectionable. She had nuzzled back into him, her damn body betraying her as she slept. Their legs were tangled together, very comfortably actually. Her back was pressed up against his chest and stomach and—

*Oh god.*

Darcy pushed *that* out of her head, trying her best not to think too into it. She had a situation on her hands: Loki was still asleep, which meant Darcy could get herself out of this situation and he would never have to know. But she had time; she had woken up very early, and she was very comfortable. She could lay here for a little while longer while she figured out the best way to go about this without waking him up.

And then it happened. The worst possible thing that could happen in this situation, save someone walking in on them: Loki began to stretch a little, moving his muscles as he woke up. A very quiet, deep noise came from his throat, Darcy doing her best to ignore it, and then suddenly Loki froze. He must've opened his eyes, seeing the back of her head not even inches from his face.

Darcy closed her eyes and slowed down her breathing. This situation didn't have to be any more awkward for him. She could just lay there and pretended to be asleep. She figured her being awake and the two of them having to talk this out would be far worse than Loki not knowing she was awake.

It felt like several days passed, but in reality it hadn't even been a full minute yet. Either way, Darcy decided that now was the time to get out of this situation. She stretched similarly to the way Loki had, but then rolled away from him and onto her stomach, mimicking someone simply rolling over in their sleep.

*Crisis averted. Now we never have to deal with that awkward conversation. We've definitely had enough of those.*

Her thoughts were cut off by the sound of a motor coming from outside. She and Loki both shot up, glancing at each other confused. Before Darcy could say anything, Loki unzipped the tent and slipped out, leaving her alone. Quickly pulling on her shoes and her glasses, Darcy emerged from the tent to quite the sight. It took her a moment to soak everything in.

Off to the left there were three large black SUVs. Jane and Thor weren't in sight, which meant they
were most likely either sleeping through the commotion or trying to get dressed as fast as they could, which was much more likely, considering what Darcy had heard the night before. Clint and Loki were there in front of her, along with three men she didn't recognize. Clint was standing away from the group, crossing his arms and generally looking menacing and badass. He was already dressed for the day, at just a quarter to seven. Loki, on the other hand, was in a heated argument with one of the men she didn't know. He was barefoot, shirtless, his hair was all mussed up from sleep, and he was currently pointing one finger at the man he was disputing with. Darcy decided to approach this before a catfight broke out.

"We were here first. We are on an academic study-"

"Hello boys," Darcy said, interrupting Loki's heated statement. "What seems to be the problem?"
She looked from Loki to the other man, trying her best to put on a polite, innocent smile.

"We've been planning this for months," the man said to Loki, not really answering her. He was a fellow American. Great.

"I'm sorry; what's your name?" Darcy asked, stepping directly between the man and Loki, forcing him to focus on her.

"I'm Tony Stark, and I was just telling him that I've invested a lot of money into this and I am not just going to leave because someone else got here first,"

"Just because you spent a lot of money doesn't mean you have more of a right to be here. We've spent a lot of money too and we actually got here first," Loki shot back.

"Gentlemen," Darcy interjected, "Please play nice,"

"Why don't you just let us talk this out, okay sweetie?" Stark put his hand on her arm, slightly pulling her out from between them. Even though it was completely gentle and Darcy thought nothing of it, Loki's eyes flashed pure anger and he started to step toward Stark. Darcy could've sworn she even heard a slight growl.

"Whoa! Easy, tiger," Stark said, putting his hands up in mock surrender. "I won't touch your lady next time. But you still have to leave."

"I'm not his 'lady', and—"

"We're not leaving," Loki all but snarled, anger radiating off of him.

"What's going on?" Jane had finally entered the scene. Darcy had never been happier to see her.

Darcy briefly told her the predicament, Jane looking like she was listening to the biggest pile of bullshit she had ever heard. When she finished, Jane simply shook her head.

"And that's what we're arguing about?" Jane asked, rubbing one temple.

"That's basically it," Stark said. He was standing farther away from Darcy now, probably scared Loki would jump at him if he didn't.

"Why don't we just share the site?" she said, looking from Loki to Stark and his group.

Loki and Stark exploded, both spouting out reasons why that was a bad idea. Darcy actually put one hand on each of their chests, the two of them trying to get closer to each other as they yelled in each other's faces.
"We're all adults. We know how to share," Darcy said at a small break in the arguing. Both men looked at her, as if just realizing she was there between them. "We're all friends here. Why don't we pull resources and work together?"

Apparently 'working together' was a bit of a stretch because Loki and Stark started arguing again, yelling about how they'd never work with each other and how they'd rather die and a lot more colorful language.

After a moment of that, Jane simply walked over to them. Darcy took a few steps back, standing beside Clint.

"All right, listen." Jane was pulling her middle school teacher bit, where she'd get really quiet and intense. "We don't have to work together. We don't even have to get along. We just have to be around each other while we work. We can both study the same site, and we can do this without fighting. Understand?"

Loki and Stark both simply nodded, both their manhood's beaten to a pulp.

A door from one of the SUVs closed loudly and a woman walked over and joined the group.

"Everything's set, boss," she said to Stark.

"Nat?" Clint said, looking confused.

"Clint?"

The two of them suddenly smiled, but said nothing after that.

"Um, I'm sorry. Do you two know each other?" Stark asked, looking between the two of them.

"Nah. They just know each other's names by looking at them," Darcy said. Stark looked at her with the smallest of smiles.

"Well, I personally am very okay with our two groups both being here," one of the other men with Stark said.

"So am I. We could really help each other out," the last man said. This guy looked like a total Boy Scout. Darcy saw Stark roll his eyes after he spoke.

"It could be fun," Darcy offered, looking back over at Loki. He still seemed angry, but he was much better at hiding it now.

"Yes, it could be quite fun. We could… make it interesting," Stark said, walking back over to Loki.

"Interesting how?" Loki said dryly, trying to hide his curiosity.

"Oh, you know. Make a little wager. Who's team will find something big first,"

"That is not what I meant," Darcy said, but neither of them heard it.

"And what are we wagering?" Loki asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Well, bragging rights are a given. You, my friend, don't look like the betting of money type," Loki said nothing, just listened to Stark as he continued: "Try this on for size: whenever something is found, the losers pack up, leave town, and get none of the credit."
"That's—" Jane tried to say something but Loki cut her off, eyes locked with Stark's.

"Deal."

"Hold on," Jane said, raising her voice. Everyone looked at her, the scene frozen. "If this is happening, there have to be some ground rules."

"I couldn't agree more," Stark said. "No interfering with each other's work. No whining when you guys—I mean the losers—have to leave."

"If it isn't obvious who found something first, the bet is off," Darcy said to agreement.

"Everyone happy?" Stark said after a moment. There were a few nods, but no one said anything.

He held out his hand to Loki, who firmly shook it.

Stark grinned. "Go put your clothes on, loverboy. You've got a day of work in front of you if you think you've got a chance at winning."

Both teams had been working for hours relentlessly with little to show for it. They had all split up into smaller groups to cover more ground faster. Jane had gone off with Thor, examining one of the obelisks as Thor watched and occasionally got her things. Darcy and Loki teamed up and were currently looking for possible entrances to something below ground. The American team was on the other side of the site, looking at who knows what. Clint and Nat, though, were off with each other, looking through their security measures and whatever else.

Darcy was getting tired of sifting through sand and finding nothing while over her shoulder she could hear the Americans getting excited about something. From the sounds of it, they found an artifact every couple hours. Every time they found something new, Loki would start looking harder, determined to keep going, to show Stark up.

The other men in the American group were not like Stark at all. Both of them were nice, intelligent, and quiet. The Boy Scout was Steve Rogers, an archeologist from New York, and the other was Bruce Banner, a biological anthropologist who had apparently written a couple books and was very well known in his field. Loki was actually very surprised when he said who he was, and then looked embarrassed for meeting one of the authors he had studied while in just his trousers.

The day ended with nothing to show for it on the Brit's side besides some translations on the hieroglyphics on the obelisks from Jane. The five of them drove back to Cairo that night, renting out four hotel rooms in a fairly nice place.

After showering, Darcy went straight to sleep. Working in the desert sun for hours had worn her out.

In the morning, they left the hotel and were back at the site just as the sun was coming up. They were an hour into their work before the Americans even got out of their tents.

They all ate lunch together; Jane, Thor, and Darcy getting along well with Steve and Bruce. Stark would interject snarky comments every once in a while, and Loki mostly kept to himself. The security talked to each other, but didn't say much.

Neither team had any luck in the afternoon. By nightfall, nothing was found on either side.

The Americans set up a small bonfire, sitting in chairs around it. Darcy decided to make friends and just go over to them. She asked Loki if he wanted to go and he'd said he'd be over in a few minutes.
"Mind if I join you?" she said as she approached the group.

"Not at all," Stark replied, motioning at an empty chair. Nat had already gone to bed, leaving an open spot. Interestingly, Clint had also gone to bed very early that night.

The four of them sat around for a moment in silence, watching the fire.

"Hey, could you pass me a drink?" Darcy asked Stark, who was sitting next to a cooler.

"What do you want?"

"Surprise me,"

A second later, Stark threw a soda at her over the fire. She put her hand up in time, but the drink bounced off her hand and away from her. It hit the ground at a weird angle, exploding and covering Darcy's legs and all of Bruce in soda.

"I'm so sorry," Darcy said to Bruce as Stark proceeded to laugh his ass off.

"It's fine," he said, smiling weakly, wiping soda off his face. After a moment, he left to go clean himself off.

"Bruce is really chill," Darcy said.

"Yeah, I still don't know how he does it," Stark said.

"Some people are just like that," Steve commented, not looking up from his papers.

"He and Loki seem to have that in common," Tony added.

"And what makes you say that?" she asked. Loki hadn't exactly been chill when he and Stark first met.

"He's got the whole 'gentleman' act going on. I see right through that."

Loki walked up to the group, sitting down where Bruce had just been. "What do you see right through?" he asked. He didn't appear to actually know what they had just been talking about, which was probably for the best. Steve handed him a drink, which he thanked him for.

"Case and point," Stark said.

"And that just proves that?" Darcy asked.

"Completely." Stark and Darcy locked eyes, Loki and Steve looking between the two of them.

"So, what is your analysis then?"

"Well, they're way too nice for their own good. Borderline pansies."

"You would say that, Stark,"

"But deep down, under all that chivalry bull, most of the time they're really sneaky."

"Really,"

"But I've heard there's one thing they all have in common: they're all kinky as hell. But I'm sure you know all about that, Darcy."
Steve, who had been taking a drink in that moment, pulled an honest-to-god spit take off to the side, eyes widening in shock. Loki looked from Stark to Darcy, one eyebrow raised.

"You seem to know a lot more about this than I do," Darcy shot back smoothly.

Steve looked disgusted, Loki looked curious, and Stark's face was pure joy at someone actually talking back at him. Darcy smiled triumphantly, Loki catching that too.

"And what stereotype would this be?" Loki asked, still glancing unsurely between Darcy and Stark.

"Gentlemen," Darcy said. "I wonder where Stark learned all that, though,"

"It's common knowledge." Stark said.

"Is it, now?" she replied.

"And why would Darcy know all about this, Tony?" Loki wasn't exactly glaring at Stark; there was the smallest of smiles on his mouth.

"Now you're just playing dirty," Stark said as Bruce came back to the group. He must've seen Loki had joined them because he brought a fifth chair.

The conversation moved on to less controversial topics, the five of them actually getting along very well.

That night, Loki and Darcy shared a tent again. It wasn't as bad as the first night, but Darcy was still trying to hammer into her subconscious not to end up on Loki's side of the tent.

In the morning, to Darcy's surprise, they weren't spooning. She quickly got ready for the day and left the tent, finding out that she was the first one awake in the whole site.

She read some, rocked out to her iPod, read some more, and eventually just started breakfast before the others started waking up.

They started working a little later, all of them enjoying breakfast a little longer than they had before. There was more of an air of community today, even though they were still split up. Darcy and Loki were in the middle of the area, looking for a trapdoor or anything that could potentially lead to an entrance.

"I just don't understand how you can't like the Spice Girls. You're English,"

"They're very overrated and not really my style,"

"What is you style then?"

Before Loki could answer, they heard elevated voices from the Americans. Turning, they could see Stark holding something and acting very excited.

"Damn it," Loki exasperatedly said, kicking the ground hard.

"Don't worry. I bet we'll find the entrance, and then a bunch of little artifacts will be meaningless."

"We're never going to find it. It probably never even existed."

"Well, we're going to keep looking for it until you can prove to me it doesn't exist. All right?" She smiled, trying to lift his spirits.
"All right," he agreed, getting back to work.

After a while of working, Darcy started talking again.

"Tell me about you and Thor,"

Loki sighed before speaking. "Well, we're around the same age, so we were in the same friend group. Thor was Mister Popularity, very smooth with girls, that sort of thing."

"And you?"

"I was more into academics. Thor liked sports a lot, but I could only ever get into running. Thor had loads of friends, who I was then forced to be friends with as well by association. They never really liked me, though,"

"I don't see how anyone could not like you. Well, except for Stark,"

"That's very kind of you, but Thor's friends and I never really saw eye to eye on much."

"And what about you and Thor?"

"We got along well enough. As time went on, though, we just drifted apart. Since we were teenagers, there's just been a rift. We're just different. But enough about me. Tell me about you, Darcy,"

"Oh," She stuttered at the change in direction. "Well, there's nothing too exciting. I was raised in New Mexico, had a normal, boring childhood, and then I got into a college program that let me study at Cambridge. That's about it,"

"That can't be it," he said, glancing over at her. They were both on their knees, sifting through sand, looking for anything.

"That's really about it. I mean, I was kind of a loser in high school. I didn't really do much. I just studied and spent time on the Internet or reading."

"Yeah,"

"But when I got into the program with Cambridge, I met Jane and we became friends by lack of other option, and it's actually been pretty great. She and I are pretty different, but it works, you know? We're still good, even when she's glued to Thor or pestering me about men or anything," Darcy felt herself starting to babble, which was probably very dangerous. "And you know, she always pesters me about men. 'Who's that guy you're talking to?' or 'You should go talk to that guy! He looks great for you!' or 'Are you fucking him yet?' or stuff like that. It gets ridiculous sometimes."

Darcy cut herself off there, figuring she'd talked enough for a while.

"But you're friends with her, even though you two are different," Loki commented.

"Yeah. She annoys the shit out of me sometimes, but I love that woman to death," Darcy said.

Their conversation was interrupted abruptly. "Hey, Odinson!" Stark yelled from across the site. They looked over at him, seeing him waving around yet another artifact they'd found.

"That's it," Loki said, standing up and walking with determination toward Stark.
"Loki, just ignore him," Darcy called, running after him.

She didn't even take five steps before the ground fell out beneath her and she was falling.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is familiar with the ff.net version of this, you'll see that I've combined chapters. I'll be doing that throughout, so that I can get all of this out faster. I should have this all up by next week.
"Darcy, are you all right? Can you hear me? Darcy!"

Darcy opened her eyes but immediately had to close them again from the brightness of the sun. Once she was adjusted, she took a moment to take in her surroundings: about two stories above her was a two-foot round hole in the ceiling, the sun coming through it and hitting her right in the face. The room itself was huge, easily three hundred feet long and about half as wide. There were unlit torches hanging off of pillars lining the walls, but other than that the room was empty.

"Darcy?" Loki called down again.

Darcy had been lucky enough to land on a large pile of sand instead of the stone ground, but she was still just a little sore. Nothing hurt too badly, though.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I think we found the entrance, though,"

She could hear Loki laugh. Up above, the sound of the others running over echoed down.

"What the hell?" Stark's voice was loudest. The three Americans looked down at her sitting there on the sand. "Well I'll be damned."

"Hey— since I found the entrance, the bet's off. Everyone can stay." Darcy yelled up. The bet was dumb anyway and she knew they'd need Bruce and Steve's help studying down here. Stark and Loki started to protest but she gave them her best 'bitch please' look she could convey from that distance.

The four men stood there for a while contemplating how to get Darcy out. Eventually, Darcy just stood up and started looking around the room, the four men never noticing she left her spot. At the far end of the hall, there was a hallway leading deeper into the temple, but Darcy opted not to go at that one alone. From where she was standing, though, she could see that the hallway split into four different directions almost immediately.

In the main hall, there were a few hieroglyphics but no artifacts or mummies or anything like that. As bored as she was, she didn't want to go any deeper inside alone. Darcy was growing tired of listening to them talk about nothing and being stuck down here by herself.

"Hey, ladies. Quick question," Darcy yelled up after almost twenty minutes of Stark and Loki arguing about her safety and getting down to her and whatever else.

"Yeah?" Loki called down, all four boys' attention now on her.

"Actually two questions. For starters, has anyone told Jane about this? She might find this interesting. Secondly, are you guys going to come down here or am I going to have to explore this place by myself?"

Loki stayed with her as Bruce went to get Clint and Nat and Steve went to tell Jane and Thor. Tony was apparently still there as well, by the annoyed look on Loki's face.

When everyone had gathered and Jane had calmed down, someone went and got a rope and secured it to something up above. Loki went down first, the seven other people peeking around the hole curiously as he descended. When he was about ten feet from the ground, he just jumped the rest of the way.
Loki rushed to Darcy immediately. He put his hands on the sides of her arms, gently but firmly. "Are you all right?" His eyes were searching hers, genuine concern on his face.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Sand is fairly soft," Darcy half-heartedly motioned toward the giant pile of sand that must've built up over the centuries.

Loki looked like he had something else to say, but he kept quiet.

The others all climbed down the rope, except for Clint. They figured it would be good to have at least one person above ground, in case something happened.

Darcy showed them the hallway she had found and where it split off into different parts. They divided themselves into groups of two: Loki and Darcy, Jane and Thor, Bruce and Tony, and Steve and Nat. Each group, in addition to Clint, had a walkie-talkie and they decided to meet back in the main hall in a few hours. Each team had a very powerful flashlight, a camera, and a small bag of basic archeological tools.

Loki and Darcy took the middle left hall, Loki holding the flashlight and leading the way. The only thing she could see was Loki's silhouette as he walked into darkness, which led to Darcy's mind beginning to wander.

The way Loki had reacted when he reached her could almost be considered cliché, but the jump was pretty badass. Everyone else had seen him jump down and run to her, but they hadn't seen his face or heard what he said. She still wasn't sure what it meant, but it definitely meant something.

Loki suddenly stopped, causing Darcy to walk into him. He stepped to the side, showing her why they paused: there was a drop-off right in front of them, the opposite ledge five feet in front of them. He shined the light down, but they couldn't see a bottom.

"What shall we do?" she asked, hoping their journey hadn't ended before it started.

"I think we can jump that," Loki said, eyeing the ledge.

"How can we be sure it's safe?" she asked, glancing at the opposite side of the hole. She'd seen enough Indiana Jones to know some temples like this were booby-trapped. She didn't particularly want to jump across the pit just to have the floor fall out.

Loki took the bag of tools from Darcy and swung it across, a loud thud echoing through the dark halls.

"Ground seems stable," he commented. "I guess there's only one way to find out for sure," He grinned at her for a second, but then took a few steps back and suddenly took a running start and jumped across the drop.

He landed with ease on the opposite side, turning to face Darcy. "Perfectly safe," he said.

Darcy looked down over the ledge. She contemplated the choice in front of her, but it wasn't really a competition.

"You better catch me," she threatened, taking a few steps back just as Loki had.

She started running and then pushed off of the ground, and before she knew it she felt Loki's arms surrounding her, her feet back on solid ground.

"Thanks," she muttered as they broke their embrace.
They walked on for a little while, not coming across anything else. The air was getting just a little thicker, the temperature slowly dropping.

"Darcy, I think we're in another big room," Loki said suddenly.

"Look for torches. I'm pretty sure there are matches in here,"

She felt around in the bag and found the little pack of matches. Loki found a torch hanging from the wall, and within minutes the entire room was illuminated.

"Holy shit," Darcy said. Loki was frozen as he looked around them.

This room was probably twice as big as the original room, but this one actually had stuff in it. There were probably sixty mummified bodies, dozens and dozens of pots, a few piles of tools, and a table in the middle covered in scrolls. The far wall, though, had another door leading even deeper, with a huge encryption above it.

Darcy and Loki both jumped to work, Darcy taking pictures of everything and Loki writing everything he saw down. Darcy photographed each pot, all of the tools, but didn't dare open up the scrolls or even touch them. They would need special equipment for that.

"Darcy, come here please," Loki called out after a while, standing below the encryption.

"What's up?" she said as she walked up.

"Do you notice anything wrong about this?" He motioned up above the door.

"Was somebody's spellcheck not working?" Darcy suggested.

"It's in Latin, though the obelisks and the first room were done in Egyptian hieroglyphics."

"Maybe this part was made during the Roman occupation of Egypt,"

"That's what I thought at first, but it's the wrong time period. Not only that, but this is Late Latin. Fourth century by the looks of it, but I'm a little rusty."

"So someone back in the day broke in and vandalized a little?"

"If someone broke in, they would've stolen things or looted. I'm working on translating what this says, but it may take a few minutes."

"By all means," Darcy said, leaving him too it.

Darcy paced around the room, pulling the walkie-talkie out of the bag and playing with it, twirling it in her hands. It suddenly began giving off static, so Darcy just turned it off as to not bother Loki.

"I think I've got it," he said, turning to face her. "It says 'progressus fiat in templo ad omnes deos,' which loosely translates to something like 'the step is in the temple to all gods.'"

"The temple to all gods? If it's Roman, could it be talking about the Roman gods instead of Egyptian gods?" Darcy did her best to not be affected by Loki speaking another language, though it was difficult.

"That's more than likely. The temple to all gods... if I had to guess, I'd say this is about the Pantheon in Rome,"
Before Darcy could reply, the roar of a gunshot filled the air, bouncing off the walls. She looked to Loki, who looked just as confused as she was.

"What the hell?" she said more to herself.

Just after the initial gunshot, several more rang out. Somewhere else, somebody was having an all-out battle.

Darcy turned the walkie-talkie back on, but either nobody was talking or they just didn't have a good enough signal, which was more than likely. She ran back toward the way they came, hoping to lessen the static.

"Can anyone hear me?" Finally something came through. Darcy froze were she stood, not wanting to mess up the signal. Loki joined her a few seconds later.

"Yes! I can hear you! Who is this? What's going on?"

"This is Clint. We've got unfriendlies up on the ground level. I can't tell who they are, but I could use some back up. Who's this?"

“This is Darcy,”

“Darcy? Do me a favor Darcy, and find Natasha. I need her right now.”

“Sure, you got it.”

Darcy looked to Loki, who was staring at the walkie-talkie in her hands.

"Do you remember which hallway Nat and Steve went down?"

It only took the two of them ten minutes to get back to the fork, and when they got there they were greeted by Steve and Nat running up from their hallway.

"Nat, Clint wants your help," Darcy said, panting.

"I figured. You guys stay down here until you hear from us. In case things go south, you guys should probably go hide until it's safe."

She didn't wait for any of them to respond. Natasha ran over to the rope and climbed up it at an almost inhuman speed. When she disappeared from sight, the sound of gunshots doubled.

"I guess we should go back and hide," Darcy said after a moment.

"I couldn't agree more," Steve added.

As they reached the fork, they heard something land on the ground in the main room behind them. The three of them turned around to see a small device rolling to a stop in the middle of the ground in the hall. It clicked three times and then a white gas began emitting from it, spreading quickly through the room. Loki, Darcy, and Steve took off running, not wanting to get caught in whatever that was.

Darcy was a good hundred yards down her original hallway before she realized Steve had run off a different way.

"Loki," she says, skidding to a stop.
"What is it?"

"Steve must've gone down a different hallway," she said, looking behind her.

Loki paused for a moment. "It's probably better if we're not in larger groups anyway, in case Nat and Clint don't do well,"

"I understand that, but Steve shouldn't have to be alone down here,"

"We can't go back to the main room yet. If that was poison, which I'm guessing it was, then the air will most likely be unbreathable for a while."

Darcy sighed. "I guess you're right. Let's go,"

They ran down the hall, pausing to carefully jump the void, then finally entered the large room. They could still hear gunshots off in the distance, but it was a ways off.

Loki led her through the large room and under the encryption into a room they hadn't been in yet. The new hallway went on for a ways, turning a few times, definitely going slightly deeper underground. They came to a three-way split in the hallway.

"Heads, tails, or middles?" Darcy asked, looking to Loki. He simply shrugged, apparently not in a decisive mood.

"You decide."

"Let's go with this one," Darcy said, picking the choice farthest left.

They walked a ways, neither of them saying much. Darcy was overwhelmed with feelings of worry for Clint and Nat and Steve, concern for all of their safeties, and whatever the hell it was that she was feeling for Loki. As they walked, she fought off the urge to grab his hand and not let go of it until she was out of this damned temple, but she fought that off.

They reached a turn and Loki suddenly grabbed Darcy's arm hard. Had he not, she would've fallen off another ledge. She was semi-leaning over the ledge, Loki's grip holding her there, both of them frozen from the shock of what happened.

"Thanks," she muttered. She took the flashlight from him and looked over the edge. About thirty feet down, large spikes stuck out of the ground, ready to skewer whoever was walking around the corner too fast and didn't have someone to grab them before they fell.

"I guess we'll go back and try path number two, then," Loki said, still holding Darcy's arm even though she'd regained her footing.

"Yeah," she agreed.

They made their way back to the split, this time taking the middle hallway. Darcy was currently thinking over multiplication tables; anything to keep her mind off the current situation. Her stomach was panging from hunger, her arms were shaking from cold, and her eyes were flitting around in the almost dark from her growing fear. It was taking everything she had to not latch on to Loki like a leech, to just hold on to him until this whole situation was over.

Had she actually been excited for this trip? That concept seemed impossible for Darcy at this exact moment. Clouding her perception of the good times she had been having were the thoughts of walking through the dark and hoping the ground wouldn't disappear beneath their feet and the
What the hell is up with that? Who are these guys? Clint didn't know who they are, which suggests a few things: obviously, there's more than one. He and Nat could be facing a whole army. Also, that suggests it's not personal. Maybe. If Clint doesn't know them, then maybe they're just hit men. But who sent these assclowns?

Up ahead of them they could see the light shining into a large room. When they got there, they saw that this room was about the size of a small house, lined on both walls with scrolls, jewelry, and a few pots. Straight in front of them was what looked like a very large drop-off. There was no fourth wall, only blackness. Upon walking over to it and shining the light around, they realized that the lack of wall was actually a wall-to-wall staircase leading down into an empty room, nothing anywhere except another encryption on the wall. They had reached a dead end, but this was worth taking a minute to look at.

After lighting the torches in the main room, Loki all but ran down into the lower room, enthralled by the new message on the wall. Darcy walked down the short staircase, stepping up beside him.

"Can you tell what this one says?" she asked, looking over at him as he seemed to be studying the message.

"Yeah," he said, pulling the small notepad out of his back pocket. He scribbled down something, looked back up at the wall, and then scribbled something else down.

"It doesn't really make sense," he said, "It says 'ignotum thesaurum esse in fine,' which means 'the unknown treasure is at the end.'"

"Maybe, if we use the other translation, there's like a clue at the Pantheon to where the key is."

"And 'the end' would be like the end of the trail," he said as he put the notepad away again.

"And there's some huge treasure there," she said.

"Darcy, do you think Stark would take all of us to Rome to further investigate this?" Loki cracked a smile.

"Maybe if you ask really nicely and promise not to be mean to him," They both laughed lightly at that, the conversation taking a small comfortable pause.

Both of them looked at the wall again, Darcy noticing something she hadn't seen before. She walked over to it, reaching out with her hand to feel it.

"What does this feel like to you?" She took his hand and led him to what she was feeling, a confused look coming to his face.

"Is that a key hole?" he asked, furrowing his brow.

"It would appear so,"

It occurred to them both that they hadn't heard any gunshots in a while.

"Do you think it's over?" Darcy asked quietly, looking over at him. As Loki opened his mouth to answer, a loud banging noise came from the other room.

Before she could even react, Loki sidestepped, standing directly in front of her, separating her from
the entrance.

Darcy looked around the room: there were no other doors or passageways. There wasn't even anything to hide behind. They were in an empty room with nowhere to run or hide. The gunman could just stand at the top of the steps and shoot them both down before they could even do anything.

_We're going to die. It'll be a fucking execution. We'll just be standing here, the easiest targets ever._

From behind him, she could see Loki clenching his jaw, thinking things over, trying to find a way out. If the gunman was in the room at the top of the steps, which is where the crash came from, then there was no way out.

Suddenly turning around, Loki grabbed her and pulled her close to him, kissing her hard. His arms wrapped around her so tightly she though she might faint after a while, not that it mattered. They moved their lips against each other, both pushing themselves onto and into each other, touching as much as possible.

Any moment now, they would both be dead. It was as if that thought was echoing around in both their minds, forcing them to make up for lost time and stolen time and whatever their relationship was going to become. What would their relationship have been? Darcy definitely felt something for him and he evidently felt something similar back. Darcy tried to pull away from him; she felt like she was about to start crying. But Loki just pulled her closer, holding her tighter.

Darcy had never been more scared or more alive in her entire life. Through her mind-numbing fear, though, she also felt victorious. She was pulling Loki's hair yet pushing his head toward her with one hand, and it felt fan-fucking-tastic. His hands ran over her back, pulling her into him. His tongue was doing amazing things, Darcy only wishing she were half as good a kisser so she could reciprocate. _And I thought I was a good kisser. This fucker's on a whole new level._

She could hear them now: whoever was in the next room was approaching. The footsteps were growing louder. She and Loki would be at in view any second now.

Not daring to open her eyes, Darcy simply held Loki for dear life, kissing him as hard as she could, wishing she had done this a long time ago but knowing now that it was way past too late. Behind him, she heard someone enter the room.

_This is it._
Chapter 6

This is it.

"Do you guys want us to come back in a few minutes or…?"

Loki and Darcy both froze, recognizing the voice.

"Stark?" Darcy called out, peering out from behind Loki. It was none other than Tony Stark standing there at the top of the stairs, Bruce right beside him. Bruce looked guilty for walking in on the two of them, backing away slightly, but Stark looked like he was having the time of his life.

"We leave you guys alone for what? An hour? And this is what happens?"

"Didn't you guys hear the shooting?" Darcy asked, separating from Loki and walking toward the stairs. Her face was red, but she wouldn't let Stark win this battle.

"Yeah, we did. The gun-and-arrow-slinging duo took them out thoroughly. Now everyone's looking for you two. We didn't know you were lost for a reason,"

"What was that loud crash?" Loki asked, stepping up beside Darcy. His presence beside her made her stand a little taller. She didn't really care that Bruce and Tony had walked in on them. If anything, that proved it actually happened to her. And right now, she was really just happy to be alive.

"Bruce over here knocked over a two thousand year old pot." Stark said, crossing his arms and turning to look at Bruce.

"It's not like it's the only one down here," Bruce mumbled.

"Well, I'm pretty eager to return to the surface world." Darcy said, getting the attention off poor Bruce. She took off, leading the way back.

Darcy felt like she had just won the lottery. She was walking with pride; this was arguably the best day of her life, and it was all because of that kiss. She was elated and giddy and just overall very excited and nothing could ruin that.

After a few minutes of walking, Stark caught up to her, walking beside her. "Is everyone else ok? Nobody got hurt?" Darcy asked him before Stark could open his mouth.

"They're all fine, last we saw. I'm more concerned about you. McSteamy looked like he was going to rip my throat out when you two were interrupted,"

"If he was going to rip your throat out, why are you concerned for me?"

Stark glanced over his shoulder, Darcy doing the same, if just to see what he was looking at. Loki and Bruce were several yards behind them, talking about the potential knowledge from this huge discovery or something like that.

"He just seems… kind of dangerous,"

"Dangerous?" Darcy repeated.

"Yeah. There's bad-boy dangerous, and then there's whatever Loki is. He just seems kind of… dark."
"Look, Stark; I'm not pretending that I know a lot about him, because I don't. We only met like three weeks ago. But he's not dark. He's saved me a few times now, and I feel like there is something deep down there, but it's not dark, whatever it is."

"And you're sure?" They reached the ledge, each of them taking turns jumping over it, Loki helping Darcy yet again. Stark took notice of that but said nothing, to Darcy's relief.

"Of course not, but I'm hoping I'll be able to find out for myself," she said to Stark before walking ahead on her own.

Back in the original room, they all climbed up the rope one at a time, finally seeing sunlight again. Jane ran to Darcy when she reached the surface, hugging her tightly.

"Where were you guys? You and Loki have been missing for almost an hour!"

"We were hiding. We went really far in. We also found a bunch of stuff,"

"I guess you guys were the only ones to find anything. We were all just led around in circles or to dead ends," Steve said.

"What you guys find?" Jane asked.

"We found a bunch of mummified bodies, some tools, that sort of stuff, but something else, too." Darcy looked over to the hole, seeing Loki climbing out. "Loki would probably explain it better,"

"What would I explain better?" he said as he stood up, brushing sand off his pants.

"The encryptions we found,"

"Ah, yes. Well, we found two encryptions, both in Latin. The first one translated to 'the step is in the temple to all gods' and the second said 'the unknown treasure is at the end.' We figured the temple to all gods would be the Pantheon in Rome and that there is a clue to where a key may be. I think we may've found a hole-"

"If we hadn't walked in on you, I'm sure you would have," Stark cut in. Loki and Darcy glared at him as Jane covered her gaping mouth in shock. Luckily, Loki continued on before Jane could comment.

"I think we may've found a keyhole that could potentially lead to whatever treasure the encryption is talking about," Loki said firmly.

"Sounds cool. Are we going to Rome then?" Stark asked the group, holding his arms out.

"We? You're bringing us?" Darcy asked.

"Of course. You guys are pretty handy." Stark made a show of turning to look at Loki, "No pun intended."

"Sounds good to me," Jane said, looking from Stark to Loki to Darcy. Everyone agreed, and it was set.

"Next order of business: what happened up here while we were down below?" Stark turned to Clint and Nat, who were standing slightly away from the group.

"Well," Clint began, "Six men came out of nowhere and started shooting. They were extremely skilled, obviously hit men doing the work for someone else. Nat and I took them all out. There was
one who was badly wounded, but when we tried to talk to him he wouldn't say anything. He had a German accent, though."

"The uniforms are Hydra. They must be after the encryption is talking about, for whatever reason," Nat added.

"Hydra?" Steve asked, Darcy not the only one confused.

"World War II era Nazi deep-science division. I thought they disbanded at the end of the war, but it looks like they're back in business. I don't know what they'd be doing in Egypt, but Nazis back in the day were very into mythology,"

"What would a Nazi science club want with Egyptian artifacts?" Darcy asked.

"The money from it. The recognition. Who knows," Nat pulled her gun out of its holster, checking her ammunition. "Whatever the case, we can count on these guys having trackers on them. Whoever sent them already knows they're dead. We don't have much time before reinforcements show up."

"Well, we should get packing, then," Stark said, smacking his hands together. "I've got my plane in Cairo, it can be ready for us as soon as we get there,"

Everyone in the group nodded in agreement and immediately got to work.

Both teams were packed and ready to leave within an hour. Stark was paying for all of their supplies they wouldn't need to be stored in Cairo while they were gone. He had people come out to the site and take care of both teams' stuff, as well as drive all of them in fancy cars.

"What exactly is Stark to you guys?" Darcy asked. She was riding with Loki, Jane, Thor, Steve, and Bruce in the bigger car. Stark took his own ride, and Clint and Natasha were going by the hospital to get a couple cuts and minor injuries checked out (Stark said he wasn't going to let them bleed on his plane).

"He is a very interested investor," Bruce said carefully.

"Does he actually know anything about archaeology or Egypt?" Loki asked bitterly.

"He's an intelligent man. He's just very versatile. He likes being smarter than everybody at everything." Steve said.

Loki started to say something, but Darcy elbowed him. She glanced over to see him smiling smugly to himself.

Darcy wondered if what happened down there would ever be addressed. She hadn't had much time to think about it yet, but she knew she'd be overanalyzing that the next time she had a lot of time to herself. Right now, she didn't want to get into it. That was most likely a downward spiral. Sure, their kiss was spur-of-the-moment, rash, and Loki probably only did it because he thought he was about to die, but it had to count for something. Darcy was definitely glad it happened.

*No. Darcy, you need to calm your tits. Don't start dissecting this now.*

She and Loki were sitting in the back of the van by themselves, the rest of the crew up in the other rows. He was stretched out, his arm around the back of the seat and therefore kind of around her. Their legs were touching as well; Darcy was trying her best to keep her mind involved and not where it was going. Steve was talking about something now and everyone else was listening and
occasionally laughing.

As hard as she tried, Darcy couldn't stop her mind from wandering. Eventually she just let it free, hoping this would get it out of her system.

A lone man got out of a car, carefully looking around to see if anyone else was still around. The archaeologists that had been there had left soon after the first attack. They had brought some kind of security, which the man found very surprising. This group of scientists could prove to be challenging.

The man walked over to the newly discovered entrance and simply climbed down the rope that had carelessly been left there. It didn't take him long to find and translate the encryptions.

"The temple to all gods," he said to himself, thinking carefully. He immediately thought of Rome and the Pantheon, which was probably where the archaeologists were off to so quickly.

The man returned to the exit, climbed up the rope, and returned to his car. Upon returning, he pulled out his phone and went to the only contact in the new, untraceable company phone.

"Schmidt, they're going to Rome."

Darcy had never been on a private jet. Hell, she'd only been on a plane three times in her life, including when she flew over from America for college. Sitting in Stark's private jet, listening to some classy music he had playing, drinking a glass of wine, Darcy couldn't help noting how damn posh she felt. Too bad she was still dressed like she was in high school gym class.

Stark had explained to them that he'd be paying for everything they'd need, including new, more classy clothing. After the attack earlier, he was treating this more like an undercover mission and less like an archeological exploration. He wanted them to appear as socialites while in Rome, that way they'd be able to attend the gala he was now throwing at the Pantheon in a few days. Tony had his assistant Pepper planning it all out from New York; it would be in honor of some bullshit Pepper and Stark were making up as they went along. He figured they'd be able to look around more thoroughly if it was during a party he was throwing instead of during museum hours.

Darcy put her feet up on Jane's leg across from her. Jane made a face, to which Darcy responded by sticking her tongue out at her. She took a sip of her champagne, with her pinky out of course, and looked out the window at the Mediterranean Sea.

One thing she was very glad about was that the gala would be Saturday night, which meant they had the rest of today, all of tomorrow, and most of Saturday to do whatever they wanted. She had never been anywhere besides southwest United States, New York City once, and then Cambridge. Now, she was on this huge journey in Egypt and Rome and who knows where else. She'd get to explore Rome for almost two days, maybe even with Loki, and Stark would insist on paying for all of it. Apparently, Stark was a multi-billionaire who didn't mind sharing his money. Darcy had never been one to accept handouts, but this was a special case.

Darcy and Jane were also supposed to go shopping for their dresses and various accessories the next day. That's probably every girl's dream: unlimited shopping spree in Rome. Well, Rome probably isn't the first city on everyone's list as far as shopping sprees go, but it's up there. Whatever. It's still fucking awesome.

The plane landed just around five o'clock local time. They were at a small local airport just outside
the city so Stark could avoid the press. Apparently, paparazzi care a lot about him, simply for the fact that he's rich.

There was a large black limousine waiting for them steps from the jet. All of their bags were unloaded for them into a separate car.

"Damn, Stark," Darcy commented as a man opened the limo door for her.

"You like that? Wait 'til you see where we're all staying tonight," he replied. Darcy dropped it at that, wanting it to be a surprise.

They were all driven to an upscale designer store where Stark instructed them all to pick out a couple outfits for while they were in Rome. Jane, Nat, and Darcy went to the second floor of the women's section, where more day-to-day women's clothing was kept.

"This is just a white V-neck and it's five hundred dollars." Jane said, putting that back very carefully.

"If Stark's paying, I'm going all out," Darcy said from a few racks over, holding three complete outfits and a purse already.

"At least try them on first," Jane muttered before moving on to a different rack.

"Or you could get one in each size," Nat said, not looking up from the rack of extremely expensive leather jackets. Darcy smiled and grabbed the next size up and down of the shirt she was looking at.

Everybody eventually regrouped by the register and Stark paid with one swipe of a credit card. The total was more than what Darcy would ever see at once in her entire life.

After everyone changed in the dressing rooms into their socialite attire, they filed back into the limo and headed into the city. Stark had the driver take the scenic route, passing a few of the landmarks on the way. Darcy tried to make a mental list of all the places she wanted to visit before they left, but the list got too long very quickly.

They arrived at an upscale hotel (i.e. more money per night than Darcy made in a few months) and walked right in the front door. Stark rented two suites, in addition to one regular room (Nat and Clint insisted).

"What do you think the chances are they're fucking each other?" Stark said to Darcy quietly.

"I don't know, but if I were you, I wouldn't bet against that. And you're you," she said.

"Fair point. I guess we'll just let them go to their room and maybe we'll see them again before Saturday night,"

"I wouldn't count on it,"

The two suites Stark got shared the top floor of the hotel, one a two-bedroom and the other a three-bedroom. Stark, Bruce, and Steve would share one and Darcy, Jane, Thor, and Loki would take the other. When the elevator doors opened on the top floor, the bellhops led each group separate ways and opened their doors for them.

The room in front of Darcy was something out of a movie. They were only in the connecting room between bedrooms and this was about the size of her apartment. It was decorated with furniture that looked like it fell out of the 1700's or a Martha Stewart magazine or both.
Darcy took her bag from the bellhop and half ran over to one of the bedrooms. It was absolutely stunning. The bed was whatever the next size up from king was. There was an antique desk with the most comfortable looking chair she had ever seen and a small couch beside the window and a huge TV and so many other things Darcy could barely take in. She dropped her bag by the foot of the bed and jumped onto the comforter, sinking in slightly after landing. She could definitely get used to this.

"Darcy?" Jane called from the other room.

Darcy rolled out of bed and drudged back into the other room.

"I think we're in the wrong room,"

"What makes you say that?" Darcy asked.

"This one only has two bedrooms," Thor said, glancing at his brother for half a second. Loki was across the room, distracted by the weird centerpiece on the table.

"I thought one of the suites was a three-bedroom," Darcy aimed that more at the bellhop, who was still standing by the door.

"Mr. Stark said for him to be lead to the three-bedroom suite," he replied with very impressive English but still a slight Italian accent.

"He did, now?" Darcy said, shaking her head.

"Darcy," Jane warned, shaking her head.

"What?"

"It does make sense for them to have that room," Jane lowered her voice.

"Stark did it on purpose. I know what he's up to," She stormed out of the room and down the hall before Jane could say another word.

"Stark! Open up!" she yelled as she banged on the door.

"Darcy, are you all right?" Steve was the one who came to the door. Of course, Stark. He knew I'd come for him. I bet he just did this to piss me off: Jackass.

"I'm fine, but Stark might not be in a minute or so," Darcy brushed past Steve (somewhat rudely, but she was angry and he was in the way at the moment) and looked around the room carefully. "Which room is his?"

"On the left," Steve said, not sounding as scared as Darcy thought he would.

Darcy kicked open the door upon reaching it. Sure, it was cracked open, but she wanted to make an entrance.

"Well hello to you too," Stark said, lounging on his bed.

"Why do you guys get the three-bedroom suite?" she blurted.

"Well, my dear Ms. Lewis, there are several reasons why I gave you guys the smaller suite," He stood up after speaking, stretching a little.

"Explain."
"Fine." He dramatically sighed. "For one thing, Jane and Thor will be dancing the tango and will definitely be sharing a bed, so no matter who has the smaller room, someone's sleeping on the couch. Now, seeing what I saw earlier today, chances are you and Romeo will also be hitting it home pretty soon as well. Ergo, you guys get the smaller room. Also: my money, my rules. And my rules state you guys get the smaller room."

Darcy didn't really have a good response for that. She put her hands on her hips and tried to think of a comeback, but nothing clever came to her.

"I am not 'hitting it home' with Loki," she eventually said, glaring at him.

"And my name's not Tony Stark. We're not in Rome. You're not still complaining about something inevitable."

"You walked in at the wrong time."

"Was there a part when you two said 'let's make out on a pornographic level just to fool whoever walks in on us into thinking we're fucking each other'?"

"No, but..." she trailed off, knowing Stark was going to win this fight.

"If you think about it, I'm kind of doing you a favor."

"Whatever." She turned and stormed out of the room, going back to her own suite.

When she entered her suite again, she opened the door to see Thor and Jane looking expectant and Loki looking comparable to a lost puppy.

"What'd he say?" Jane all but demanded.

"He said that we have this room because he paid for it," Darcy said carefully. Jane threw up her hands in exasperation, turning and going into her bedroom. Thor, looking concerned, ran after her to do damage control.

"I'm sorry," Darcy began to say to Loki.

"It's perfectly fine. I'll sleep on the couch. It does actually look very comfortable." He smiled reassuringly. "Now, earlier I saw you making eyes at the Trevi Fountain. I think we can fit that in before we both pass out from exhaustion," They both grinned.

"I definitely think we can squeeze in an hour or so of sight-seeing before we keel over," she agreed, turning for the door.

"Sounds good to me," Loki said as he grabbed his jacket.

That night, Darcy had just finished taking the best shower of her life in the shower that was about twice the size of a standard shower. The hotel's soaps were the greatest smelling things she had ever smelled. Everything about this hotel was perfect. Well, except the number of beds. She still felt kind of guilty about that.

In that moment, Darcy made a rash decision. She'd already made a few of those today, so what was one more in that pile?

After Darcy put on the one nice pair of pajamas she brought (probably a little on the skimpy side, but hey, they were comfortable), she went to the door leading to the main room. She paused for a
moment, taking a second to build herself up, and then finally grew a pair and opened the door.

Loki was lounging on the couch, reading some papers, not noticing her standing in the doorway.

"Loki?" she said, catching his attention. He looked up at her, setting his papers aside.

"Yes?"

"Would you like to sleep in here?"

He seemed to be contemplating something, but after a moment stood and walked over to her.

"Are you sure?" he asked as he approached, stopping in front of her. She answered by grabbing his hand and pulling him into the bedroom.

This was probably stupid, but he had invited her to sleep in his tent, so she was returning the favor. Sure, a couch in a fancy hotel wasn't exactly the same as outside in the middle of the desert, but whatever. It was kinda the same, if you squinted your eyes.

The door swung shut behind them, Darcy dropping Loki's hand just after. The room was peacefully quiet, the only noise coming from the street outside and a few drips of water from the shower every once in a while. The only light in the room was the lamp beside the bed, creating a low glow throughout the room. Darcy watched as Loki took a moment to take in the grandeur of the room, finally stopping at the bed.

"There's only one," he commented, looking confused.

"Well, yeah. If there were two, you'd have been in here hours ago."

"Darcy, I'm perfectly fine on the couch. I don't want to force you into anything-"

"You're not forcing me into anything," she said, stepping to him, putting only a few inches between them.

He opened his mouth to respond, but something came over Darcy in that moment and she just kissed him, stopping whatever words that were going to come out. It took him a second to respond, but finally Loki grabbed either side of her face, holding her there. They both seemed to have a hard time believing what was happening.

This was much different than last time. Where that was desperate and eager and touchy and a last attempt to get feelings across, this was slow and tender and finally. That was a good word for it, Darcy decided. It was definitely one of the main things she was feeling right now.

She hadn't realized it until it already happened, but they were now lying back onto the bed, Loki's weight on top of her. A small smile came across her face, her heartbeat elevating, feeling an overwhelming feeling of finally.
As she blinked her eyes open the next morning, Darcy was pretty sure she had never been more comfortable than she was right now. It took a moment for her to remember where she was and what was happening and all that.

She was sprawled smack dab in the middle of the enormous bed, and she was alone. She remembered Loki kissing her, it getting a little heated, but nothing else happening. It had been a PG night- well, making out in bed was probably more along the lines of PG-13.

Darcy sat up and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. She rolled to the side of the bed, standing up and stretching. It wasn't until then that she noticed the door to the bathroom was cracked open and that the shower was on.

So that's where he went.

She walked over to the table in the corner beside the bathroom door. On one of the chairs sat Loki's bag. He must've moved it in there before showering.

The water stopped, and not even five seconds later the door swung open, Darcy unable to react or even move to a better, less conspicuous spot besides a few feet in front of the door.

"Oh, Darcy," Loki said, seeing her out of bed. Luckily, he was wearing a towel and not in fact naked, therefore saving this conversation and their relationship. "Please excuse my state of undress,"

"You're fine," she said, trying not to stare.

Oh my god. Darcy, don't look. Don't look at his body. Focus on his face. God, his hair looks fantastic wet- No! Stop it! Don't look at the water dripping off him or how low the towel is— Darcy!

"I'm sorry—" he began to say.

"Don't apologize. You haven't done anything,"

A few seconds passed and a change shifted the air, her words hanging out between them. And just a moment after she said anything, they were reenacting the first time they kissed, pressing against each other as much as possible, desperate at the hands and mouth.
Nothing like this had ever happened to Darcy. She had had a few boyfriends in the past, but never anything too serious. Now, with Loki, the two of them couldn't even be alone for five minutes without them playing tonsil hockey. Something big had changed down in the temple, and Darcy liked where it was going.

The door to the room swung open and they heard Jane scream in shock, and just like that, their moment was over.

"Oh my god! I'm so sorry, I didn't know you guys were- what are you guys doing? Oh god," Jane was sputtering on, still standing there, though. Darcy walked over to the door and nodded as Jane kept blabbering on, slowly backing out of the room at Darcy's pushing. Finally, Darcy swung the door shut, this time locking it.

She turned back to Loki, still standing there in that damn towel, grinning ear to ear.

"I just wanted to tell you Tony wanted to meet us in fifteen minutes," Jane called through the door.

"I suppose we should get dressed then," Loki said, a mischievous grin across his face.

"All right, children: do you know why I've gathered you here today?" Stark said once everyone had sat down in the main room of his suite. Pepper had gotten in fairly recently, and she was sitting beside Stark. She was very professional looking, about the size of a stick, and totally beautiful. *Stark's totally banging that.*

"Some very important reason, I imagine," Darcy said dryly.

"Exactly. I just wanted to go over the plan with everyone, to make sure everyone was clear on what they're to do."

"Very important," Loki commented sarcastically, Darcy silently giggling.

"Do you two mind? I'm trying to go over important information," Stark directed his demand at Loki and Darcy, who were both smiling to themselves smugly.

"Go on," she said, trying her best to keep from laughing at Stark getting mad.

"Anyways," Stark cleared his throat. "What's going to happen is that the ladies are going to go shopping to get whatever it is they need with Pepper. The guys will go tux shopping during that shebang. After that, you guys have the rest of the day and then tomorrow to do whatever it is you want to do. Tomorrow night, we'll be showing up to the party in groups. Pepper is with me, since she's seen with me all the time anyway. Thor and Jane will be one group, Bruce and Steve are another," -Darcy snorted and Stark glared at her- "And Loki and Darcy another, and Clint and Nat are working security. Jane, Thor, Darcy, Loki, Bruce, and Steve, will break off when I start my speech. Cover different parts of the building. Look for whatever it is we're looking for and try not to be seen too much by any guests. After the party, we'll all meet up here to discuss what we've found. Since this is a private party with security, hopefully none of those thugs from Cairo will show up again. Is everyone clear on the plan?"

"I think I may have fallen asleep a few times during that," Darcy said, her neck tilted back so she could stare at the ceiling during Stark's speech.

"One thing that is very important for you all is to blend in before he starts his speech," Pepper explained. "That means dancing with each other, being sociable, maybe talking to a few other people outside the group,"
"That last one does not apply to Darcy. We're trying to appear as intelligent," Stark said.

"Excuse you, Stark. I was the one that found the entrance," she shot back.

"By falling through it."

"I still found it, though."

Pepper interrupted them; "I think it's a good idea for you guys to not mention anything about what you guys found in Egypt to anyone."

"I couldn't agree more. So, is everyone good on what's going on? Good? All right. Meeting adjourned." Stark announced, standing up.

The room began to clear, and Darcy picked herself up off the couch. Stark glanced over at her, smiling arrogantly.

"What are you cheery about?" she asked as everyone else from her room left.

"I heard a rumor that the couch in your suite went vacant last night," Stark said.

"Grow up, Stark. Nothing happened."

"Uh, that's not what Jane told me," he said mockingly.

"And what did Jane tell you?"

"She may have mentioned something about walking into your room this morning, discovering something she didn't want to discover,"

"Nothing happened, Stark," Darcy said as she moved to the door.

"I told you I was doing you a favor,"

She didn't respond to him, only went back to her suite. Jane was already ready to leave. Nat had decided not to go shopping with them, instead going with Clint to stock up on what they would be needing for working security. Pepper came over to their room a few minutes later, and the three of them went down to the lobby and outside to the waiting car.

"I could really get used to this lifestyle," Darcy said as some random staff member opened the car door for her.

Pepper gave the driver the address and they took off. Evidently this dress shop was some prominent fancy designer store in the center of the fancy shopping district.

"How upscale is this shindig going to be? Like, are we going for cocktail dresses or full-length gowns?" Darcy asked Pepper.

"It will be pretty upscale. Picture a red-carpet event," Pepper explained. "Full-length will be the best way to go."

"Well holy shit, are there going to be like photographers or anything?"

"Most likely, but just outside. They'll be more after Tony, though. No one will publish any pictures of people who aren't recognizable, so you won't have to worry,"
"Well that's good," Darcy said, sighing of relief. She didn't particularly want to be photographed by paparazzi tomorrow night; the idea of it was way too foreign to her.

_This has to be the strangest archeological exploration of all time. Well, maybe 'The Mummy' has us beat. Also the second Indiana Jones. But we're definitely top five, unless we break an ancient curse or discover a secret Indian cult that steals children._

They arrived at the store a little while later. Pepper led them into the store, directly to the back where the swanky clothes were kept. Darcy was planning on not even looking at price tags; she'd probably cry looking at the cheapest ones.

"Get anything you want. Tony specifically said he wanted all of us to be as convincing as possible, so don't worry about price," Pepper said.

Jane and Darcy exchanged a wide-eyed glance, both accepting the whole 'don't worry about price' thing.

After two hours of trying on dresses that were worth more than her life, Darcy finally found the one. Pepper and Jane both found beautiful gowns as well, and then the dresses were sent back to their hotel.

Pepper took them to a store specifically for shoes, then a store specifically for purses, and finally – after a small lunch- a store specifically for jewelry. The next day, she was to take them to some schmancy salon to get their hair and makeup and everything done for them.

"This is getting ridiculous," Darcy said with a mouthful of food at dinner. The three women, joined by Nat, were eating at the restaurant in their hotel. "Are we like some poor children Tony's adopted to spend all his money on?"

"That's one way of looking at it," Pepper said. "I think, in his own way, he likes you guys. And he's a good man. He wouldn't leave you guys behind or have you pay for what he's having you do,"

"We could've been in and out of the Pantheon two days ago, but instead he's throwing a giant party."

Jane said, shaking her head.

"It is a good idea for you guys to look around without the normal security," Pepper said.

"And the people who attacked us in Egypt would have a much harder time getting in at a private event," Nat said.

"And who doesn't love a good party?" Darcy added. _That's a good reason too. Jane is just being a worrywart, as always. She doesn't know how to have fun._

"I guess you guys are right. I'm just a little anxious about this supposed treasure and Hydra and everything," Jane said.

"You should be anxious about that. That's only natural," Pepper said reassuringly.

"You should **not**, however, be anxious over a fancy-dress party." Darcy said, stuffing another bite of food into her mouth.

That night, Loki slept in the same bed as her again. There was no making out or anything beyond that; he simply had an arm around her as they slept. Darcy wasn't exactly sure what their relationship was at this point, but she supposed it was heading in the direction of 'dating' or 'being a couple' or whatever. Maybe.
In the morning, the two of them snuck out before Jane and Thor woke up and got one of the hotel's private cars to take them to a few of the major tourist attractions.

Their conversations mostly consisted of small talk, from random facts either of them knew about Rome to stories about Thor and Jane that usually ended in suppressed laughter, as to (unsuccessfully) avoid weird looks from fellow tourists.

They returned to the hotel just after lunch. As soon as Darcy opened the door of the suite, she was turned around and pushed back out by Jane and Pepper, off to their appointments for the gala.

All of the preparations took a little over five hours. Darcy listened to Jane and Pepper chat, but she really wasn't in a talking mood. As the time drew nearer, her anxiety began to grow. It was completely irrational to be afraid of this, yet here she was. A few days before, she had been walking around a dark temple while a shoot-out was going down. Now, though, her heart rate was elevated. Her mind was distracted. At one point, she even caught her hands shaking. She had no idea which thought was scaring her the most: the fact that at any point tonight, Hydra could burst in, guns blazing, or the fact that she was getting all dressed up and she'd have to dance with Loki and be sociable with strangers. Both were daunting in their own terrifying ways.

The team of stylists finished up the three women about two hours before the start of the gala. They took a car back to the hotel, Darcy only feeling slightly out of place with her hair and makeup done extravagantly while she was just wearing street clothes.

When Jane and Darcy entered their suite, Loki and Thor were standing by the table chatting, both already in their tuxes.

"A little eager, are we?" Darcy asked.

"We wanted to give you full reign to the suite," Loki said, buttoning his jacket. His tuxedo was extremely well fitted and his hair was styled well. Darcy was trying her hardest not to stare at him. That was becoming a common problem for her.

"We were just going over to the other suite now, to wait with the others. That way you can do whatever it is you need to do without us bothering you," Thor said, putting his hand on his brother's shoulder.

"We're getting dressed, not redecorating the whole suite," Darcy said teasingly. "How much room do you think we'll be needing?"

"We don't know, we just don't want to be in your way," Thor said. He and Loki moved for the door, leaving Jane and Darcy alone.

"Huh," Jane said after the door closed.

"Whatever." Darcy added, turning and going to her and Loki's room.

Everything she had bought the day before was already in her room, the dress hanging in a garment bag in the closet and everything else in bags on the table. Darcy was extremely glad she had worn a button-up shirt that day; she hadn't gotten the chance to change after sight-seeing and if she had worn a regular shirt, she would've had to cut it off as to not ruin her hair (at least, that's what Pepper had told her).

After undressing, she slipped on her gown and met Jane in the middle room to do up each other's dresses. Jane's dress was simple, elegant, and absolutely stunning. The dress reminded Darcy a lot of Cinderella's.
Darcy returned to her room and looked in the full-length mirror for a while. Her own dress was strapless and deep red with an empire waist, the material chiffon. Jane had told her that it 'emboldened her figure,' which was just Jane's was of saying it made her boobs look fantastic. Darcy, looking at herself, was slapping herself internally for being so pathetic and simply hoping Loki would like her.

Darcy slid on her shoes and got together everything else she had bought. After making sure everything looked ok, she joined Jane in the main room of the suite. Pepper was there now too, looking just as beautiful as Jane, with her long white gown that screamed elegance.

"The gala starts in a half an hour. Tony wants to be a little late, but you guys, Loki, Thor, Bruce, and Steve can get there when it starts. Nat and Clint are already there, I think." Pepper said.

"Where's everybody else now?" Jane asked.

"They're all down in the lobby,"

"Well, let's go on down then," Darcy said.

The three women went to the elevator and stood silently as it descended.

*Any second now he'll see me. Why am I acting like this is my senior prom? Snap out of it, Darce. It doesn't matter what he thinks of me. Either way, we have a job to do tonight: find the next clue. That's all that matters.*

The doors slid open and Darcy's heart just about stopped. She got off the elevator last, walking at the back of the group. Pepper led them through the lobby to one of the little gatherings of chairs where all of the men besides Clint were sitting, waiting for them.

"What took you so long?" Stark said, standing and kissing Pepper on the cheek. "Did you have to sew your dresses yourself or something?"

"Not this time," Pepper replied smoothly.

"You look beautiful," Thor said to Jane, gently grabbing her hand.

Everyone in the group looked at Loki as inconspicuously as they could, wanting to watch his turn. Loki himself was staring wide-eyed at Darcy, looking like he was in shock. He opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. Darcy didn't know how to take that, if he was stumbling in a good way or a bad way.

Before he could get anything out, Stark interrupted.

"You guy's have to go now if you're going to get there when it starts," he said, shepherding them all out the door to three waiting cars. He and Pepper stood at the door, watching them all split up into the different vehicles. Darcy and Loki slid into the last car, the driver shutting the door behind them.

"Somebody wants to get rid of us fast," Darcy said to Loki, who still looked generally shocked at everything.

The cars all went different ways to the Pantheon, as to avoid them all arriving together. Their car was taking the longest route, so they'd be getting there last besides Pepper and Tony.

"Darcy," Loki said, finally.
"Yeah?"

"You look... absolutely stunning," he managed to get out, his eyes heartfelt and deep.

"Oh, well, thanks," Darcy stumbled. She smiled at him as she internally fought to not become giddy.

As they drove, Darcy became more and more confident. With this feeling, she was pretty sure she could take down all of Hydra or win a battle of wits with Tony. It was when they reached the Pantheon, though, that Darcy saw the huge crowd of photographers and completely lost her nerve.

"Oh god," she muttered, her face turning white.

"It'll be fine," Loki said comfortingly, squeezing her hand. That gave her just enough confidence to be able to physically get out of the car.

*Here we go. I can do this.*

A few steps out of the car, cameras began flashing.

*I don't know if I can do this.*

Just after thinking this, she whispered it to Loki as he fixed his jacket after getting out of the car.

"I'll be right here the whole time, I promise," he whispered back. He put out his arm and Darcy hooked hers around it. She put on her best brave face and the two of them walked down the actual red carpet into the building, hundreds of lights flashing as they went.

"That wasn't so bad," Loki said once they got through, smiling down at her.

"Yeah. We should go back through again later tonight," she said as she tried to stop shaking.

Inside, the party was just picking up. A small orchestra played fancy music; the guests sitting at the tables encircling the dance floor or standing around talking and drinking champagne. Darcy spotted Jane and Thor across the room, Jane in deep conversation with an old man and Thor looking extremely bored.

Darcy and Loki blended in with the other guests fairly quickly, occasionally making some small talk or being introduced to people. They were in a crowd of Italian socialites, sprinkled with a few American and French as well. The thought crossed Darcy's mind that every single person here besides most of the people in her group were millionaires, while she had to stretch to get all her bills paid back in Cambridge.

Darcy and Loki were introduced by Bruce to a man named 'Happy Hogan,' but he became very distracted when Nat happened to walk by. Apparently Happy had met Nat before, so Bruce had to make up something on the spot about why Nat would be there.

A huge buzz filled the room as Stark and Pepper arrived, everybody perking up and hoping the famous Tony Stark would talk to them at some point.

Stark strutted in with Pepper on his arm, a sly smirk on his mouth. He had sunglasses on when he walked in, but he pulled them off and handed them to someone standing nearby.

"You've got to be kidding me," Darcy said, shaking her head.

Stark walked over to the band and said something to the conductor, who nodded and smiled. The song changed a moment later from background music to a slow pretty thing, and Stark grabbed
Pepper and brought her to the middle of the floor.

"Shall we?" Loki said, offering his hand to Darcy. Her breath caught in her throat, but she took his hand and was lead out to the floor. There were only five or six other couples dancing, but that really didn't matter to her right now. Darcy's attention was fully on Loki.

He took her hand in one hand and her waist in the other, Darcy putting her free hand on his shoulder.

"You know, I don't know how to dance," she said as they started swaying.

"I've seen you dance, quite well actually," he said. Her faced turned bright red, remembering the second time they met. "And you're dancing right now,"

"That wasn't dancing, that was having a seizure. And this is just swaying. I meant dancing, like ballroom dancing or waltzing or whatever's going to go on tonight,"

"It's not too hard. I'll show you," he offered.

"I'm going to step on your feet if it gets any faster than this,"

"I will personally get the band to play something slow, even just one song later tonight."

"All right," Darcy said. "I'm going to hold you to that,"

The song picked up a little, their feet moving a little faster now as well. Loki was spinning them a little, keeping up with the other dancers without getting too crazy.

After a moment, a smile spread across Darcy's mouth.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's just funny, because we're supposed to be halfway through our exploration in Egypt, but instead we're dressed up in Rome, dancing and hanging out with rich people, looking for a clue in a Roman temple because we found a Latin clue in an Egyptian tomb."

"Huh," Loki said, smiling too. "Well, I'm personally very happy with this turn of events."

"Me too," Darcy said. They went back to dancing again, spinning slightly and whatnot. As they danced, Stark and Pepper came up beside them.

"Hey Lewis; who taught you to dance, Thor?" Stark asked, motioning across the dance floor to Jane and Thor, who were pulling the awkward middle school slow dance off to the side of the other dancers.

"How about next time you try to make a more showy entrance, Stark," she shot back. "Where were your background dancers?"

"They weren't able to make it on such short notice," he replied smoothly.

Darcy made a face at him, to which he smiled smugly, winked, and spun away with Pepper elegantly.

Darcy looked up to Loki. He grinned at her mischievously.
"Shall we show him?" he asked.

"If you lead the way, I'll go with the flow," she said, hoping she wouldn't regret it.

As fate would have it, the music picked up into a Disney-esque twirl-filled section, most of the other dancers falling into a rhythm with each other. Loki, however, ignored what they were doing, taking Darcy to the middle of the floor. They spun at an impressive speed, Loki leading her as fast as she could go. He twirled her a few times as well, her dress spinning around her legs. He even threw in a few lifts as well, Darcy not believing the things she was doing. Her feet skinned the ground as he brought her down again, Darcy becoming dizzy, but definitely not from the spinning and twirling. She had never danced like this before, and yet, here she was.

Loki was completely in control, leading both of them around and around. Darcy was just concentrating on keeping her legs in motion to keep up with him and on his eyes to not become too wobbly. His hand was holding pretty tight onto her side; Darcy figured he was probably scared she'd go flying if he let go. I probably would, actually.

The song slowed down as it ended, Loki holding her in a dip as the last notes hung out.

The only way this could become any more Disney-like would be if he kissed me right now or the car we drove here in turned into a pumpkin, Darcy thought. Loki looked like he might actually kiss her, glancing at her lips in an anything but subtle way. Applause suddenly broke out, Loki and Darcy looking around and realizing it was for them. Darcy stood up properly again and put on a small smile as the large group of millionaires applauded them.

"See, you're a great dancer," he whispered into her ear. He put his arm around her waist as the two of them walked off the dance floor.

"Only because you led me the whole time," she said, elbowing him lightly in the stomach.

"Well," Stark's voice rang out over a microphone. "I guess that's a good of a transition as any. Let's hear it for Darcy and Loki one more time," Applause thundered through the room again. Darcy was unsure how to react, so she just smiled a little in gratitude for the applause.

Stark began his speech again as Darcy and Loki made their way to the back of the room as inconspicuously as they could. A few people complimented them as they passed, the two of them politely thanking them without starting a conversation anywhere.

"We probably shouldn't have done that. We were supposed to lie low," Darcy said under her breath. They stopped at the back of the hall, waiting for everyone to become properly distracted by Stark's speech before making their getaway.

"Actually, we were supposed to blend in, be as much like them as possible. Why not outshine them as well?" Loki whispered back. His arm was still around her waist, but it felt very natural, almost as if it belonged there. Darcy tried her best not to overthink that one.

"Because we're supposed to be blending in, not outshining," she said. She couldn't help it in that moment; she was actually blushing from this whole situation. Now, she was standing there with Loki's arm wrapped around her, whispering back and forth. When he spoke, he whispered directly into her ear, Darcy's knees going weak each and every time.

If anyone's looking at us, they'll probably think we're just a young couple, deep in love. That's good for our cover. Yeah. That's probably what Loki's thinking. We're just playing a part.

Somehow these thoughts helped comfort her; Darcy couldn't quite grasp the idea of Loki doing all
"I think now's the time for us to make out escape," Loki said lowly into her ear.

The two of them turned and walked toward the section of the Pantheon they were to look at, the tombs. As they walked they passed Clint, who nodded at them and even smiled a little.

"Good job out there," he whispered as they passed in front of him. Darcy gave him a thumbs up and an overly enthusiastic grin in response.

The tombs were deserted, all of the party guests being held in the main room. If anyone besides someone in their group were to try to come back here, they'd have to go through Clint.

"In 609," Loki began as they actually entered the room holding the tombs, "The Pantheon was converted into a Christian church. If I had to guess, though, I'd say our time period is before that."

"So ignore Christian things?" Darcy asked.

"Maybe. Probably," he said. "There was a bit of repair done in the year 202, which may be the time period we are looking for. That's when one of the known inscriptions here was added, and therefore what we're looking for could've been added then."

"Well, if I had to guess, I'd say what we're looking for is underneath us. Just like the temple back in Egypt. They'd want to put the message or whatever in a place that'd be safe, a place that would last."

"And when the Christians took it, they just built over whatever was here. That's probably why the original people making the clues chose this building; its importance would save the clue in the years to come."

The two of them stopped in front of the grave of Raphael. He was the only person buried here that Darcy knew of.

"Ille hic est raphael timuit quo sospite vinci, rerum magna parens et moriente mori," Loki read.

"That's beautiful. What does it mean?" she asked bluntly.

"It means 'Here lies Raphael, by whom the mother of all things feared to be overcome while he was living, and while he was dying, herself to die.'"

"Wowza. Sounds like quite the dude."

"He was. But he's not our guy; he died in 1520. He's way after what we're looking for."

"That may be true, but he was an important person. Important people are buried in important places. And if something was important for one group of people, it may have been important for another group of people a while later."

Loki furrowed his brow and tilted his head, but he seemed to follow what she said for the most part.

"So we should start by looking here, at Raphael's grave?" he asked.

"Basically. I've just got a feeling. Plus, the Pantheon is built like a perfect circle, right? Like, the length and height of the dome are exactly the same. So that means that the builders and architects were pretty into symmetry and the placement of things." Darcy actually knew a bit about the Pantheon; Ancient Rome had always been interesting to her. She continued, "When the Christians took it, they made a few improvements, but didn't change too much or destroy it like they did with
most of the Pagan temples. In that case, the best place to look for the place that would lead underground then would also make sense now. You feel me?"

She paused for a moment, hoping Loki kept up with all that. He seemed to, judging by the slight smile on his face.

"Where do you think they would hide the entrance?" he asked, his expression hardening.

"Well, if I were an architect and I was trying to hide a secret underground room, I'd make the entrance hard to find for anyone who didn't know where it was. I'd make opening the door or whatever be as easy as pressing a button, but I'd make the button hard to find,"

"So we should look for a button?" he asked.

"I don't know. I suppose. Was that something they could've done when building this?"

"The sky's the limit," Loki said, shrugging. "It's a place to start,"

"All right. Let's find ourselves a button."

They split up, each looking on opposite sides of the room. Darcy ran her fingers along the walls, feeling every indentation and crack. There were a lot of niches and crevasses and a whole bunch of hidden corners and things to hide a button behind, but everything she saw would have been seen throughout history. She needed to look harder; find something that no one would have ever noticed. Easy enough. After we find the entrance, we should go play the lottery.

They probably looked for that damned button for a half an hour. Darcy was pretty sure she'd walk away from tonight with a disease from the amount of touching she was doing.

"Darcy," Loki finally called out.

"What's up?"

"I think I may've found something," He had his hand on something in the corner, but it was blocked from her vision. She walked over to him and saw his hand on a slight indentation in the plain part of the wall.

"You wouldn't happen to have a pick brush on you, would you?" he asked dryly.

"Can't say that I do," She put her hand up to the indentation. It felt like a whole lot of dust and dirt that had been compressed into something.

Darcy dug her finger into it, scratching away at some of the dirt. It came out pretty easily, to her surprise.

Darcy scratched at the dent in the wall for a moment, but suddenly the dirt all fell out and a mechanical noise filled the air. They both took a step back instinctively, expecting something to happen. Instead of a giant door swinging open or a booby trap being set off, another noise filled the room for just a split second. The noise most reminded Darcy of a bunch of air being released all at once.

After that, though, the room was silent and still.

"I think we may have found something," Darcy said, eyeing the now-present hole in the wall.

"Yeah," he agreed.
"Now, I don't know what you heard, but that sounded like something being unsealed to me,"

"That's what I heard, too," Loki seemed very distant yet fascinated by everything going on. His eyes were observing the hole, almost as if he was expecting it to do something else.

He reached forward with both hands suddenly and pushed on the wall, hard enough that his feet began to slide on the ground when the wall didn't budge. He stood up properly again and crossed his arms.

"Maybe it's the other way," Darcy suggested.

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe you have to pull to open it,"

Darcy stepped up in front of the door and put her hand in the hole. She grabbed at the side of the wall and pulled. With a surprising amount of ease, the door swung open toward them. The blast of air that followed was mind-numbingly cold and so full of dust that Darcy had to turn away and cough.

"Darcy, you are an absolute genius," Loki said, beaming ear to ear.

Loki pulled a small flashlight out of his pocket and the ray shined down into the darkness.

"Let's fuck this bitch," Darcy said, grabbing his hand and walking into the dark.
Chapter 8

As soon as they entered the room, the temperature dropped easily fifty degrees. Goosebumps spread up Darcy's arms like a wildfire, chilling her to her very core. Loki gave her his tux jacket, but it did little to help her.

Her hand was tightly clasped to his, their fingers laced together.

This is how it should've been back in Egypt. I probably wouldn't have been as scared then. Ok, that's not true. I still would've been scared shitless. Loki's hand is just awesome.

They walked down a fairly steep incline for not even ten steps before reaching a giant spiral staircase leading down. Loki walked ahead of her, testing the first few steps.

"Looks good to-" He was cut off when the floor beneath him fell out and he disappeared from sight.

"Loki!" Darcy jumped forward, not even making sure she was on safe ground. The flashlight that had been in his hand had gone out, leaving them in complete darkness. A sheer panic went through her, straight down to her bones. "Can you hear me? Are you hurt?"

She heard him coughing, thankfully sounding relatively close. He must've only fallen about ten feet or so.

"Yeah, I'm all right. Don't try to come down here; I'll find the flashlight and come back to you." She couldn't see him, but she heard Loki stand up and start walking around. A light suddenly shined out; Loki had found the flashlight and was shining on the wall opposite where Darcy was standing.

"Is that…?" Darcy couldn't finish her sentence. On the wall where Loki's light shined, a Latin inscription wrapped around the wall of the circular room.

"It is. We did it," Loki's voice said from somewhere below her.

"What does it say? Where are we going now?"

"The first part says 'Artemis tenet," which means 'Artemis holds.' There's more to it, but the wall is crumbling there."

"Well, we don't need to know what she's holding. We just need to know where to look." Darcy commented.

"The most famous Artemis temple is in present-day Turkey, but that temple is ruins now. There's nothing left except a few pillars." She heard Loki sigh after that out of frustration.

"The Temple of Artemis you're talking about is the one at Ephesus, right? It was destroyed in 401. That's just after what we're dealing with. Maybe the original hiders of the treasure went back and made sure the clue was still there,"

"That would be really good for us, but this clue says 'Artemis holds.' If I had to guess, the clue would've been in the hands of a statue."

"Is 'holds' the only thing that word translates to?"

"Hmm… I think tenet could also mean 'keeps,'"
"There you go. Maybe it'll be like this and Egypt: something underground. The original hiders were obviously building these clues to last, so they wouldn't put a clue in the hands of a statue or anything like that. It's hidden, and hidden well."

Loki was silent for a moment. Finally, Darcy heard his voice again. "We have no way to know for sure right now. We'll discuss everything with the others tonight."

"Sounds good to me."

"I'm coming up now,"

"Be careful," It helped her, saying that. At any moment the floor could fall out beneath him, and this time he could actually get hurt.

Darcy could tell where he was by the origin of the light, making its way up the stairs toward her. All she could do in that moment was stand there and wring her hands and simply hope Loki would be all right.

Even with the light in Loki's hand, Darcy couldn't see her hand in front of her face. She had been in a cave once in her life, on a field trip in middle school, and this experience was something like that. Judging from the way the passage leading them in had been, this room was probably directly under the Pantheon's main room. There were no windows or light sources, but the distant sound of dripping water could be from the drains of the main room.

Loki's light fell onto her as he finished getting around the hole he had fallen through and back onto solid ground.

Darcy, without even thinking, stepped forward and wrapped both arms around him. His long arms wrapped around her as well, his face nestling into the curve between her shoulder and neck.

Three days ago. Three days ago, she was worried about them accidentally touching when they were both asleep and possible feelings and making sure she wasn't caught staring at him as they sifted through the sand. Now, three days later, everything's changed. Not just with Loki, but that's off topic right now. Anyways, he obviously cared about her, judging just by the amount of time they've spent kissing the past few days. Darcy wasn't sure yet how much he actually cared, though. For all she knew, he had some girl back at Cambridge waiting for him and he was just bored right now. No, he wouldn't do that. I think I know him well enough at this point to know he's not like that. Do I?

Loki separated from her and took her hand.

"Let's get back to the party before people start noticing we're gone," he said. She could hear the smile in his voice.

They walked back into the room with the graves and Loki pushed the door closed again. She didn't notice until they were in the light again, but Loki was walking with a limp.

"Are you all right?" she asked as they walked back toward the party.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I landed wrong on my foot, but I'll be fine." Darcy wasn't sure he was being completely honest, but she didn't want to push it.

"If you insist. Let's just go back to the hotel now. You're covered in dust anyway. The guests might find that weird," She tried to laugh a little with that to help lighten the mood, but she couldn't get it out. Darcy slipped her arm around him to help steady him. Loki didn't object to it, he just tried to put as little of his weight on her as possible.
They walked into the main room and Clint saw them and rushed to them.

"What happened?" he asked as he approached. He pulled Loki's arm around his shoulder and helped him stand up better. Darcy was a lot shorter than Loki and therefore could only do so much as his crutch. Clint was stronger and taller and would be able to help him better than she could.

"I fell. We're going back to the hotel now," Loki said.

"You sure you don't want to go to the hospital?" Clint asked.

Loki shook his head. They took a few steps, though, and Loki almost fell to his knees.

"You're going to the hospital. Darcy, can you run over to Nat real quick and tell her where we're going? She's just on the other side of that pillar," Clint motioned with his head behind her.

"Yeah. I'll be right back," Darcy started to run but then stopped, took off her heels, and then took off running again. She reached the pillar but didn't see Nat.

"Nat? Natasha?" she said.

"What is it, Darcy?" Darcy almost fell over from shock. Nat had snuck up and was now standing right behind her.

"Loki got hurt, so Clint is helping me take him to the hospital,"

"Ok. I've got everything here,"

"Thanks," Darcy said, not waiting for a response after that. She took off, going back to Loki and Clint, who were just now reaching the door.

Loki was a lot more hurt than he was letting on to be. She could see it in his face and in the way he was trying to walk when he could barely stand. *He probably hurt himself even more trying to show her that he was fine. Goddammit, Loki.*

The three of them got into a car, Darcy sitting with Loki in the back seat while Clint took shotgun. He told the driver to go to the nearest hospital in Italian; they were in a taxi instead of one of Stark's cars since the party wasn't scheduled to be over for a while. The driver didn't speak any English, but luckily Clint was sufficient enough in Italian.

"How are you feeling?" Darcy asked, her voice smaller than she had intended.

"I'm good. We really don't have to go to the hospital," he said. His face was pained, a thin layer of sweat on his forehead.

"Oh, shut up." she replied, shaking her head.

They drove for a few minutes in silence before Clint spoke up.

"So, did you guys find anything?"

"Yeah. There's a tunnel leading to a room with another inscription." Darcy said.

"Really? How 'bout that. Where are we off to now?" Clint asked.

"Turkey, we think." she said.
"What's in Turkey?"

"A temple to Artemis."

"Alright. Sounds good to me." Clint obviously didn't need much as far as directions were concerned. Darcy had noticed about him that he was much more of an observer than a participator. Also: people are still into archery? Like, for security purposes? I know Loki said he was a 'specialist,' but damn.

They reached the hospital and Clint helped him inside, Darcy valiantly holding the doors for them as they made their way into the ER.

An hour later, the three of them were leaving the hospital to go back to the hotel. They were told that Loki had badly sprained his ankle, but that he'd be able to walk normally in about a week or two. The nurse they'd been with had wrapped his leg, told him not to walk too much, gave him some pain medicine, and sent them on their way.

They got back to the hotel and Darcy and Clint helped Loki out of the car. They threw one of his arms over each of them, helping him through the lobby, up the elevator, and into the suite.

Once he was sitting on the bed, Clint left the room to call Nat and make sure everything at the party had gone all right. The party had ended a little while ago, so everyone should be coming back soon.

Darcy helped Loki take his jacket off and untucked his shirt for him. She started unbuttoning his shirt, but he put his hand on hers to stop her.

"You don't have to do that," he said. He looked utterly defeated: guilty about needing help, in pain from his ankle, and just plain tired.

"I'll go check and see what Clint's heard from Natasha," Darcy said. She walked to the door to almost run into Clint, who had been trying to get back into the room frantically.

"What's wrong?" Loki said as he saw Clint looking panicked.

"At the gala," he began. "Hydra hit again. Nat took care of them, but she says there may be civilian casualties. She wasn't very clear. She says she'll be back soon and explain then,"

"Are all of ours all right?" Darcy asked, her mind immediately going to Jane and Thor and her new friends.

"Everyone got split up. She was able to get ahold of everyone except Jane and Thor,"

Darcy and Loki were both speechless. Darcy sat down on the bed beside him, staring at the ground in front of her.

Clint's cellphone started ringing, so he stepped from the room and swung the door shut behind him. Darcy looked to Loki.

"Well, today's turned to shit." she blurted.

"Everyone may be all right. For all we know, nobody at all got hurt and there was just a big confusion. And we did find the next clue. It still could be a good day."

"Maybe, but we can't know for sure now. Plus, you got hurt."

"I'll be fine. The doctor said I'd be back to normal in a week."
"But still," Darcy said. Her thought was cut off when Clint came back into the room.

"They're here. You up to sit in on this?" he asked Loki, who nodded in response.

Clint helped Loki into the main room and sat him down on the couch. Darcy sat beside him, knotting her hands together in anticipation. For all she knew, the group could show up and one of them could be dead or one of them could've been shot in the leg or something awful like that.

The door opened and Stark was the first one through. He looked pissed off beyond imagine, but he was fine. Pepper, Bruce, and Steve followed him in, all completely fine. Jane and Thor walked in next, to Darcy's relief. Thor had his arm around Jane, who looked like she was suffering from PTSD, but had no visible injuries. Natasha was the last one in; she had a splatter of blood across her face, but was uninjured as well. Everyone came in and sat down except for Steve, Thor, and Stark as to lack of enough seats. Stark walked over to stand directly in front of Loki.

"What the hell happened to you?" He looked at Loki's leg with confusion.

"I fell," Loki said bluntly.

"Was that before or after the Hydra agents saw you leaving the Pantheon with half our security?"

"Are you trying to blame this on him?" Darcy said.

"Tony," Pepper warned.

"You guys were as obvious as you could be when you left, weren't you?" Stark asked, his attention fully on Loki.

"He sprained his ankle, Stark. Would you have preferred us to sneak him out through the sewers? We weren't aware that Hydra was watching us." Darcy told him.

"We should be focusing on how Hydra knew we were here in the first place," Loki said.

"Did anyone get hurt?" Darcy turned to ask Nat.

"One man got shot in the arm. It was a clean wound, though. He'll be fine."

"What was Hydra trying to do?" Clint asked, sitting down in the chair beside Loki and Darcy.

"They didn't really have a plan that I saw. Only five or six of them came in, and they mostly tried to avoid the crowd." Nat said.

"They went straight for the tombs, but Nat cut them before they got there. Just the sound of the guns is what caused the hysteria," Steve said. "A few people went toward the noise for whatever reason, but Nat was able to keep them back for the most part."

"I tried to keep one Hydra agent alive for questioning, but he had a cyanide pill. Killed himself before I could even get across the room to him." Nat added.

"But how did they know where we are?" Loki asked again.

"They could've known that from any number of sources," Nat said. "Someone followed us from Egypt. Another Hydra agent went down into the tomb and found the inscriptions themself. They probably knew because they heard Tony Stark was throwing a last minute gala at the Pantheon just after seeing him in Egypt," She shot Stark a look.
"We need to be much more careful. Next time, we'll travel more sporadically," Stark said.

"And not throw a giant party when we're trying to lie low," Darcy said.

"So, where are we going now? Did you guys find anything?" Steve asked.

"The encryption we found suggests the temple to Artemis in Turkey," Loki said, sitting up a little straighter.

"What'd it say?" Jane asked.

"I could only read the first part. It read 'Artemis holds,' something." Stark scoffed, crossing his arms.

"Oh, I'm sorry. How about next time you go down and translate it for us?" Loki said. "And you know what? Ever since you walked in, you've been blaming me for everything that went wrong today."

Everybody else in the room went silent and looked at Stark, waiting for his response.

"I've been 'blaming you' because you were careless and almost lost a man his life."

"Yes, I directly caused that to happen. It's all my fault;"

"How about you roll back your sass for a second and maybe take a few more pain pills before you get too out of hand."

Loki pushed himself up to stand on his good leg in front of Stark. The two men were sizing each other up, standing probably a little too close, Darcy noted. Loki was a head taller than him, but Stark had enough bravado and ego to tower over him.

"Bring it on, professor. I'll hit a cripple,"

"Enough!" Pepper finally cut in, standing and walking to Stark. "Enough fighting. Tony, go to bed. You're only acting up because you're tired and someone ruined your party. Loki, you obviously need rest. Somebody help him. And for the love of god, nobody talk to each other unless you're going to be civil!"

Everyone stared wide-eyed and Pepper for a moment before springing into action. Thor and Steve helped Loki back into his room. The two men were sizing each other up, standing probably a little too close, Darcy noted. Loki was a head taller than him, but Stark had enough bravado and ego to tower over him.

"What the fuck." Darcy was staring out in front of her, trying to process everything that went on.

"What have we gotten ourselves into?" Jane responded, equally spaced-out.

Not even a second later, Steve and Thor walked out of the bedroom. Steve left immediately, but Thor went to Jane and helped her up.

"My brother and Stark are both very stressed today," Thor said. "Tomorrow, everyone will be happier, hopefully,"

Darcy couldn't help smiling at Thor's optimism. Jane and Thor went into their bedroom, and Darcy
had no intention of listening to what was most likely about to occur. She stood up and went into her
own bedroom.

Loki was sitting on the edge of the bed, his back to her. He had changed into just pants (trousers-
Darcy had learned her lesson when it came to the differences with American/British terms the day
some old woman heard her say 'fanny' in public).

"Hey, big guy," She walked over and sat down beside him.

"I'd like to apologize for my behavior," he immediately said.

"No, don't. Stark's a tool. You should've hit him."

"I don't know why he is still keeping us around, or at least me, anyway. He doesn't need us and he
obviously doesn't enjoy being around me,"

"He does need us, specifically you. You've found and translated everything so far. Stark knows that
no matter how much he doesn't like us, he needs you to find the clues and eventually the treasure."

"I suppose you're right,"

"Of course I am,"

"I'm just feeling sorry for myself."

"Only a little,"

"I'm being extremely rude."

"I wouldn't go that far,"

"I need to be more polite to Stark. He's being very generous, letting us come with him."

"That's too far."

"Yeah, that is too far. We just need to be respectful to him without actually being nice."

"That sounds like a plan." Darcy grinned.

"A plan we will most likely struggle with," he replied, matching her grin with his own.

"But it will at least be a fun struggle, full of snarky and clever remarks."

"Naturally,"

"This plan can start tomorrow. As for now, let's go to bed. You'll need your rest for when you wake
up screaming in pain at five in the morning."

"I don't think it'll be that bad," Loki said, pushing himself back onto the bed.

"Nope. That's how injuries always work. You'll start out fine, and then bam! It's 5 A.M. and you're
crying, wondering where your god is." Darcy stood up and walked to her pile of clothes and began
changing. She was way too lazy and tired to worry about the implications of changing her clothes in
front Loki. She just needed out of this damn dress.

"I suppose I'll find out if this is true in a few hours regardless," he said.
"It's gonna be a good time." Darcy turned around when she was finished changing and joined Loki in bed.

I feel like it should bother me how fucking domestic we're becoming, yet here I am, snuggling up to him as we go to sleep. Whatever.

The morning eventually came, a little too early to Darcy's liking. It was incredibly rainy and cold and gross outside while bed was warm and comfy and most importantly had Loki in it. After a while of building up energy, though, she finally was able to pull herself out of bed and start getting ready for the day.

Jane stopped by for a moment and told them (through the door; she learned her lesson last time) that Stark wanted them packed and down in the lobby by eleven.

Half of Darcy wanted to go down at eleven and continue with all this and find the treasure and all that jazz. The other half, though, just wanted to spend a very long time in a bed with Loki doing nothing and everything and stuff that belonged in a cheesy romance novel and stuff that belonged on Animal Planet. The second option seemed a lot more fun, but the first was definitely a lot more fiscally rewarding. Darcy's inner archeologist/treasure hunter was probably what was pushing her away from option number two, at least for right now. Besides, maybe they could do both. Find the treasure and have Loki fuck my brains out. Two-in-one.

This was assuming Loki wanted to sleep with her. He hadn't really made a move so far, unless you counted the sleeping in the same bed and occasional kissing, which you easily could. But beyond that, the two of them were by no means partners or lovers or anything like that.

Darcy showered and packed and helped Loki get ready and by eleven they were ready to go. Thor came over and took all of their bags for them just after that.

Loki was feeling much better today; there had been no middle-of-the-night-screaming-in-pain like she had thought there would be, which was always good. He was able to walk on his own now, though not for very long and with a pretty bad limp. He was healing, though, which counted for something. He probably shouldn't be walking on his ankle, but he was insisting.

Down in the lobby, everyone else in their group was seated in the same spot they had been in the pervious night before the gala. Darcy, Loki, Jane, and Thor joined the group as Pepper began explaining the plan.

After this, she explained, Pepper was going back to New York. For a potential distraction to Hydra, she had bought four extra tickets on her flight, assigned to the members of the American group. Hopefully it would help them with not getting followed.

The nine of them were splitting up into groups of two or three and all traveling in different directions. Pepper had four packets with instructions, travel supplies, money, and fake passports; one for Darcy and Loki, one for Clint and Nat, one for Jane and Thor, and one for Bruce, Steve, and Stark. Darcy was kind of surprised by their use of fake passports, but they had no idea the extent of Hydra's resources or power. It didn't hurt to be safe. Pepper had phrased it as a 'shield' against Hydra.

Once each group got to their new location, they'd spend a few days in whatever city they were in, following the directions in the packet and laying low. The group actually wouldn't be back together until they arrived at the temple in Turkey. The whole plan was elaborate and ingenious and all thanks to Pepper.

Darcy felt extremely spy-like in this moment. They actually had a manila envelope they weren't
supposed to open until they were in the car, telling them where to go and what to do. *This is very James Bond-esque. Kinda. It counts.*

The time came for the groups to split up. Darcy gave a big hug to everyone except Loki (her travel partner) and Stark (asshat). She had to admit she would be missing Pepper; that lady had style and knew how to deal with Stark like no other, in addition to just being awesome. Darcy knew that she'd also be missing Jane, though she hated to admit it. Jane was overbearing and overly emotional most of the time, but she was really Darcy's only friend and she loved that woman. *I'll see her in a week. Suck it up; I'll be fine.*

At last, they all split up. Loki and Darcy took their bags and got a taxi out in front of the hotel. They told the driver to just go and that they'd tell him specifically where to in a minute.

Darcy took the manila envelope and opened it up.

"Budapest," Darcy murmured. "Huh. I guess we're taking the northern route,"

The two of them had a simple enough agenda, if simple involved four different modes of transportation, four days of not being seen, and illegally train-hopping. They were to travel by commercial airline to Budapest, where they'd hide out for four days. That was simple enough. It was the second part of their journey that worried Darcy: trek through the city to the train station, travel to Bucharest, sneak onto a train there, take *that* train to Istanbul, rent a car and drive to a small port town, and then finally take a boat to a small dock fifteen minutes away from the ruins of the Temple of Artemis.

Their packet included plane tickets, information about the hotel in Budapest, train tickets, boat tickets, passports, and a bunch of money in three different currencies (but not enough to get stopped at airport security).

"It appears doable, potentially," Loki said after looking over it for a few minutes.

"If we end up in a Turkish prison, I'm blaming Stark." Darcy said.

Loki told the taxi driver to go to the airport. He gave Darcy her passport and plane ticket and then hid away the rest of the packet in his bag.

The two of them arrived at the airport a little while later. Their flight was at twelve thirty, so they had to rush through security and run to their gate and they still barely made it to their flight on time.

The flight to Budapest only took about an hour and a half. They followed Pepper's directions and took a city bus from the airport to a few blocks from their hotel and walked the rest of the way. Darcy was slightly concerned for Loki- his leg was still obviously paining him- but he brushed it off and said he was fine.

They made it to their hotel by three, but both of them were too tired to attempt going back out into the city. Pepper had advised them in her directions to avoid going out as much as possible ("once a day at most and for no longer than two or three hours"). Loki and Darcy took this time to study up on the game plan.

"So, it says your name is *Tom*?" Darcy asked him, picking up his passport and examining it. The two of them were sitting on the large bed in their fairly nice hotel room, Loki leaning against the headboard and Darcy sitting cross-legged facing him.

"It sure does, Maxine,"
"At least you got a normal name. Maxine," Darcy scoffed. *What the hell, Pepper? I thought we were cool.*

"Perhaps you could go by Max?" Loki suggested.

"Shut up," She tossed his passport at him.

The two of them spent the entire next day in the hotel as well, eating all their meals in the various restaurants in the hotel or via room service. They watched movies, talked, or occasionally read to each other from the books they had with them. Loki had brought a couple of books on ancient Egyptian culture, while Darcy was more on the classic literature side of the fence. By the third night, they were almost done reading *Jekyll and Hyde*.

Now, they were finishing up that book. Loki was reading, lounging in the chair at the desk. Darcy was lying on the bed with her hair hanging off the end, staring at the ceiling as Loki read.

"...I bring the life of that unhappy Henry Jekyll to an end." Loki finished reading the last page.

"That was... pleasant,"

"Yeah."

Darcy rolled over and sat properly on the bed.

"The whole 'dark side taking over' thing is a pretty cool topic, though,"

"Yeah. I've always loved this story," Loki admitted. "The mild-mannerism of Jekyll and the feral, savage nature of Hyde is enthralling."

"Agreed." Darcy stood up and stretched.

Darcy remembered something in that moment, something Stark had said to her that day down in the temple. *He seems kind of dark.* She hadn't thought of it that way then, but now her scumbag mind was taking that the wrong way and back.

Loki had stood up and was now putting her book in her bag for her. His ankle was much better now; he didn't walk with a limp or take the pain pills or anything.

"Speaking of people who are dark," Darcy began before she could stop herself. "You'll never guess what Stark said that day down in the temple in Egypt." *Darcy, no. What are you doing? Stop now before it's too late*-

"Did he give you his review of *Jekyll and Hyde* down there?" Loki smiled a little. He had walked over to her and was leaning against the wall in front of her.

"Nah. He told me that he thought you were dark. Like, kind of dangerous. I think he thinks you really don't like him. I don't know. I feel like I'm babbling. I think Stark was just jealous you were getting some while he was walking around with Bruce and I also think he thinks you're smarter than him. I also think I don't possess the ability to stop talking. Oh god." Darcy finally cut herself off there.

Loki seemed to be puzzling through her rant, but looked like he followed it.

"Stark thinks I'm dark?" he asked unsurely.
"Basically."

"And what do you think?"

Darcy's stomach dropped. Loki was now standing in front of her, waiting for an answer she wasn't sure how to give.

"Well, I don't really know for sure. I don't think you are. You're definitely not a teddy bear, but you're not dangerous. At least, not dangerous to people you like. If that makes sense."

Darcy's hormones were all over the place right now. Her mouth wanted to start talking, but if she started talking she probably wouldn't be able to stop and she'd just babble nonsense. Don't you fucking dare mess this up, Darcy. Oh god, he's making bedroom eyes. When did he get so close? I could've sworn he was like three steps away and a whole lot taller, but now his mouth is really close-oh god.

"But how can you know for sure?" he asked. That was way more than borderline cheesy and Darcy knew it, but it didn't change the fact that he was five seconds away from kissing her and those five seconds couldn't come fast enough.

Loki lowered his mouth to hers agonizingly slow, down until they were just barely touching. She closed her eyes as he made contact, slightly parting her lips simultaneously. Loki drank her in, their kiss deepening and advancing from soft to eager. As she moved one hand through his hair, he let out a deep, rumbling groan that caused Darcy to shudder.

He ran one hand down her, touching all he could. The other hand knotted in her hair, holding her there. Loki didn't seem to realize that she wasn't going anywhere.

Their lips parted and his mouth lowered to kiss along her neck and then her collarbone. He pressed his lips gently into her neck again just before Darcy brought a hand up to pull his mouth back to hers, this time their tongues circling each other's. Loki's hand fell to her thigh, pulling her leg up to wrap around his hip. She arched her body up into his, attempting to close all empty space.

Darcy didn't acknowledge it when it happened, but now both legs were wrapped around him and one of his hands was below her blouse on the small of her back. Something else was against her back now; Loki had turned and taken a couple steps forward and her back was now against the wall. Darcy felt her feet touch the floor as Loki separated their mouths again. His mouth began exploring, never going lower than her neck. Just as she was about to protest that, Loki began unbuttoning her shirt. Around three buttons down, though, he stopped.

"How important is this shirt to you?" he asked in a low voice.

"Not very. Why?"

He gripped each side of the blouse, lacing his fingers in between the buttons. In one solid motion, all of the buttons popped off, hitting the ground around them. The shirt fell to the ground a few seconds after. Her bra was off moments later as well.

Look at him. It's not even fair. He's got the body of a fucking god.

Loki ravished her, his hands and mouth everywhere at once. A sigh escaped her lips, desperation
Holy shit, I think I'm lapsing in time. I swear both of our pants were on a second ago. Or maybe it was a few minutes ago? Maybe my short-term memory is just getting screwed-up. Dear lord, we're both completely naked. Look at him! No, don't stare. Oh god.

"Did you say something, darling?" Loki said, his voice deep and his speech almost slurred. Had she said that out loud?

"No, sorry," she said bluntly, mostly to keep herself from babbling. Her face turned an even deeper red at the thought of her just speaking her reflections aloud as she thought them. Loki smiled a little but then returned to his work.

He moved down her body, touching with mostly his mouth until he was on his knees in front of her. Is he going to… oh my god, he is. Loki hooked one of her legs on his shoulder.

Darcy's body clenched, her hands reaching out against the wall for something to hold on to. She grabbed him by his hair with one hand, fairly sure she'd fall over if she didn't. Loki's mouth and (specifically) tongue were doing all sorts of things to her and she was responding by gasping and moaning and eventually screaming. She barely even realized she was pulling his hair, probably a little too hard.

Finally, Darcy's nerves and legs gave out. She collapsed before him, breathless and seeing stars. Loki was winded as well, but nowhere near to her extent.

"Holy shit," she said, catching her breath.

"You said that. A few times, actually." Loki grinned as he spoke.

"Really?" Darcy asked. "What else did I say?"

Loki's grin widened. "I'm not quite sure. I don't think it was exactly words, per say,"

Both of them laughed a little, Darcy still attempting to get her breath back. A moment later, Loki had apparently decided her energy was restored and she was recovered enough to get on with the show. He moved forward, Darcy not quite sure what to expect. What he actually did genuinely surprised her: snaking his arms under her knees and around her upper body, Loki stood, lifting her with him. He walked across the room carrying her, bridal-style. When he reached the bed, he put her down almost too gently. Before she could protest his mildness, he was on top of her, kissing her so hard she was pretty sure her lips would just be giant bruises later and grabbing at her with savageness and roughness that she somehow experienced as stimulating and exhilarating.

Darcy's legs spread under him.

He was kissing her even harder, his tongue probably reaching the back of her throat. She was trying to compete/keep up with him, but it proved better to just let him do his thing and focus on the things she was currently struggling with, like breathing and well formed thoughts.

Loki positioned himself on top of her.

I need to think of something more clever and/or eloquent to say than holy shit. Maybe I cou- HOLY SHIT.
Loki had rolled his hips, their bodies joining. She whimpered or moaned or maybe screamed; she wasn't quite sure. He kept going, increasing in intensity each time he entered her. Darcy had no clue if she was screaming or groaning or quiet, but his name definitely escaped her mouth a few times.

She dug her fingers into his back as the friction between them built, Loki's hips plunging and Darcy's back arching. If she was going to have bruises on her neck, he was going to have scratches on his back. It was only fair. Besides that, the deeper Loki went, the further gone she was becoming. Any minute now she'd either explode or completely lose it.

Darcy was pretty sure at some point she felt Loki bite her, teeth definitely being involved there. They were both getting to the point where they weren't really feeling anything besides ecstasy and pleasure.

Simultaneously, both of them unraveled. Darcy screamed/moaned one last time as Loki pressed his face against the side of her head, sighing into her hair.

Loki briefly collapsed on top of her, but rolled off to the side as immediately as he physically could. Both of them stared at the ceiling as they tried to catch their breath.

"You win. You're dangerous, dark, whatever. But in the best possible way," she said in between breaths.

"I've never been so glad to prove something to someone,"

"Did you bite me?"

"I think I might have. My apologies. It seemed fitting at the time." Loki seemed genuinely sorry about biting her, even though it was kind of totally awesome and she definitely wanted that incorporated into any potential future sexytimes.

"No, no. It's good. It helps with the whole 'dark and dangerous' thing you're evidently going for."

"I've heard that the epitome of 'dark and dangerous' is biting one's partner during sex," He turned onto his side beside her.

"Well, that's just common knowledge,"

Loki brought his head down and kissed her shoulder. *Huh.* He proceeded to bring his hand to her cheek and kiss her on the mouth yet again. This time around, though, was much gentler than every other time, save the beginning of the first one that night. It was light, tender, and not rushed in any way. He traced her skin with his other hand, running his fingers up and down her arm.

That night, the two of them went back and forth between straight up fucking to making love. The two usually ended up blending together by the end anyway, but the beginning and middle had surprising degrees of affection and savageness. Eventually they fell asleep, his arms wrapped around her the exact same way they had been the first night back in Egypt.
Chapter 9

Darcy woke up, smiling as she felt Loki's arms around her. Everything in their room was calm and quiet and perfectly serene. And then she remembered the night before.

*Jesus fucking Christ. That actually happened. It happened. Multiple times. Good thing I'm on the pill or I'd be seriously concerned about the likelihood of being pregnant after a night like that. Also: I really hope the rooms around ours are vacant right now. Geez.*

Darcy snaked out of bed and stood up and stretched. Her thighs were on fire; she hadn't felt a burn in her muscles like this since she had attempted to start being a runner in high school. If she had no memory of the night before, she would've guessed she had gone horseback riding. *Heh. Heh heh. Oh, shut up. Mind out of the gutter, Darce.*

She looked back at Loki, still fast asleep, the sheets covering him from the waist down. He looked peaceful, but more than that, he looked happy. He had a satisfyingly bad case of bedhead that looked decidedly very good on him and the smallest of smiles on his lips as he slept.

Darcy 'walked' across the room (walking may be an issue for a while, on account of the 'horseback riding') and went into the bathroom. Upon turning on the light, she almost had a heart attack as she saw herself in the mirror: her lips were swollen (they were usually pretty big, but *damn*), her neck was lined with hickeys, her hair was lopsided (Loki's left hand had pulled her hair while his right hand was busy), and a very distinctive bite mark was chilling out on her collarbone.

"I look like I've been attacked by a gang," Darcy muttered to herself, staring wide-eyed at her reflection. After getting over her appearance enough to function, she brushed her teeth and turned on the shower. Out in the other room she heard Loki moving around so she stepped back into that room with him. He was sitting on the edge of the bed facing the other way, stretching his back a little.

"Look at those scratches. What's wrong with me? Why would I ever think that scratching him on purpose was a good idea?" She remembered the actual bite mark on her shoulder and calmed down a little. She cleared her throat.

Loki turned to look at her, his eyes lighting up. "Good morning, darling," He stood and walked over to her.

"Good morning. I'm sorry about your back," Darcy said. She quite suddenly came to the realization that they were both standing there naked; of course, they both knew every inch of each other very well after the previous night (he's a thorough guy), but she still self-consciously crossed her arms and tried her very hardest to just make eye contact with Loki and not let her eyes wander over his chest or stomach or-

"Don't be sorry. You're the one with marks all over your neck,"

"And I will wear them with pride. Well, maybe I'll wear a scarf when we're out," she laughed, generating a smile from Loki.

"I'm sorry about your hair," he said, motioning at the rat's nest on one side of her head. "And the bruises. Fuck, the bite left an impressive mark,"

"Yeah, I was just admiring that. I guess we'll both walk out of this a little beaten up," Darcy walked gingerly over to her suitcase and began setting out clothes for her to wear that day.
"Your legs..." Loki began.

"Bit of a rough night. Definitely worth it. Don't worry about it, I'll be fine," she assured. She walked back over to the bathroom, the shower now sufficiently warm and ready for her. "I'd invite you to join me, but we have somewhere to be today."

"I understand," he said, smiling.

Darcy showered quickly and dried her hair, and then walked back out into the room to get dressed. Loki had put pants on, but he went in and showered as soon as Darcy had finished. They both packed up all of their belongings and were ready to go within an hour.

Today was the day they were to make it across the city to the train station as inconspicuously as they could. If Hydra was somehow still on their tail, today would probably be the best day to lose them.

Darcy and Loki went down to the lobby. She stopped in the gift shop and bought a nice big scarf to help cover the hickey lining her neck. After that, they were off into the city.

They took the subway to the half of the city across the river, but got off a few stops early. From where they were, they had a beautiful view of the Buda Castle. Darcy felt dumb doing this, but she would probably never be back there again, so she got Loki to take a picture with her with the castle across the river in the background.

Darcy, now satisfied with her sightseeing, and Loki took a city bus up to the XIII District, and from there they took a taxi to their train station.

Their train ride lasted about fifteen and a half hours, which was almost completely filled with the two of them sitting in their private compartment reading or talking or sleeping.

In the morning, as they reached Bucharest, Darcy and Loki prepared themselves for their illegal activities. They read over Pepper's specific instructions one last time, and then they left their compartment.

Their instructions told them that the train they were on always stopped outside the station for about fifteen minutes to wait for the track to clear up. Loki and Darcy got off their train then and walked along the side to keep from being seen. They got to the front of the train and were able to sneak into the maintenance portion of the station without being seen. Within a few minutes, they were in the civilian portion of the station and buying tickets for the train to Istanbul. The Istanbul train was scheduled to leave five minutes before the train they had ridden in on even entered the station.

"I can't believe that worked," Darcy said as the door to their new compartment on the new train slid shut.

"So simple, yet so brilliant," Loki agreed, setting his bag down.

The train lurched into motion and they were off to Istanbul, leaving Bucharest just as their old train was starting to inch into the station.

Eighteen and a half hours, the entirety of the book Dracula, and three very heated making out sessions later, their train arrived in Istanbul. Darcy and Loki walked through the city for an hour before taking a ferry to the Asian portion of the country. From there, they rented a car and drove to a small town where they got on a boat that would take them to Selçuk.

There were a couple other people on the boat: a family of four, another couple, and a man by
himself. Darcy kept an eye on the man; she caught him looking at her weirdly a few times, but other
than that he wasn't doing anything.

They reached Selçuk, where a black car with tinted windows that just screamed Tony Stark was
waiting for them. From the dock, the temple was only about a twenty minute ride.

Apparently, Darcy and Loki were the last ones to get there by about an hour. Jane greeted Darcy
with a big hug, Stark greeted both her and Loki with a contemptuous smirk, and everyone else
simply smiled and said hello. Clint put down a large bag he had with him to give a classic bro-hug to
Loki, which left Darcy fighting off the urge to snicker.

The temple really wasn't much; there was the one pillar that they were currently standing beside, a
bunch of random blocks lying around, and that was about it. There were a few modern buildings off
in the background on one side and a large forest on the other side.

"So, where'd you guys end up going?" Steve asked.

"Budapest, for most of the time," Darcy said.

"You guys were in Budapest? Did you get to see the castle?" Nat asked, a small smile appearing.

"Yeah, it was awesome." Darcy smiled as well.

"That sounds just like when we went to Budapest, huh Clint?"

"You and I remember Budapest very differently," he muttered. Darcy caught what he was getting at
and smiled slyly.

"Our trips to Budapest may be more alike than you think, Clint," she said, patting him on the
shoulder. His eyes went wide.

"Moving on," Stark said, clearing his throat. "We've been looking around a little. There's not much
in the way of Latin inscriptions."

"Everything else has been underground so far, so that's where we were thinking it would be this
time, too." Darcy said.

"Who's that?" Jane said suddenly, looking at something behind Darcy and Loki. Everyone turned
and looked to see the man that had been on the boat with them off in the distance, looking at some of
the ruins by himself.

"He was on the boat with us." Loki said, not taking his eyes off the man.

"So he followed you here?" Stark asked, his eyes narrowing as he looked at Loki.

"This is a pretty big tourist attraction. He's probably just someone coming to look at the ruins. We
don't have to freak out." Darcy said.

"Excuse me," Stark said, putting his hands up in mock defeat.

"So, we looked around a bit," Bruce interjected. "And we haven't been able to find anything. You
guys are welcome to look around as well, but we're pretty sure there's nothing here."

"Of course, Loki and Darcy are always the lucky ones," Stark said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Darcy said, crossing her arms.
"Oh, nothing. Just that every time you two split off, you come back saying you've found the next clue,"

"We just happen to be looking in the right places," she said.

Loki gritted his teeth before speaking. "In Egypt, it was a one-in-four shot that we would be the ones to choose the correct passage to go down. In Rome, I chose the tombs to search because that's where I suspected there would be the greatest chance of finding something. Now, Mr. Stark, what are you trying to suggest about us?" Loki had spoken with a coldness that had everyone else in the group besides Darcy and Stark looking like they really didn't want to be there.

"I'm simply suggesting, Professor, that you two are getting lucky a lot." Darcy rolled her eyes at his word choice.

"How about we get back on topic, boys," Jane said, stepping over to Stark and Loki. The two of them were currently in what looked like a staring contest, both of them glaring at each other and just about steaming out the ears. "Loki, what exactly did the last clue say?"

Loki broke eye contact with Stark and lost his death-stare to answer Jane. "It said 'Artemis holds' and then something else. I couldn't read the last part."

"Of course." Stark muttered.

Darcy knew it was coming before it happened. That didn't stop the shock from hitting her when it did, though. As soon as Stark had said that, Loki had turned and socked him right in the mouth, causing Stark to turn and fall on his face. Everyone except Darcy turned their attention to Stark, making sure he was still conscious and alive. Darcy, though, looked at Loki, who was looking at Stark with anger and shaking out the hand he had just potentially knocked out Stark with. He noticed Darcy looking at him and his eyes immediately softened. He was probably expecting her to shake her head or glare at him, but instead she decided to surprise him and gave him a thumbs up.

Stark stood back up and righted himself. He turned to face Loki, who now looked a lot more sure of himself. Stark had a busted lip and was definitely trying to play it off as not hurting him as much as it had.

"What I meant to say before you hit me, Odinson, was that we probably can't find the next clue because you couldn't read half the damn clue last time,"

"The last word was inconsequential. All we needed to know was where to look. The first clue only said 'temple to all gods' and we found the clue there. Maybe you, Stark, are not looking in the right place."

"We looked! There is nothing here! Maybe you sent us all to the wrong place. Maybe we're actually supposed to be in Greece, or back in Egypt, or somewhere else, and not in the middle of a field in Turkey." Stark exasperatedly said.

Darcy leaned against the pillar and sighed. Everyone else was watching the argument unfold with little interest now; they all seemed to just want these two to stop arguing.

"I said Artemis. All of us agreed that the most likely place that this meant was here, at the Temple of Artemis." Loki said matter-of-factly.

"It doesn't matter," Stark said. "What does matter is the likelihood that we are just being led around on a wild goose chase and that there is no treasure. The clue back in Egypt didn't say anything about the Pantheon. It probably said 'dead end' or 'watch your step on the stairs' or something like that."
"The inscription didn't say that." Loki sighed. "There is a clue here, we just need to look."

"Fine. Say there is a clue here. After that, we'll be lead to another clue, and then another clue, and another and another. We'll just be lead around forever. The trail will go on for forever. We're lucky we haven't wasted more time."

As Stark spoke, Loki looked distracted. He narrowed his eyes and was looking at something beyond Stark, examining it or trying to make out what it was. Darcy turned her head to look at what he was looking at, but before she could even make sense of what she was seeing, Loki jumped at her and knocked her to the ground. Above her, the part of the pillar where her head had just been exploded, dust falling on the back of Loki's head and on Darcy's face.

A shootout began; Nat and Clint drawing weapons and gunshots filling the air. A group of six armed men about forty feet away were open firing on where their group had just been. Behind them, the man that had been on the boat with them was shooting as well. Nat turned and took him out with one shot.

Everyone else in the group split up and ran off, hiding behind the larger pieces of the ruins or running toward the cars. Loki pulled Darcy to her feet and wrapped an arm around her, the two of them attempting to get out of the line of fire. Clint stepped out from behind where he was standing for protection and walked beside them, shooting like crazy and providing them with cover.

They reached the edge of the open field and Loki and Darcy took off running into the forest. Darcy glanced back just as Clint ducked down behind something again, pulling his bow and arrows out of his bag.

They ran quite a ways, Darcy's feet and legs burning after a while. Loki, though, did not let them stop until the gunshots were just quiet beats and echoes.

Finally, they slowed down and stopped to catch their breath.

"What the hell?" Darcy exclaimed. "How'd they find us again?"

Loki was contemplating something, his brow furrowed. He suddenly stood up much straighter and grabbed Darcy's arm, pulling her behind him. A Hydra agent lunged out from behind a tree to stand where Darcy just had been, as if he meant to tackle someone standing there.

Loki jumped into action, punching the man through his ski mask with one hand and pulling his gun from his hands with the other. When the man tried to retaliate, Loki took the rifle and knocked the guy out with the back end of it. Loki proceeded to do some awesome move with the gun, checking the ammunition or something like that.

"Where'd you learn how to fight and use a gun?" Darcy asked, eyeing the rifle in his hand.

"My father taught me how to shoot and hold a gun, but I don't know where the fighting is coming from," Loki leaned the gun against a tree and ran his hand through his hair.

"That was pretty badass," she said, looking back at the unconscious Hydra man. Darcy walked over to him and dropped to her knees.

"What are you doing?" Loki asked, walking over and getting down on the other side of the man.
"In Rome, Nat tried to question one of these guys, but he killed himself before she could do anything," Darcy rolled the man onto his back.

"Cyanide pills are usually kept in the cheek," Loki said.

"If I were one of these guys, I'd probably accidentally kill myself," she commented.

Darcy knew what had to be done. She held her hand out in front of her, contemplating. *I have to do this. Come on, Darce. It won't be that bad. Oh god, this guy looks so gross. No- don't think about it.*

Darcy pushed all thoughts out of her head and just did it: she stuck her finger's in the dude's mouth, felt around for a second, and then pulled out the cyanide pill. She threw the pill behind her into the underbrush and wiped her hand on the guy's shirt.

"That was fun,"

"We need to make sure he's not still armed," Loki said. He started unzipping pockets and checking the guy, looking for anything weapon-like. He managed to pull three throwing knives and a handgun off the guy before he finished searching him.

"What do we do now?" Darcy asked, standing up. She started pacing, walking from the feet of the man to a nearby tree and back.

"When the gunshots stop, we can bring him back to the group. Natasha and Clint can question him when he wakes up."

"Have the gunshots stopped?" Darcy stopped walking and tried to listen. Loki stood up and walked over beside her to listen as well.

"I think they might've. We can wait a few minutes and then go back."

Darcy started pacing again. She walked around the trees, mindlessly strolling. As she stepped behind a tree, though, the ground fell out from beneath her feet and she found herself falling. She let out a short scream, but cut herself off when she hit the ground not even two seconds later. She'd fallen less than ten feet and she was back on solid ground.

"Darcy?" She heard Loki yell.

"I'm fine. I think I've found where the next clue may be, though,"

"You think so?"

"Well, every time we find something, either you or I fall into it. This keeps up with tradition."

"All right, I'll be right down."

Darcy tried her best to look around the room she was now in. Light was shining in from the hole she had just fallen through, but the air was thick and dust-filled. There was a dripping sound off in the distance, but that's not what Darcy was focusing on. A very distinctive hissing filled the air.

"Be careful," she called up when she heard Loki trying to come down. "I can hear snakes,"

"I'll keep that in mind. Give me a second," She heard him climb back up and walk away for a moment. Then, a light shined down and illuminated the room around her.

There was a central platform about two feet above a surrounding floor literally covered in snakes of
all sizes and colors. Darcy was standing on the edge of the platform, but she quickly moved to a more central spot.

Loki made his way down the hole but eventually just jumped, landing beside Darcy. He looked around for a second, taking everything in.

"Snakes. Why'd it have to be snakes?" she heard Loki mutter.

"You scared of snakes?"

"I'm not overly fond of them,"

Darcy and Loki walked down the platform, making sure to keep away from the edges to the best of their abilities. Darcy was squeezing Loki's hand so tight she actually had to keep reminding herself to loosen up a few times.

At the end of the platform, there was a large wall with a Latin inscription reaching from one side to the other.

"Fuck yeah." Darcy said, grinning.

"Finis est principio; clavem est in…" Loki read, but stopped.

"Is that Arabic?" Darcy asked, eyeing the part he was tripping up on.

"I think so. I can't read Arabic, but I believe Clint is able to," Loki pulled a pen out of his back pocket and began drawing the Arabic portion on his hand.

"What's the rest of it say?" she asked.

"There are two parts. The first part is 'the end is at the beginning.' After that, it says 'the key is at' something. There's another Latin word after the Arabic…" Loki shined the light on that part. "Monasterium. Monastery. The key is at a monastery."

"A monastery? And it's in Arabic?" Darcy said. "Are you thinking Petra?"

"Yeah. That being said, when Rome took over that land, they didn't use Petra because it wasn't by the sea. There was an earthquake there in the fourth century that drove out all of the inhabitants. I don't know about you, but I'd hide a clue that I wanted to keep hidden in a city that had recently been deserted."

"I guess we're going to Petra. Just as soon as Clint translates this and we make sure. Plus, Nat and Clint get to question our Hydra dude."

"Hopefully we'll finally find out why and how they keep showing up everywhere we are,"

"Yeah. Let's go back up now. I'm going to be hearing these snakes in my dreams tonight."

The two of them went back to the hole. Loki was able to jump and grab onto a root sticking out and pull himself up onto solid ground. He reached down and helped Darcy up after that.

To her relief, Darcy couldn't hear gunshots or fighting or anything. Of course, everyone else could be dead and Hydra could've gotten away, but Darcy was going to hold onto the brighter side and hope for the best.

Back in the clearing with the Hydra agent and the gun against the tree, Loki and Darcy stood side-
by-side facing the way they had come. Darcy could almost see the edge of the clearing where the ruins were, but it was a ways away.

Behind them, they heard a rustling and a small clink of metal.

Darcy turned back to the man a split second before Loki did. She saw two main things in that split-second: the Hydra agent was awake, and the Hydra agent was pulling the pin out of a grenade. Everything after that happened in less than two seconds, Darcy not even able to move or think or blink as the scene unfolded before her:

The hydra agent threw the live grenade at them, but Loki smacked the grenade back at the man as it flew at them.

Loki turned and wrapped his arms around Darcy, putting his back to the Hydra agent and the grenade.

And then the grenade exploded.
Chapter 10

The blast threw them back violently. Darcy felt Loki try to keep a grip on her, but the two of them were separated as they were thrown through the air, Darcy flying straight back and landing on her back about ten feet from where she had been standing. They were lucky that the grenade hadn't thrown out any shrapnel or anything like that. That would've been bad.

Darcy struggled to her feet as soon as she built up enough energy. Her back was killing her; it was probably one giant scratch from sliding on the ground the way it had. A loud ringing filled her ears to the point of actually affecting her vision with how loud this damn ringing was. She reached up to her ears and when she brought her hand back down, her fingers were covered in blood.

Darcy spotted the Hydra agent, or at least what remained of him. He looked like a giant red and black paint splatter. So much for questioning him.

"Loki?" she called out. "Loki, where are you? Are you all right?" She realized she literally couldn't hear her own voice. She was pretty sure she was yelling, but she had no way to be sure.

After a moment, Darcy spotted him. Loki was laying face down at the base of a large tree. From where she was, she could see that he was bleeding out the ears as well. She couldn't tell, though, if he was unconscious or… no. Shut up, Darcy. He's not. He can't be.

She ran to him and rolled him on to his back. He was definitely breathing and he didn't have any bones sticking out anywhere, but there was the potential for internal damage. From where he was when she spotted him, it looked like he had been thrown into the tree. She stretched out his arms, seeing if they were… were… she had some reason for doing this, but she couldn't remember what.

Darcy's head was spinning. She sat down beside Loki, holding her head in her hands. Her vision went fuzzy, but off in the distance, back where the ruins were, she could make out a couple of people running toward them. Are they… are they Hydra… or… or…?

She felt herself fall over sideways, facing Loki's side. Her hearing and vision were both gone and she knew in the back of her mind that her consciousness was next. She had no feeling anywhere in her body except the now distant, dull pain in the skin on her back.

Darcy realized then in her half-gone mind that she had fallen over in a way that made it so that Loki's arm was around her. She smiled a little to herself as she slipped out of consciousness and several people approached the two of them.

Darcy was laying on probably the softest bed she had ever been on in her life. Like, damn.

She opened her eyes, but immediately had to close them again from the brightness. As her eyes adjusted, she opened them again little by little until she was able to look around the room.

She was in what looked like a stereotypical hotel room. Darcy sat up to get a better view and surprisingly wasn't greeted with any pain.

There were two main options to where she was: 1. She was in a hotel room Stark rented and Jane and Loki and everyone was just somewhere else nearby, everything fine and dandy, or 2. Hydra had gotten her and she was now in their captivity.

The door to her room opened and Darcy prepared herself to jump up and try to make a run for it, but
she saw Jane walking in carrying a tray of something. Darcy sighed in relief. When Jane saw that Darcy was awake, she dropped the tray and ran to her side.

"How are you feeling?" Jane asked, hugging her tightly.

"I feel great, actually. How long have I been out?"

"It's been almost two days. We've all been worried sick."

"What happened to me?" Darcy asked.

"You burst your eardrums, both of you and Loki did. You have some scratches on your back, but other than that you're fine."

"Where's Loki?" Darcy's stomach dropped. He had been much worse off than she had when she passed out.

"He's out in the main room. He's been awake for a few hours,"

Darcy jumped up out of the bed. She was wearing pajamas that weren't hers: a loose white T-shirt and shorts. Her wardrobe distracted her for a second, but then she was making her way to the door again.

When she opened the door and Loki spotted her, he jumped up and ran to her. They met each other halfway in an embrace, their arms struggling to hold each other tighter.

Darcy almost broke out into a sob. She pressed her face into Loki's collar and fought off all of those thoughts, not wanting to start crying right now. Loki brought his hands to her face and kissed her over and over, apparently attempting to make up for lost time.

Eventually they broke and Darcy looked at everyone gathered around. Jane was now out with the rest of the group, holding hands with Thor off to the side. Everyone else was there, smiling at her being awake and well (except Stark, whose smile was just cheeky).

"So, have you told them anything yet?" Darcy asked Loki. She realized that they had just kissed and everything in front of some of the people gathered for the first time. Yet, all of them were smiling. Thor was looking at his brother, a huge mix of expressions on his face. The most prevalent ones Darcy could see, though, were pride and pure joy.

"I had just finished explaining what happened to us, but I haven't told them what the encryption revealed yet." Loki said.

"Oh, good. I didn't miss the best part." Darcy walked over to the large dining room table and sat down. Everyone else sat as well.

"The clue said 'the end is the beginning; the key is at blank monastery.'" Loki said. He looked at his hand, the drawing he did long gone.

"The blank was an Arabic word," Darcy said. "We figured that since it said monastery and was in Arabic, it was talking about Petra."

"That would make sense," Jane said.

"So, Petra it is." Stark said.

"Are we all splitting up again?" Darcy asked.
"They found us anyway last time, so why bother going through the trouble?" Stark stood up after speaking and left the room.

Nobody in the group had anything to say after that. Everyone stood and dispersed except for Loki and Darcy.

"How are you feeling?" Loki asked her. He took her hand in his.

"I'm feeling pretty great. How are you feeling?" she said.

"Much better, now." He squeezed her hand.

"So apparently we both burst our eardrums," Darcy said. "I hope you didn't have any dreams of being a singer,"

"Well, being a professor was always my fallback,"

Steve walked back into the room.

"We're leaving for Jordan tomorrow morning," he said sternly.

"Oh boy," Darcy said half-heartedly. Steve left after that without another word.

"We both need rest," Loki said to her.

"Lead the way, professor."

Within twenty minutes, the two of them were fast asleep in the bed Darcy had woken up in.

If I had a nickel for every time on this trip one of us has gotten hurt, I would probably be as rich as Stark.

It was about seven o'clock in the morning. Darcy was laying in bed with a sleeping Loki, listening to the rain outside and Loki's breathing and the general silence of the suite and thinking about life, the universe, and everything, as she often did when she couldn't get back to sleep. Her mind had wandered from Loki to Hydra to Loki to the group's aptitude for getting mildly injured.

It was weird, but everything seemed at peace. It had started storming a while ago, but it had toned down to a light rain as the morning came.

Darcy got out of bed and walked into the bathroom. She went through her morning ritual, and then turned on the shower and stripped down.

After she showered, Darcy went back out into the bedroom. Loki had awoken at some point during her bathing, and now he was getting dressed for the day.

A loud knock on the door pierced through the room.

"What?" Darcy yelled out. Loki chuckled a little at her bluntness.

"I see you're as charming as ever. I just wanted to say we're leaving in an hour." Stark's voice called through the door.

"Got it." Darcy sat up. She looked over at Loki. "I should probably start being nicer to him. You punched him and he still keeps us around; I think that's what love is."
"I heard that. And yes, you should be nicer to me." Stark yelled from the other room.

"Can it, Stark!" she yelled in response.

Loki and Darcy got dressed and packed and were ready to go just in time for their departure.

They flew into Amman, Jordan, and from there they drove for three hours down a desert highway to the present day town near Petra. They were going to get a fresh start at the Petra monastery the following day.

Darcy stood in the bathroom of the new hotel room, looking at the mirror. Her back had healed very well; there were only a few scratches left. Her ears didn't really pain her, which was definitely good. Her bruises from her original sexcapades had healed very nicely as well.

She pulled her eyes away from the mirror and joined Loki in the bedroom, possibly getting a couple more bruises that night.

In the morning, they gathered in the main room and headed out. The trip to the monastery was a long one: the group spent a solid hour hiking up the steep steps to the monastery entrance. When they finally got there, they spent a few minutes recovering from the hike and drinking water at the grand entrance before going in.

"Well, gang, here we are." Stark said loudly. "Hopefully this time we'll all find it together and not get attacked part of the way through,"

"But that's half the fun," Darcy shot back.

After a few moments, everyone stood up and prepared to walk into the monastery entrance.

They all walked inside the main room, through a doorway, and into a second room. As soon as the last one of them was through the second door, a short yell filled the air and a metallic clicking noise echoed around the walls. Darcy was last through the door and at the back of the group, so she couldn't see anything going on. She could, however, sense the panic coming from the rest of them.

"What's going on?" she muttered to Loki beside her. He was tall enough to see over and around the rest of the group.

"Hydra," Loki whispered back.

The group spread out, all of them putting their hands up as they did. About thirty men in Hydra uniform lined the walls, guns aimed at the group. A single man stood in front of them, this one not in uniform or even a mask.

"Come on in, everyone," the man said in a very German accent. "My name is Johann Schmidt. I've been wanting to meet all of you for quite some time now."
she was on the very end, right next to Loki. Everyone looked scared, some a lot more than others. Jane was almost shaking but was still holding up fairly well. Nat and Clint were both stone-faced; Darcy had a feeling those badasses had been in a situation somewhat like this before.

The room was silent for a while. Schmidt looked like he was waiting for one of them to speak up first. What he might do when one of them did, though, was keeping any of them from speaking.

After a few moments, Nat finally spoke up. "Why is Hydra interested in an Egyptian site?"

Schmidt smiled at someone being brave enough to speak. "An Egyptian site? Not so much. Egyptian treasure, that's where it's at. There are a few reasons why I am interested in Egyptian treasure, Miss Romanoff. Call it a personal quest, or secured funding, or a way to put Hydra back on the map in a positive light before launching our new global strike. Any of those will work."

"And what is your 'new global strike'?" Nat asked.

"Well, if I told you, that'd ruin the surprise." Schmidt said.

"Why do you keep trying to kill us every time we turn around?" Stark spoke up next.

"Ah. The famous Tony Stark. Why are you so interested in Egyptian treasure? Was your fortune not enough for you?"

"I asked you first."

"Fair enough." Schmidt smiled again. His smile was creepy, just like the rest of him. He had a creepy old man feel about him, which kind of disgusted Darcy to think about. He continued, "You and your party, Mr. Stark, keep getting in my way. Now, though, you are going to help me. I've been watching all of you for a while, fairly closely. When you tried to lose us after Rome, you failed. We simply followed all of you and you all lead us to Selçuk separately. Well, except for Ms. Potts. She really is beautiful, Mr. Stark."

"Don't you dare," Stark warned, pure rage dripping off of his threat. Schmidt smiled when he saw how his comment affected him.

"This encryption," Schmidt continued, motioning to the wall behind him where a large inscription looked like it had recently been uncovered by an explosion, "is different from the others. It contains four sections: Latin, Egyptian, Arabic, and Greek. Now, there is one person that I know of who can read all of those. I'd like to know what this says and I'm not in the mood to hunt down four different translators. So, Mr. Odinson; tell me what it says."

Everyone in the group glanced over at Loki. No one dared to move too much; the eight gunmen behind Schmidt probably weren't the understanding types.

Loki took a deep breath and bit his lip. He looked down at the ground in front of him before speaking.

"No."

Schmidt pulled out his pistol and flipped off the safety. Putting the gun up to Loki's forehead, he said, "What does it say?"

Loki doesn't respond. He stares out straight in front of him, silent.

Schmidt doesn't take kindly to that; he turns away from Loki for a moment, visibly shaking in anger.
He turns back suddenly, hitting Loki across the face with the gun, causing him to fall over. Schmidt faces Darcy suddenly, grabbing her and pulling her to her feet.

"Translate it now," Schmidt says, putting the gun against Darcy's temple. "Or watch your friends die for you one at a time, starting with her."

"If you harm any of them, there is no way in hell I'd translate anything." Loki said as he pushed himself back up and put his hands up again.

"Nice try, Mr. Odinson, but I know what she means to you. Bluff all you want, but I'll still kill her if you don't start cooperating."

Loki's eyes moved from Schmidt to the gun to Darcy, trying to figure out something. His cheek had a deep cut in it from getting pistol-whipped; a single thin trail of blood left the cut and ran down his face and neck and to stain his collar.

Darcy tried her best not to seem afraid. If she was a terrified mess, that wouldn't help Loki. On the inside, she felt like crying and screaming and curling up in a ball, but she needed to look like she wasn't afraid. In this situation, she wanted to die. If Loki didn't translate the inscription and Schmidt didn't shoot her, Hydra would win and a bunch of other people would die in the 'global strike' bullshit. She knew Loki wouldn't let any of them die, though. Would he?

"Five, four-"

"All right," Loki said quickly, cutting Schmidt off. Darcy's stomach dropped.

"Tell me what it says, now."

"I need paper. And a pencil." Loki blurted. "So I can write it down," he said to Schmidt's questioning look.

Schmidt nodded to one of his men, who retrieved a small notepad and pen. He brought it to Loki, who slowly walked over to stand under the encryption.

"Before I start, I'm going to have to ask you to stop pointing the gun at her," Loki said, still facing the other way.

"I don't think you're in any position to ask anything of me."

"She's a specialist in Egyptian hieroglyphics, while I am better at Latin and the other languages here. I'll work faster with her help," Loki turned to face Schmidt, who was still holding Darcy in the cliché hostage position.

"I've got time."

"I'm complying with your demands. I'm doing as you say. All I ask is for her help," Loki's eyes were pleading, his hands up in surrender.

"Fine. No funny business," Schmidt pushed Darcy away from him and toward Loki. She started to trip over her feet from the sudden movement, but Loki rushed forward and caught her.

"Are you all right?" he said quietly, brushing some hair out of her face.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Living the dream," She tried to smile, but she knew it came across as weak. Loki kissed her hard, wrapping his arms around her.
After a moment, Schmidt cleared his throat.

"I said I had time, that doesn't mean you get to waste it," he said angrily.

"My apologies," Loki said, smiling mischievously. "We'll get to work straight away."

They both turned to face the encryption. Loki opened the pad and wrote down a few things.

"I can't read Egyptian very well," she muttered.

"But I can. I just didn't want you at gunpoint."

"You should've let me die," Darcy whispered.

"And why would you say that?" He turned to face her, standing close so no one else could hear what they were saying.

"Because if you tell him what it says, they find the treasure and they win and Schmidt can start his 'global strike.' If you don't tell him anything, he just hurts us."

"Well, I'm taking option number three," Loki breathed into her ear. He turned back to the wall and spent a few minutes looking at it.

Loki, with his hands raised above his head, walked over to Clint. They exchanged a few words, and then Loki returned to Darcy.

"I'm not as fluent in Arabic as he is," Loki commented to Schmidt, who was fuming at Loki's noncompliance.

"Do you have it yet?" he almost yelled.

"It says 'go under the great lighthouse.'" Loki said. "The time period would suggest the Lighthouse of Alexandria. The next clue would most likely be there."

"And you're sure?" Schmidt's eyes narrowed.

"That's what it says." Loki replied coolly.

Schmidt holstered his gun and walked toward the exit. He gave an order in German and all of Schmidt's men moved at once, following him out. The last one out pushed the giant door closed, sealing them inside and cutting them off from the main room and the outside world.

Darcy smacked Loki's arm. "Why the hell did you tell them that?"

"Calm down, please," he said, smiling at her. "And everyone follow me," He turned and strode through the doorway under the encryption. Everyone jumped up and followed him.

"Odinson, are you going to tell us what's going on or do we have to guess?" Stark called out.

He turned around to face everyone gathering around him. "First off: there's nothing at the Lighthouse of Alexandria. The real translation says 'go deeper for truth,'"

"You clever bastard," Stark smiled.

"So you sent them off to some other place. How are we going to get out of here?" Bruce asked.
"The stairs over there," Loki motioned behind him. A large staircase led out of sight, up over the first room. "There are windows up there. Clint, you still have rope?"

"Yeah,"

"We can just walk up the steps, tie a rope, and climb down."

"If Schmidt ever catches up to us, he's not going to like this," Darcy said.

"Yeah, well, I don't think he really liked us to begin with," Loki said.

He led the group down the hallway, deeper into the monastery. After a few minutes of walking, they finally hit a dead end. In the middle of the room, though, there was a small stone table with a large gold key that looked roughly old as balls.

"There's no message," Jane said, looking around the room.

"Or a keyhole," Steve added.

"What are we supposed to do with a key and no keyhole?" Stark said.

"There is a keyhole!" Darcy said loudly. Everyone looked at her.

"Where?" Stark raised an eyebrow.

"We found one back in Egypt," Loki said, a huge smile spreading across his face.

"'The unknown treasure is at the end,'" Darcy said, smiling as well.

"What?" Stark looked between the two of them.

"Back in Egypt, where you and Bruce found us, there was an encryption that said 'it ends where it began' and there was a keyhole there!" Darcy exclaimed.

"And the clue at Selçuk was 'the end is the beginning,' and then it mentioned a key." Loki said.

"So all we have to do is take that key to Egypt, open a door, and bam, we win?" Stark asked.

"Exactly." Loki said.

"Well, let's go, before Schmidt and his men figure us out." Steve said. "We need to get to the site before they get to the lighthouse and find out you lied to them,"

"I couldn't agree more with Captain Obvious," Stark said. "I don't really want to find out what Schmidt-head does to people who lie to his face."

The group, after escaping from Petra and making their way back to Stark's jet, flew back to Cairo and drove out into the desert to their original dig site, all in a matter of a little over five hours.

*We're actually doing it. We found a key and we know where the keyhole is. We've discovered something huge! Well, that's assuming the treasure-hiders weren't liars or over-exaggerators. Darcy grabbed Loki's hand as they drove up to the site. He smiled at her, squeezing her hand. A charge had filled the air and everyone could feel it: they were going to find the treasure and beat*
Hydra. Stark had explained that once they found the treasure he would fly them all out to New York to stay at his building with him and Pepper for a while. He apparently had lots of space and if this discovery was as big as they thought it would be, they'd most likely be doing some interviews and other stuff for a little while. Plus they'd need to be safe from Hydra until the CIA or whoever could take care of them.

They all jumped out of the cars and ran to the site. Clint tied a rope to the obelisk and threw the other end down the hole, the rope now ready for them to all climb down.

Their elation was cut short.

"Put your hands up, all of you!" a man with a German accent yelled out suddenly.

_We walked out of one trap to walk right into another. Of fucking course._

Everyone in the group put their hands above their head and turned around slowly.

This guy was kind of funny looking, Darcy had to admit. He was short, round, and looked scared out of his mind, but was holding a gun that was pointed in their direction.

"Really? Can we not go anywhere without being stopped by you guys?" Stark asked.

The man shot off the gun straight up into the air. Three Hydra agents came out from behind sand dunes, much more impressive guns aimed at the group.

"My name is Zola. Schmidt had me follow you in case you tried anything funny. I guess he was right to assume that."

"So, what? You're going to call Schmidt and he's going to beat us up some? Kill us? Then what?" Darcy was feeling mouthy today, which was probably not a good thing for someone being held at gunpoint.

"No, I will not be calling Schmidt. I _will_ be finding the treasure myself, with a little help." Zola walked over to Darcy. She took a few steps back as he approached her, but he reached out and grabbed her, pulling her close to him.

"You're coming with me," he said into her ear.

Darcy looked to the rest of her group. They were all forced onto their knees by Hydra agents for the second time that day. One of the Hydra agents was searching each of them, roughly reaching into their pockets as they looked for something. When the agent reached Loki, they found what they were looking for: the key.

The agent and Zola exchanged a few words in German as the agent handed over the key.

"Climb," Zola pointed the gun at Darcy.

"Wait!" Loki suddenly yelled out. Everyone looked at him, curious as to what he would do next. His face was pained, his eyes pleading. "Take me down instead."

"Loki, no," Darcy said the same time Zola said, "And why should I do that?"

"There could be another inscription down there that you wouldn't be able to read." Loki said, eyes flitting from Darcy to Zola.

Zola seemed to contemplate it for a moment. Finally, he said, "Fine. Both of you go down." He
moved to point his gun at Loki instead of Darcy.

"She doesn't need to go."

Zola cut him off, "I said both of you. Now go."

Loki rose from his knees slowly, and he and Darcy walked over to the hole. When they got to the bottom, they had to wait for Zola to climb down (which would kind of be funny if this situation wasn't serious). They had maybe a minute before he reached them, though. Loki suddenly turned to Darcy.

"You will get out of this," he said, grabbing her by the arms. "I won't let anything happen to you, I promise."

"You need to worry about yourself, too. Not just me," she said. Darcy was trying her hardest not to cry, but a few tears escaped anyway. "You shouldn't have come down here with me."

"You're my priority; I'm going to keep you safe," he said. He smiled a shattered, despaired, contented smile, his eyes looked like they might join her in being teary. "I love you."

"I love you too," Darcy half-smiled-half-sobbed, "I love you, Loki."

Loki's thumbs brushed away her tears as he kissed her, an urgency passing between them. The thought crossed her mind that he was kissing her like it may be the last time he ever kissed her.

And we love each other. We may be kissing for the last time, we may both die today, but holy shit: we love each other.

The feelings of relief and pure joy almost washed out her crippling fear of the situation. The result left her a pathetic mess, tears streaming down her face as Loki kissed her as much as he physically could.

Zola cleared his throat when he reached the bottom of the rope. "Stop that! Don't touch each other!" he yelled. He looked really uncomfortable with them showing affection.

Darcy and Loki separated, but he grabbed her hand as Zola forced them to lead the way into the temple.

When they reached the dead end, Zola pulled out the key and handed it to Loki. Pointing his gun at him, Zola commanded, "Open it. Now."

Loki looked at the key for a moment, almost like he was deciding whether or not to actually listen to Zola's orders. That rebellious dream was cut short when Zola turned to point the gun at Darcy.

This dude really loves pointing that gun around. He seems like the kind of guy who's never really used a gun before and now he's overusing it to prove that he knows how. Jackass.

Loki walked over to the wall and slid the key into its place. A few seconds later, a loud snapping noise filled the air and the entire wall slid apart by about five feet each way, making a large doorway for them.

The room that had been revealed was about the same size as the room they currently stood in, but more importantly than that: it was completely empty.

"Where is it? Where's the treasure?" Zola demanded, eyes wide from rage.
"It's not here. It was moved or it never existed or something like that." Loki said. Darcy could see his attention was on the gun in Zola's hand, watching it as Zola's arms flailed around in his exasperation.

"No! It has to be here!" he yelled.

"The room is empty. It's obviously not here," Darcy said. Zola turned to her and before she even realized it happened, backhanded her, causing her to stumble.

Loki started toward him, but Zola pointed his gun at him, causing him to freeze in his tracks.

"I don't think so, Odinson. You stay right where you are."

Darcy was ever so slowly edging away from Zola and toward Loki. The slap hadn't hurt that badly, it was more the shock of it that caused her to stagger. She looked to Loki to see his eyes boring into her, an unreadable expression on his face.

"Now, both of you: get on your knees with your hands on your head. Beside each other, there," He motioned to the ground in front of him with his gun expectantly.

They complied, getting on their knees and putting their hands on their heads. Zola turned to Loki and grabbed him by the collar.

"Where is it? Where's the treasure?" he yelled.

"I don't know. I thought it was going to be here too, but it's not. I can't control that." Loki tried to explain calmly, but Zola wasn't having it.

"If it's not here, you both are useless to me." He cocked the gun and put it up against Loki's forehead. Zola looked over at Darcy. "She's very pretty. After I take care of you, I might keep her around for a little while." Darcy's stomach dropped. Loki was visibly shaking in rage, but he didn't dare move or lash out. Zola noticed this and started laughing. "I'll definitely be sure to do that."

Zola suddenly turned away from them. "But, what will I do with her?" Now he was just tormenting Loki. Zola paced before them, adamant on dragging this out.

"I could… kill her slowly,"

Darcy felt disturbed and disgusted by this whole thing. This asshat was literally describing what he was going to do with her just to fuck with Loki. She knew they weren't getting out of this alive- how could they? If they somehow overpowered Zola, the goons up top would kill them if they reemerged without him. This was a no-win scenario, but some losses were better than others. If she had her choice about it, Darcy would prefer to just go quick and at the same time as Loki.

"But what if I killed her first?" the creepy little man said. "What if I made you watch?"

It was almost like Darcy wasn't even there, just an inanimate object for Zola to talk to Loki about, to threaten Loki with. Yet another thing on the list of why this guy's an assclown.

Darcy dared a glance over at Loki. It surprised her to see it, but Loki was actually crying. Well, his eyes were all teary and one single tear fell down his face. He looked utterly tormented, distressed, and overall just defeated. That was a good word for it, Darcy decided.

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Zola continued to describe different methods of killing her for Loki's viewing. Shooting her somewhere nonfatal and letting her bleed out, shooting her in the gut so it would be especially painful, etc. Darcy was getting tired of listening to this. She just wanted it to be over. She didn't want
to die, of course, but she could only take so much of listening to Zola describe his plans to kill her and being right beside the one person she wouldn't want to have see the whole thing.

A tear rolled down her face as well. She was feeling an overwhelming feeling of defeated.

Zola seemed to be growing tired of discussing methods of murder as well, so he stopped his pacing and positioned himself. He was about five feet from her, gun aimed. *He's just going for the headshot.* *Huh.* His eyes narrowed; he was mentally preparing himself. Zola didn't seem like the executioner type, but that didn't appear to be stopping him now. Darcy closed her eyes.

Everything that followed occurred in less than a second:

Loki suddenly twisted himself, grabbing Darcy and knocking both of them onto the ground.

A single gunshot rang out.
Chapter 11

I'm dead. I have to be dead. If I'm dead, death feels a lot like laying on the ground with Loki on top of me. That doesn't sound too bad. Wait- I never felt any pain. Did I go that quickly? No, I'm sure there would've been at least a split second of pain before dying. Maybe. Also: death feels a lot like life. Actually, I don't feel any different. Maybe I didn't die. But there was a gunshot- Loki! Wait, he's breathing. He's not dead either. So… what happened? Why hasn't Zola massacred us yet? If he missed the first time, he would've just kept going… right?

Darcy opened her eyes. She was currently lying on her back on the ground, Loki on top of her. Normally that would be a very, very good thing, but right now she was more concerned with the fact that at any moment they would both be shot and killed, perhaps in an even worse way now that Loki had tried to protect her like this. He had turned and knocked her over, putting his body in the direct line of fire, covering her as much and holding her as tightly as he could. The bullet that had been shot off around the same time hadn't hit either of them, which was always good, but from where Zola was standing, it should have hit Loki in the back of the head.

Darcy turned her head to the best of her ability to see Zola slumped on the ground, his lifeless hand still holding the unfired gun.

"Wait- what?" Darcy was no expert in guns, but that was definitely not how they worked.

She heard movement from elsewhere in the room. Looking up behind them, she saw all seven members of their group gathered at the top of the steps. Every single one of them had the Hydra agents' guns that they must've commandeered (excluding Clint and Nat, who had their own weapons).

Thor was standing at the front of the group; he had a horrified look on his face and was holding up a smoking gun, pointed at where Zola had just been. Clint was easing the gun out of his hand and patting him on the back, saying something Darcy couldn't hear.

"Are you all right?" Loki asked her, bringing her attention back to him.

"Yeah, I guess so. I mean, they could've cut it a little closer, but it was still fun."

Loki leaned down and kissed her. She knew it was coming, yet it still managed to surprise her and briefly take her breath away.

Up on the steps, Stark spoke out. "We save their lives and it's like we aren't even here. Typical."

Darcy and Loki both smiled into their kiss.

Loki stood, helping Darcy to her feet.

"How'd you guys get away?" Darcy called out.

"Well," Stark began as he walked down the steps toward them, "One of the Hydra punks started getting a little mouthy and handsy with Nat, and you can guess how that turned out."

"After that it just sort of turned into a brawl," Steve said.

"And then, once we took care of the Hydra agents, we armed up and came in after you guys." Clint said.
"We thought, option one: go back into Cairo and let you guys handle this, or two: see if you guys found the treasure, which I see you haven't." Stark pulled the key out of the hole when he reached it.

"Yeah. That fact really upset our round little friend." Darcy said.

Something else was happening in the group, Darcy just now noticing it. The rest of the group went on talking about something while up at the top of the stairs, Loki and Thor were exchanging a few words.

Throughout the entire trip, Loki had barely talked to his brother at all. Hell, he barely talked of his brother at all. She knew of a few things from their past; a few funny stories Loki had told her earlier in the trip, but not much else. She could see, even now, that there was a rift in their relationship. Something had happened between them and it never healed.

Up at the top of the stairs, Loki and Thor shook hands and exchanged a kind of half bro hug, and then Loki walked back down to the rest of the group. When he reached Stark, he took the key from his hand in passing and walked through the door and into the second room.

"Do you have a plan, Romeo, or are you just walking around for shits and giggles?" Stark asked, following him. Darcy also followed them in, but everyone else watched from where they stood at the entrance to the second room.

"When the doors opened," Loki said, reaching the opposite wall, "I honestly thought there would be a treasure. When there wasn't, it took me a little while to figure out what was going on. But now… now I think I've got it." Loki ran his hand along the wall, looking for something.

"And what is it you've got?" Stark asked.

"It was common in Ancient Egypt for tombs like this to have false rooms, dead ends, stuff like that. We saw that the first time we were here. Something else they may have done to trick thieves would be to have a second door to open."

Loki looked like he found what he was looking for; far off to the side, at about knee-height, he took the key and put it in a second keyhole and twisted.

It all happened in an almost dream state to Darcy, like she could see what was going on but had no power to stop it or even move. As Loki twisted the key, what seemed like the entire room shook fiercely, Darcy almost falling over from the sheer force of it.

The middle of the floor in the room she, Stark, and Loki were in began slowly lowering itself, in the style of a giant elevator. A grotesque noise filled the air, like two rocks rubbing against each other or maybe nails on a chalkboard. The group standing in the doorway on one side and Loki on the other remained stationary as Darcy and Stark were slowly lowered downward.

Darcy looked at Stark to see he had the same terrified look she knew she must have. The two of them, currently in the very middle of the room, both turned and ran like hell for the doorway.

They were all standing at the ledge, observing the scene as it unfolded before them, some closer than others. Jane and Thor weren't even visible, and Bruce was about as far back as he could be without disappearing completely.

Darcy could see from where she was that they weren't going to make it in time; they were being lowered too quickly and they hadn't started running soon enough. When Stark and Darcy reached the ledge, Steve was on his stomach, his hand reaching out to them. She and Stark both jumped, with no luck.
Darcy felt Stark turn and grab her by the waist, borderline violently heaving her up to Steve. Her hand brushed Steve's, but then he was out of reach and it was too late.

They jerked to a halt, both of them staggering, the awful noise finally stopping. The ledge was about twenty feet up.

"What the hell?" Darcy yelled. "Now what do we do?" She looked up at the group. To her surprise, all of the people she could see weren't looking at her and Stark at all. Instead, their focus was on the opposite wall.

Opposite of where Stark and Darcy were standing, a new doorway had been revealed by the lowered floor. In that room, through that doorway, was more gold than Darcy had ever seen in one place in her entire life. And that was just the part of the room Darcy could see.

"We did it." Darcy muttered as she stared wide-eyed at the doorway.

The group up top began rejoicing, yelling and cheering and hugging each other. Loki had carefully jumped down to Darcy and Stark's level and was now making his way over to her. Darcy met him in the middle of the room.

"Are you all right?" he asked as they reunited.

"Yeah. That was exciting." Loki smiled and kissed her. Wow, every time we're apart or something happens, we kiss. I could really get used to this. I'll have to make stuff happen more often. Well, not life threatening stuff. Maybe I'll just kiss him more often, just for the hell of it.

"Hey, you guys might want to postpone that. I have a feeling we'll all be celebrating for a while anyway." Stark said as he walked past them, patting Loki on the back roughly as he did.

Darcy and Loki walked behind Stark toward the treasure room. Behind them, the rest of the group had managed to produce a rope (Clint was always so well prepared) and were now making their way down as well.

Stark had already disappeared into the room when Darcy and Loki arrived at the doorway. Before them was a library of treasures, rows and heaps and piles of gold and jewels and treasure, more than Darcy had ever seen in any movie or television show or documentary. There was a section of ancient scrolls, a few open treasure chests scattered around (actual treasure chests; what!?), a row of sarcophagi that looked decidedly royal, and about a hundred different things that all demanded individual attention Darcy was definitely planning on giving.

There was a gathering of probably solid gold statues in front of her that Darcy decided were as good of a place as any to start. The statue she went to was of a cat, and it was about as tall as she was. She ran her hand along the side of it, wiping off some of the dust that had gathered on it, hoping that if she could feel it as well as see it she would be able to believe it was in front of her.

"Are you petting it?" Darcy looked over at Stark standing at a nearby table, now wearing a crown and a few pendants.

"No. I'm examining it. We're not treasure hunters," she shot back.

"Archeologists," he muttered, shaking his head.

"You have a problem with archeologists?" Darcy said, crossing her arms.

"I point and laugh at archeologists."
"This is important, though. This is probably the greatest find since King Tut. Hell, including King Tut,"

"I never really understood the scientific community's obsession with dead people," Stark said, eyeing one of the sarcophagi as he passed it.

"You wouldn't," Darcy said, but Stark was gone before she said it.

The group split up and looked through the room for hours before finally meeting up again at the entrance. They decided to call it a day and head into the city for the night. In the morning, they were to leave for New York. They couldn't risk staying at the site for more than a day because Schmidt might figure them out and come for them.

Stark rented them all rooms at the nicest hotel in Cairo, even going as far to get a suite for each of the couples in the group.

Darcy and Loki had both showered and changed, and were now on the bed. Loki was sitting cross-legged and Darcy was resting her head on his legs, drained from the day they had just gone through.

"So, what happens now?" Darcy asked.

"Well, I suppose we'll fly to New York and stay with Stark until Schmidt and the rest of Hydra is taken care of, and then we can all return here to finish our work." Loki brushed some hair off her face, but then continued with that motion, moving across cheek so lightly Darcy felt her senses turning to mush.

"Hmm," Darcy murmured, smiling a little, softly closing her eyes. "And what about after that?"

"What would you like to do after that?"

"Well, we'll all be extremely rich, right?"

"I suppose so,"

"We'll all be rolling in money. I'll travel to all the places I've always wanted to go and hopefully this time I won't get attacked by Hydra."

"That would be awfully bad luck, getting attacked by them on two separate occasions,"

"Yeah, that'd suck. Maybe I'll just go to Disney World or something."

"I don't know, I bet Disney World is Hydra's backyard."

Darcy opened her eyes. "I bet their headquarters is like Space Mountain or something,"

"And they store all of their weapons in the castle,"

"I think we've figured them out."

They both laughed for a moment, a non-awkward silence falling between them. Loki was the one to break it.

"So, what else will you be buying with your piles of money?"

"I'm glad you asked. I want an apartment in New York City, right on Central Park. And a huge
library full of books I could never finish but I'll try to. And you'll be there."

"Will I?"

"As my butler, of course." She grinned as she felt Loki laughing.

"Really? Well, what if I wanted an apartment in New York with a huge library, and you to be my maid?" Loki had the most mischievous look on his eyes, perfectly matching his dumb grin.

"There is a conflict in our plans."

"We could compromise by sharing," he suggested.

"Loki Odinson, are you asking me to share an apartment with you?" Darcy sat up and turned to face him.

"Forgive me, I'm being terribly forward-" he stammered, looking for forgiveness that wasn't necessary.

"I'd love to," She grinned ear-to-ear as she watched Loki's face transform from shame to confusion to joy.

"Are you sure?" he asked, still not believing.

"Absolutely. We've been living together for a while, now I've gotten used to it. I figure, what the hell? I may as well stick with you. That is, if you'll have me."

"Of course I'll have you. I'd like that more than anything. Are you sure you'll have me?"

"Yeah, you're not so bad. The sex is fantastic, and you punched Stark, which was pretty cool."

"Is that all I am to you?" he laughed, "Sex and hitting Stark?"

"I guess there are a few other minor things. That being said, I think we should do one of the major things right about now," Darcy said.

"Well, Stark is just down the hall,"

Loki grinned at his joke as Darcy grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, pulling him to her.

Almost three weeks had passed since they left Egypt. They were staying with Stark in his own tower (who has their own tower?) in New York City, living in absolute luxury. They didn't have to leave the tower, and there was enough to do there so that they didn't get bored. Darcy found herself doing new totally awesome things each day: one day, Clint taught her how to handle a bow and arrow (once she even hit the bull's-eye after practicing for a few hours). Another day, she had an 80's movies marathon with Loki, after she heard him say he'd never seen The Breakfast Club. That being said, one of Darcy's favorite days so far was the day she and Stark made homemade firecrackers and used them to scare the others. They'd wait until someone would go off by themselves, and then they'd give their next victim a big surprise. Darcy was pretty sure Nat was going to kill them when she figured it out, and Steve about peed himself. Thor, on the other hand, had just yelled out his brother's name, as if Loki were the one trying to scare him.

A few times, though, they got to leave the tower and see the city. Never for very long and almost
always just to go to an interview about their find or something like that, their journeys were usually short-lived and lacking in any kind of sight-seeing. They were in New York City, but they weren't really allowed to go see New York City.

Stark and Pepper had reported Schmidt and Hydra to several different organizations and bureaus and whatnot, but little progress had been made from there. A few agents here and there had been found, but Schmidt was still out there. It left an uneasy feeling in Darcy, knowing he was still free, but at least now people knew about Hydra and Schmidt's chances of a 'global strike' were greatly lessened. Hopefully.

Today, Darcy had slept in until eleven or so (she and Loki had watched all of the Terminator movies the night before, and then had a bit of fun. Well, more than a bit). She and Loki had been put in the same room; that was just assumed now. When Stark was passing out the keys, he had just given them their key and neither of them had had any second thoughts about it. It had been a little over six weeks since they had met each other and they were becoming sufficiently domestic. They'd cooked together a few times, watched movies, read to each other- on the other end of the spectrum, they'd had sex on just about every available surface in their bedroom, varying greatly in roughness and intensity each time they went at it.

Back in Egypt, when Zola was busy attempting to climb down the rope, they had said that they loved each other. That really hadn't been addressed since then, but Darcy knew deep down that she still felt the same way. So far, their relationship had been very physical. They were both mental people, therefore she knew Loki was probably thinking about the importance of their declarations of love as well. She just hoped that he still felt the same way she did.

In this exact moment, Darcy was so satisfied with life she was pretty sure she could burst. In addition to having Loki, who was more than enough to keep her beyond happy, she was also monumentally rich. The treasure in Egypt would be split up among the world's museums, different things going to different specialists to be studied and properly taken care of. It had been unanimously decided that the finder's fee they would be receiving —ten percent of the treasure's worth— would be split evenly amongst the members of the group, one percent for each of the members, and the remaining one percent would go to Pepper, since she had helped them so much back in Rome. Even though they each only received one percent, they were now all billionaires. Well, Stark was already a billionaire, but their find put him in the top three richest people on the planet.

Darcy laid in bed and thought of the day ahead of her: they had the press conference (their find was pretty big news) at three, which she should probably start getting ready for. After that, Stark was taking them all out to dinner at some fancy schmancy French restaurant in the Upper East Side. That meant she had to dress nice and put in effort. Hopefully after that, she and Loki could spend the rest of their evening alone together. *Oh baby. And we all know how 'alone together' always ends up.*

Loki was still asleep, his breathing against her almost lulling her back to sleep. His arm was wrapped around her and her hand was on his chest, rising and falling with him. It still pleasantly surprised her how their bodies sort of matched, like how when they slept or were just laying in bed together, Loki on his back and Darcy on her side facing him (unless they were spooning), intertwining in some places and pressed against each other in other places, matching up perfectly. They were almost like puzzle pieces in a way that was simply fulfilling and satisfying and exquisite. *Wow, that's cheesy,* Darcy thought, recalling her musings. *Yet very accurate. I guess sometimes life is cheesy. That sounded like a crappy fortune cookie or something. Yikes.*

Beside her, Loki shifted slightly as he woke up. Before even opening his eyes, a smile spread across his face. He then turned his head and kissed Darcy on the forehead.
"Good morning," she said lightly.

"Good morning, darling," he replied in a husky, sleepy voice against her head, kissing her there again after. That voice of his was doing serious things to her. And this early in the day? Control yourself, Darcy.

Darcy let out a contented sigh, elated and generally just happy with life. Loki responded with a low groan, apparently taking her sigh in a different, much better way. The close proximity of their bodies resulted in Darcy feeling more than hearing his groan, eliciting an immediate response in her, a deep shudder she felt in her bones. Loki turned onto his side and kissed down her face from her forehead to her cheek to her neck. As he did serious things to her earlobe, Darcy nuzzled closer to him. They were both still naked from the night before, which had been one of their most intense nights yet. She felt his reaction to her nestling against her lower stomach, which caused a thin smile to appear on her face.

"Eager, are we, professor?"

"Minx," he muttered, smiling.

I'm a minx now? I'll show him a minx. He'll regret saying that one. Well, maybe not regret, exactly. I'll just prove it to him.

Darcy rolled both of them so that she was straddling him. She moved in to kiss him on the mouth, but just before making contact she hovered there. Leaving him in anticipation and perhaps agony, she drew back. Loki narrowed his eyes and smiled, knowing what she was doing. She slyly smiled back before starting her work. She kissed his cheek, then along his jaw, and then under his ear. Biting at his earlobe, she brought her hands up his chest lightly.

There was a loud knock on the door. Darcy and Loki both paused, waiting for what followed.

"Darcy? Darcy, are you in there?" Jane called in. Of course.

"Yeah," she yelled, hoping she didn't sound too annoyed.

"I was just wondering if I could borrow that blue shirt of yours, if you weren't planning on wearing it today,"

It took everything Darcy had not to let out a scream. Of course the reason for Jane's visit would be something that menial. The next time Darcy and Loki were going at it, Jane would probably knock on the door to ask what their favorite movie was or how many ounces were in a cup. The only thing holding Darcy together was the fact that Jane didn't know they had been having a moment and therefore couldn't have known she was actually interrupting something.

Darcy rolled off of Loki and picked up the sheets off the floor. Wrapping them around her body, she went to the closet, grabbed the shirt Jane was talking about, and walked over to the door.

She opened the door, handed Jane the shirt, and said, "Here you go, Jane. See you in a few hours."

With that, she shut the door in her face.

The second the door closed, Darcy dropped the sheet. She dramatically turned back to face Loki, who looked very amused.

"You know," Darcy began as she walked back to the bed, "I'm kind of glad she interrupted us. We need to start getting ready for the press conference this afternoon. And you know what? Both of us need showers. I think we should save time and just shower together."
"I couldn't agree more, sweetheart," Loki's smile was pure mischief, with just a touch of predaciousness in it and it sent a shiver down her spine in the best possible way.

They ended up taking about double the time it would've taken both of them to shower separately, but hey: at least they had fun. By the time they got out of the shower, they had to rush to get dressed in time to meet up with the rest of the group.

"What took you so long? Did you have to hand-make your outfits?" Stark asked as Pepper ushered them all into the elevator.

"I had trouble teaching him how to cross-stitch. His pants were so difficult." Darcy said as she was squeezed into the corner between Loki and Steve.

"That last part could be taken… differently," Stark responded, pressing the button for the ground floor.

They walked into the hotel the press conference was being held at precisely two fifty. This specific interview was only for the archeologists in the group, plus Stark of course, so Darcy, Thor, Clint, Nat, and Pepper sat in the back row, waiting for the interviews to start.

The interviewers and cameramen and photographers were all anxiously talking to each other. A few of them got a couple shots of the group in the back row when word spread through the room of who they were, but not many seemed to really care about the non-scientific or famous part of the group too much.

Darcy had just beaten Thor at a thumb-war when all of the press jumped up and started yelling and snapping pictures. The rest of the group filed into the room- Bruce, Steve, Stark in the middle of course, Jane, and lastly Loki. All of them except Stark were visibly nervous from all of the flashing cameras and shouting people, but Stark was making a show of himself; blowing kisses, winking here and there, a big smile the whole time.

The questions began, most of them directed at Stark unless they were more scientific in nature. Jane received a few questions as well, but Loki, Bruce, and Steve remained quiet most of the time. Darcy was proud of them; they all seemed very intelligent yet funny and cool. That was more than she could've done; she would've started babbling and made a fool of herself really quickly.

Bruce began going on about the cultural importance of the find or something like that. Darcy started looking around the room, simply to keep herself awake; Bruce had a tendency to use big words that usually only Stark and Loki understood. The man was definitely a scientist.

As Darcy scanned the room, she played one of her favorite games: make up scenarios for the random people she saw. For example: the woman and the man swapping notes two rows in front of her were having a secret affair, the dude across the aisle from them was actually a spy, and the dude leaning against the wall in the back… looked familiar. That she didn't make up. Darcy tilted her head and squinted her eyes— she was never really one for being discreet— and attempted to get a better look at the guy.

Not successful, she decided to change her approach. She stood up and walked as quietly as she could to the small table with pitchers of water and fancy goblets and poured herself a drink. As she sipped her water, she glanced over at the man who she was now about twice as close to— and immediately recognized him. Darcy almost gagged on her water but was able to hold herself together.

The man began to walk toward her. Every step he took, Darcy wished more and more that she had
taken karate or had Loki or Nat or Clint or really anyone with her to keep her from facing this alone.  

"Miss Lewis," the man said, nodding falsely politely at her. She recognized that as the threat it was.

Darcy couldn't bring herself to respond. She was currently having trouble controlling her trembling; she didn't want the man to see her shaking in her boots. Darcy could be brave like the rest of the group. Maybe.

"It's rude not to speak when spoken to. Not very ladylike,"

"Well, I'm not a very ladylike lady," Darcy said with a little too much false confidence.

"If I weren't a gentleman, I'd say my response to that."

Darcy didn't respond to that. Instead, she put her glass back on the table in the used cups pile and made her way back to her seat. She stared straight in front of her with wide eyes, trying to push away her fear of the current situation.

Loki began speaking. That actually helped calmed her nerves, just hearing him speak. As hard as she tried, though, she just couldn't make sense of the words.

Darcy could feel the man's stare on the back of her head, boring into her. She dared a glance back at him and immediately wished she hadn't; his expression was pure hatred. He had every right to hate them, Darcy supposed; they had lied to his face and gotten the treasure that he had wanted so badly.

The man turned and left the room suddenly, Darcy actually sighing in relief. Thinking over what to do next, she decided the best plan of action was to tell Nat. That way, someone with more combat experience and a better chance of not having a panic attack over this would know what had happened.

Darcy elbowed Nat in the arm.

"What?" Nat hissed, trying to keep her voice down.

"I don't mean scare you," Darcy began, trying her hardest to keep calm herself, "But when I went back to the water table just now, Schmidt walked over and said hello."

Nat had gone to the event planner and told him that the interview needed to be cut a little short. The reporters had asked a few more questions but then the dude in charge calmly wrapped it up a little early, as to not draw attention to the fact that something was wrong. The press had just been filed out, satisfied with their quotes and shots and whatnot.

Darcy felt like she was going to be sick. When the press left, all of the chairs had kind of gone catawampus, so Darcy was sitting in one of the random chairs in the middle of the room. She had her head between her legs and was doing her best to just breathe in and out until the others got there and they could all talk about what happened. Thor had gotten past the security and was attempting to find Jane and Loki; he knew something was wrong, but not what. So far, only Nat and Pepper knew who had stopped by. Clint was standing at the door; Nat had instructed him to let no one in unless it was one of the group members. Nat and Pepper were now standing together by the water table, discussing something in hushed tones. Pepper was glancing at Darcy every few seconds with a worried look. That wasn't helping with Darcy's borderline nausea from the situation.
Finally, after what felt like a few days but was a little closer to twenty minutes, Loki, Jane, Thor, Stark, Steve and Bruce trailed into the room through the same door they had come through earlier before the interviews began. Loki got around the others and all but ran to Darcy, dropping to his knees in front of her.

He put his hand on her cheek. "What happened?" His eyes were searching hers, looking for something Darcy didn't know how to convey.

"Schmidt was here. He called me unladylike, gave me kind of a dirty look, and split. Other than that, he didn't do anything."

"He called you unladylike?" Loki looked confused. Now that Darcy thought about it, she supposed that comment out of context was pretty funny and didn't really make much sense.

"He said hi, I didn't answer, he said not answering him was rude," Darcy quickly explained.

"He didn't hurt you?" Loki's hand on her face moved to the back of her head and his fingers moved a little bit, almost massaging her. It was working wonders on her nerves; she no longer felt panicked or even in danger. Fingers on her scalp/ in her hair relaxed her like nothing else. When someone did that to her, she could usually fall asleep within minutes. Loki had picked up on that and was now exploiting that knowledge to help calm her down.

"No. We just talked. It was unnerving, but he didn't really do anything besides let us know he knows where we are and that he can get around security."

"How did he get around the security? I thought they knew what Schmidt looked like," Darcy heard Steve ask someone.

"We still don't know. If I had to guess, the security was Hydra or was paid off by Hydra. Right now we need to assume everyone is against us, therefore we won't be taking any risks." Nat said.

"Assume everyone's Hydra? That's insane!" Jane cried out.

"It's the only thing we can do to make sure nothing happens to us. We go back to the tower and stay there until Schmidt is caught. Even then, we'll never be safe until Hydra is completely brought down." Nat shot back.

"How do we even know Schmidt is the leader of Hydra? He could just be a face, one small part of a bigger monster," Steve said.

"Schmidt has the ego. He's the leader." Stark said confidently.

As the group debated, Darcy and Loki drifted out of the conversation. He put his forehead to hers and they both closed their eyes. Darcy successfully blocked out the group's escalating discussion just as Stark was saying something about how Schmidt could have killed Darcy today and Clint and Nat had done nothing.

Darcy hated herself for being so afraid. Just seeing Schmidt had scared her shitless; imagine if he actually tried hurting her. He had kind of threatened her back in Petra, but that was more to get a rise out of Loki and make him translate the encryption. There was something about Schmidt that just scared Darcy. The way he spoke, the way he carried himself; it scared her, and Schmidt knew it scared her.

Darcy tensed up as she thought that, and Loki caught that. His hand that wasn't busy on her head moved to take her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. When the voices of the fighting group
escalated further, Loki suddenly stood up.

"Enough!" he yelled, catching everyone by surprise. His expression softened, along with his voice: "You are wasting time and energy." He sighed and glanced back at Darcy before continuing. "Let's just go home."

No one in the group even tried to argue with that. They all got in the cars and went back to the tower in complete silence.

That night, Darcy and Loki didn't have sex or make love or anything along those lines for the first time in a while; they simply changed out of their fancy clothes and climbed into bed. Darcy acknowledged that it felt really weird for Loki to be holding her with their clothes on, but it was an interesting change.

Sleep came quickly to her. In all honesty, Darcy was really tired. She needed to stop having as much sex with Loki— well, stop having it go so late. And she needed to stop watching movies and reading books with Loki until the sun came up. Well, she just needed a little more sleep.

It was around three AM when Darcy woke suddenly after hearing a loud crash coming from somewhere above her. She looked over at Loki to see that he was still asleep. In that moment, Darcy made the slightly rash decision to wiggle out of bed and go check on the mysterious crash from above.

She walked up a floor and went toward the main room. Apparently no one else had heard the crash or no one else cared about it, because when Darcy walked into the main room, nobody else was there.

The first thing Darcy noticed was the fact that it was fifteen degrees colder in the main room than it was in the rest of the building. It didn't take long looking around the room for Darcy to notice the big problem: in Stark's giant windows overlooking the city, there was now a gaping hole. This giant hole in the side of the building was absolutely huge, stretching from the floor to the ceiling in a circular fashion. On one of the remaining portions of window, a piece of paper was pressed to the outside, not even a foot from the edge of the hole.

Darcy approached the paper cautiously, expecting it to explode or be a trap to get her in the line of sight of a sniper or something like that. When she got to it, she quickly reached around outside, grabbed the paper, and retreated back to the safety of the back wall of the room.

Looking over the note, Darcy got a sick feeling in her gut. It was addressed to Loki of all people, and it read as:

'Loki Odinson:

It is your move. If you skip your turn, my next strike will be twice as hard.
Watch your valuables.
—J.S.'

Darcy almost dropped the paper. What, is this all a game to Schmidt? He phrased it like he's playing chess, not attacking us. How is Loki supposed to 'take his turn?' We have no idea where Schmidt is. We have no way of contacting him. That means that we have to wait until Schmidt goes again—and the next attack will be twice as hard. Simple enough. But: what does 'watch your valuables' mean? What does Loki have that Schmidt could steal? Maybe he'll go after Loki's newly acquired money
from the finder's fee or maybe he'll try to steal the actual treasure from the museums. That doesn't make sense; Loki doesn't watch over the treasure. He hasn't received the finder's fee yet. What could Schmidt possibly mean? He punches a hole in the wall and leaves a cryptic note— but why? What's his plan here?

Darcy's thoughts were interrupted by Stark, Pepper, Loki, Steve, Nat, and Clint entering the room. Stark's attention immediately went to the giant hole in his window, which he didn't seem to be taking too well. Pepper went to try to console him on that. Clint and Nat both turned and left the room, most likely heading down to security to see if anything was caught on the external video cameras. Steve went up to the edge of the hole and was looking outside, observing the hole and the glass on the ground and other stuff.

Darcy turned to Loki and handed him the paper. After a moment of Loki looking at the paper with an unreadable expression on his face, he dropped his hands to his sides.

"What do you think he means by 'valuables'?'" Darcy asked.

"I don't know, nor do I care. He can take anything, as long as he doesn't hurt anyone— hurt you."

"He's going to be coming for us. He got in here easily; broke the window, left a note, and split before anyone even noticed. He has the means to get around Stark's security, and apparently he's coming for you."

"Let him come. I'm growing weary of waiting in fear for him to scare us some more. Let him do what he means to and be done with it."

"That's just it, Loki. Schmidt seems pretty vindictive. I bet you he's out for blood. You lied to him back in Petra, and now he's mad at you. We should work on figuring out what 'your move' would be, and then attempt to complete it."

Loki sighed, his expression changing from anger at the situation to acceptance and exhaustion. "I suppose we can try to appease whatever madness Schmidt is concocting in an attempt to keep him from hurting anyone;"

"Yeah, basically."

Darcy was planning on keeping the conversation going, but sleep was calling her again. She could hear Stark in the next room, yelling on the phone ("What do you mean it's 'not your division'? Hydra broke into my house! If it were any more 'your division,' it'd be up your ass!"). Now, she wanted nothing more than for Loki to carry her off to bed and to sleep for a few days.

As Darcy and Loki climbed back into bed, they weren't very worried about Schmidt or what he was planning. A few miles away now, though, Schmidt was flying away from the city in the helicopter he had been in when he shot a hole in the window and left a note for Loki. He had a plan— a plan he was looking forward to carrying out. Loki Odinson would get what he deserved, even if it meant killing that Darcy Lewis woman. Schmidt planned to make Loki suffer as much as possible. He was willing to make Loki watch as he killed the woman, tortured her, perhaps raped her— Schmidt was a creative man who enjoyed improvisation when it came to his torture techniques.

His strike was coming soon. And the best part? There was nothing Loki Odinson could do to stop it. Schmidt planned to give Loki as many opportunities to think he could have saved her, opportunities to look back and wish he had done something differently. The more regret and sorrow that plagued his heart when Schmidt finally killed him, the better. Loki Odinson had wronged Schmidt, made a
fool out of him, and then stolen the find and the rewards. Schmidt was an unforgiving man and Loki was the one who would pay for what he did. This was going to be so much fun.
Chapter 12

It had been three days since Schmidt's little foray against the tower. Now that the novelty had worn off and the panic had died down, Darcy found herself more curious than scared over what Schmidt was going to do next. They knew that he was angry; they had taken the treasure he had been after, Loki had lied to him and played him, and he just really seemed to not like them. They knew he was after Loki; the note had been that evident. Maybe he didn't have an interest in the rest of them, maybe getting back at Loki would be enough for him. Hopefully.

Loki was currently up with Stark at the bar. Stark had asked to have a little conversation with him, just the two of them. Everyone else had already gone to bed for the night, which meant that Darcy was waiting up for Loki in their bedroom. She had just taken the most relaxing bath of her life, but to her surprise, Loki hadn't gotten back yet when she finished. His meeting with Stark was taking forever, and Darcy was growing impatient.

Finally, Darcy heard the door open slowly, like Loki was trying not to wake her.

"I'm still up," she called out to him.

The door closed and Loki appeared around the corner a moment later. His eyes were weary as he looked over her.

"What's wrong?" Darcy rose from the bed and went to him. Before getting to him, he stepped back. Her hand had been outstretched to reach to him, but she dropped it to her side. "What happened?" she asked quietly, wanting more than anything to reach out and comfort him.

There was a part of his face, just above the corner of his mouth, that twitched. Oh god, he's fighting off crying. What happened to him?

"Stark said that everyone should leave the tower. You, Jane, and Thor go back to Cambridge, the others all return to their homes,"

"Loki—"

"The jet leaves tomorrow morning. The three of you will return to Cambridge, where you will be safe."

"But what about you?" Now Darcy was the one fighting off tears.

"Stark says that I can stay here with him and Pepper since Schmidt already knows that I'm here. I will wait for Schmidt to come for me here."

"But you don't have to send us away. We can stay with you," Her expression broke as tears escaped her. "I can stay with you,"

"I can't ask that of you. In all honesty, Schmidt is probably going to kill me. It'll be better if you're far away from here, far away from me, when that happens. That way Schmidt can take out his anger and be done with us."

"Loki, no. I won't leave you. I won't let you face that alone," Darcy tried to reach out and touch his face, but Loki stepped back again.

"I am not safe to be around. All of you will leave the tower, leave me, and I will let Schmidt do what
he will. If I'm still alive when it's over and I believe it to be safe, I'll return to you. That is, if you'll want me back."

"Of course I'll want you back. I love you," Darcy brought her arms together, wrapping them around herself. Tears were openly flowing from her eyes and Loki was refusing to let her touch him for some reason. Worse than that, she felt like her heart was being ripped out. "I love you, and that is exactly why I want to stay here with you. You're it for me. I won't abandon you."

"I've told you before, you are my priority. I will not let you stand in the line of fire because someone is after me. You will go back to England if I have to put you on the jet myself."

Darcy didn't know what came over her, but just after he finished speaking, she slapped him across the face. She hated what he was saying and he wouldn't let her touch him in a less gentle way. His expression said that he believed he deserved that, but more than that, it didn't really seem to faze him.

"Stop that. Stop talking." Darcy said. "You're trying to talk me into something I will never be for, and it won't work. You're trying to make me leave you when you're in danger, but I won't. This relationship is a two-way street. You wouldn't leave me if I were the one in danger no matter what I said,"

"Yes, but—"

"Don't you dare say 'but that's different.' It's not different. We're not misogynists here. You wouldn't leave me, and I'm not leaving you. Please, Loki,"

"Darcy," His face slid from begging to absolutely broken. "Schmidt is going to kill me, regardless of whether you are here or not. We can't beat him, we can't fight him, we can't even find him unless he shows up right in front of us. He is going to come for me. Now, call this a last request, but I do not want you to be here when he does. He will exploit my love for you, just to make me suffer more. He will hurt you to hurt me, or when he is done with me he'll kill you too just because he's bored and he feels like it. If he kills me— when he kills me— it would not be as bad if I knew in the back of my head that you were safe. You can live your life, find someone else, have a family. When Schmidt carries out his revenge, you will be free to live your life."

"Loki, I don't want to. I don't want to live my life without you," Darcy knew that sounded extremely clingy, especially for a seven week relationship, but she didn't give a fuck. It was wholly and completely true.

"Please," He was begging her. She could see the desperation on his face, mixed right in with the pain.

She reached out to him yet again, slowly, like she was reaching out to a wild animal. When he moved away from her again, the pain cut deep.

"Why won't you let me touch you?" she asked quietly.

"Because," Loki began, staring straight into her. His voice was small and broken, "If I touch you, I won't be able to let you go."

"Loki," Darcy sobbed out, her heart successfully breaking in two.

She saw Loki's willpower weaning as she simply stood before him. She watched as the internal struggle showed on his face, playing out a war in his eyes, and then one side of him beat the other. He stepped to her, wrapping his arms around her so tightly she thought she'd burst. He kissed her with a need she felt deep within him. Loki seemed to realize he was holding her rather forcefully and
his hold on her eased up a little.

Darcy felt herself being lowered back onto the bed, Loki's mouth still connected as they went back. He removed her clothing slowly and gently, running his hands over her so softly she could barely feel him. He quickly removed his own clothing before returning to support himself over her. Starting at her mouth, he kissed slowly over to her ear and then down her neck.

"I love you so much," he whispered before pressing his lips to her throat, "my dear, sweet, beautiful Darcy,"

He kissed every inch of her body, taking his time with her. He was gentle, extremely thorough, and had an air of finality in his actions. When he finished softly exploring her with his mouth, he returned to her lips, taking her mouth with his own again. His hands caressed her more than touched her, re-memorizing her skin. He entered her with a roll of his hips just as Darcy brought her hands up to hold his face. One hand slid around to the back of his head, running through his hair.

If this moment were to have a sound besides that of the whimpers and moans that were already present, Darcy imagined it would be something like a symphony full of strings and maybe a grand piano performing the saddest song they knew. Not sad, necessarily. Melancholy. That was a good word for it. Bittersweet. Some song with parts where one could mistake the tone for bliss instead of sorrow. That was what this was: bliss in the midst of sorrow. Whatever sound it was that actually belonged here would be like that. Darcy found it difficult to think about that as she and Loki found their rhythm and pleasure rose within her. She was kissing him again as much as she could, between a groan from him and a whimper from her. They finally climaxed together and Loki collapsed on her. When he tried to roll off of her, she held him there. Eventually Loki rolled partially off of her and they both turned, facing each other as they lay.

Loki looked like he was ready to go to sleep. Darcy pulled him close to her, holding him for what was most likely the last time. She worked both of them to position them so that his head was on her chest. Running her fingers lightly through his hair, she felt him drift slowly off to sleep. As much as she fought it, sleep eventually took her as well.

Darcy was only partially awake; she currently rested in that land where one wasn't awake but they were fairly aware of what was going on around them. She felt Loki's arms around her retreat and the bed rise as his weight was removed. The sound of him pulling on his pants and shirt and whatnot filled the room.

After hearing him walk around the bed, she heard something being put down on the bedside table. And then Loki was kneeling down beside the bed. He kissed her on the forehead lightly before standing up and walking out the door.

The second the door closed, Darcy snapped up. On the bedside table, there was a folded up piece of paper; Loki had actually left her a note as he left her. If this were any more cliché, he'd make it up to me by holding a boom box over his head as he apologized.

"My dear Darcy," she read aloud quietly to herself.

I'm so sorry. I left so that I would not be tempted to stop you from leaving later on today. Someone will come for you when it is time for you to leave. You will not truly be safe, I am afraid, until you are back in Cambridge. As long as you are around me, you will be in danger. Since I cannot protect you actively here, I must protect you through omission and distance. My only wish is that we had longer together.
Darcy stared blankly at the page. It took a moment for the words to sink in, for her to realize the meaning behind the symbols. She threw the paper, pushing it away from her, letting it fall to the floor. She sat there in pure shock of the situation for probably fifteen minutes before pulling her legs up to her body and wrapping her arms around them. She would not cry— she refused to cry. She had done enough of that lately. She was pretty sure she couldn't cry if she wanted to; her emotions were all too raw right now, too in shock.

A loud knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. Jane called in, "Darcy? We're leaving for the airport in about an hour. Do you want any help packing?"

Darcy looked over herself: naked, curled up in a ball, too in shock to even manage tears. She didn't particularly want anyone seeing her like this. "No, I'm good."

"All right. Be upstairs when it's time,"

Darcy forced herself to roll out of bed after a few minutes. She slowly dressed, pushing herself through the motions. She packed up her clothes, mindlessly throwing her belongings into her bag. Her mind was somehow racing while thinking about absolutely nothing, resulting in a slight headache that she did her best to ignore.

Once finished, she sat on the end of the bed, waiting for the time to leave to come. She could barely think about Loki without a deep pain entering her heart— what she was worried about was how long that would last. Just thinking about that though made her start shaking.

This is pathetic. He left me, and now I'm a trembling mess. Really, I'm pathetic. I can do this; I can pull through. I'm not going to be the girl who is completely destroyed for the rest of her life because of a breakup. I will not be a Miss Havisham. Maybe I should start playing 'I Will Survive'…

Darcy stood up. Maybe, just maybe, she'd be able to get over this. Loki had left her for a good reason… he was going to die. The weight of that memory/realization almost knocked her over. She sat back down on the bed as her legs began failing her. Leaving her for a good reason, she could handle. Loki's death was something she would probably never get over.

As she thought over this, she didn't even hear the strange noise coming from outside. Well, it wasn't strange; it just didn't belong there and was very loud. The noise belonged to the helicopter that was approaching the side of the tower. Darcy most definitely noticed what followed: the side of the building exploding, sending her flying into the opposite wall and knocking her unconscious.
Darcy slowly became aware that she was sitting in a very uncomfortable chair and that she was tied up very tightly. Her vision was blurry, her hearing fuzzy. She groaned a little, moving her head slightly. She could feel something wrong within her, a broken or sore rib perhaps. Nothing too bad.

Hearing came back to her first; faintly, as if in a different room or across a field, she heard something that sounded most comparable to an incantation. It was ancient Egyptian by the sound of it, but the voice was what most distracted her. As she became more in-focused, she realized where she was and, more importantly, who else was there.

Darcy was in the now mostly empty treasure room of the Egyptian temple, tied to a chair in front of a large stone table that had previously been covered by a portion of the treasure. On the opposite side of the table stood Schmidt, reading something from a very large, very old book.

"Um, what are you doing?" Darcy asked him, interrupting his readings.

"I am attempting to use the power of the gods to ensure my luck," Schmidt explained condescendingly, as if it were obvious.

"Are you now?" Darcy looked around the room while she spoke. No one else was there. No Hydra agents, no Loki, no anybody. Just the two of them.

"I do not appreciate your condescension. It is a practiced art,"

"I bet it is."

Schmidt gave her a look but then returned to his readings. Darcy pulled at her binds, proving that one cannot untie a rope simply by pulling on it.

Darcy spoke up again, "Yeah, this is getting a little weird for me. How about you untie me, and we can maybe go into the city and talk about this, maybe around some other people?"

Schmidt didn't even look back up at her. "It is too late for that. By now, they know where we are. They are coming for you."

"Who, the gods?" She enjoyed pressing his buttons. She could see how Loki had sassed him so much back in Petra; this guy was a fucking prick.

"No. Loki Odinson and all the others."

"And how do they know where we are? Did you have 'the gods' send them a message?"

"I left them a message when I took you."

"And what makes you think they'll come get me? I'm not worth risking all of their lives," She knew that wasn't true. As much as she hated it, she knew they'd come for her. Loki would make them go, just how Darcy would make them if Schmidt had taken Loki.

"To them, you will be. Loki Odinson will come for you. I'm counting on it." Schmidt said Loki's name with obvious distaste, nearly spitting his name out of his mouth.

"And what are you going to do to him when he gets here?" Darcy tested.
"Miss Lewis," Schmidt said, beginning to pace across the room. "I do not take you for a fool,"

"But you did take me."

Schmidt glared at her yet again. "Do you know how angry I was when I arrived at the Lighthouse in Alexandria only to find out I had been lied to and my men, along with Zola, were dead?"

"I imagine you were pretty upset," Darcy said, squirming in her bindings. "Did you pee yourself in anger?"

Schmidt ignored her comments. "I made it my new goal, before I begin mass production of my weapons, to personally see that arrogant bastard Loki Odinson to the gates of hell."

"That seems a little harsh," Darcy said, trying to hide the overwhelming fear rushing over her at his last comment.

"And that is why I took you, Ms. Lewis: because I know he'll come for you. And when he does, I will destroy him."

Darcy didn't respond to that. She didn't need to. Schmidt saw her fear and smiled at it, going back to his readings.

Oh no. I will not go down without a fight. If I can't physically fight him, I can make fun of him and press his buttons. I'll annoy him until he regrets taking me.

"When you say 'destroy him,' you don't mean like in a sexual way, do you? I mean, I respect the lifestyle, but Loki doesn't swing that way. I'd know—"

"I will destroy him, as in, I will torture him in every way imaginable before finally killing him. I will make him watch as you suffer and die and make sure he knows there is nothing he can do about it. I will make him understand that he knowingly walked into his own demise, and couldn't even save you. I will make him beg for death."


"You know, I've tried making him beg. As far as I can tell, I've been the only person to ever do that."

"You are attempting to get a rise out of me, and it will not work. I suggest you shut your mouth."

"I'm trying to 'get a rise' out of you? Oh, Johann, you should buy me dinner first."

"You speak, but your words lack intelligence and meaning."

"First you were going to destroy Loki, now I'm trying to get a rise out of you? Sorry, we're both taken."

"Remember what you're saying now when I am torturing you. You will regret mocking me."

"Trust me, no matter what you do, I will never regret mocking you."

"I'll have to test that." Schmidt smiled his creepy smile and returned to his readings once again.

Darcy sat quietly for a few minutes but decided that she hadn't annoyed Schmidt in a while. She noticed that his readings had a bit of a rhythm to them, and began beat boxing (to the best of her ability—which wasn't saying much). When Schmidt stopped reading and gave her a death glare, she
stopped beat boxing and gave him a big smile.

"You are an insolent ignorant imp," he said.

"You look like the love child of Hitler and an elf."

"I will kill you. Slowly, intimately, and I will make Loki watch, unable to save you,"

"You seem like the kind of person who got picked on as a child."

"I don't think you understand what a threat is,"

"I bet the only person you ever had sex with told you it wasn't very good. And then I bet they demanded that you pay them double for their troubles."

"You are the most arrogant person I have ever met."

"You have a weird nose and I bet you cry yourself to sleep every night."

She could see him visibly shaking in anger. He can't hurt me too badly now, he's saving that for when Loki gets here. And if he's going to kill me anyway, I may as well have fun before it's over.

"Stop speaking or I will make you unable to speak."

"Can you speak any other languages? Besides English and German,"

"Excuse me?"

"You heard what I said," She had a plan, and hopefully Schmidt would follow it.

"I can speak a few languages, but read even more,"

"But you couldn't read those ones at Petra. Tsk tsk, Johann. You had to get Loki to do it. You're probably about twice Loki's age, huh? You had to get a man half your age to do something you couldn't. How does that feel?"

"Not as bad as it will feel when I cut your fingers off one by one, I imagine,"

"Hey Johann, are you from Tennessee?" She decided a different approach: pure annoyance.

"You are insolent and just stupid. Stop speaking."

"'Cause you're the only ten I see,"

Darcy and Schmidt made eye contact for a moment. She could see, deep in his eyes, pure hatred boiling within him. Well, she thought the joke was a little funny.

"Are you Jamaican? 'Cause 'ja makin' me crazy,"

Schmidt began reading again, loudly.

"Hey, are you a beaver? 'Cause dam."

Schmidt suddenly slammed the book shut. So, the beaver joke is what crossed the line. Hmm. He walked with purpose over to her, and as he approached he brought back his hand, ready to strike her. She flinched in anticipation.
Before actually swinging, he froze. He lowered his hand slowly, a smile on his face.

"Do not forget your place. Now stop speaking."

Darcy couldn't argue with that. Besides, she was getting bored of Schmidt. She'd say something to annoy him, he'd say 'shut up.' That's all it was. He ruins all the fun.

About a half an hour later, Schmidt began placing all sorts of different weapons and instruments on the table in one big line. A rope, a whip, all sorts of fun stuff.

"Oh, Johann, I don't really do that kind of thing. Well, maybe if Loki was really in to it,"

Schmidt picked up the whip and cracked it in her general direction, successfully shutting her up.

The anticipation was rising in her. Loki would eventually gallantly enter and then they'd both be completely destroyed and killed. He would be here soon, and she just had to sit there and wait for him to walk into this trap.

*At least our last time was perfect; that was the most sensual shit I have ever been a part of or even heard of in my life. Goddamn. And then he left. He left to save me, and then I ended up being the one Schmidt took.*

If she hadn't have been in the bedroom at the time. If she had gone up to the others a few minutes before hand. If she had chased after Loki. If, if, if.

Those ifs would probably haunt her for the rest of her life, the whole few hours, if that. When Schmidt was torturing her, she'd think about those ifs, and about Loki, and about how she wished he wouldn't be able to see. Well, she'd probably be thinking something along the lines of 'ow ow ow ow ow,' but that was beside the point.

The time finally came. She heard it off in the distance, before even Schmidt had heard it. As quiet as they were trying to be, someone else was in the temple.

"No," Darcy whispered, pulling instinctively at her bindings.

Schmidt picked up two of the weapons—a gun and a club—and hid.
Chapter 14

Darcy wanted more than anything to call out to Loki. She wanted to see his face, have him hold her, to never let him go. But she held her tongue. She had come up with a plan, a plan that wouldn't work, but still a plan.

It was set up so that Loki couldn't see Darcy until he was actually in the room. Schmidt was hidden right beside Darcy, so that when Loki reached her, he could jump out and get him.

Darcy's plan was simple: tell him to run. Schmidt could do whatever he wanted to her, but Loki could get away. She knew that Loki would never listen to her, but she had to try.

At long last, she heard him coming: Loki had reached the room. He ran in and froze in his tracks when he saw her.

Loki started to say something, grinning ear to ear at just the sight of her, but she cut him off. "Loki, don't come over here. Just leave."

"Darcy, no. I won't do that," Loki started to walk to her, but she shook her head.

She knew what she had to do. She knew what she had to say that would make him leave. Loki would never abandon her when she was in danger. She knew, especially now, that he'd fight for her. But maybe, just maybe, if she got him to believe she didn't love him, he'd leave. It was a long shot and it would kill her doing it, but it could save his life. If she got him to believe that she absolutely hated him and would rather die than let him save her, then maybe he would leave.

"Loki, just get out of here. You shouldn't have come."

"Why are you saying this?"

She refused to let herself cry. "You got me into this mess. Just go."

"What…?" Loki couldn't even fathom words. His expression screamed confusion, his eyes hinted betrayal.

"Go!" she yelled. Her voice lowered but hardened, "You owe me that much,"

Darcy hated feeding him these lies. However, she'd rather him live with regret than die when she could have saved him. Maybe, later on down the road, he would find someone else. Have a family. Everything she couldn't do with him because of how fate turned out. Everything he wanted me to have when he thought he was the one going to die.

"Don't just stand there staring at me, leave. I don't love you the way you love me, I never did—"

"Darcy, what are you talking about?" Loki started toward her again, but stopped when Darcy suddenly yelled.

"Loki, leave!" she cried out, suddenly hysterical. She pulled violently at the ropes holding her, to no avail. Desperation was swallowing her alive as time was quickly running out for him.

"Darcy, I will not leave you here. Even if you hate me, I won't leave you here to die,"

"Is that what you want to hear? I hate you! I hate you, Loki! Just leave! I don't love you. I hate you."

She was frantic, hysterical, trying to get him to listen to her.
Loki looked like he was trying to read her, but also like he wanted more than anything to just hold her, which at this point would probably make her even more distraught than she already was.

"I don't care if you hate me," He was a very talented liar, but she saw right through that one. "It's my fault that you're here, and I will not let you die here."

"I don't want you to save me. I'd rather die at the hands of Schmidt than let you save me yet again. I don't want to be saved; I want you to leave."

Before the conversation could move along any further, Schmidt emerged from his hiding spot, gun aimed at Darcy. Loki's face drained of what little color it had.

"That was a magnificent performance, Miss Lewis. Truly heartbreaking. However, your intentions conflict with my intentions. Therefore, you will be punished for that later." He turned his full attention to Loki. "Hello, Mr. Odinson. It's been a while."

Loki started toward Schmidt, eyes filled with rage, but Schmidt pushed his gun up against the side of Darcy's head.

"I don't think we want to skip that far ahead quite yet. We have work to do."

Schmidt began pacing, circling Loki like a shark. Loki did his best to not have his back to Schmidt while also not turning completely away from Darcy. As Schmidt paced, he put his weapons back on the table, picking up some new device that Darcy didn't recognize.

"I bet Miss Lewis honestly believed she could save you. I'll have to prove her wrong on that one. Well, I don't know if she'll be around to see it,"

Loki ignored Schmidt's jabs and stood his ground. Darcy personally would've lunged at Schmidt and smacked him if she and Loki switched positions, but that probably wasn't the best thing to do right now. Loki was always the more patient one between the two of them.

Schmidt came full circle, standing beside Darcy. Loki tightened his lips, clenched his fists, but did not move. He wasn't going to test Schmidt.

"Mr. Odinson, your whore is maddening, exasperating, infuriating as hell,"

Loki was obviously bothered Schmidt's use of the word 'whore,' but he put on a smile. "She annoyed you? I'm proud of her;"

Darcy would've added another jab at Schmidt, but he was standing a little too close to comfort for that one.

"You shouldn't be. I have never seen such a mindless, vexing bitch in my life."

"I don't think we're speaking of the same woman," Loki smiled a little. "Vixen, maybe. Vexing? Well, only a little;"

Darcy swallowed back her fear of speaking; he was going to kill both of them no matter what they said to him. She needed to get back to her mindset she had had earlier; it was a lot more fun. "I think he has a crush on us, honey. He told me he wants to destroy you, and that I 'get a rise' in him,"

Schmidt turned around and smacked Darcy across the face, almost knocking her and the chair over. Loki stepped forward, but Schmidt turned and Loki froze from whatever expression was on Schmidt's face.
"You are in no position for that, Odinson. You should also think twice before mocking me. Your whore made that mistake earlier. I've found through watching you both for a while that the best way to punish either of you would be to watch the other be tortured. Since your whore decided earlier not to stop when I asked her, I'll begin with her punishment, but only for a little while. I wouldn't want to obscure from my grand plan too much."

Schmidt walked toward Loki, who backed away out of instinct with wide eyes. Schmidt turned on the strange device in his hand, a weird buzzing noise coming from it.

What Loki did next truly surprised Darcy. Judging by the look on his face, it surprised him too. When Schmidt approached him, Loki gave him a right-hook that actually caused Schmidt to stumble. Loki looked wide-eyed from Schmidt to his fist and back, but then decided just to go with it. When Schmidt righted himself, angrier than ever, but before he could do anything Loki gave him a left-hook right to the eye. While Schmidt was kind of bent over, kind of pulling himself together, Loki kicked the mystery device out of his hand and away from them both.

Schmidt finally responded to Loki's strikes; he punched Loki hard across the face. When Loki turned back to face him, Darcy could see that his cheek had a gash in it.

"I'm going to kill her, Loki," Schmidt spoke almost too calmly. Loki swung at him angrily, but Schmidt easily dodged it, simply taking a small step back.

"I'm going to make her beg for death."

Loki went in for a punch straight to his nose, but Schmidt caught his fist and then threw it away from him.

"You won't be able to save her. You will sit there and know that it is your fault she is here,"

Loki swung again, with no luck. Darcy could see the despair on his face building every time Schmidt spoke.

"It's your fault, Loki. Your whore will die for you. Painfully."

Loki finally got a punch to connect, sending Schmidt spinning. He landed on the ground beside Darcy.

"Do not call her a whore," Loki said coldly.

Off in the distance, Darcy heard something she truly did not expect to hear: other people. She had no way to tell if it was Hydra or the rest of their group, but judging by Loki's lack of panicking, it seemed more like the latter.

"You didn't come alone?" Schmidt yelled. "I told you to come alone or I would kill her!"

"You just said you were going to kill her because you were trying to punish me. Please get your story straight, and stop threatening for the sake of threatening."

Schmidt slowly stood, using the table to support himself. He glanced down at the table and the closest weapon to him—a very large, weird gun-looking thing with same symbol all the Hydra agents wore on their fancy jackets. Loki gave Schmidt a look Darcy best described as 'bitch, please.'

"That is the prototype for one of my Hydra weapons. With the money from the treasure, I was going to mass-produce these. Once they were made, I planned to sell them to whoever would buy them, smuggle them with pieces of the treasure. It was a perfect plan."
"Not perfect, since it didn't seem to work," Loki responded.

"That doesn't matter anymore. All that matters is me killing you and her."

Schmidt lunged forward toward the weapon, but Loki grabbed him by the arm and twisted him onto the ground.

"Do not," Loki looked down at Schmidt from directly over top of him, "threaten her again." Loki kneeled down over Schmidt, and with one hand grabbed him by the collar and with the other he punched Schmidt right in the mouth. After the initial blow, Loki looked like he was just taking his anger out on Schmidt, repeatedly punching that fucker in the face until even Darcy was seeing stars. Normally, seeing that kind of violence in-person would have at least concerned Darcy. That being said, the thing she was most concerned about in that moment was Loki's hand, to be honest. Pummeling someone that many times with the same hand probably hurt. But damn if it wasn't hot as hell.

Finally, Loki released his hold on Schmidt's collar and his unconscious body slumped to the ground. Loki rushed to Darcy, immediately untying her. He put his hands on either side of her face, but hesitated to go any further or touch her anywhere else. He glanced over her body, searching for something. Off in the distance, she could hear what had to be the group finally drawing near, maybe two rooms plus the climb down the rope to go. Took them long enough. She'd have to ask Loki later why he'd gotten so far ahead of them.

"Darcy, are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

"No, I'm fine." She stood up and stepped away from the chair she had been tied to for a little too long. "Loki, it was a trap. He wanted you to come here so he could kill you. He just used me as bait. I'm so sorry I lied and said I didn't love you. I was trying to save you,

"I know. I don't care why he took you or about any of that. I love you,"

"I love you too, Loki. I love you too."

Loki moved in and kissed her so hard she thought her lips would concave. His arms were around her tightly, keeping her from trembling. She hadn't even realized she had been shaking, but there she was.

It all happened in slow motion for Darcy. She opened her eyes for a split second and saw Schmidt standing up behind Loki, grabbing the fancy Hydra gun and aiming it at Loki's back. Darcy pulled away from Loki and screamed "No!" just as she watched Schmidt pull the trigger. The end of the gun lit up as it charged itself before shooting out a blast of what looked like pure energy.

Darcy didn't know what she was thinking, if she was thinking at all. It was probably along the lines of 'I'd rather die than live without him' or some cheesy notion like that. She was having lots of cheesy notions lately, but maybe that was just what being in love was all about. Just after Darcy screamed and Schmidt fired the Hydra weapon, Darcy twisted herself and Loki so that she took the hit in her upper back instead of Loki taking it in his back.

Holy fucking mother of damn, that hurt like a bitch. It felt like the upper-right part of her back had just had lava splashed on it. Hell, maybe it did; she didn't know what those Hydra weapons did. Darcy was vaguely aware that she was screaming, but that was in a distant land, far away from where Darcy's mind was currently.

There was some kind of commotion going on behind her; other people were there. She did her best
to look and see who else was there, but she could only catch silhouettes and outlines. She could make out probably five or six other people in addition to what had to be Schmidt, now conscious but being pulled away by two people. *That's good. That's… Loki…* Her mind was turning to mush as her mind turned into something along the lines of *pain pain Loki back ow pain burning back ow Loki.*

It felt somewhat like a dream, but she was kind of aware of the fact that Loki was holding her. She was pretty sure she was on the ground… yeah. Loki was holding up her torso, though, as he yelled for her to wake up or look at him or something.

Darcy pushed out the pain to the best of her ability; she wanted to focus on Loki. She felt something really wrong on the inside; from where the blast hit, it was most likely her lung that was damaged. There were probably other things wrong too, but she didn't want to think about that. All she knew for sure was that she was getting dizzy and there was a lot of blood around them— on the floor, on Loki's arms, trailing down her back— she could feel it pumping out of her body, and that fact simply nauseated her. All that aside, she had a feeling this whole blood loss thing was probably a problem that would end up being fatal for her.

When she spoke, her voice was smaller and higher-pitched than she had ever heard it. "It's about time I saved you for once, huh?" She even managed a small smile in an attempt to lighten the mood.

There were actual tears streaming down Loki's face. That alone was enough to make Darcy want to close her eyes, break down, and sob for the rest of her short life, but she wanted—no, she *needed*— to be strong. For Loki.

"Loki, I love you so much," Her voice was small and cracking.

"Darcy…" He shook his head as he spoke, pulling her closer to him. She winced from the pain he unknowingly caused her by doing that, and the look on his face when he noticed that almost destroyed her. She wished more than anything that she could tell him that it wasn't his fault, but those words wouldn't come to her.

"I love you. It's been amazing, Loki. You've been amazing. Thank you," Darcy whispered, her voice almost completely failing her.

"Darcy… Darcy, no. We can help you. We can get help— I— I'll get help. I'll save you," Tears were openly flowing from his eyes. Darcy didn't know how much longer she could take it, watching him like this. Then again, she didn't know how much longer she had left at all.

"You've saved me enough. More than you even know. I wished we could've had longer, but what we had was fantastic. I love you, Loki. I love you so much."

"I love you too," Loki brought a hand to her face, brushing hair out of her eyes and wiping away tears she didn't know were there. She wanted nothing more than to wipe away his tears as well, but her hands weren't responding to her mind. Now that she thought about it, her whole body wasn't really doing much. She looked back at Loki and actually watched as her vision and hearing and all sensation drifted out of focus into a black nothingness. The last thing she was aware of was Loki's face as it shifted from sorrow to panic.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Darcy woke up in Stark's tower of all places. She recognized it immediately simply by the technology around the room. That fancy TV would never be in an actual hospital. The panel by the bed and door was Stark's system he had throughout the tower. The room she was in, though, looked like a hospital room. Darcy knew Stark had a doctor on staff for some weird chest problem, but an actual hospital room? Well, it was a big tower. Stark could put whatever he wanted in it.

Another key thing in the room, besides the technology, was the person half-sitting half-falling off of the lounge chair in the corner. Even asleep, Loki looked tired. More importantly, though, he was alive. He had all of his limbs and didn't appear to have a severe brain injury or that he had almost bled to death. That was more than what Darcy could say for herself— she distinctly remembered losing a lot of blood. Looking back over at Loki, she noticed that on his exposed arm there was a bandage on the inside of his elbow. She distantly remembered him mentioning once that both he and his brother had O negative blood.

Darcy pushed herself into a sitting position and immediately regretted it. Her back felt like it was on fire. Well, she had been shot with Schmidt's fancy gun there. I wonder what happened to good old Schmidt... I hope Loki killed him. No, wait, that's awful. Well... yeah, I hope Loki killed him.

Darcy tried to piece together what happened through her hazy memories: Loki showed up, Schmidt sasssed him a little, Loki beat him up, Loki untied her, and then Schmidt shot her. Somewhere in there the group had shown up as well. They probably grabbed Schmidt right after he had shot her, which meant they would have all witnessed her and Loki's little moment together. After she had been shot, she honestly thought she was going to die. She thought she was going to bleed out in Loki's arms all dramatic-like.

Well that's awkward. Maybe I should say 'gotcha!' when Loki wakes up...

As if on cue, Loki's head began moving a little. When he opened his eyes and saw her awake, he looked at her like he thought he was still dreaming. When he seemed to realize that he wasn't in fact asleep, a huge grin spread across his face.

"Darcy," He jumped up and went to her side, sitting carefully beside her.

"How'd we get to New York?" she asked. That was how she was going to start their reunion? Tsk, tsk. Come on, Darce.

"We took you to a hospital in Cairo. Once you were stable enough to fly, we brought you here so Stark's personal doctors could take care of you,"

"Once I was stable?"

"Yes," She watched as the pain from the memory of it entered his eyes. "Back in Cairo... they thought you were not going to make it, as a result of losing so much blood. They were able to give you enough, though,"

"From you?" Darcy smiled as she poked him in the arm beside his band-aid.

"It seemed like a worthy cause." He cracked a smile and had just a hint of mischief in his eyes.

"Oh, did it now?" It was somewhat abrupt, but she felt like they had gone long enough. Grabbing
him by the collar, she pulled him close enough to kiss him. Part of it was out of gratitude, part of it out of longing, and most of it because holy shit they made it through together.

"Look's like someone's awake and wasting no time," a voice rang out, interrupting them.

Darcy backed off Loki by an inch. "Nice to see you too, Stark," she answered, smiling, still embracing Loki.

Stark stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. Loki and Darcy parted.

For some odd reason, Stark was dressed up. Then again, he was the kind of guy who just enjoyed wearing three-piece suits even if there wasn't a reason. "Has he told you yet that you've been out for almost three days now?"

"No, he has not," Darcy said, looking over at Loki.

"It hadn't come up yet." Loki smiled playfully at her. "I figured I would break that one to her a little later, once she actually recovered some."

"I'm plenty recovered. Never felt better. What else have I missed?"

"Oh, you missed all the fun. There was mad panic after Schmidt hit you with his ray-gun," Stark did an impeccable impression of Marvin the Martian on the last few words that both shocked Darcy and caused her to start laughing. Stark smiled just a little at her laughter before continuing, "And then we kind of split up for a little bit. Some of us went to the hospital with you while the rest took care of Schmidt."

"What happened to him?"

"Oh, he's going to be in jail for a long time. Being an arms dealer to terrorists and kidnapping and almost killing people will do that to a person. He's getting what he deserves." Stark explained.

"That sounds good enough for me," Darcy said. "So, who and all was in Egypt? I know I saw a few people, but it didn't look like everybody."

"Jane, Pepper, Thor, and Bruce stayed behind here at the tower. The rest of us all came after you almost immediately once we knew what happened." Loki said.

"The note said for him to come alone or whatever, but we weren't going to let him have all the fun," Stark said. "We did send him in first so we could take Schmidt by surprise, but it didn't work out quite as well as we wanted it to."

"Hey, shit happens." Darcy said with a shrug.

Stark laughed. "She got shot and her response is 'shit happens.' Odinson, I like this one. She's a keeper."

Loki smiled at him and nodded in agreement. "That has been my impression with her, too. Hopefully she'll let me stick around."

"We'll see. Finish what happened, then we'll talk." Darcy said more to both of them than just Loki.

"Right," Stark said. "So after that, the master assassins and Steve took care of our buddy Schmidt while you received medical attention," Stark continued.

"So you went with me to the hospital? Oh, Tony, you do care!" Darcy sarcastically spoke blithely.
"I had to make sure someone competent was present. Loki was a bit of a mess,"

"Thanks for that," Loki said dryly.

"Anyways, long story short: you're better now. Schmidt's behind bars forever. Everybody's ok. Did I miss anything?"

"I think that is everything," Loki said, nodding.

"Well, I was just stopping in to check on you guys. You know, make sure loverboy hadn't gotten too upset. If you're ok here, I have people to do and things to see. I'll leave you to celebrate your reunion in peace."

"Yes, please," Darcy said a little too eagerly. Stark smiled knowingly and closed the door quietly behind him on the way out.

"You two sure are warming up. How long ago was it, the day you punch him?"

"He has been very hospitable to all of us. And he's not as bad as I initially thought. He's… tolerable."

"I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship," Darcy grinned as she spoke. Loki rolled his eyes a little, but did not protest.

Loki explained to her that her back would heal, but there would be some scarring where the blast had hit her. Nothing too bad, just a circle of slightly red skin about five inches in diameter below her right shoulder. That was nothing compared to what could have been done to them. She’d bled a lot, but nothing was damaged beyond repair with her insides.

The rest of the day was filled with Darcy attempting to walk on slightly wobbly legs, a few teary reunions, and quite a bit of pain medication. Loki eventually brought her to their room and helped her shower (among other things she greatly enjoyed), and then the two of them went to bed. And that was that. Darcy had lain awake for a little while, thinking over how the day back in the temple had gone down: how she had begged Loki to leave, but he wouldn't. How Loki had beaten the shit out of Schmidt. How she and Loki had spent what they both had thought were her last moments. If that last thing proved anything to her, it was that she and Loki definitely loved each other. She couldn't ask for more.

A few days later, Stark gathered everybody and told them all about Schmidt's trial, which apparently already happened. (Hell yeah, justice system! Do work!) It actually wasn't much of a 'trial,' but more of a 'here's what you did wrong and how long you'll be in jail. Hint: you'll be in jail until you die.' Stark had been a witness to it, providing more than a few slightly scandalous quotes for the papers. With Stark against Schmidt plus all of the evidence the court had found over the years of Hydra attempting and failing to lie low, the case was easy to build against him quickly. Apparently dudes who want to sell guns to terrorists don't have the best chances of being proven innocent. And bada-bing; signed, sealed, delivered. He can rot in jail for the next five hundred years or however long his sentence is.

After Stark's spiel about Schmidt, he broke the news that he would be throwing a party for them here at the tower. It was to be a 'Get Well Soon, Darcy/Glad You Aren't Dead, Loki and Darcy/Schmidt's In Jail/We Found The Treasure/We're All Rich Now' party, fancy dress of course. Pepper was already on it, under Stark's orders. The things she goes through for him.

If Rome proved anything to Stark, it was that Pepper could put together a great party at the last minute, which meant that he didn't have to wait very long for his parties. She said she'd only need a
week, and that was just so that the invitations could get out.

And so, a week came and passed. There was one day when Loki and Thor mysteriously vanished, neither of them telling their lady-friends or anybody else where they were going. When they returned, Thor had a dumb look on his face the entire evening and Darcy could see something weird in Loki's eyes. Other than that, the week was fairly normal. Well, as normal as things could be at Stark Tower.

The night of the party was upon them. Jane, Pepper, and Darcy were getting ready together in Pepper's room, helping each other out here and there. Darcy had found a great dress; it was dark green (she had found that Loki, for some reason, really liked the color green, particularly on her), flashy and fairly low in the front (low enough Steve would probably suddenly become very interested in the ceiling), at a more-than-slightly teasing length, and it covered her back. She wasn't ashamed of her scar, but she wasn't quite used to it yet. Besides that, it was still in the gross healing/sometimes-it-still-bleeds stage, so she covered it up with a big bandage, her dress, and then wore her hair down and very curly.

When the three women finished, the party had been going for about a half an hour. What is it with rich people and not going to their own parties until they've already started? They rode up the elevator to meet their dates and the other members of the group. Clint and Nat were of course paired up, as always choosing to seclude themselves from the group to the best of their abilities. Steve went alone; he'd probably stand off by himself or dance with a few women after asking them nicely. Bruce, on the other hand, had a date; some woman named Betty who he seemed very fond of.

Thor and Jane and Darcy and Loki made their featured but not really very grand entrances, but Stark and Pepper stole the show. Still no background dancers, though.

Darcy danced with Loki for a while. She had gotten a little better since Rome, but Loki was still doing almost all of the work. A song came on where everyone was supposed to dance with someone they didn't come with, so the Odinson brothers swapped dates and Jane got to have an actual dance partner for once. Thor wasn't quite as bad as he had looked in Rome, but he was still no Loki.

As the two of them swayed to the music, Thor moved in a little closer.

"I have a confession to make," Thor said, a gleam in his eyes.

"Ok…" Darcy said unsurely.

"My brother and I, we went to this very nice store the other day. I— I bought Jane a ring,"

"A ring?" Darcy's eyes widened, hoping he meant what she thought he meant.

"An engagement ring. I am telling you this because you are the closest thing Jane has to family. She is not close to her parents or really anyone she is related to by blood,"

Darcy immediately felt really guilty over all of those times she had internally made fun of Jane. She was a funny gal, though a little overdramatic and emotional. She also had a problem with showing affection with Thor. But Darcy loved the girl; she had never really thought about it, but she supposed Jane was the closest thing Darcy had to family as well.

"Are you asking for my permission or something?"

"Well," Thor looked embarrassed now.

"You have my blessings. Marry that girl." Darcy beamed at him.
Thor smiled widely. "Thank you so much. At the wedding, Loki is to be my best man. I know I do not technically have a say in this, but I am sure Jane will have you as the maid of honor."

"I'd be honored just to make it into one wedding picture."

The song ended and the two of them parted. Darcy cut through the crowd and made her way to the balcony. For the first time all night, it was deserted. The wind cut straight through her dress, making her almost wish she had worn a ball gown instead.

The city was lit up in front of her, electrified with life and color and distant sounds. She could see the giant patch of darkness that was Central Park. There was one specific building she could just barely see that she could definitely see herself living in.

Maybe Loki will live with me. We talked about that; we were going to get a place. Hopefully. That is rather rash for a two-month relationship. Well, considering the mileage we already have, I think we could chalk this up to equaling maybe a one-year relationship. That sounds about right. Darcy's mind was drawn to thoughts of Thor and Jane, and how they would hopefully be getting married soon. Naturally, her mind wandered to the possibility of her and Loki getting married. That is definitely too rash for even a one-year relationship. Well, maybe after a little while of living together we can start thinking about that.

Darcy was feeling something, but she couldn't exactly put her finger on the name for it. She was happy, genuinely happy, and it was fantastic. Ecstasy? No, that's not it. Joy? Nope. Damn, what's the name for this? Her thoughts were interrupted by someone else joining her on the balcony.

"You know, I really like that dress."

Darcy rolled her eyes, not even turning around to look at him.

"I noticed you liked the color."

She felt his arms snake around her. She felt his warmth against her, filling her to her core. The chill air still hit her front, but she couldn't even think about that now if she tried to. He spoke lowly into her ear, "Did you? What else did you notice I like?"

Darcy turned herself in his arms to face him. Loki looked thrilled with this turn in the conversation. She spoke lowly, knowing this would kill him. "Well, I could show you, but we're in public."

"I do not have any problem with indecency whatsoever." His eyes were aglow.

"I really like when you use unnecessary fancy words. It makes me feel vehemently concupiscent."

"You echo my sentiments. A large vocabulary is extremely alluring."

Darcy was about to continue this incredibly entertaining conversation, but was cut off by a sudden gasp coming from the main room. After the last two months, she immediately assumed the worst and ran toward the door, ready to kick some Hydra ass. Instead of seeing partygoers being killed, she saw something that surprised her even more.

Thor was on his knee in front of a crying Jane. Jane was grinning and nodding and Thor was saying something to her that the people who could actually hear were awww-ing about. He pulled out a ring and slid it on her finger, and then the two of them hugged and the band started playing some pretty song and Thor and Jane starting dancing all cute-like.

"This is so fucking cute," Darcy said.
"Your word choice is absolutely marvelous, darling," Loki said, putting his arm around her waist.

"I thought you'd enjoy that. I know how you like when I use big words,"

"Nothing thrills me more than hearing you describe something as 'so fucking cute.'"

"I'll have to test that later. So, your brother is getting married,"

"It would appear so. He really has found himself a great woman."

"Jane's quite the catch. She's a rad gal."

"Groovy," Loki said in agreement, only slightly mocking her use of the word 'rad.' Darcy actually started laughing at Loki using the word 'groovy.' There was something about a proper English gentleman (if Loki counted as such) saying that word that really just got her.

The party ended with no other major events taking place. Loki and Darcy went to bed and the two of them had quite a bit of fun before finally turning in around sunrise. That poor green dress would never be wearable again, unless one of them was to become a seamstress; Loki had literally torn it in half in his attempt to get it off of her as fast as possible. Not that it mattered that much: they were billionaires now. She could buy ten new dresses that looked just like it if she felt so inclined.

As Darcy drifted off to sleep, arms and legs tangled with Loki's, she finally realized what she was feeling. Bliss. That's the word she had been searching for earlier, Darcy recalled. She was ecstatic, happy, and absolutely full of bliss. She had Loki and that's all she would ever need.

As she drifted off to sleep, a small smile spread across her face. Darcy sighed contently, feeling an overwhelming feeling of bliss.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there's Part 1 or whatever. Part 2, What We Lost, is already partially up on ff.net. I might put it up on here, but I'm not sure yet. My other story, another tasertricks thingy called Life's Great Lie, is receiving all of my attention right now, so that's happening.

It's been an honor. Peace out.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!