Heroes Get Remembered, Legends Never Die

by emma98

Summary

Darcy Lewis is a legend. Steve has heard a lot of stories about her in the last five years. Now, after his "little spat" with Tony, he finally gets to meet the legend, face to face. It turns out that Darcy Lewis is a legend for a reason.

** Captain America Civil War compliant**
** Contains spoilers.**
I had the very real joy of seeing Civil war last night. It was...I don't know if there is a correct adjective here that I could use. Amazing seems weak. And by the end of it, while waiting for the post credits scene, I had a plot bunny, and this morning, I ran with it.

I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Heroes Get Remembered, Legends Never Die

Chapter One: The Running Ladies

May 2016

When it came down to it, the decision of where to settle had been out of Darcy's hands completely. It had fallen to the stars.

Sure, she had argued passionately with Jane about how the Sokovia Accords were just another World Security Council/SHIELD/Hydra mess waiting to be corrupted. When the Black Widow had aired SHIELD’s dirty laundry in 2014, Darcy had quickly found all of the files that referenced her and Jane specifically. It was clear that Hydra had big plans for both of them. Jane had been off world at the time with Thor, but when she came back and Darcy had returned to her with the news, Jane had been less than pleased.

Since then, Darcy had made sure to stay up to date on the world’s governing powers, religiously hacking in and setting up protocols that would tell her when she, Jane, Thor or Selvig where on the radar. She had gotten wind of the Accords two months ago, and had been very worried ever since. She doubted Thor would appreciate being told what to do and when to do it.. But Jane felt that the Accords might do some good. Darcy had tried to convince her otherwise. She had even had one full day where she attempted to make her point by enacting the Darcy Accords.

'Sorry Janie, can't get that box of poptarts from the kitchens for you. Have to wait for approval before I can move.'
'No, I HAD to go and watch that new cartoon movie five times in a row. It was orders from up on high. No free will here, or else I'll be labeled a vigilante."

'Please fill out the following paperwork before you speak to me. We have to make sure that you'll be safe in your interactions with me.'

But Jane had been unimpressed. Especially when they finally arrived at the Avenger's facility after a six month college lecture tour to find her new lab completely destroyed. From what intelligence Darcy could gather from her many insider information providers, the Winter Soldier had been through the facility less than thirty-six hours prior to Jane and Darcy's arrival at the new Avenger's facility.

Darcy had also learned that there was a definitive split between the Avengers after all the dust settled. More than half of them were imprisoned for siding with Captain Rogers. The only super heroes left at the facility were Vision, Tony and Rhody. Tony had eschewed talking to Darcy, a first for him, as he focused on building an exoskeleton to assist Rhodey. Vision was moping and was hardly helpful in explaining anything that had happened in the span of a week. He simply took the blame for Rhodey's injuries and stared longingly at the kitchen.

When she and Jane had agreed to move to the facility, it had been under the conditions that a full house of heroes would be there to protect Thor's favorite ladies in his absence. But Steve Rogers was on the run with Bucky Barnes, Natasha was nowhere to be found, and Clint was in some superhero prison with Wanda and Sam.

Darcy's thoughts strayed to Clint's family. They were surely safe on the farm. Darcy knew that. But they were alone, and probably worried out of their skulls. She had tried to call roughly fifty times in the span of four hours, but no one answered.

So when Darcy's phone rang with an unknown number, she automatically picked up.

"What can I do for you, big sister?" she asked in Russian.

"Be ready to move in the next six hours." Came the answer in Farsi, and the call immediately disconnected.

Darcy sighed. It was time to bring out the big guns to get Jane ready to move.
“Pack up Janie. We’re out of here,” Darcy ordered as she stopped Jane from the cleaning of the wreckage of her lab.

“Darcy, we can find you new eye candy to look at,” Jane promised, waving off Darcy’s surprisingly strong little hands as the slightly shorter former intern tried to pull her away. “We can’t just run off because Captain Rogers is gone.”

“We’re not safe here,” Darcy insisted. “The Black Widow isn’t here. I would like to go to wherever she is, and I’m sure Thor would feel the same for you.”

"Neither side would do anything to hurt me," Jane said confidently, as only the chosen future bride and queen of Asgard could. "My new lab is here."

Darcy heaved a sigh. If she was going to stay wrapped up in the land of hot superheroes and ridiculous danger, she would much rather prefer to be in the company of people who actually wanted to do something about the ridiculous danger. It had taken the former intern and current lab manager a little deep digging and more than a little hacking to get her trump card she had been saving to finally get Jane to see reason. She’d been holding on to it for weeks, waiting for the time to be right.

Because Jane was expected to abide by the Sokovia Accords as well. Any other worldly information she had obtained would have to be dissected by a specially selected panel of the United Nations, and if it was deemed safe enough, then and only then could she think about publishing it. If she wanted to DEVELOP new technology, she had a couple thousand forms to fill out, and then at least a two year wait until a different specially selected panel would decide whether or not she could do anything.

For the world's safety, of course.

Darcy handed her a tablet with the section regarding Jane, highlighting the good (super awful) stuff.

“You’ll be expected to sign if we stay,” Darcy gave Jane a calm, commiserating look. “I wouldn’t joke about this Jane. We have to get out of here.”

"DO THEY FORGET IT WAS MY TECH THAT SAVED LONDON A FEW YEARS AGO?" Jane demanded hotly, the thought of having to answer to over 100 nations whenever she wanted to stargaze finally getting to her.
"Oh, also, here are the meteorology reports from Wakanda for the last two years, indexed and filtered for your normal sweet spots," Darcy tried to hide her smug grin, but failed miserably. "Looks like you might get better readings in Africa. And I don’t know for sure, but I think that’s where we’re going."

"Okay, alright. You were right," Jane sighed. "Let me go shout at Heimdall so he can let Thor and Bruce know where we are."

"I'm sorry, hold the phone, Janie," Darcy held up her hands, palms facing out. Her gap toothed grin was so wide that she had a demented look about her. "Repeat that phrase you put in there. Nice and slow, you know how I like it. Do it. Do it now, Janie. Do it now."

"You. Were. Riiiiiiight," Jane rolled her eyes, tossing Darcy the middle finger before rushing from the lab. She called out over her shoulder with no small amount of amusement, "Hey Lab Manager, start packing!"

"Ugh, no!" Darcy whined. She looked around at Jane's messy lab, with her cobbled together proprietary tech, volumes of hand written notes that were strewn everywhere, and approximately enough star charts to blanket all of the football fields in the world. "Wakanda is like---the richest country in the world. I'm sure the King will swing for some new stuff!"

As it turned out, their exit from the Avenger's facility and the United States of America as a whole, was so covert and secretive and sudden that Darcy had no time to pack up Jane's lab. Three hours after Darcy’s very brief phone call with Natasha, she had received an ominous text message from an unknown number with coordinates.

She had at least managed to grab her and Jane's bug out bags before grabbing the doctor herself that was just finishing up with Heimdall at Thor's landing spot on the front lawn. She grabbed Jane’s arm and yanked the tiny astrophysicist towards the car they had arrived in. She hoped they had enough gas to drive the two hundred odd miles to the coordinates.

“What did Vision say?” Jane wondered, knowing that the maroon skinned superhero had approached Darcy on their way back to their well used Jeep.
“To tell her sorry?” Darcy shrugged. “So many things must have gone down, Janie. I don’t think we know half the story.”

“But that’s why I have you. To find out the rest of the story,” Jane reminded her.

“Well, I’ll need a little more time,” Darcy huffed out. “It only happened---like, yesterday. And I think Natasha will have a lot of answers for us.”

“She always does,” Jane nodded. Natasha had been indispensable to the two women since the Chitauri Attack in 2012.

But finally meeting up with Natasha exactly six hours after Darcy’s initial contact with her only raised way more questions for Jane. They ambled onto the quinjet to find Natasha behind the controls, and in the co-pilot seat was a small boy, about ten years old. In the cargo hold was an overabundance of luggage and a few rubbermaid totes. But most interestingly was the woman sitting in a very old rocking chair tied down to the floor of the jet, rocking a toddler while another little girl pranced around her.

“Uhmmmm,” Jane’s noise of confusion slowly went upwards.

“AUNTIE DAR-DAR!” the little girl squealed in excitement.

“Lila! Hey kiddo, are you having fun?” Darcy questioned.

“So much fun, but mommy cried when we had to leave the farm,” Lila patted her mother’s shoulder soothingly. “We’re going to Africa!”

“I thought as much,” Darcy nodded.

“Darce?” Jane questioned.

“This is Doctor Jane Foster,” Darcy pointed to a confused Jane. “She’s Thor’s favorite person and she knows everything about stars and space and physics.”
“Really?” the little boy questioned, rushing from the cockpit to look at Jane. “Like, do you know about Kelu-1?”

Jane grinned in relief. She had been expecting the little boy to ask questions about Thor. She would have no problem talking about stars.

“Nerd time later, Cooper,” Darcy advised. She pointed out each member of Clint's family as she introduced them, “So, Lila, Cooper, Nathaniel...and this is the super lucky woman that married Clint Barton. Other than that, she’s very nice and awesomely brilliant. I’ve forgiven her for her moment of weakness.”

“You never told me,” Jane pouted at Darcy.

“Top secret,” Darcy shrugged. “And also, you abandoned me to go planet hopping with Thor when Shield was burnt to the ground. Clint grabbed me before Hydra could and took me to his house. I was their favorite babysitter.”

“We like Uncle Steve more now,” Lila told her with a silly little smirk.

“RUDE!” Darcy gasped in mock indignation.

“You should get married and you can both be our favorites,” Lila shrugged, her little smirk turning into something way more Natasha-like than should be necessary. “Mommy and Daddy talked about it last Christ---”

“Lila, hush,” Laura said quickly, her cheeks flushing just slightly, looking a little like she had gotten caught with her hand in the cookie jar. She gave a weak smile Jane’s way and said, “It’s nice to finally meet you. Thor spoke of you last year when he spent some time at my house.”

“Okay, Cooper, now you can nerd out while I talk to Aunt Nat,” Darcy gave Laura a swift, strong hug before popping kisses on top of all of the kid’s heads. She would have time to interrogate the children later and find out just what Clint and Laura had been up to. For now there were more important things to find out. She hopped into the co-pilot chair and began reaching for buttons, pouting when Natasha swatted at her hands. “So...the weather has been wacky this week.”
Natasha rolled her eyes. “I screwed up. Things got out of hand.”

“I told you the Accords were bad news,” Darcy sighed.

“They needed someone on the other side who could help them,” Natasha insisted. "I know just how awful the Accords would have been.”

“Okay, so where are we going?” Darcy wondered.

“I’ve been in contact with T’Challa, he’s forgiven me for trying to electrocute him,” Natasha admitted. “He’s willing to offer us all his protection.”

“Wakanda it is,” Darcy nodded. She had seen pictures of T’Challa. She was more than ready to sign up for that protection. She'd sign up a couple of hundred times.

“But first, we have a stop to make,” Natasha looked down at a cellphone as a text came in. “I’m going to need you to brush off those keyboard skills, we have a very high tech security system to take down.”

“Sounds fun!” Darcy shrugged, going for the cellphone and reading the text. “Who is Spangles?”

“Who do you think?” Natasha rolled her eyes.

The text from Spangles was simple enough. A set of coordinates prior to a short message.

Twenty-five armed guards. Will need electronic support. 1900 hours.

Darcy took a deep breath and nodded, trying not to let her face betray her very warranted nerves. Sure, she was great with a computer. But she would have to be great with a computer and four Avengers lives, plus Natasha and Captain Rogers were going to be relying on her. She sighed very softly and nodded, “We’re busting the other Avengers out of superhero jail?”

“Looks like it.”
Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Chapter Notes

I can't begin to express my gratitude for the response to this story. Everyone is very kind to have clicked and read it and left kudos and comments.

I really hope that I don't leave you down!
<3 Em

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Two: In Captivity

New York City May 8th, 2012

“Back away from the door, Miss.”

“Dude. Jane and I are barely five foot three and combined we weigh less than you. I think you can manage to come into the room and drop off a tray of disgusting egg salad sandwiches that neither of us plan on eating anyway. Seriously, some people say New York City is the food capital of America, and you can’t get us a proper deli sandwich? I mean, Yelp says that there’s a five star deli around the block, if the Hulk didn’t smash it with giant alien carcasses.”

The SHIELD lackey sighed heavily. He had drawn the short straw and had to deliver lunch to the two brunettes that had arrived back from Norway eighteen hours ago and had been ushered into the SHIELD conference room and kept there under lock and key and armed guard ever since. The curvy mouthy assistant had not made the job easy, at all. She’d made the first agent assigned to watching them cry. She’d made the second one request emergency medical leave. When he had first knocked on the door with their lunch, she had grinned and greeted him with Third time’s a charm.

He’d have been lying if he didn’t admit that the gap toothed, wicked little grin on her face hadn’t set off a fight or flight response.

Darcy Lewis was a living legend after all.
She’d managed to hack into SHIELD a few times a week since she had figured it out back in New Mexico and managed to access information about Thor when he was first taken in. She had used that connection since then to cause no small amount of mischief. Her very first strike had been to change everyone’s pay grades, reversing them so that Nick Fury got minimum wage for two full weeks. He had not been pleased. The janitors were delighted with their exorbitant salary though.

Three weeks after New Mexico, and she’d changed all of Phil Coulson’s contacts in all of his devices into characters from the Harry Potter series. Fury had been Mad Eye Moody and Hill had been McGonagall. Five days before being sent to Norway, she’d altered Maria Hill’s email program to auto correct the to the fanfuckingtastic . Clint had howled with laughter when she had sent out her first email memo stating that All new SHIELD recruits must complete the fanfuckingtastic non-disclosure agreements before the fanfuckingtastic end of the fanfuckingtastic day .

And legend had it that Clint Barton himself had been messed with most of all by the sassy, obnoxious intern in the few short months since he had tipped his imaginary hat to her while returning Jane’s equipment after Thor had left. Selvig had to be helping out there, because the torture wasn’t only technological (his ringtone was now Toxic by Britney Spears) but the physical as well. No one in the Tesseract Facility would forget what Clint Barton had looked like with a perm. Nor would they forget when all of his arrows had been magnetized specifically to a small metal disc permanently embedded into the bottom of his quiver of arrows. Every time he had let one fly, it rounded immediately and went straight for his ass.

And now here the legend was. Being held against her will, and without knowledge as to why. And she definitely was not pleased with the lunch selection.

“How did you know where you were?” the SHIELD lackey wondered. “Your electronics were taken before boarding.”

“That’s classified, Jack,” Darcy smirked. “Bring me Hill or Barton or Coulson.”

“That’s---that’s not going to happen,” the SHIELD lackey shook his head. Hill was knee deep in dealing with alien carcasses. Barton was on emergency leave after all that had happened. And Coulson was….well. Coulson wasn’t with them any longer.

Jane giggled in delight as she watched the interaction as if it were Emmy winning television. The guy from SHIELD was shaking in his boots. It served him right. Darcy had hacked into SHIELD fifteen minutes ago and they had realized that their arrival in New York City had coincided with Thor and Loki’s departure from Earth. SHIELD, as an institution, was a dirty, rotten, no good, old fashioned cock blocker.
“If I don’t speak with Coulson, Hill or Barton in the next five minutes, you’re going to be so very, very sorry,” Darcy said with a demented sort of cheerfulness, big blue eyes twinkling wickedly at her poor victim.

The door to their conference room/holding cell opened and a beautiful redhead, that both Jane and Darcy recognized from the footage they had watched of the Chitauri attack, entered the conference room and the relief in the SHIELD lackey’s face was palpable. The Black Widow gave a small, amenable, honest smile to both Darcy and Jane.

“You can go change your underwear now,” Jane waved at the SHIELD lackey, who did book it out of the room eagerly.

“Ladies, I’m neither Coulson, Hill or Barton, but I hope I can help you. My name is Natasha Romanoff,” she nodded at both of them. “And I bring apologies from Thor. Coulson had you sent to Norway to keep you safe and away from Loki, as either one of you would have been quite the handy target for Thor’s brother.”

“Where is Erik?” Jane wondered.

“He’s safe, but not well,” Natasha answered truthfully. “Why don’t I take you to that deli around the corner, and I’ll explain everything that happened?”

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_Somewhere above the Atlantic Ocean, May 2016_

“I never did ask you how you snuck a smart phone past those agents back in 2012,” Natasha said softly as she watched Darcy manipulating an old brick of a laptop, something stashed away in every quinjet since May of 2012 at Darcy’s own request and Natasha and Clint’s doing.

“You’d be amazed that in this fascinating new century, there are idiot men who won’t touch something that looks like a box of tampons but is actually a smartphone,” Darcy giggled to herself. “And considering that 80 percent of SHIELD is comprised of men, I took my chances. And made sure that the box said something about _heavy flow._”
“And this is why you’re my favorite,” Natasha smirked.

“I may not be your favorite after this debacle,” Darcy shook her head at the laptop. She had been able to crack SHIELD, FBI, CIA and Buzzfeed pretty easily (the *Top Ten Things to Do With an Asgardian in the Sack* article had been one of the most clicked articles on that website). But the security systems for the underwater prison were Stark tech. And she’d gotten close a couple of times with JARVIS, and even closer with FRIDAY, but she had never successfully hacked Stark tech before. Not without getting caught.

“Darcy,” Natasha shook her head. She put a firm hand on the younger woman’s shoulder and said softly in Russian, “You can do this, little sister.”

“And if I can’t?” Darcy spoke back in Natasha’s native tongue, having picked it up quickly with the spy-sassin as her tutor. She sighed, never once stopping her typing on the laptop keyboard as she continued to work frantically for a solution. “This is so important, Nat.”

“I believe in you,” Lila said softly from Darcy’s side where she was diligently pressing a button in a specific rhythm for her Aunt Natasha. “You’re going to help Uncle Steve get Daddy back, Auntie Dar-Dar. I know you can.”

“Okay. Just, make a prison rise from a quarter mile down in the ocean, get the landing doors to open on their own, without sounding the alarm or letting the twenty-five armed guards know that we’re there,” Darcy nodded, looking back at her computer.

“That’s all I need, Steve and Barnes and I can do the rest,” Natasha promised.

“You do the techno bit and I’ll handle the armed guards,” Darcy proposed.

“While I’m very good at what I do with a computer, you’re better,” Natasha admitted easily. “Remember when you had all upper level numbered Agents getting a weekly appointment at the proctologist to get their head removed from their ass?”

“Language!” Lila gasped.
“Clinical terms don’t count,” Darcy reminded Lila helpfully. Two minutes aboard the quinjet, Lila had badgered her for swearing and held out an honest to god swear jar that was more than halfway full with cash. Darcy doubted she could find an ATM machine in the middle of the ocean before the end of their adventure. Whoever gave Lila the idea for a swear jar was in for it.

Darcy looked at Natasha thoughtfully and nodded once. “That had been easy. Because I stole Agent 13’s phone off of her after London. I had a physical connection, I didn’t have to do it through—hold on. I can do this. I never got into JARVIS or FRIDAY because Tony never let me have access to the physical servers, that untrusting metalhead. But if I could—”

“No, wait, figure out another way,” Natasha shook her head adamantly, trying to break into Darcy’s thought process.

“I just have to be in the prison to do it.”

“Hey guys?”

Sam huffed out a sigh and looked up at the ceiling to his awful prison cell, willing himself to have a little patience. This was a scary situation. He had to have some kind of allowance for annoying situations.

“Yeah, Tic Tac?” Clint answered for Sam, knowing that it was technically his turn to amuse Scott.

“Which do you think is worse? Being an ex-convict or being a vigilante?” Scott wondered thoughtfully. “I’m only asking because I’m wondering which one my baby mama will choose.”

“For the last time, Lang, stop using the phrase baby mama,” Sam called out.

“You know what would be worse?”

Sam’s eyes widened at Wanda’s voice. She had not spoken or made a sound in the last thirty-six
hours. He had heard one sniffle from her when they had first been placed in the cells, but since then, it had been radio silence. His stomach had been twisting in knots in worry for the poor young woman. He had seen the rig they had her wrapped up in, like she was some kind of monster.

“Disappointing your daughter,” Wanda said thoughtfully. “My father was perfect in my eyes. Strong. Loving. Always kind and gentle to me and Pietro. And do you know what he did for a living?”

“Vigilante?” Scott wondered hopefully.

“He did nothing,” Wanda said softly. “My mother worked in a bakery. My father could not find a steady job, so he did nothing, but also everything. I knew he tried his best. I knew he did the right thing at every choice. Your daughter will know this, no matter the label that her mother gives to you.”

“Thanks Samantha,” Scott said softly. When he was greeted with silence he huffed out a sigh. “From Bewitched? Come on, Barton, stop trying to make me look like the oldest one in the room.”

“Sabrina would have been more accurate. You know, cause of the teenaged witch thing,” Clint shrugged.

“I am not a teenager,” Wanda rolled her eyes.

“Oh, five years away from being a teenager. How impressive,” Clint mocked her eagerly. He had missed the sound of her voice in the last thirty-six hours.

The imprisoned quartet let silence fall again, but this bout of silence felt less oppressive. Wanda finally coming out of her pain and grief stricken trance had eased the weight off of the three men’s shoulders. If she was talking, she was going to be okay.

“Hey guys?” Scott spoke up again after five minutes of silence.

“Yes, Tic Tac,” Wanda was the one to answer this time.
“He’s going to come for us, right?” he said softly. “I mean—if he made it. If the mission is done.”

“Absolutely,” Sam said with powerful conviction.

“It will be soon,” Wanda promised. “If we were not so far underwater, I would be able to detect his thoughts when he is close.”

Clint took a deep breath and a slow, genuine smile took over his face. He knew that the rest of his imprisoned companions were looking to Steve for the rescue. And he knew Steve would play a part if it were possible. But he had other lifesavers out in the world. He knew it was only a matter of time before a handful of strong, powerful, capable women out there would team up and bust him out.

He looked over at Scott the best he could, giving him his most reassuring smile.

“It’ll be soon, Lang. Don’t you worry about that.”

The sound was oddly familiar to him. It had probably been about twenty or thirty years, both in and out of the ice, since he had heard the noises. But they were familiar. Clicking and small barely audible beeps. In decisive rhythms and patterns. The noises might have started hours ago, but they couldn’t be heard until Steve had killed the primary engines as they hovered above the Atlantic Ocean.

“Morse code?” Steve furrowed his brow, looking at Bucky curiously. “Doesn’t sound right.”

“Not morse code,” Bucky shook his head. The corners of his lips turned just barely upwards and his eyes clouded over with memory. “A code only two people on this Earth know.”

“Here’s to hoping that you’re one of them, pal,” Steve smirked as Bucky stood from the co-pilot seat, his balance slightly off now that he was short one metal arm. Steve grimaced as Bucky compensated for the weight, his movements becoming more sure with every passing second as he searched out the sound of the noise.
The two of them had been put through the ringer in the last four days. And they had managed to scrounge together provisions and a change of clothes a few hours ago before they were off again, keen on springing the rest of their allies from the underwater prison they had been placed in. Steve should have insisted that they rest a little longer, but found that his conscience wouldn’t allow it. And once Bucky had learned that both Clint and Scott had kids, then there was no dissuading him. They were in the air again five minutes after Steve had mentioned the Barton kids and babysitting them for a one week period last summer after baby Nathaniel had been born.

“Bucky...if Nat’s gotten my message, and if she can get me on that hunk of metal, I want you to know that I can do this myself.”

Bucky gave Steve an epically unimpressed look. The last time he had given Steve such a look had been during the war back in ’44, when Steve had enthusiastically suggested that they invade a fucking castle. They’d invaded the castle, of course, but Bucky had still been massively unimpressed with Steve’s reckless, brave idiocy.

“I can manage with the one arm,” Bucky said quietly, turning his head to hear for the clicking and buzzing.

“I know you can,” Steve nodded. “But, still, twenty-five armed guards. That’s no big deal for me to deal with alone. And I know that Romanoff keeps containers of knockout gas in her weapons cache on every quinjet. That'll take out five or six of them, the rest I can manage.”

“Idiot,” Bucky grumbled under his breath. Because Steve would face down ten times that number if he had to. He focused on the noise, willing his memory to come back completely so that he could translate it. The noise was coming from a flat panel that was bolted shut underneath a steel panel on the ceiling. He looked down at the frayed and jagged stump of his left arm and rolled his eyes, “A shiny metal arm or a shiny metal shield would be pretty useful right now.”

“Sorry,” Steve whispered, looking forlorn behind the wheel.

“Don’t be,” Bucky insisted. He squinted and nodded. “I can understand what she’s trying to tell us.”


“It was a code we developed,” Bucky nodded.
“A code you developed.”

"Yes."

"With Natasha?"

"Yes."

"...when, exactly?" Steve asked in complete and utter confusion.

“She didn’t---well no, guess she didn’t tell you,” Bucky shrugged. She would keep those secrets, she had told him she would. It had been their agreement that the very best thing found in their dark lives would be kept to themselves always. "Moscow. Red Room. I trained her. She’s gonna be plenty upset when she realizes I took her rifle off the jet, back in Siberia. Especially when she realizes I left it behind."

Steve looked at his childhood best friend and chosen brother skeptically. The Bucky of yore always resorted to short answers when he wanted to hide something. There was something there that Bucky wasn’t saying. And Natasha certainly had never said anything to him regarding Winter Soldier training in the last few years.

“Red heads, huh?” Steve got a soft look on his face.

“Cram it, or we’ll start talking about how you suddenly like blondes now, even after that dame at the expo soured you on them,” Bucky rolled his eyes. He reached for a note pad and pencil on the control panel and scribbled down coordinates. He nodded and turned to Steve with a curious look.

“She says we have a pickup to make in order to infiltrate the prison. Do you know what a Darcy is?”

Steve’s eyes widened imperceptibly.
Boy, did he ever know what a Darcy was.

He had never actually met her, but he had been the recipient of a mass memo she had sent out last fall. He knew about her. Or at the very least, he had certainly heard about the girl in question. Quite a lot.

Darcy was a legend, after all.

Chapter End Notes

So how do you feel about flashbacks? I mean... I love reading them, and apparently they are loads of fun to write, as the one that was in this chapter was loads of fun to write. And I think they will be happening quite often, because this story is full of characters that have plenty of ripe material for flashbacks (side-eyeing the Winter Soldier and the Black Widow and T’Challa).

Again, thank you so much for the completely terrifying response. I think I have some things planned up ahead that you might like!
Infiltrate, Infiltrate, Infiltrate

Chapter Notes

I am updating this from my phone when I am supposed to be studying in study hall for a test. I am a bad student.

I am eager to hear what you think about this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Three: Infiltrate, Infiltrate, Infiltrate

New York City, May 2015

“Captain! My chosen shield brother,” Thor pounded Steve on his back after another shot of Asgardian mead had been knocked back by both of the warriors.

“Thor! My brother that—that my shield chose,” Steve nodded. He blinked very rapidly and looked down at his fourth empty shot glass of the Asgardian mead. For the first time in over seventy-years, Steve was drunk. It was, simply put, amazing. “Those words didn’t end up right.”

“You have certainly had enough then, my friend,” Thor nodded, pocketing the mead much to Steve’s displeasure.

“But I need that,” Steve muttered, a frown creasing his brow.

“You remind me of my chosen shield sister, the wielder of Mjolnir’s chosen sister,” Thor nodded.

“A hammer can have a sister?” Steve wondered. “And also...you have a lot of chosen family. Wouldn’t it just be easier to say friends?”

“Do not be foolish, Steven,” Thor slapped the man’s shoulder again with real strength. “You above
all others should know the difference between friends and brothers. How goes your search for your own chosen brother?”

“Not so great,” Steve admitted. “I get the feeling he doesn’t want to be found.”

“It is to be understood to a certain extent,” Thor nodded. He had even asked Heimdall for assistance, but was told that the Norns forbade him from revealing where Steve’s damaged friend was. “For he caused you pain. And he caused others pain, even if it was not his will that exerted the act. He is a good man deep down, or else you would not put your faith in him. So this other that has forced him into the shape of a weapon may be to blame, but your brother is the one who feels the burden.”

“S’like poetry,” Steve whispered his eyes wide as he stared at Thor’s mouth in wonder. “You speak in poetry.”

Thor boomed with echoing laughter for a solid minute. It said something to the volume of the music and the chatter at a Tony Stark party in that not one party goer turned a glance their way as Thor laughed uproariously and shook his head in disbelief, mumbling the name Darcy in between chuckles.

“Apparently I’m a hilarious drunk,” Steve smirked. “Can I get another nip of that stuff? I’m feeling it fading away already.”

“No, you are a mortal, Steven,” Thor shook his head. “Although your body would recover from the spirits, we mustn’t tempt the will of the Norns.”

“Huh?” Steve asked eloquently.

“For a mortal to imbibe such meade would force your thread of fate tighter to where it is tied to. Certainly it would increase the timeline,” Thor nodded. He patted the pocket he had tucked the liquor away in. “Even I feel that I have had enough for one night.”

“Thread of fate,” Steve shook his head in dismay. “My thread of fate has always been straight and narrow, Thor. Or it has been ever since I became Captain America. Straight. Narrow. Violent. And forever tied to the shield.”

“I see,” Thor nodded. A great understanding coming upon him as Steve certainly sobered a little and
the effect was immediate. Thor was no longer reminded of his shield sister. The norns certainly did have plans. “My great and powerful shield sister, Lady Darcy of the Lewis clan---”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I hear a lot about the dame, but you know what shield brother? I never ever met her face to face. Not even once,” Steve declared with none too little drunken drama shading his words. “M’beginning to think that Darcy Lewis is something you all made up to poke fun at the old Captain.”

Because Thor told stories of his lightning sister. Thrilling tales of a beautiful warrior woman and her bravery in the face of aliens. Sassiness in the face of authority. Kindness in the face of sadness. Clint had stories of his favorite science wrangler. Tales of pranks and trickery and sass. Tony told him about some chick with a body like a coca cola bottle that Steve had ‘to bone’ for the love of the country, and also because Tony was monogamous and wanted to live vicariously through Steve. Natasha was at least subtle about it, never mentioning Darcy by name, always referring to her entertaining tales as stories about this friend she had.

Darcy Lewis was a story book, and according to Nick Fury even, the girl was destined to take Steve Rogers down a peg or two. But storybooks were fairy tales and fairy tales were dreams on paper and Darcy Lewis was a legend amongst Steve’s friends and teammates and co-workers. And everyone knew that legends didn’t exist.

“Allow me to tell the tale of when Lady Darcy encountered her first bilgesnipe nest. She had worked with my ingenious Jane and had subdued the small beasts within one of your Midgardian hours. It had been truly impressive. But then...she wanted to take one of the awful beasts as a pet...”

Somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean, May 2016

“Helen Cho approved first aid kit.”

“Got it boss.”

“Waterproof bag.”
“Always have it.”

“Deionizing particle cleaver, infiltrating suction devices and automatic relay tube system?”

“Check, Check and Check, Janie,” Darcy smiled at her very worried best friend. She nodded at the woman who had taken one look at her back at Culver all those years ago and shrugged at her saying *Yeah, you’re the only one. You’ll do.* They had certainly come a long way since then.

“Let me see the suction devices, I want to recalibrate them,” Jane held out her hand impatiently.

“Janie. It’s a breast pump that you and Laura modified and pimped out,” Darcy shook her head in her bemusement. “There’s nothing to recalibrate. It has one function. To suck.”

“I don’t like this, Darce,” Jane shook her head. “Thor would never approve of you going down there.”

“I’ll be with Captain America, I’m pretty sure that if he didn’t keep me safe, he’d spontaneously combust,” Darcy wagered. “And then Thor would come down and terrorize his ashes with Mew-mew.”

“Why can’t Nat do it?” Jane asked for the thousandth time in the last ten minutes.

“She has to fly the quinjet,” Darcy said patiently. “None of us can do what needs to be done with the quinjet but her, remember? Clint offered to teach you to fly it, and you decided to try and work out a way to portal Tony’s underwear off of him.”

“Worth it,” Jane shrugged.

“And Darcy is better with the programming,” Natasha called out from the cockpit where she was preparing the bird to dock with Steve and Bucky’s quinjet. While she had set Lila to clicking out the code for Bucky earlier, Bucky had never managed to answer back. Luckily, she had spotted their quinjet rushing towards them on the sub-radar system Clint had installed into his personal quinjet.

“And apparently I’m better with typing crap into a computer,” Darcy shrugged. She looked down at
the gear that they had been cobblling together for a solid forty-five minutes.

Cooper Barton had been especially helpful with the suction device. The little man obviously got his brains from his mother, who had a degree in mechanical engineering and had worked for the biggest names in science before becoming Mama Barton on the farm. It was how she had met Clint to begin with. SHIELD had contracted her company to work on his arrows and she’d figured out and invented the multi-arrow selection quiver. Laura was one of the best. Even Stark had admired her work, even though he didn’t know she had done it.

But breaking into an underwater prison? With only the equipment on a quinjet and whatever belongings they’d managed to pack in those rubbermaid containers from the farm, including two breast pumps?

Yeah, that had been pretty difficult to work out, but they’d done it.

“There’s got to be a better way,” Jane huffed out a sigh. “If I could have brought the displacer and a couple of the portal---”

“Oh shit no, Janie! I don’t need you to accidentally portal me back through time and space. You know your fucking displacer is grossly untested,” Darcy shook her head adamantly. She heard Lila gasp and roll her eyes, fishing into her bag for a dollar and handing it off to the girl. “I am going to punch the throat of whoever taught that girl the concept of a swear jar. Cooper blindfold!”

“I’d like to see that,” Laura smirked, waiting as Darcy began to strip to her underwear once Cooper had covered his eyes dutifully. Laura held up a black cat suit for Darcy to step into once she was down to her skivvies. She gave Jane a reassuring smile and said, “I promise you, Dr. Foster, that Darcy will be safe.”

“We’re sending her into the ocean to open up a beyond maximum security prison,” Jane fretted as she watched Laura stuff Darcy into a catsuit.

“Hey! I must have lost weight, I fit into Nat’s suit! I knew those five pushups I did three weeks ago would pay off,” Darcy grinned as Laura zipped her up. She was super proud that the zipper went up with only minimal grunting from Laura.

“Not Nat’s suit,” Laura said gently.

“Oh, well, still your suit then still meant I shrunk. Five pushups once a month. It’ll be the name of
my new fitness book,” Darcy shrugged as she gave a twirl in the skin tight suit. She caught Laura’s guilty look and sighed. “This is your pregnant lady suit, isn’t it?”

“Post partum, I needed a bigger one for the knockers, just in case,” Laura gestured to her own breasts which had thankfully gone back to near normal after she had started to wean Nathaniel off of breastfeeding. She hadn’t needed the cat suits, thank goodness. But Natasha had been adamant that she always have one on hand, just in case the worst ever happened. Even the kids had the bulletproof suits and knew how to get them on in thirty seconds flat.

Darcy shrugged, taking it in stride as Laura set about french braiding her hair tightly. Darcy was a curvy gal and there was absolutely nothing wrong with that. Some people liked a soft hourglass shape. Surely, she hadn’t found someone who was worthy of it in quite some time, but she knew that there were people out there that did. She checked her equipment again as Natasha announced that the other quinjet was connecting with them and any other words were drowned out by the sound of heavy machinery moving into place so that the two planes could physically connect with one another midair.

She was pretty sure that everything would work the way they wanted to in regards to breaking into the prison. What she was worried about was the swimming. Ever since that summer spent on a New Jersey beach when she was twelve and had almost drowned in her quest to swim out as far as she could, Darcy hadn’t been the most avid of swimmers. Some would say that it freaked her out a bit. Many might even concede that it gave her severe anxiety.

“UNCLE STEVE!”

Lila and Cooper’s enthusiastic shouting broke Darcy out of her panicked trance and she looked up to the hatch that had opened at the far end of the quinjet. Uncle Steve, aka Captain America, was standing with outstretched arms and a genuine grin as Lila and Cooper ran into his arms and clutched at bulging biceps as Steve swung them around.

She furrowed her brow and looked down at her body and mentally chastised herself. Bad Uterus. Don’t do that.

Because really, Steve Rogers, with his face still looking a little like ground meat, in a Captain America uniform that had obviously seen better days, playing with a bunch of adorable children and looking so happy to be doing it was doing absolutely awful tingly things to her baby box.

“Auntie Dar-Dar had to give me three dollars for the swear jar already!” Lila announced in delight.
“You told them about the swear jar?” Bucky rolled his eyes from his place in the shadow that Steve made behind him. He huffed a small, fond sigh. Steve Rogers was and always would be, a fucking little shit. “Hypocrite.”

The memory surfaced in Bucky’s brain of a troll faced Steve Rogers holding out a swear jar to each and every person who had worked with the Howling Commandos during the war, using the preconceived notion of virtuous and saintly Captain America to guilt them into putting quarters into the jar with every swear word. Never mind that when it was just he, Bucky and the rest of the Commandos, Steve Rogers swore as easy as he breathed. He knew how to take advantage of some aspects of Captain America, and the swear jar had paid for their bar tab most weeks.

And now he had innocent children running the scam.

“Good work, Lila,” Steve nodded.

“Fucker,” Darcy whispered under her breath. And Steve may have been too preoccupied with the children to hear it, but Bucky did and he looked at the young woman in curiosity.

She was poured into black kevlar, clutching a bag in her tightly fisted hands as she stared back at him unabashedly. He bit back the natural inclination to let out a low wolf whistle. Because the girl was something else. Another woman finished up fixing her hair and then went towards Steve and the kids, giving him a warm hug.

The girl in the catsuit had a body like Miss Brown, who had been their teacher when Steve had just turned thirteen. And Miss Brown, with her soft curves and bountiful chest had been the person that had awakened Steve’s...manhood. Except the dame in front of them now was in a more appropriate age bracket for Steve. And wasn’t wearing any kind of rings on her little fingers. Something inside Bucky that had been dormant since 1942 awakened and he had the sudden urge to set his best friend up for a double at the pictures.

Bucky wanted to nudge Steve in the ribs to get him to take notice of the looker staring at them like they were puzzles, but realized that he didn’t have the left arm to do it any longer. The girl in the kevlar followed the flick of his eyes to the remains of his metal arm and her eyes went wide in concern for a moment before a grim determination set in.

“Janie, the weights, I’ll get the tape,” she called out.
Steve finally looked up at the sound of her voice. Soft and sweet and feminine, sounding like a little tinkling bell, almost, with the slightest scratch to it. He allowed Cooper and Lila to climb up his body and perch on bruised shoulders as he watched a slender brunette dig around in a large plastic container and walk over to the woman with the voice. His eyes darted very quickly across a very appealing body, his mouth going completely dry as he glanced at Bucky and Bucky’s stupid knowing smirk on his face.

The knowing smirk disappeared completely and was replaced with trepidation as the girl stepped right up, brandishing a large roll of duct tape. The other brunette, Jane, Steve would wager, stepped up as well, holding onto a few six inch metal discs. She held them in place at the base of Bucky’s stump and the cat suit wearing brunette, who Steve was rapidly beginning to both hope and fear was the legendary Darcy Lewis, started taping the arm up rapidly, securing the metal discs and providing an airtight seal around frayed wires and jagged metal.

“Better?” Jane wondered.

Bucky moved his body experimentally. The balance was very much improved.

“How did you?” he questioned.

“Smelting discs from Vanaheim,” Jane explained. As if it made any sense to either man. “It’s the opposite of vibranium, really. Way heavier than it looks and almost soft to the touch, it should be helping any feedback the wires were giving your nerves.. And now you owe me for my wrecked lab and the corrected balance.”

“I didn’t wreck your lab,” Bucky shook his head. He looked to Steve in confusion. “Did I wreck her lab?”

“You wrecked a lot,” Steve offered helpfully, the hint of a smirk playing at his lips.

“Stop tormenting the amnesiac, you trolly asshole,” Darcy scolded. Lila gasped from Steve’s shoulder and went for her jar and Darcy narrowed her eyes at the little girl. “Clinical term!”

“He hasn’t set foot in the United States since early 2015,” Natasha announced, walking into the quinjet bay. She looked at Bucky very carefully as she explained, “Your lab was wrecked by Vision. Or more accurately when Wanda put Vision through the building.”
“Oh. I can’t be mad at that, Vision is way more pompous than Jarvis was,” Jane nodded. She smiled back at Bucky cheerfully, “Sorry for wrongfully accusing you there, big guy.”

“I’m getting used to it,” Bucky said dryly, his eyes staring right at Natasha.

Steve watched the staring match with no small amount of interest. Natasha had of course revealed nothing to him in the two years that had passed since learning of Bucky’s survival. But she was revealing plenty now, even if she wasn’t speaking at all. Her eyes darted between Bucky’s own, and flicking over various injuries that were healing, focusing on the stump of his metal arm for prolonged seconds. Her lips were parted as she took slow, calming breaths through her mouth. It was her tell. If she was breathing through her mouth, Steve knew that it was the closest thing the Black Widow had to being overwhelmed.

“What’s the plan?” Bucky asked, his voice low and gravelly.

“Darcy needs physical access to the servers to get the cell doors open,” Natasha revealed. “These cells were built with enhanced humans in mind. No amount of strength will blast them open, they need to be opened through the security system. Or at least Wanda’s needs to be opened and the device that they’ve placed on her body needs to be disengaged. I’m thinking after that, Wanda could open the rest with her powers when unrestrained.”

“I’m Darcy by the way,” the woman in question waved at Bucky and Steve. She nodded her head in Jane’s direction. “This is my boss, Dr. Jane Foster.”

“Wait a minute, she’s can’t go into the prison with us,” Steve shook his head at Natasha, his eyes going wide with concern.

“She’s a civilian, no muscle there,” Bucky gave her an appraising look.

“Hey! I did five pushups three months ago!” Darcy countered. Jane snickered behind her with Laura. She glared at her boss and said, “FINE, six months ago.”

Bucky gave her an unimpressed look and she stood straighter, placing her body along the lines that Natasha had drilled into her after SHIELD had fallen. The effect was instantaneous. Bucky’s eyes widened with surprise but the shock was quickly replaced with a distinct look of dislike.
“Woman, what have you done?” Bucky barked out at Natasha in Russian.

“She wanted to learn,” Natasha quickly came back in Russian. “Call me woman again and I’ll rip your other arm off!”

“Those are not your secrets to tell to an innocent girl,” Bucky shook his head. “After everything we endured, you decided to inflict it on a child? What happened to you?”

“Hey! I’m not a child!” Darcy answered back in English. “I wanted to learn how to protect myself.”

“You barely made it through your own torture, Natalia,” Bucky shook his head.

Steve watched as Natasha and Bucky traded angry Russian words while Darcy tried to allay Bucky’s anger in English. Steve never got the hang of Russian, no matter how annoying it was that Natasha and Barton could speak it to each other. But from Darcy’s end of the conversation, she was trying to insist that Natasha hadn’t done anything wrong, and that she hadn’t been tortured and that she could defend herself in an aggressive way if need be.

“She would never break me or hurt me in anyway!” Darcy defended Natasha tirelessly. “I’m standing right here as proof of that. STOP IT!”

“Uncle Steve?” Lila whispered in Steve’s ear from her perch on his shoulder. “Auntie Dar-Dar can do it. She’s real good at getting where she doesn’t belong. I promise. She’ll bring Daddy back.”

“Yeah. Okay,” Steve nodded. He looked between Natasha and Bucky, who both looked like they had just expelled more emotions in the past five minutes than they had in decades. There was a flush across Bucky’s cheeks that Steve hadn’t seen since 1942, and Natasha’s mouth was hanging open as she took deep breaths and glared at Bucky. Steve finally looked to Darcy, who was looking at him like he should be doing something. And yeah. He supposed he should.

He put the kids down on the ground, and to their credit, they left the adults to plan, rushing off to the cockpit to watch the auto pilot screen. He gave Darcy a slow nod and felt his lips curve involuntarily upwards in a tentative, shy smile before he shook himself out of it and cleared his throat.
“What’s the game plan?”

Laura stepped forward and handed them the diagrams that she and Jane had worked on. Darcy and Natasha had spent their time working on the actual computer programs that they would need to get the prisoners out and the prison afloat. Laura and Jane had been in charge of the actual physics of getting into the underwater prison.

“You ladies don’t do things halfway,” Steve shook his head in amazement.

“You’re just learning this now?” Jane sassily wondered.

“I’m slow on the uptake,” Steve promised. He nodded at the obviously brilliant scientists in front of him and pointed at a spot on the diagrams. “You’re going to have to walk me through how to do this.”

Darcy stood and watched as Bucky and Natasha continued to stare at each other. Their eyes going between wary, angry and if Darcy wasn’t completely mistaken, heated in a sort of NC-17 way. She shuffled her feet and nodded after a moment’s silence.

“I’m going to go and wait on your quinjet, so Jane can’t do her crying, awkward goodbye thing,” she began a slow shuffle to the connector between the planes. “You guys...catch up. Or. You know. Whatever.”

They continued to stare at each other even after Darcy made her way out. Thankfully, Nathaniel began to stir in the tightly secured pack and play and Natasha darted to the baby, picking him up and attempting to bounce him back to sleep.

“Steve said I tried to strangle you. M’sorry,” Bucky said gruffly, his words barely discernable as he watched Natasha gently handle the nearly one year old child. He was fascinated with the way the baby’s chubby cheek pressed against the long slope of her neck. “And also for shooting you twice.”

“Sorry I garroted you,” Natasha said with a silken, smooth soft whisper, feeling Nathaniel begin to droop again with sleepiness.

“It happens,” Bucky shrugged.
“Only in our world,” Natasha couldn’t help but smile as the downy soft blond hairs on Nathaniel’s hair tickled her cheeks. “You seem—better.”

“Steve said something about cognitive recalibration, something he learned from you,” Bucky nodded. “It just got me over the first triggers. We both know that there are more.”

“There’s only one way to break those,” Natasha sighed, placing Nathaniel back in his portable crib.

“They have to be broken, Natalia,” Bucky switched to Russian.

“I promise you they will be,” Natasha nodded. She ran a hand over Nathaniel’s back before straightening up. “I’m going to check in with Darcy. And grab my weapons cache from your jet.”

“About that,” Bucky nodded, speaking in English once more. His mouth formed an almost painful, sheepish grimace.

“You know better, Yasha,” Natasha shook her head. “You must know better than this.”

“Stevie and I didn’t have all the time in the world,” Bucky lied. He had plenty of time on the jet on their way to their final destination. He had spent it chatting with Steve about things both heavy and light. “I needed to choose the weapon that would have been properly taken care of. That I could trust.”

“Where is my rifle, Yasha?” Natasha asked, her voice deadly and low, her eyebrow arched almost painfully.

“Buried beneath a lot of rubble in Siberia,” Bucky said quickly, backpedaling easily with his renewed sense of balance thanks to whatever Jane and Darcy had affixed to his arm. “I’m going to go check on your little Widow, go over the game plan, make sure she’s okay. I’ll see you on the other side, Natalia.”

He poked his head back into the quinjet and looked at her hopefully.
“I’m going to need to take the blades and the handgun---just in case---”

“GET OUT!”

“Cooper, go with Dr. Foster and help her solder the tubes together,” Laura asked nicely after she and Steve finished up with the logistics of the plan.

“Okay, Mommy,” Cooper reached for Jane’s hand and asked, “Dr. Foster, do you know about the KIC 8462852? I did a report paper on it, and mommy gave me an A plus plus plus.”

“Let me tell you about good ole KIC 8462852 and what I learned about it in the astronomy towers on Asgard,” Jane squeezed the little boy’s hand reassuringly. “And you can call me Jane.”

“Okay Dr. Jane,” Cooper nodded.

Steve watched the little boy go as he listened, completely enraptured by whatever scientific mumbo jumbo that Jane was spitting out. He looked back at the pilot’s chair and saw Lila perched on it, sketching something on a piece of paper with a small dull pencil.

“That looks excellent, Lila,” Steve said softly. “You’ve been practicing a lot, I see.”

“Yeah, but I drew everything on the farm It’ll be nice to find all kinds of fun things to sketch in Africa,” Lila beamed back at him.

“Africa?” Steve looked to Laura curiously.

“Africa,” Laura nodded. “Nat’s spoken with T’Challa, apparently. Once we have everyone back in house, we’ll be heading there.”

“Laura, I’m so sorry,” Steve shook his head in dismay. “I never wanted to uproot your lives like this.”
“Steve, please,” Laura shook her head. “I did love our farm, I won’t lie. But it was isolated. It was just me and the kids most days. While the circumstances of this big move aren’t exactly...ideal, there are things in Wakanda we can have that we didn’t have in Idaho.”

“Mommy said we can go to a real school!” Lila chirped excitedly. “No more home school.”

“Wow, that’s great,” Steve smiled at the girl. He looked back at Laura and saw that she had what Clint had deemed her stubborn face on. She wasn’t going to accept his apologies. That was for damned sure. Instead, he put all the earnestness he could into his next words, “I’m going to bring Clint back to you.”

“I know,” Laura nodded.

“And you have to always let me know what I can do for you,” Steve asked seriously. “Your lives are changing a lot right now, and that’s my fault.”

“You could take us waterskiing,” Lila suggested hopefully. “Daddy was supposed to before you called.”

“Wakanda has an awful lot of beautiful water surrounding it,” Laura smiled.

“Yes, I’ll absolutely take you water skiing,” Steve agreed readily.

“And bungee jumping,” Lila added.

“Uhm...if your Mom says it’s okay,” Steve said warily.

“And sky diving,” Lila grinned wickedly.

“Stop torturing Uncle Steve!” Laura ordered. She shrugged and explained, “She gets this way around her Aunt Darcy. She’s like a sponge, I swear. After a few weeks around Darcy, Lila could sell anyone the Brooklyn Bridge.”
“Yeah,” Steve nodded. “So...the legendary Darcy Lewis.”

“Mhmmm,” Laura grinned, her brown eyes sparkling with joyful mirth.

“Interesting,” Steve’s eyebrows rose up quickly before going right back to normal. “Didn’t think she existed.”

“Well, she’ll be following you down that tube. She definitely exists,” Laura looked like the cat that ate the canary. To say that she had been planning this matchmaking of hers for the last two years would have been an understatement. She was finally getting her pay off.

“So yeah...some gossip that Natasha will no doubt tell you, probably the moment I leave this bird,” Steve gave her a slightly guilty smile. “Remember that Shield agent I told you about? The nurse?”

“Yes?” Laura’s grin disappeared and she looked at Steve warily.

“We uh...we, well I sort of kissed her,” Steve blurted.

“NO!” Lila screeched loudly, her hands flying to the side of her face as she stared up at Steve with abject betrayal written all over her child-like features. “NO! UNCLE STEVE! NO!”

“Steve, when?” Laura whispered, wondering if it was before or after Peggy Carter had passed.

“A few days ago, when she gave me and Sam our gear back before the fight in Germany,” Steve explained.

“Interesting,” Laura nodded. “So...are the two of you---dating?”

“I don’t know,” Steve shrugged. “It was kind of...just, unsettled.”

Laura could work with unsettled. Laura could definitely work with unsettled.
“Uncle Steve, why?” Lila cried out dramatically. “You and Auntie Dar-Dar are---”

“Liles, leave Uncle Steve alone. This is grown up stuff, not Girl Meets World,” Laura said softly. She gave Steve’s right bicep a squeeze and nodded. “Don’t worry about it Steve, these things have a way of straightening themselves out.”

“THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT! HEAAAAAAT OF THE MOMENT!”

“Make it stop, please!” Wanda begged from her cell.

Scott had been singing through his favorite 80’s rock hits for the last hour. While it had certainly annoyed the guards, possibly even annoyed them enough to mute the audio surveillance, it had come at a heavy price. Scott was an enthusiastic performer, drumming out beats on his stool. But without backup music, he veered wildly off key. Perhaps the offkey singing was on purpose as well, in order to distract the guards.

“You’re good, Lang,” Clint announced. He held a hand to his hearing aid and nodded. “They’ve muted us, I’m not getting any feedback from the audio surveillance anymore.”

“Coolio, so---logistics?” Scott wondered. “Like, what’s going to happen when they get us?”

“They’re going to need to bring in the big guns to get the tech to go down, especially on that fucking collar they have around Wanda’s neck,” Clint grumbled, seeing the red light against the pale column of Wanda’s throat.

“Stark loaned out his tech to build this,” Scott revealed. “My gir---a girl I know told me that. She’d been super pissed.”

“Stark isn’t going to be the one to help break us out,” Sam wagered
“Well, I do know someone who might be capable,” Clint sat down on his cot. The tone in his voice conveyed the shit eating grin on his face. “She’s awful good at getting into stuff she’s not meant to.”

“Oh for Christ’s Sake!” Sam huffed out in annoyance. “Not this whole, Darcy Lewis imaginary person again.”

“Clint knows an imaginary person?” Scott wondered, his eyes big and wide and hopeful. "Can they walk through walls?"

“Darcy Lewis is a real person,” Wanda disputed.

“Not you too, you’re the sane one here,” Sam reminded her. “Don’t do this to me, Tiny Dancer. You have to be my rope to sanity.”

“I’m currently in a modified straight jacket,” Wanda smirked at the sound of Sam’s reassuringly familiar dramatics.

“Darcy Lewis is this name that he uses, and Stark uses, and Natasha hints about using whenever Steve and I turn up,” Sam explained to no one in particular. “She’s not real, they’re just doing it to torture Steve with his supposedly perfect match.”

“But, Sam, she is a real person,” Wanda insisted. “We spent Christmas together with Clint’s family in Idaho. When you and Steve were looking for Barnes in Brazil.”

“No,” Sam shook his head.

“Yes,” Wanda promised earnestly.

“You’re telling me there is a person out there, a real live human being woman person who bedazzled Nick Fury’s eyepatch?” Sam asked skeptically. “And made Tony Stark’s skin green for a month? And convinced Jarvis to give control of Stark Tower to Dum-E for a full week?”

“Her only previous success with Stark tech,” Clint nodded. “She sweet talked him into it, no hacking required.”
“She taught me how to knit,” Wanda revealed. “And she gave me the idea for my thumbtack globe. We are in a race to see who can visit more countries.”

“So you think Natasha is going to have this imaginary Darcy Lewis work with Steve to get us out of here?” Sam rolled his eyes.

“Not imaginary, and yes. It’ll be a nice meet cute to tell their grandkids,” Clint nodded. “Married within two years is my guess. A year if the birth control fails.”

“I hate to dispute with you Barton, but that’s not gonna happen,” Sam smirked.

“Fuck off, Wilson, I’m the physical manifestation of Cupid,” Clint laughed. “I’ll shoot an arrow in your boy’s ass.”

“Too slow, Cupid. You should have stayed retired,” Sam countered. “Steve and Sharon Carter are a thing now. Saw the smooch with my own two eyes.”

“What?” Clint wrinkled his nose. “What?!”

“Sorry Cupid,” Sam laughed.

“That’s a shame. I quite liked Darcy,” Wanda sighed. “She could bring Steve a lot of joy.”

“Don’t worry kid, Cupid isn’t taken out that easy,” Clint promised her. “You’re gonna learn and learn quick, Wilson. Darce gets into all sorts of kind of things she’s not really supposed to. And Steve’s heart? That’s gonna be one of them if I have anything to say about it. Shit--Lang...sing.”

“EVERY ROSE HAS ITS THORN JUST LIKE EVERY NIGHT HAS ITS DAWN!!”

Chapter End Notes
I promise that we start the real rescue in the next chapter. This thing is getting much longer that I originally thought it would be. Still I am having a lot of fun

And that is thanks to everyone reading and being so very welcoming and kind! Thank you!!!
Chapter Notes

This is the longest thing I've ever written (except for term papers, but who cares about those?).

Things get a little crazy here. The chapter was originally titled "Oxygen Deprivation and Self Defense Basics", before the chapter got out of hand and a little long.

I hope that you guys like this!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Four: The Rescuers

“I feel something.”

Scott fell from his cot at Wanda’s words, rolling on the floor so he was on his stomach, his head moving back and forth as he looked outside for any potential rescuers. Sam got closer to his door, looking cautiously optimistic. But Clint remained calm, cool and collected, laying back in his cot, seemingly enjoying his moments of quiet solitude for the moment. The complacent smile on his face looked out of place, but certainly it was not unwelcome.

“Is it--- big poppa ?” Sam winced. They really needed to work on their coded conversation.

Wanda giggled and shook her head.

“Do you remember that song? From a long time ago? Ice Ice Baby too cold ,” Wanda looked up at her ceiling in obvious amusement.

“Long time ago,” Scott huffed out in annoyance. “I’ve never felt so old.”
“Someone is thinking the lyrics. Repeatedly. It’s as if the song is on repeat in their head,” Wanda giggled again.

“Is it one of the guards?” Sam wondered.

“No, definitely not,” Wanda shook her head.

“A girl? Kind of a high pitched voice?” Clint put his hands behind his head and grinned at the ceiling when Wanda made a humming noise of approval, giggling when she realized who it was that was singing.

“It is very far...but strong still, and getting closer.”

“Yeah. Won’t be long now,” Clint nodded. “Be ready to move.”

“You’re nervous.”

Darcy looked up from her place on the bench in Steve and Bucky’s quinjet. They had disengaged ten minutes ago and Steve was dropping the bird gently to land in the choppy waters of the Atlantic. At least it had stopped storming. Twenty-four hours earlier, and they would have had a hell of a time getting to where they needed to go.

“I’m not nervous,” Darcy said with false bravado as she stared up at Bucky in cheeky defiance.

“Little Widow, I can tell,” Bucky promised her. “I taught the coping mechanisms to Natalia.”

“Yeah...so that. How’d it go after I left?” Darcy wondered with a wicked little smirk.

“Deflection won’t work on me, little lady,” Bucky smirked right back at her.
“So it went bad? I mean...she’s single and ready to mingle, but I understand if you’re not ready to commit to anything serious,” Darcy nodded. She shrugged and her smirk went five shades wicked-er. “Or you know, I’d understand if you and Spangles wanted to rekindle something.”

“Spang---hey now, we’re brothers, and he’s never gone for a boy---oh,” Bucky shook his head as Darcy’s smirk turned into a feral little grin. “You’re good.”

“So I’ve been told,” Darcy shrugged again as Bucky sat next to her.

“Why are you nervous? You gotta share these kinds of things when you’re a part of a team,” Bucky told her seriously. “We need to know in case things go south, doll.”

“I would prefer the code name Little Widow,” Darcy sighed. “Or Rainbow Widow. Yeah. Like Rainbow Brite, but super deadly and kick ass.”

“Little Rainbow Widow,” Bucky said sternly. “Why are you nervous? No one will lay a hand on you. Me and Steve wouldn’t let it happen. You do your computer thing and then wait for one of us to retrieve you.”

“I can take down an armed guard or two when the situation warrants it,” Darcy promised. She sighed, “I don’t like to swim. I’m not very good at it.”

“You won’t be swimming much from what I saw of it,” Bucky shook his head.

“Just ten feet down in the very powerful Atlantic Ocean,” Darcy shivered. “I don’t even like baths.”

Bucky looked at the shiny silver tape that Darcy had used to tape him up. The weights were really amazing. It truly felt like the arm was there and he knew that they were nearly identical to the weight that the metal arm had been.

“This is water proof?” he questioned.
“Duct tape is waterproof. It was gifted to us by the Gods. Janie and I could save the world with duct tape, just like Macguyver,” Darcy arrogantly asserted.

“Don’t know any Macguyver,” Bucky smirked. “But Stevie will go down first. He’s got to take care of the tube. You will hold on to me, and we’ll go down together.”

The quinjet jostled as Steve brought it to rest on the water and he appeared in the quinjet bay looking curiously between an earnest Bucky and a grateful Darcy. Bucky gave him a look, and Steve knew he wanted him to do something, to say something to Darcy, but for the life of him, he couldn’t think of what.

“Are you---I mean, are we ready?” Steve wondered.

“As I’ll ever be,” Darcy nodded, holding out the waterproof bag to Steve. “You’re doing the heavy lifting, really. I’m just going along for the ride.”

Steve took the bag, and made his way to the bay doors, which were set in their water open positions. He gave Bucky and Darcy a confident smile before taking a deep breath and diving right into the frigid waters of the Atlantic. Halfway down, his brain made the connection of what Bucky had wanted him to do and he cursed himself. Darcy had needed reassurance, and instead he had just plowed straight ahead into the mission. He wouldn’t have known what to say anyway. Legendary tales of mischief and defying any and all authority aside, Darcy was still a civilian. He couldn’t just give her a rousing speech and expect her to be reassured from it.

He was still plenty awful with pretty dames. His awkward kiss with Agent 13 had proven that.

Steve’s hand gripped onto metal and his other hand went for his tool belt where he had secured the long, collapsable ventilation tube that would have normally been used for gas extraction in a mission. He placed it around a circular manhole and secured it with adhesive that Natasha had found from a prior mission that had involved Clint being secured to the bottom of a helicopter for a few hours. If it could hold him going the speeds he had been going, it could certainly hold the tubing.

Steve began pulling out the devices that Laura and Jane had cobbled together. One went on the end of the tubing that would float up towards the surface, and the other went on the bottom by the manhole.

He grabbed the end of the ventilation tubing and pushed off of the prison, shooting up towards the
surface with it, ending about ten feet from the topside of the ocean. He reached into the tubing and turned on the power, shaking his head in amazement as the ingenious little device did it's job, pushing all the water in the tubing upwards towards the surface, creating nearly half a mile of airtight space in the tube.

He let go of the tube, the flow of water and suction keeping it steady and in place and popped out of the water with a gasp for air.

“Holy shit!” Darcy squealed from her place beside Bucky where they had been staring at the dark waters of the Atlantic in apparent worry. “Dude, you were down there for five minutes!”

“He’s losing his touch, I know,” Bucky grinned at Steve. “I can beat him on that.”

“We’re working on a time limit here,” Steve reminded them. He watched with interest as Darcy nodded, took a few deep breaths to calm herself and jumped right into the ocean.

“Hey!” Bucky called out. That hadn’t been the plan. He glared at Steve and said, “She said she’s not a strong swimmer!”

Steve dove for her at the same time that Bucky jumped into the water. Steve reached her first, seeing that she was stubbornly trying to push her way downwards, with little to no results except for frustrating and scaring her. She had begun to thrash when he reached out for her, grabbing her arm and yanking her downwards. Bucky was right there, powerful legs and his one arm pushing him just as efficiently as any normal human swimming in a gentle lap pool. He nudged Steve forward and they swam with Darcy clinging to Steve’s hand towards the tube.

“Oh god, oh god, oh god!” Darcy whispered as soon as Steve had pulled her into the safety of the tube. She took deep gasping breaths.

“You can’t swim,” Steve accused.

“I can, I just...suck at it,” Darcy shook her head.

“You knew you’d have to swim to do this,” Steve furrowed his brow as Bucky pushed into the tube behind them. “Why’d you agree to it if you knew you’d have to swim?”
“Your human logic makes no sense to me,” Darcy’s mouth twisted into a frown. “I needed to be down here to help, so I figured...I’d find a way to figure it out.”

“Or you could have held on to me like we planned,” Bucky reminded her.

“Again, human logic. The Rainbow Widow prefers troll logic,” Darcy finally got control of her breathing. “Okay, let’s do this.”

The travel down to the prison was slow and painstaking. They had created a vacuum of air, and it wasn’t as easy as sliding down the tube. They actually had to work at it, their hands gripping the boning of the ventilation tube and pulling themselves down ring by ring. Darcy was completely winded halfway down.

“Natalia is lazy in her training of you,” Bucky muttered as Darcy paused for a breath again. “A true Widow would be able to do this without her lungs exploding.”

“Natasha Romanoff is a benevolent and kind taskmaster,” Darcy insisted between wheezes that reminded Bucky painfully of Steve’s asthma attacks prior to the serum. “Also, you try staring at Captain America’s ass while doing the equivalent of a reverse Jacob’s ladder in a severely oxygen deprived tube.”

“In Mother Russia that was called a Tuesday,” Bucky muttered dryly.

Darcy full out stopped and began intermittently cackling with laughter and wheezing for breath. Bucky rolled his eyes. Steve shook his head, glad to see that neither of his mission companions could see his red stained cheeks or his amused smirk.

“Stevie? Remember what we had to do with Morita when he sprained his ankle in Vienna?” Bucky demanded.

“Got it,” Steve called out, stopping his steady descent downwards. He took a deep, indulgent breath, feeling the oxygen getting thinner the closer they got to their entrance point. He heard an enthusiastic slapping sound as Bucky’s hand met Darcy’s bottom and pushed her forward towards Steve. Her body wiggled over his back and soon enough he felt her breath against his ear and her curves pressed into his back.
“Hold on to him, Little Widow,” Bucky ordered.

“Mmphphfucker,” Darcy squeaked out indignantly in Steve’s ear.

“Well at least you don’t have to stare at that pathetic excuse he calls an ass anymore,” Bucky reasoned helpfully. They settled into a quick rhythm. Steve would push forward and Bucky would push his hand against Darcy’s bottom, making sure she had enough momentum not to push back against him in the vacuum. Then Bucky would pull himself with his hand along the tube while Steve pushed forward again.

“TREASON!” Darcy called out. “You awful communist fucker, how dare you blaspheme Captain America’s red, white and blue ass of patriotic perfection!”

“Oxygen is getting thin,” Steve called out nervously. Darcy was babbling in his ear incoherently. Mostly it was about the virtues of his ass. And how Bucky was a filthy communist. “Almost there Miss Lewis.”


“I’m not calling you that,” Steve shook his head in bemusement, blushing heavily when Darcy’s lips accidentally hit his neck when he moved.

“Then at least call me Darcy,” she insisted. “BARNES. Let that hand squeeze my ass like that one more time and I will get Nat to yank off the other arm and then I will punch you in the balls with it!”

Steve decided not to chastise her about the inappropriateness of her joke after hearing Bucky’s bemused chuckle and whispered, “Natalia knows how to pick her apprentices.”

“Here,” Steve announced. He reached out for the manhole cover as Darcy groped around his body to access the bag he had strapped on his body. Her hand landed against the crotch of his pants and she squeezed not-so-little-Cap and shouted an apology in his ear at the same time.

“Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap. I’m going to have my citizenship revoked, I just sexually assaulted Captain America!” Darcy wailed. Bucky gently smacked her bottom and she screeched in Steve’s
ear, “BARNES! I DON’T WANT A KINKY ALL AMERICAN THREESOME! I’M NOT READY FOR THAT!”

“Calm down, little rainbow widow,” Bucky ordered gently. “Stop trying to pull in so much air, it’s doing you no good down here.”

“It’s not that you’re not handsome, Barnes, cause DUH, you are,” Darcy babbled, her head positively swimming in a fog as she completely lost her usually very small brain to mouth filter. “But I’m pretty sure you got Property of the Black Widow stamped on your ass right next to the tattoo of Steve’s shield.”

“Darcy, please, focus,” Steve managed to say softly. “I know that your head hurts right now, and you’re having trouble thinking, but we need to get in here and I promise you’ll be able to think clearly then.”

“Okay, I’ll do it for America... and your booty,” Darcy nodded against him, her hands going for the bag and grabbing Laura’s favorite chisel. She jammed it into the manhole’s weak point and wrapped her arms around Steve’s waist and burrowed her face into his neck.

“Little Rainbow Widow,” Bucky whispered softly, squeezing against her ankle.

“Cozy,” Darcy mumbled against Steve’s skin. “His skin is like poetry.”

Steve furrowed his brow at that even as he worked at opening the cover. The words felt familiar.

“Get that phone out, kid,” Bucky reminded her. “You’re going to need to be ready and raring to go when Steve gets us in.”

“Yes, I will stun you with my mad crazy skills,” Darcy reached for the bag again and pulled at a zipper. “I’m usually hella more competent than this but I can’t---I can’t breathe.”

“Darcy, that’s my pants zipper,” Steve’s voice sounded strained as he worked the chisel around the circumference of the manhole.

“Guess I gotta buy you dinner first,” Darcy grumbled, her head swimming at the lack of oxygen.
She could feel her vision going dark and she whimpered as she went for the bag weakly and managed to pull out the super powered smartphone that would allow her to work her magic. If she hadn’t caused herself permanent brain damage before then.

“If you hold on just a little while longer, I’ll make the punk make you dinner,” Bucky promised. Darcy wasn’t responsive and Bucky could feel the cold dread running up his spine. She had less than a minute before the oxygen deprivation would do real damage. “Stevie, please hurry.”

Steve jammed against the chisel harder and let out a groan of exertion as he clenched his teeth and used all of his strength for a full thirty seconds before a loud, creaking metallic sound echoed through the tube and they were all blasted in the face with a breath of fresh air.

“Get her inside,” Bucky ordered.

Steve was already doing that, gripping Darcy’s hands that were lifelessly hanging on his waist with one hand as the other pulled himself into the darkened utility room. He had her on her back in less than a heartbeat and didn’t hesitate in pushing her head back and bringing his mouth down to hers to push air back into her lungs. He hadn’t felt her heartbeat against him for at least fifteen seconds at that point.

Bucky clamored in and shut the cover grabbing for Darcy’s phone and staring at it in wonder.

There was a large red button on the screen, with the words *Press here to save us if I pass out from oxygen deprivation*.

Bucky did just that and watched in amazement as the screen was replaced with a rapid fire line of 0’s and 1’s, obviously doing the job it was meant to do, covering up the blip in the prison’s security with some kind of diversion and overriding camera feeds for a fifty yard radius. He looked back to Steve, who was checking for her pulse.

“Why didn’t they think she would need oxygen? We should have prepared for that,” Steve demanded anxiously.

“She did,” Bucky held up the phone, which had a series of buttons to press now that the initial security measures had been taken care of. “She knew what she was doing.”
“Miss Lewis? Darcy? Please wake up,” Steve placed a large hand against her neck, feeling the weak thrum of her heartbeat once more. “Open up those beautiful big blue eyes and give us a smile. Talk about my ass some more, I don’t mind.”

“Charmer,” Darcy whispered. She blinked her eyes open and a slow smile spread across her face. “Your ass should be right next to those dead presidents on Mount Rushmore. It’s like a national treasure.”

“Thanks,” Steve smiled down at her. “I’ll bring that up to Congress the next time they invite me back for a visit.”

“Did I get the kiss of life?” Darcy sprang into a sitting position very quickly. She felt her lips and they seemed wet, but then again, all of them were a little wet from their plunge into the ocean. She looked up to see Steve’s flush and Bucky’s slow smirk. “I missed it, do it again! Do it again!”

She lay back down and closed her eyes tightly. And the pursed her lips in an exaggerated manner. Then started to make a smacking kissing noise.

“We’re on a time limit,” Bucky saved Steve as he stared down at the cheeky dame in wonderment. The blond doofus leaned in for a split second before shaking his head and changing his mind. “C’mon little Rainbow Widow. We have friends to save.”

“Fine,” Darcy huffed out a sigh, sitting back up.

“Plenty of time for smooching later,” Bucky promised her as he got to his feet.

“Your face doesn’t look like beat up hamburger anymore,” Darcy furrowed her brow at Steve’s completely healed up face once she stopped staring at his shiny bottom lip. “It’s all handsome and perfect again.”

“Thanks?” Steve’s voice slid up an octave by the end of the one syllable word. “Serum accelerated healing.”

“Huh. Handy,” Darcy nodded. She looked at Bucky and saw that his previous injuries were mostly gone too. “Hey your face is perfect and handsome too. How’s that arm feeling? Growing back yet?”
“Fine. You ready for the next step little Rainbow Widow?” Bucky wondered, looking over her carefully, wishing he had that metal arm back so he could get a reliable read on her vitals.

“Yeah, we knew this might happen,” Darcy nodded.

“Why didn’t you bring an oxygen mask from the quinjet?” Steve wondered as he stood and divested himself of his wet uniform, trying not to blush as Darcy wrinkled her nose in disappointment at the sight of simple black ops clothing underneath. “From either of the quinjets?”

“You guys only have three masks on each quinjet,” Darcy shrugged, taking her phone from Bucky’s outstretched hand. “I sent Cooper and Jane back to their quinjet with yours. Just in case they needed them.”

Steve nodded in understanding, lifting Darcy to her feet as she shook off the water from her catsuit. Bucky watched the pair of them in interest, a realization stealing the spotlight in his brain away from the mission. While his reaction to Darcy’s giving up a source of oxygen for an infant (who probably wouldn’t even need it unless there was a worst case scenario) was one of disbelief and exasperation, Steve’s had been calm understanding.

They were selfless idiots, the both of them.

There was an overly analytical part of his brain that began working over his own worst case scenarios now that he understood he had two of them to deal with. Any self sacrificing, noble thing that Steve could do, Bucky now assumed that Darcy would do as well. The difference being that Steve was the supersoldier and Darcy was a civilian. A plucky civilian that had been trained by the Black Widow to some extent, but a small, not really in shape, completely reckless civilian.

Amidst all the Winter Soldier-esque plotting his brain was doing, Bucky also had the errant thought of just how serious Steve was about that blonde he had kissed before the airport. Because if it had just been one of those let’s kiss before I go off to battle and might die kinds of kisses (Bucky had had plenty of those in England between the years of 1943 and 1945) and not the I’m feeling real feelings for you and you have to know before I leave kinds of kisses (he’d only had a handful of those, and they had all come from the same redheaded dame he had met in Russia), then there was some wiggle room here.

Bucky took off the waterproof suit they had found in the quinjet. Steve had assumed it had been meant as a backup for him, as Bucky fit into it pretty well, even if it was a little tight on his friend’s
thighs and a little looser in the chest. Steve looked at Darcy expectantly as she continued to shake water droplets off of her suit.

“Why’s he staring at me like that?” Darcy stage whispered to Bucky, obviously regaining all the faculties she had lost during her oxygen deprivation on the way down.

“Think he wants you to start unzipping that second skin you’re wearing,” Bucky tried in vain to check his knowing smirk aimed at Steve, who tried to dispute the very truthful words coming out of Bucky’s mouth. So it had been one of those, better kiss you now just in case you mean something to me someday kinds of kisses. He could work with that.

“You’ll be able to move quicker and quieter if you weren’t soaked,” Steve defended himself.

“Sure, sure,” Darcy nodded, her hand going for the zipper, slowly pulling it down to reveal ivory skin and the rounded tops of her very endowed breasts. “But fair warning, I couldn’t fit other clothing underneath this sausage casing and I’m wearing my I’m meeting new people today underthings. It’s called Cherry bomb red in the catalogue.”

“Woah there, little Rainbow widow,” Bucky put his hand on top of her wet hair, patting her a few times. “You’re gonna break the punk’s brain.”

“Jerk,” Steve huffed, turning away as Darcy zipped back up, covering up the barest slip of bright, violently red shiny material and a long, beautiful line of cleavage. He reached into the bag and grabbed a gas container. “I’m going out. Give me two minutes before following.”

“Oh.”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up into his hairline at the little sound Wanda made. He looked over at Clint’s cell and put his hand palm up. Clint frowned and blinked twice.

“I wish I knew your code,” Scott sighed heavily. He took a deep breath and sang loudly, “I wanna know what your code is!” to the tune of I want to know what love is.
Wanda flat out gasped as she got a lovely warm tingling feeling in the pit of her stomach. Clint made a loud coughing noise and gave her a stone faced barely perceptible shake of his head. She knew that she should block what she was getting off of the new arrivals on the raft prison. She had worked extensively on it with Clint and Natasha. It was highly inappropriate to be getting those feelings from other people. Those butterflies. The attraction. The very palpable desire. Those were private feelings of other people and she didn’t want to feel them.

But she had to keep a line open to Steve to know what was happening and to warn the others.

If only Steve could shut down whatever was going on with himself right now. Steve was the easiest to connect to. Darcy was not an option. She and Wanda had tried to connect during their time together on the Barton farm at Christmas, but Darcy’s inner feelings and thoughts had been so downright rapidfire and hilarious that Wanda had been overwhelmed with hysterical giggles that had her sides aching. The Ice Ice Baby interlude had been enough to get her snorting with laughter.

And the other person who had boarded, Wanda had assumed it was Sergeant Barnes. She didn’t have permission to ride along on his psyche and she really didn’t think she could handle it. With Steve, on missions, she was allowed to and on missions his thoughts were concise and exacting.

But now he was feeling things about perfect breasts and red lips and someone in dripping wet leather and kevlar. And Wanda wanted to bash her head against the wall.

Steve must have gotten it together, because she was given some relief as her friend and leader focused on the mission at hand. There was a moment of tense preparation and then relief set in as whatever he had done had worked.

Less than two minutes later, after some pretty satisfying violence, the inappropriate feelings were back again.

“God,” Wanda whined in annoyance. “Clint. I’m a believer. I will help you in your cause to bring Steve and Darcy together.”

“Dammit Wanda,” Sam huffed out in annoyance. “New rules, no voodoo allowed in this little bet I have going with Hawknose over there.”

“Won’t need it,” Wanda wrinkled her nose as Steve’s inner feelings ran rampant about the way
Darcy’s hips jutted out in a perfect, soft hourglass. She didn’t know how Steve felt about Agent Carter, but she certainly knew how he felt about Darcy Lewis. “He’s a goner.”

“Fuck me,” Sam rolled his eyes. Just once, he’d like to prove Barton wrong.

“Level 8,” Darcy whispered as she bent over the knocked out body of the guard at the central surveillance station. She bit at her lip anxiously as she saw Clint laying back on his cot, and Wanda wrapped up in restraints with a collar around her neck. “God.”

“Can you disable the collar?” Bucky asked as he moved the guard out of her way and Darcy immediately began working very quickly on the computer station.

“I’ll do it or I’ll fry this whole place trying. Give it to me, you son of a bitch,” Darcy muttered at the computer as she pounded against the keys violently. “I am going to fuck you against the damned wall, you rat faced piece of crap. And when I’m done, I’m going to bend you over and spank your ass until you beg me to stop.”

“Holy cow,” Bucky bit back a chuckle at the way Steve’s eyes widened and pupils dilated at Darcy’s diatribe. This was going to be a lot of fun.

“I can get the collar down and her cell open for thirty seconds right now, but it’s got to go back on another person before the window is closed or else we’re going to have every nation in the world swarming this place in the next half hour,” Darcy revealed.

Steve nodded and reached down, grabbing a guard and hauling him bodily over his shoulder.

“Their little prison uniforms are reading their biometrics,” Darcy wrinkled her nose in displeasure. She began speaking very, very rapidly, her voice tinkling like a lovely bell in Steve’s ears. “You’re going to need to switch them all out with guards in the cell, one by one. And no pressure, but this all has to be done in the next fifteen minutes, because they also have a guard check every twenty minutes. The fingerprint was already done on the last run, the next checkpoint is voice recognition, so yeah…”
“Once Wanda is secure, get the other cells up, we’ll all work on the switch out,” Steve nodded. “And then bring this raft topside.”

“Can do Capitaine,” Darcy saluted him jauntily with a wink before going back to typing rapidly on the keyboard.

“Topside?” Bucky gave Steve an unimpressed look. “You a sailor now?”

“Shove it, Buck, guard her,” Steve ordered as Bucky bent down to pick up one of the passed out guards, a female that was roughly Wanda’s size. “Not all of them got hit with the gas, some of them might come to.”

“I’ll be a-okay,” Darcy waved them off.

“Darcy I can’t leave a civilian alone in a room full of armed men,” Steve shook his head as Bucky heaved the guard over his left shoulder.

“And we have a fifteen minute time line to meet,” Darcy reminded him. “I’ll be fine.”

“No,” Steve shook his head stubbornly. He looked to Bucky and said, “Give me that guard.”

“Get. Out. Of. Here.” Darcy gave her fiercest glare to Steve, which didn’t seem all that dangerous, seeing as she looked like a sweet little kid with the little bits of drying hair curling up around her makeup free face, and her cheeks all rosy from her earlier diatribe against the computer.

Bucky sighed. Looks like they were not only self-sacrificing idiots together, they were also stubborn self-sacrificing idiots together. Neither of them was going to back down unless they were proven wrong. Bucky turned on one foot and his right hand flew open palmed at Darcy’s face in a strike. She blocked him with the precision that Natasha had drilled into her and gripped his wrist, turning it towards a painful angle before Bucky disengaged.

He gave Steve a resigned shake of his head.

“She’ll be fine alone. Tick tock, punk.”
“Three friendly, five unfriendly left on patrol,” Wanda announced with all the spy professionalism that had been drilled into her head by the rest of the team. “Permission to speak freely. Darcy has the feed under control. Steve can’t stop thinking of how smart she is, it’s so adorable that I don’t think I can take Steve seriously any longer.”

“Do we need to do anything?” Sam wondered, pacing his cell.

“Four unfriendly...three, two, one...all out,” Wanda couldn’t help but smile. She strained her muscles against her restraints, hating the feeling of the unyielding collar against her neck. She was not an animal. It said something about her current captors that while Hydra had kept her in a cell, they had never physically restrained her or monitored her so aggressively. If she had been unsure about which side was right and wrong days ago, it was clear to her now. She would always trust Steve. Always.

“Pack your things time?” Scott wondered hopefully. “Not that I have a lot of things to pack...but still. Pack your things time?”

The door to their containment level opened and the thud of a few bodies on the ground could be heard before Sam felt a slow, genuine smile stretch across his lips as Steve Rogers appeared out of the shadows, giving him a half smirk.

“Bout time,” Sam flat out grinned. He gestured his chin towards Barnes behind him, who was pulling shirts off of guards one handed. Sam hid a flinch well and his voice was effortlessly teasing, “You guys stop off and get the early bird special at the diner across the street or somethin’?”

“Ha ha,” Bucky mechanically laughed as he divested the last guard of his weapons and his shirt. “I’m old, I get it.”

“Dude, you’re like a hundred,” Sam reminded him helpfully.

“Technically I’m ninety-nine,” Bucky pushed back.
“Stop with the buddy cop movie and get that thing off of Wanda’s neck and cut her restraints,” Clint hollered out with no small amount of impatience.

Darcy could obviously hear them, and very suddenly, Wanda’s cell door whizzed open. Bucky picked up the female guard and popped her over his left shoulder again.

“Holy shitballs, where’d your awesome metal arm go?” Scott demanded.

“Stark?” Clint ground out. He didn’t even need to see Steve’s small nod of confirmation. There was only one person who could have been responsible for that.

“Are you fucking shitting me?” Sam demanded angrily. “I only told him where you were because he promised to go as a friend.”

“We’ll discuss it later,” Steve ordered, as he watched the blinking on Wanda’s collar with an inordinate amount of anger before it stopped blinking altogether. He pulled it off of her carefully before placing it on the female guard’s neck. He then went about removing the restraints, his anger still bubbling. He knew that his other teammates in the room, save for Bucky and Scott, who had only just met her, had a rather large protective streak for the orphaned twenty-three year old enhanced woman. All previous sins had been forgiven throughout the year that she had done her absolute best to work through her grief and become a part of the team.

“Stop being so angry, please,” Wanda whispered. “I can feel it, and I don’t know what will happen when my hands are free. Please...be ready to duck.”

Bucky placed the guard into the corner that Wanda had been crouched in before exiting the cell and finding some cover. He may not have known the little witch very long, but he knew from what he had seen that she was plenty powerful. He too worried what feeling Steve’s righteous anger and having a pent up amount of energy may do.

“Focus, kid,” Barton called out helpfully. “Think of the snowflakes. Remember how they tickled your nose?”

“Okay, ready,” Wanda nodded as Steve undid the rest of the restraints. She balled her hands into fists and bit at her lip as she tried not to explode with the pent up energy. Swirls of red energy were leaking from her fingertips and she made a small whimpering sound.
Darcy opened the other three cell doors quickly and Steve pointed to the other guards that he and Bucky had carried into the containment level.

“Switch them out,” he called out.

Wanda held up her hands and focused, and the three unconscious bodies were enveloped with highly concentrated red clouds of energy and stood upright immediately before zooming into the rest of the cells. She took deep, even breaths through her nostrils as she maintained the holds.

“Shirts off boys,” Darcy’s voice echoed over the sound system. “Hustle, hustle. Do you want a stripping soundtrack? Because I forgot my ipod, but I can knock out a passible *I’m too sexy for my shirt.*”

“TOO SEXY FOR MY SHIRT SO SEXY IT HUUUURTS!” Scott sang out with enjoyment as he pulled his fancy prison scrubs off. He grinned at Sam and shrugged his shoulders, “Sorry dude. I like the imaginary invisible friend.”

“Don’t just stand there you hunky adonis,” Darcy advised. “Put them on the passed out people and get a move on we’ve got a—oh shit!”

“Darcy?” Wanda called out. She looked to Steve and said, “She’s in danger.”

Steve was off like a rocket, climbing back up the eight levels they had come down to get to Darcy in the control room. He heard a thundering of footsteps below him and knew that once the switch was complete, the rest of his friends would be quick to follow. A set of footsteps was faster than the others and he knew that was Bucky doing his damndest to get there first.

“Hurry,” Bucky grunted as he outpaced Steve in his desperation. Less than ten minutes ago, he had given the okay to leave Darcy alone. If something happened to the little Rainbow Widow, he would be distraught, and not only because Natasha would eviscerate him for losing her protégé. He already really liked the dame. She was a pistol. And also perfect for Steve.

Both of the super soldiers were outpaced by Wanda who rocketed up the eight floors with her powers and landed in front of the door to the control room. She blasted it open and rushed through it even as Steve and Bucky were hot on her heels. Steve worried that Wanda knew exactly where to go. It meant that Wanda could still feel Darcy’s distress. It had been less than a minute since Darcy had been compromised, but Steve knew, and had taught Wanda that every passing second in hostage
situation was incredibly dangerous for the hostage.

“Go to sleep, go to sleep, go to sleep stupid UN guard. Cause if not, I know people with guns and they will totally shoot you!”

Darcy’s singing could be heard ten feet out from the control room and when Steve, Bucky and Wanda came upon the room, they found that Darcy was perched on a guard’s shoulders, another one with a bloody nose lay unconscious on the ground in front of them. She had her legs wrapped around the man’s neck in a move she obviously had learned from Natasha, and was slowly trying to choke him unconscious with her thighs.

“Barton! No cracks about him finding heaven between my thighs!” Darcy called out as the rest of the team arrived at the door. “Actually, this is taking really long, does anyone want to take over in knocking him back out so I can get us to the surface now?”

Steve stepped forward with Bucky. They shared a nod before Steve’s hands wrapped around Darcy’s waist and pulled her down even as Bucky’s right arm wrapped around the guard’s neck and had him out like a light in less than fifteen seconds.

“I loosened him up for you,” Darcy huffed as Steve placed her gently on the ground. She reached out and pressed a few buttons and the previously detained quartet felt the familiar drag of their floating prison as it moved upwards towards the surface.

“Natasha will bring the jet down for loading,” Darcy huffed out in relief. She beamed at Clint as he came up to her and pulled her away from Steve to wrap her up in a bear hug. “There are a couple people who will be very happy to see you.”

“Darce...thanks so much kiddo,” Clint grinned back at her, giving her an extra squeeze before releasing her. “You did real good.”

“Hell yeah I did, and I got to third base with Captain America!” Darcy put two thumbs up before going to hug Wanda. She then looked to an amused Scott and a clearly annoyed Sam Wilson. “Wassup?”

“Dammit,” Sam sighed, glaring at Clint. She was real. She was kick ass. And she was stinking adorable. He hated when Clint was right.
I may take AP Physics, but I'm AWFUL at it. So any kind of physics or science here is completely made up. And if you find flaws in the logic, just know that like the Little Rainbow Widow, I prefer troll logic. Troll logic is excellent. Come over to the troll logic side. We have impossible donuts.

Thanks again for reading, kudoing and commenting. I don't know what I did to get this kind of response, but I'm really kind of terrified I'm going to do something to mess it up!

You guys are awesome!!!!!
Reunited and It Feels so Good

Chapter Notes

Hi! Happy lazy Sunday! I got some typing done today.

This is a shorter chapter than last time, but has something in it that I'm strangely proud of. I hope you like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Five: Reunited and It Feels So Good

Idaho, October 2015

"Steve!" Laura gasped in delighted surprise to see Steve and his friend Sam Wilson at the back door to her house. "Clint's on a training exercise with Natasha and Wanda. But you probably already knew that...what are you doing here?"

"Hi Laura," Steve smiled as she went in for a hug. He jerked a thumb towards Sam and said, "You remember my pal, Sam."

"Mrs. Hawkeye," Sam smiled winningly.

"Mr. Birdbrain Junior," Laura shot right back.

"FALCON IS HERE! LILA! THE FALCON IS HERE!" Cooper shouted through the house. "UNCLE STEVE BROUGHT THE FALCON!"
The thundering sound of rushed, clamoring footsteps echoed throughout the house, and before they knew it, two children under the age of ten were hugging Steve forcefully before grabbing Sam's hands and yanking him out of the house.

"Going flying Ma, see you soon!" Lila yelled.

"I remember when they were that excited about seeing me," Steve huffed out with a smirk as they walked through the house.

"Well this little man is still excited to see you," Laura bent down and lifted Nathaniel out of his gated play area. The little blond haired baby was indeed thrilled to see his Uncle Steve, squealing and squawking as best he could as he reached out his hands for him.

Steve grinned as he took the baby and gave him a gentle toss in the air, careful not to put any strength behind it. He had accidentally used a little too much force on Lila one day in the summer and smacked her head against the ceiling. Clint had laughed at his panicked state over causing the girl any harm and explained that Bartons have to have thick skulls, she'll be fine.

Nathaniel was at the delightful stage of baby where he could support his own neck and sit up on his own, but wasn't entirely mobile except for a gentle, slow belly crawl, much like a cute little worm. He preferred to stand on Steve's chest and bounce up and down as he grinned down with three shiny white teeth and an excessive amount of drool coming out of his mouth. Steve would be lying if he didn't say that even with an eye full of baby drool, his time spent visiting the Barton's were some of his happiest moments since coming out of the ice.

Laura returned ten minutes later with a tray full of snacks and drinks, knowing that between the two Avengers and the two children, they would need every last fruit roll up in her pantry. She sat down next to Steve and watched as Nathaniel began to droop, bringing his chubby little body to lay against Steve's stomach, his head comfortably resting against Steve's right pec.

Steve began to hum a soft little lullaby that his mother used to sing to him on rough nights, all the while rubbing his hand up and down the baby's back as Nathaniel fell into a deep, snore addled sleep. Laura flat out grinned as Steve bent his head and took a deep inhale of the top of the baby's
Laura knew that the first visit to the farm had been a rough one for Steve. Natasha had explained Steve's forlorn, quiet attitude to her as it being the closest thing Steve could be to being jealous. This was all Steve ever wanted before going into the ice. And seventy years later, he was no closer to getting what he wanted.

Laura had made it her personal mission to make sure that Steve visited often after that. Eventually she liked to think that he grew to love it. And if she wasn't mistaken, the current look on his face was the closest thing to peace it had ever been. She wanted to say something, to reassure him that this...domestic sort of bliss, this settled happiness could be his as well someday. That he deserved it still, and while he may not live on a farm somewhere, he could have the same sort of happiness that Clint had found.

It just had to be with the right girl.

"What brings you here, Steve?" Laura wondered, watching as he stood up and went to place the baby in the playpen by the bay windows. He gave her a thoughtful look in return, and she thought that she might FINALLY be getting somewhere with him when the door slammed open and the children ran in again, followed by Sam.

"SNACKS! See, Falcon, told you Mommy would have snacks for us," Lila grinned, grabbing all the snacks her little hands could hold as Cooper did the same. "Let's go, let's go!"

"Did you deliver your memo?" Sam wondered of Steve as he paused at the front door. Steve gave him an eyeroll and Sam grinned wickedly. "Hold on rugrats, you go out and build a big leaf pile, and I'll drop you into it when it's big enough."

"AWESOME!" Cooper shrieked and ran for it.

"I received this high priority memo this morning," Steve explained to Laura. "I think it's a practical joke from...someone with the proper clearance to do it, but---I'm going to need a biometric sign off that you've had the memo read to you by me and that you understand and comply with it."
"Oh... really?" Laura gave a small little anticipatory smile. "Then please, deliver the memo."

Steve nodded and pulled out his phone, pulling up the document that had been delivered to the entirety of the personnel at the Avenger's facility. HIS version of the memo had come with specific instructions about getting the message to LadyBird Barton. And Sam's memo had come with instructions about making sure Steve followed his instructions. Sam had not said what the sender of the memo had threatened him with, but Steve knew that someone had threatened him with something. Something potentially very embarrassing.

At least as embarrassing as delivering this memo was about to be.

He cleared his throat and began.

"To all whom it may concern."

"Go on," Sam prodded, a shit eating grin on his face. He was really enjoying this far too much.

"Please allow this memorandum to serve as notice that while my----that while my," Steve paused and wrinkled his nose as his cheeks burned pink.

"I thought Captain America knew how to read," Laura bit her bottom lip to hold back a cheeky grin.

"The schools weren't so great a hundred years ago," Sam joked.

"Please allow this memorandum to serve as notice that while my vagina has been blissfully and woefully unvisited for quite some time, I am not hanging a vacancy sign at the moment on the doors to the Lady Wonderland or other vital organs, for instance, my heart," Steve read very quickly.

"Slow down, soldier, I can't sign off if I don't hear it all," Laura insisted, shrugging when Steve gave her an exasperated look.

"I am about to embark on a fun adventure around the world, and would like to focus on my job of
keeping brilliant people alive and well. Also I would like to sight see and obtain lots of souvenirs and not pine for any ridiculously good looking gentlemen I may have left behind,” Steve continued, a small smile turning his lips upwards. The writer of the memo had used a small picture of his shield as the period to end that sentence. Laura didn’t need to know that. She didn’t need to gloat anymore than she was gloating.

“Get to the good part,” Sam ordered.

“There are better parts still?” Laura clapped her hands together and did an excited little shuffle of her feet. “Go on, go on.”

“So you would understand that I don't have the time at the moment to review applications for any vacancies I have in the aforementioned...the aforementioned Lady Cave,” Steve huffed out a sigh that almost sounded like an amused chuckle. “It is, as Thor calls it, a magnificent gift, not to be bestowed upon the unworthy. And also, I prefer to entertain visitors to Vajayjayville that I have gotten to know quite well. And seeing the last few years of my life have been just a few extra bags full of crazy, I have not found someone to set up the sausage shop in—"

"Say it," Sam ordered.

"The Pink Palace of Love," Steve choked out, his entire face the color of a tomato as he diligently read the ridiculous memo. "In summary, allow this memorandum to be a legally binding document to all who have heard it, so that if they attempt to match make, talk to me about this friend they know that I'll just love, or surreptitiously send me in a town car out on an all expenses paid blind date with a flaming man whore to test the waters in regards to the face, I will make you pay.

Thank you for your time and attention."

"So who is it from?" Sam asked a red faced, hysterically giggling Laura.

"It's signed sincerely You know who I am, you awful motherfuckers,“ Steve revealed. He held out his phone and took Laura's hand to get her biometric signature. And then he wanted to go into the guest room that he called his and bury his face under the pillows until the embarrassed pink flush could fade away.

"I don't know who it is, but obviously you do," Sam looked at Laura with earnest expectation.
"Vajayjayville. She got Captain America to Say Vajayjayville!" Laura wheezed before falling to the couch in a fit of high pitched giggles. "Oh Steve, I'm so sorry...I've been...pushing a friend of mine lately, and this was just her---her drastic measure. I'm sorry."

"A friend?" Sam repeated. He thought for a moment before heaving a well put upon sigh. "A friend whose name starts with a D and ends with an Arcy Lewis? Otherwise known as an imaginary person?"

"She got you here with SOMETHING," Steve glared at Sam, whose lips pursed in consternation. "Obviously she's real enough. What was it? Picture? Video? Maybe just an audio recording? It had to be big for you to take your orders seriously."

"I think I heard the kids out there, they need me," Sam said quickly before making his escape.

"Sorry," Laura let out one last, tired sounding giggle before she got up off the couch and took Steve's phone, forwarding the memo to her own email account for any future times she would need a laugh. "I may have gone overboard with my badgering of her."

"Who were you trying to set her---" Steve began before shaking his head and looking down at his shoes. He had never even looked at a picture of Darcy Lewis. Never seen her in the flesh. Never heard the sound of her voice. But he'd heard so much about her he felt like he knew her already. She was certainly in the same circle of friends and acquaintances that he was in. He couldn't help but wonder and worry who Laura had so aggressively tried to set her up with. "Nevermind."

"You sure?" Laura wondered.

"Yeah," Steve nodded. "I'm gonna go help build up that leaf pile for the kids."

Present Day, the Atlantic Ocean
Natasha was hovering the quinjet inches away from the platform by the time the escapee's made it to the resurfaced landing pad. Clint rushed on board and held out open arms as his children threw themselves at him. Laura wasn't far behind, holding baby Nathaniel in her arms, tears in her eyes.

"Hey there, smarty-pants," Clint smiled at her softly.

"Hey there, dummy," Laura grinned back. "How was your time in the slammer?"

"Wasn't so bad. I knew my old lady would come and rescue my ass," Clint assured her.

"Doesn't she always?" Steve asked as he climbed on board last. Natasha had them hovering again, and steadily moving towards the abandoned quinjet the super soldiers had flown in.

"How'd Darcy do?" Jane asked of Steve, watching as the girl had her knuckles inspected by Sam.

"Really, really well," Steve nodded a small genuine smile blooming on his face. He got it in check when Wanda held her hands over her ears and winced. "Amazing, really."

"It might have been nice to know that she didn't have an oxygen mask for the dive," Bucky huffed a sigh. "I mean, it was entertaining to have her try to get into Steve's pants a quarter mile down, but still, she passed out."

Laura had hugged Wanda within an inch of her life before checking her over obsessively for any signs of physical trauma, but at the sound of Bucky's words she looked up eagerly. Her eyes darted between having a non-verbal conversation with Clint to a sheepish and blushing Steve. Natasha had mentioned something about a blonde that was in Steve's romantic picture before they had picked up Darcy. And Steve had copped to kissing Sharon Carter himself. She knew that the ridiculously talented Natasha and the earnest Steve were using gossip as a way to placate her very real fears about her husband and Wanda. It had worked wonderfully.
But now Clint was safe and she was ready to start her happy work.

While Clint and Laura were unlike many happily married couples in the world, they did enjoy their matchmaking. Natasha had proven to be obstinately unmatchable. Wanda was far too young. Coulson had been far too picky. So when Darcy Lewis had entered their lives, they had focused on finding her the perfect match.

Clint had thought he had a hunch about Steve sometime after the Chitauri attack. But it wasn't until Laura met Captain America that the in depth analysis really started to be done. The more she got to know Steve, the more she was convinced that he and Darcy would do well together.

Steve wasn’t committed to Sharon Carter. And Sharon Carter wasn’t committed to Steve. Laura just had to figure out how to get to the next step.

“Come on, let’s get something for that rash around your neck,” Laura said to Wanda, taking her over to the bench.

Bucky left the crowded bay of the quinjet and wandered up to the front of the jet, where Natasha was piloting it. He watched the fond smile play on her face as she focused on the delicate maneuvering to get the metal bird as close to the other jet as possible without actually landing in the water. He remembered loving to watch her. To watch her twirl in a pirouette in the privacy of her quarters back in Russia. To watch her use her bare hands to deal pain and retribution. To watch a cool eyebrow lift as she mentally took an enemy apart piece by piece. To watch her moving on top of him bringing the both of them to unreal pleasure. He had a healthy appreciation for Natasha's superior competence in all things.

She licked at her bottom lip just so when she managed to lock in the hover of the jet and he felt his brain go a little fuzzy around the edges.

Not in an entirely good way.

"Auntie Nat, what's wrong with him?" Lila whispered as she hopped up to sit on the co-pilot’s seat.

"Shit," Natasha breathed as she watched Bucky go completely blank. She switched to Russian and whispered, "Good morning, lover."
"Ready to comply," the Soldier answered back.

"Laura!" Natasha called out. "It's happening."

"Already? Damn girl," Laura blinked at Natasha owlishly. "Thought you said you could hold it off until we got to a safe landing space."

"What can I say, I'm irresistible," Natasha rolled her eyes at her friend. She looked back to the Soldier and put a hand on his shoulder and gave him a gentle order in Russian. "Follow me, lover."

"Clint, pilot," Laura said and he immediately handed his baby boy off to Wanda and rushed to the controls. Laura reached out and shoved at Steve's shoulder. "You follow them."

Steve did so without question, watching as Natasha made the short jump down into the water by the other quinjet's bay doors, immediately followed by Bucky—who didn't look at all like the Bucky who had hopped onto the quinjet before him. He looked like the man who had wrapped a hand around his neck and had them both falling into the river a few days ago. He jumped quickly, managing to land on the small space of quinjet that was open in time to pull Natasha up. He didn't even bother offering Bucky, or the Soldier, who hauled himself up one armed, giving Steve a chilly, blank faced stare.

Steve went to board the plane, but was stopped as someone shouted out from the other quinjet.

"Steve! Wait!"

Steve looked up and his eyes widened as Darcy jumped the fifteen feet from the quinjet with a large metal rod in her hand, feet first, her face terrified even as she did it. She splashed into the water right next to the ledge he was standing on and his hand shot out with lightning fast reflexes, grabbing on to her free hand and hauling her up out of the water a half of a second after she had disappeared into it. The momentum of the tug had her wet body slamming against his and he wrapped both arms around her to steady her.

"You alright? Why'd you follow, it's not safe Darcy, he's—-he's," Steve struggled to describe it.

"Triggered," Darcy finished for him, teeth chattering from the cold as the ocean breeze whipped around them. "Nat explained it before to me and Laura and Jane, what might happen. I'm here for
backup, just in case..."

"They couldn't have sent Wilson down?" Steve asked, the slightest hint of anger in his voice. He wouldn't want to question Darcy's competence, but this was the Winter Soldier they were dealing with. Triggered by something Natasha did. Steve felt the metal rod, which felt like a baseball bat against his back as Darcy pressed herself in close to his body heat.

"Laura said Natasha didn't feel comfortable with that," Darcy admitted, watching as Clint took off with the other quinjet and Steve lifted her off of her feet and pulled her into the quinjet and away from the swirling cold winds of the Atlantic. "Clint said he'd take over control of your plane, just in case you had to---you know, subdue him."

"Darcy---what exactly is Natasha going to be doing to him?" Steve whispered in her ear as he pressed the button for the bay door to close.

Natasha was standing by the utility closet, and Bucky was dutifully emptying the contents of the closet into the quinjet bay, his face blank as ever.

"Uhm...I think it's...uhm," Darcy mumbled and he could feel the blush of her cheek against his neck. "They're going to have shenanigans, like probably not doing it but still. Like...mazeltov, Winter Soldier boy. You are Winter Soldier man now."

Steve had the quinjet in the air and had assigned control of the plane over to Barton, even as Bucky was stripping off wet clothes and leaving them in a pile on the floor. Natasha was already in the utility closet and Bucky was quick to join her, closing the door behind him with an excited slam.

“This is going to be a really long flight, isn’t it?” Steve looked at Darcy, who was pink in the cheeks and still shivering from the cold water. He looked down and saw that her suit was halfway unzipped and her wet breasts were on full display. He heard what must have been a body being forcefully slammed against the utility closet door and he nodded to himself. Definitely a really long flight.

Chapter End Notes

So the memo makes an appearance! Was it everything you hoped that it would be?
Next chapter SHOULD be up Tuesday or Wednesday. :) Thanks so much for reading!
You guys rock!
Chapter Notes

Hi!

So, be warned that I think I earned that mature rating for this story with this chapter.

Please also be warned that there is a Red Room moment, where Bucky's will is not his own. There aren't any moments of non-consent in this story, but I do know that people may be sensitive to Red Room/mind control issues.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Six: An Uncomfortable Flight to Wakanda

Russia, 1982

"She is beautiful, is she not, soldier?"

The Winter Soldier did not reply. He simply stared at the grainy surveillance footage in front of him, watching as his Natalia dealt violence and pain with grace and precision. He didn't know what the handlers were trying to accomplish, but for once it didn't involve torturing him. And he had no worry about Natalia's safety. She was on a mission and he was very certain she could take care of herself against the petty thugs she had been sent in to subdue.

She flew through the air like the dancer she was, small but powerful as her fists repeatedly knocked at a man's midsection until he had no choice but to bend to her will and hit the ground. Two men approached her from either side and James almost smiled as she jumped, kicking both feet against the chest of the one man, using the momentum and leverage to push and flip so that the other man's head was between her knees.

She was a thing of beauty. Using the inertia, gravity and anything she could to bring them all down.
"What are you feeling, Soldier?"

The spoken words were different than idle chitchat. James closed his eyes as the handler slapped a small strip of metal across his forehead. It mimicked the feeling of the chair, but thankfully was only pulsing small shocks of electricity into his brain, and not the brain scrambling high voltage they usually used.

"Tell me what you are feeling for your Natalia, Soldier."

"She is competent. I have trained her well." James answered back, his voice gruff and even more carefully blank and guarded.

"Send in more," the handler ordered over James' head.

James could see Natasha's eyes widen on the black and white screen as five more men spilled into the room, these were armed with blades and firearms. He took a deep breath as she did the same on the screen and his mind went through the steps HE would take to eliminate the threats. He fought against a smile that tugged on the corners of his lips as she rolled across the floor towards the largest of the men, grabbing her garrott from her belt and wrapping it around his throat.

She used the large man as a human shield, allowing him to take the bullets meant for her, all the while going for his firearm hand, aiming it and taking quick shots until her other attackers were down. She dropped the man she had used as a shield. It had taken less than ten seconds for her to accomplish the task. He would have taken less time to do it, and would have gone for the kill shots instead of the disabling shots. But he could not fault her for her mercy.

Her mercy and the softness she kept guarded from everyone and only showed to him were what made him love her so much.
He winced as he felt the electricity from the metal band on his head increase and he stopped looking at Natalia and turned sharp eyes onto the handler.

"What are you feeling, soldier?" the handler asked. His smile was sinister as he knelt to look into his weapon's eyes. "To think that we have spent decades trying to burn the life from you, to shock the memories from your mind, to make you a hollow vessel to pour our will into."

James took deep, even breaths as he tried to deal with the pain, which was growing in intensity as he watched Natalia finishing her job on the screen.

"There are things on this Earth that are greater than pain," the handler whispered. "You were a hollow man, soldier, yet you still know how to love, do you not?"

"What are you doing?" James whispered.

"Rewiring."

Present Day, Atlantic Ocean

"I'm going to have to insist that you take your clothing off."

"This is the start of a really good self-insert fanfic, I just know it."

"Darcy, your lips are blue," Steve furrowed his brow as he looked her over from head to toe, his brain going over the symptoms of hypothermia and matching them to everything Darcy was currently exhibiting.
"And here comes the part where you offer to warm them up for me?" Darcy wondered hopefully as she stood in the cockpit, shivering from head to toe. The whole point of the catsuit was to keep the outside OUT, so it hadn't helped that she had already begun unzipping before Laura had practically thrown her out of the quinjet. She had a suit full of icy cold ocean water. She tried to purse her lips but her teeth began to chatter as the cold settled into her bones.

"Does hypothermia have the same effect on your forwardness as oxygen deprivation?" Steve wondered, unable to take her chattering teeth any longer or the way her lip color nearly matched the blue in her eyes. He reached out and yanked at the zipper to the catsuit, pulling the little metal tab clear off of the fabric.

"That's just normal me, sorry," Darcy admitted, her mouth gaping open as Steve gave up on trying to get a hold on the broken zipper and simply grabbed at handfuls of fabric on either side of her body, his knuckles brushing against the swells of her breasts before he ripped with nearly all of his strength. "Uhoh, the rating is about to go up."

Steve did his best to be respectful to her as he helped her step out of the ruined catsuit. But when he bent over to help peel the material off of her legs, she stepped forward at the same time and his face became buried into the cold, pale skin of her cleavage.

He heard a pleasured groan and had to think for a moment to wonder if that sound came from HIM. Thankfully, it had been Bucky, who was locked in the utility closet with Natasha, doing god knows what.

"The blushing is warm," Darcy choked out, her voice even higher than normal and sounding a little strangled. Because the heat from Steve's face did feel very nice against her chest.

"Sorry, I--I didn't...I'm sorry," Steve stammered, pulling away once she was free of the binding suit. He stepped back and went for the weapons cache, praying and hoping that someone kept some kind of clothing there. He knew chances were slim. He and Bucky had searched on their prior flight after Siberia. They stopped keeping extra clothes on board in favor of weapons, as spies and soldiers were wont to do. Banner had been the only one who really needed extra clothing and he hadn't been around for a year now.
He did come up with a shiny silver emergency blanket and brought it back to her, wrapping it around shaking shoulders. He let his hands rest there, rubbing back and forth to give a little heat, but as far as he could tell, it wasn't working, because her lips were still blue and her teeth were still chattering.

"I'm okay," Darcy promised, swaying on her feet.

"No you're not," Steve insisted. He tried in vain to ignore her involuntary little whine when he quickly began divesting himself of his own clothing.

"Best. Day. Ever." Darcy breathed out as the earnest faced Adonis stripped down to his very sensible black boxer briefs. She began to let out little tiny bursts of giggles as he lifted her off her feet and brought her back to the cockpit, sitting down in the pilot's chair before arranging her in his lap chest to chest, with her legs draped over his hips. The majority of her frigid skin was in contact with his much warmer skin.

She snuggled her face into the crook of his neck to avoid eye contact as she went nearly boneless, melting into him. She pulled the blanket up so that only their heads were visible as his large warm hands began rubbing at her back.

Steve knew she had to be able to feel the unfortunately timed, but very warranted arousal as she straddled his lap. She did make a very small, stifled squeak when his hardened length twitched against her inner thigh.

“Please ignore it,” he whispered.

“Uhm,” Darcy answered. She didn’t know how she was supposed to ignore it. It was right there. She managed to shrug and said, “I get it?”

The sounds of a ruckus coming from the utility closet made her squirm a bit and she missed the deep swallow that Steve did as she looked up at him and wondered, "If we don't find crap to talk about, then this is going to be the most disturbing trip in the history of all trips."

"Yeah, uhm, sure," Steve nodded. "Do you have---are you seeing anyone right now?"

"Nope," Darcy said quickly. "You?"
"It's---there's---I don't know," Steve admitted.

"Steve, I'm not really sure how you wouldn't know if you were seeing someone," Darcy let out a sigh as his fingertips hit a special spot on the small of her back. "But it certainly sounds like a complicated and distracting story. So...what's their name?"

"Well...I think to make sense of it, I should go back to the beginning," Steve nodded in determination. It might help to talk it out, to sort his feelings. "What do you know about Peggy Carter?"

"That she's a badass legend amongst mere mortals," Darcy answered quickly. "The movies and tv series that were based around her really didn't do her justice. Fury wouldn’t let me meet her because he was afraid I’d bust her out of the nursing home and we’d go on the run together, destroying bad guys."

"Yeah, I could---I could see that," Steve laughed, thinking of that week of downtime he had spent with Sam at the Barton farmhouse and how they had binge watched through the entirety of the early 2000’s television series. They never managed to get Peggy quite right, but Darcy seemed to have a handle on who Peggy Carter was. "So...back during the War..."

"So what do you want to do, man?" Clint asked of Scott.

"I want to fly this jet, because of reasons," Scott answered back quickly, staring at the amazingly complicated quinjet controls.

"Seriously, Lang," Clint insisted. "We are currently four hours out from Wakanda. You are an escaped vigilante on the run from over 100 governments around the world."

"I was trying to forget about that bit, actually," Scott sighed, his face turning serious very quickly.

"What's the situation with your kid, usually?" Clint wondered.
"Child support means I get to see her," Scott shrugged. "And I've been pulling down some regular money with Pym, but I don't really know if he'll keep me on now, you know, since I technically was seen by the entire world in the suit and fighting Iron Man. And you know, they confiscated the suit."

"Buddy, money is not a problem," Clint promised. "We can get you money if you need it. Hell, we can get the suit back, and Sam’s wings and my bow. Trust me, we can get them back. The main question is, where you want to end up. Africa? Somewhere else?"

"I'd like to go home. See my daughter, and try to explain it to her," Scott admitted softly. “Don’t think I could stay, not unless Pym can come up with something.”

"Okay, I can work with that," Clint nodded. "When Natasha has less on her plate, we'll be able to figure out a way."

"Less on her plate," Sam huffed out as he walked into the cockpit. "Fucking Barnes, man."

"She was never going to take your romantic advances seriously, Sam," Laura reminded him as she pushed past him and sat down right in Clint's lap, wrapping her arms around his midsection. "You flirt with everything that moves."

"And everything that doesn't move," Clint smirked.

"I saw you charm a telephone pole once," Laura continued.


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**Russia, 1982**

The first time it had happened, it had taken the Black Widow by surprise. She had returned to the
Red Room after a successful, if very unusual mission, where the unending supply of enemy had popped up to try and stop her in a steady rhythm. Ten minutes of rest, three minutes of fighting. Ten minutes of rest, three minutes of fighting. On and on for at least two hours.

When she had returned, she was surprised to find James in her room. The handlers let them have their fun together, under the guise of James training Natalia in all of the deadly arts, even those that might require her to be between the sheets. But when she was away from the facility, they kept James very busy, training the other girls, prepping him for his own missions, and of course the conditioning had to be kept up.

Unlike the other girls, including Natalia, who had been given a memory wipe at the very beginning, and then never remembered their parents or former lives, James would begin to remember. He had told Natalia about it one early morning, just as the sky started to lighten from a deep inky black to a dark blue. Flashes of America. Red White and Blue. A silly song he used to sing to get on another's nerves.

The first time the after effects of the new conditioning had happened, he was laying in her bed, his brow furrowed, and sweat on his forehead as he had a tumultuous dream.

"Steve," he whispered. "What'd they do to me?"

The words had been in English, and the accent, Natalia would come to know later, was from Brooklyn. At the time she didn't know, she only wanted to soothe him. She let her hand wipe the sweat from his brow before letting her fingers run along the sides of his scalp. Her words were soothing and soft as she drew him out of his nightmare.

"James, return to me," she whispered in English, hoping it would draw him out of the nightmare in a non-violent way. She let her lips press against his brow before she switched back to Russian, "Open your eyes, lover."

"S'nice to wake up to," James drawled out in that accented English. He gave her a slow, lazy smirk and sighed in contentment as she continued to massage his scalp. He reached up for her and pulled her down so her body lay against his before he met her plump lips with his own, kissing her avidly, but in a very different way than usual. There was a warmth and laziness in the way he took her bottom lip between his own, sucking languidly before letting his tongue lick into her mouth as his hands went to her rear end and grabbed two handfuls of her flesh and squeezed.

She found a short little laugh bubbling up and broke the kiss, looking down at him curiously.
"You are very different, at the moment," Natalia admitted. She wondered if he had been programmed this way for an upcoming mission.

"Feel good," James shrugged, giving her nose a kiss before squeezing his hands against her again. "Warm."

"It's not a bad different, James," Natalia insisted. "Just different. I like the way your eyes are right now. Lively."

"I'll give you lively," James grinned devilishly before flipping them on the mattress so that the bulk of his body pressed against hers heavily. His hands gave her ass one final squeeze before going about the task of divesting her of her clothing. She simultaneously went for his own clothing, nimble fingers making quick work on buttons and pulls on the black uniform pants he always wore. Her hands pushed them down his body and she wiggled her hips as he pulled down her own pants and underthings together.

"Beautiful," he sighed, looking at her as the light outside increased steadily. Her bare skin was glowing in the sunrise. He let his flesh hand run up her sides as he propped himself up on his left arm and stared down at her. "You're like a goddess."

"Goddesses were worshipped, weren't they?" Natasha arched a brow at him.

"Happy to lay my offerings at your altar," James promised, inching his way down her body, placing wet, sloppy kisses against random spots on her body. He grinned against her skin when she shivered at the contact on the skin beneath her breast and lingered there, sucking a mark against her pale skin.

"James, no marks," she scolded too late. Marks were always a pain to cover for difficult missions.

"No one's looking there," James insisted, moving to make the same dark shape against the skin under other breast.

"You don't know where someone might have to look," Natalia rolled her eyes.

His hands gripped at her hips and he stared up at her with a fierceness in his eyes.
"No one will look at you there but me," he pushed through gritted teeth. The heavily accented English was back, "I'd like to see the man who tried to look at my dame that way."

"James," Natasha whispered, staring down at him in genuine confusion.

No one knew where the Winter Soldier came from. But his words sounded like they had come from another generation altogether. Her natural curiosity had to be pushed aside, as James continued to kiss down her body, the lazy sloppiness replaced with a possessive thoroughness. He pushed her thighs apart to accommodate his shoulders and she shivered at the feel of his metal hand gripping one of her hips as he avidly sucked at the skin at the juncture of her thigh, leaving as many marks as he could.

"James," Natasha tried to scold again, but sounded half-hearted at best in her conviction.

"My girl," he murmured against her before allowing his tongue to part her wet folds, his nose nuzzling languidly against her flesh.

Natalia arched her back and let out a throaty, indulgent moan as he branded his ownership into her skin. She was always amused when James would report to the handlers that her seduction techniques were improving when they asked for a report. He had taught her a few things at first yes, but most of their private time together was dedicated to his thorough worship of her body and not him teaching her how to seduce a man. Her hands went to grasp at the heavy locks of his overgrown hair between her thighs and she pulled viciously as he groaned against her skin.

The Winter Soldier may have been a dangerous weapon in the hands of a frightening organization, but they hardly knew how devoted he was to giving her unending pleasure. Flesh fingers worked their way inside of her, stroking and petting her until she was writhing beneath him, his name spilling from her lips in a whisper as she broke into a thousand shimmering, beautiful sparks.

He loved the sound of it. He loved the feel of her. He loved giving her these moments, away from pain and structure and death.

He loved her.

He felt his brain go fuzzy and his movements stilled. A stiffness and readiness went through his body as he looked up at her with blank eyes.
"James?" Natalia questioned, looking down at him curiously. "What's the matter?"

"Ready to comply," he nearly whispered.

"What---what did they do to you?"

Present Day, Atlantic Ocean

Once Natasha had secured them in the utility closet she had looked at Bucky sternly and ordered him with absolute conviction.

"Lover, do as you wish."

He faltered for a moment, unsure. He hadn't been pushed into compliance mode and told those words in over thirty years.

"Ready to comply," he said back to his handler, who only shook her head at him. The swish of vibrant red hair around her face made something twist in his gut. He repeated with slight desperation, "Ready to comply."

"You are not my weapon," Natasha insisted. She did the same thing she had tried to do all those years ago before they had been forced their separate ways. Obviously she hadn't broken the programming completely, but she would do her best to do it now. "Do as you wish."

The soldier furrowed his brow, trying to push the memories that were there past the programming. He remembered doing as he wished. Doing what he had wanted most in the moment. He looked back into the redhead---Natalia's eyes and gave her the slightest of nods before reaching out for her,
bringing her body to crash against his.

His hand drifted over pale skin and he remembered and knew.

"My dame," he whispered. “My goddess Natalia.”

"Yes, you are no one's weapon," Natasha assured him. "You are my lover, and you should do as you wish."

Natasha was not surprised when he immediately dropped to his knees, his thumb hooking into her underwear and pulling down as he placed kisses on every inch of exposed skin. Her hands went to his hair and she threaded her fingers through long locks and pulled at the first swipe of his tongue. He let out a loud groan and Natasha couldn't help but smile.

It was going to be a long and uncomfortable flight for Darcy and Steve, which was no doubt what the meddling Laura had in mind when she pushed Darcy from the plane. Natasha just hoped that the whole idea didn't wind up blowing up in Laura's face

Chapter End Notes

So...do you think it will backfire? Or will Laura get her payoff?

Thank you so much for reading and kudoing and commenting. I'm still so overwhelmed by all of this, but it is very welcome and very much appreciated!
Happy Day before Friday. Day before Prom. Prom Eve. The eve before Prom. If anyone has hints on how to keep a very expensive hairstyling...styled for six hours before I put on a dang corset, I'd be forever appreciative!!

Oh, you don't give a rat's patoot about my dumb prom. Chapter time!!

Chapter Seven: Girl Code

New Avenger's Facility, January, 2016

"You're late."

Sam's euphoric smile disappeared pretty quickly as he entered the locker room at the new Avenger’s Facility. He had worked pretty hard to get that smile on his face and he could feel his mood souring as it slipped away. To be fair, Denise had worked pretty hard to get that smile on his face. Denise was a flight attendant and she had a pretty amazing arrangement with Sam.

She was totally cool with him not being around New York very much. She was a fairly busy girl herself and wasn't at her home base very often. But when their schedules synced up, they would spend pockets of destressing, grown up fun time together.

Sam had called the set-up 'fuck buddies' to Steve ONE time, and the man had called his mother on him and ratted him out the minute Sam had sassed him one too many times. Not because his personal sensibilities had been offended. Far from it. Steve could understand the arrangement as Bucky had had plenty of those kinds of arrangements before the war. He did it just to be a little shit,
really.

Sam picked up his pack out of his locker, and gave Steve his most smart-assiest look.

"There, I'm ready, let's go, Captain Pain in My Ass," he said petulantly.

"If you don't want to go this weekend, just say something and you can stay behind and get some more...R&R," Steve said delicately.

"Don't give me that shit, man. You know that I'm not going to leave your helpless ass run out there after Barnes alone," Sam gave him a stern look. "Have I EVER let you down yet?"

"No...no you haven't," Steve shook his head, looking properly ashamed of himself. "I'm sorry, Sam. I don't really know where my head is at."

Sam nodded his acceptance of Steve's apology before reaching into his locker and getting his goggles before both he and Steve left the locker room for the training field. They walked in silence, Sam surveying Steve carefully.

"You need to get you some."

Steve's eyes widened as he looked at Sam. Any shock wore off quickly and only a blushing annoyance remained as he walked a little bit quicker.

"I'm not saying the whole friends with benefits situation would be as good for you as it is for me," Sam said thoughtfully, although there was a hint of joy in his voice that said he was actually really enjoying this conversation. "I'm fully aware that Captain America needs to be in love before he gives up his V-card."
"Fucking Stark," Steve huffed out, stopping in his tracks and turning to point an angry finger at Sam. "I'm not a virgin."

"Dude...if you don't do it regularly, your virginity will grow back," Sam said with as much seriousness as he could muster. "You know...like cobwebs will start to form on the equipment if you don't use it regularly. And the cobwebs don't go away if you shake it a few times, you actually have to put it to good use."

Steve huffed out a small laugh at Sam's antics. He looked over to the field where Wanda was on a cellphone, chatting happily, a laugh on her face as Vision sat next to her, looking up at the sky in his usual state of curious wonder. Natasha was sharing the latest pictures of Nathaniel Barton that had been taken over her Christmas break, getting genuine smiles from Rhodey.

"I really think this is as good as it gets," Steve admitted quietly. "Seems greedy to want more."

"Are you---are you shitting me right now?" Sam was utterly gobsmacked. "You have friends, good friends, family even, I'll give you that. But you think wanting a little affection is GREEDY? Man---no. Do not come at me with that noise."

"I already had, you know, what most people look for," Steve said softly. "Time just, screwed it up. And it seems sort of wrong to go looking for something to replace her when she's still holding on out there."

"Steve," Sam shook his head.

"C'mon, let's train. Fair warning, Vision will probably want to go over your timeliness training again," Steve smirked.

"Fuck," Sam huffed a sigh.

They approached the rest of the Avengers and Sam was quick to push himself between Natasha and
Rhodey, ever eager to keep away from Vision's lectures.

"So Tony's about to press the button on the ball drop in Times Square, and he gets a text message from FRIDAY, and he just goes WHITE. Completely white and passes out face first on the button," Rhodey laughed as he recounted a tale to Natasha.

"So that's what she was doing," Natasha nodded. "We couldn't understand why she was cackling in the corner, but we figured it was better not to ask."

"I still don't know how she does it," Rhodey shook his head. "Who sweet talks a failsafe Artificial Intelligence program into doing what you want it to do? The first time, sure, it could be luck. The second and third and fourth and so on? That's plain old snake charming talent."

"Vision, you have any insight there?" Natasha wondered.

Vision furrowed his brow and tilted his head to the right, before shaking his head. "Miss Lewis is persistent in all endeavors that she deems worthy. And one such endeavor is always to annoy Mister Stark."

"What'd your imaginary person do this time?" Sam rolled his eyes.

Steve's eyes flicked up from his Starkpad that was filled with the training maneuvers they would be going over that day. He had finally accepted that Darcy Lewis was real, and was out there somewhere being perfect and mischievous and adorable. And a small part of him was glad for that awful, embarrassing memo. He knew that she wasn’t looking for someone at the moment. That maybe, when she was ready, he might be ready to finally give in to Laura Barton and go out to dinner on that sort-of blind date. Steve believed she existed now. And was happy about it. But Sam still adamantly insisted that she had to be made up, even when multiple people contradicted him.

Wanda started giggling uncontrollably and hid her face in her hands.

"She finally got Tony to do a paternity test," Rhodey revealed. "And she made sure FRIDAY
reported to him that it was a match. He fainted from the shock of it."

"Excellent," Natasha mumbled with a smile. She looked up to Steve and gave him a raise of her eyebrows, taking it in good stride when Steve could only blush and shrug as he held up the work in his hands. While Laura and Clint were less than subtle about their attempts at matchmaking, Natasha actually showed some restraint here, unlike her previous attempts in DC. There, she had been trying to throw experiences at him, to get him to open up and understand the modern dating rules and dating modern women, almost like she was trying to train and prepare him for something. Now, she was being patient. It seemed more like elaborate chess moves rather than throwing every single woman in SHIELD at him, hoping something would stick for a little while.

"Bull shit," Sam shook his head, his lips pursed in annoyance. "I'm going to start making up crazy stuff and just blaming Darcy Lewis for it. So when everybody gets their shoelaces tied together and gum in their hair, just know that it was Darcy Lewis that did it."

Present Day, somewhere over Africa

"So...hey, what got you stuck on this bird?"

Jane looked up at the attractive man who was giving her a gap toothed, slow smile and she couldn't help but giggle at him.

"Please don't let my utter refusal to take you seriously make you think you aren't appealing, because you totally are," Jane promised him. He really was cute as a button. "I date Thor, though...so. You know."

"Dr. Jane Foster," Sam nodded in understanding. He looked around the plane and sighed. "Are
there any single women here? Like...aside from the magical unicorn Darcy Lewis, who is set up for an arranged marriage with my pal Steve by at least eight different intermediaries. And as much as I'd like to, I'm not stealing the Winter Soldier's girl.

"I'm single," Wanda called out helpfully, not even taking a moment's hesitation. She was single. Definitely.

"You're twelve," Sam answered back.

"I am twenty-three years old, and will be twenty-four in two months!" Wanda shot back petulantly, sounding very much like a twelve-year-old.

"You have like---six dad figures, I'm not signing up for that kind of trouble," Sam shook his head.

"Hey, children," Laura poked her head out of the cockpit into the bay. "Don't make me come back there. And please, the both of you realize we're going to be landing soon in a country absolutely full of grade A hotties who you've never tried to hit on before."

"Sitting right here," Clint reminded his wife.

“I know,” she sing songed.

Laura went back to him and Sam shrugged, knowing what she said was true. He looked back to Jane and gave her a serious look before asking, "What do you think about this Darcy and Steve business?"

"There's a Darcy and Steve business?" Jane furrowed her brow.
"People have been trying to get them together for the last couple of years, Dr. Foster," Sam told her patiently.

"Really?!?"

Sam blinked at the brilliant astrophysicist. He didn't understand how she didn't see it. But then he thought back to Stark, the other ridiculously brilliant person he had somehow gotten in his life, who didn't notice he had a post it note on his forehead for five straight hours last summer. It had an arrow pointing to his mouth and the helpful warning "BULL SHIT DISTRIBUTION."

Natasha had claimed she was doing that particular prank for a friend. A friend who wasn't imaginary. A friend who was apparently destined for Steve Rogers.

"I don't like it," Jane shook her head.

"What now?" Sam's face went slack with shock. "Care to repeat that?"

"I don't like it," Jane repeated. "I know what it's like to date one of you. I don't want that for Darcy, to have to worry so much all the time."

"She worries already," Wanda offered her two cents in. "Would it really matter to have one more layer of worry to add to it? Especially if the benefits outweigh the negatives?"

"Hush up, child, grown ups are talking! See, Doc, that's what I'm saying!" Sam held out his hand for a high five, pleased when Jane slapped him back with a good amount of force. "Rogers has got enough on his emotional plate. He doesn't need to feel guilty about potentially disappointing some normal girl. He needs someone like Sharon, who can understand the needs of his job and stuff, who won't go running away heartbroken the first time he has to cancel on movie night because he has to save the world."
Jane's face went blank and Sam had the good grace to be slightly frightened as she stared up at him in an eerily calm, calculating way. He shuffled his feet and nodded.

"Was it---was it something I said?" he wondered.

"You think Darcy is a NORMAL girl?" Jane asked, sounding very, very insulted. "Define a NORMAL girl for me, Mr. Wilson."


"Auntie Dar-Dar is special! Every person is special!" Lila argued.

"But she's too normal for your super friend Steve?" Jane wagered. "And Sharon...is she super too?"

"She's an agent---"

"Sharon CARTER?" Jane asked. "SHIELD agent."

"CIA now," Sam shrugged.

Jane grinned wickedly. And Sam got the feeling that he had already lost his one and only ally so far. And it had been a powerful one too. Darcy’s best friend could have held a lot of sway in any future boyfriend decisions.
"I think super Sharon and super Steve would be very happy together," Jane said sweetly.

"Really? Cause you look like you're trying to murder me with your eyeballs," Sam admitted.

"Hmmm," Jane gave a noncommittal hum. "I think I probably look pretty NORMAL right now."

Sam backed away and gave a curious look to Scott, who was looking back at him with a pursed mouth and squinty eyes.

"What'd I say?" Sam wondered.

"If someone called my daughter NORMAL, I'd be pretty pissed," Scott offered helpfully. "Like, shrink down and do some damage to someone kind of pissed."

"Normal is good, normal isn't crazy."

"Dude. Were you paying attention? Cause I was," Scott looked around to make sure this wasn't a practical joke on him. "That Darcy chick busted us out of an impenetrable underwater prison and then followed a brainwashed Russian assassin by jumping into the ocean a few hours ago in order to help protect two superheroes. She's kind of crazy. In the best kind of ways."

"When Sharon gave us our gear back, it made me remember when Peggy had risked everything to help me get to Bucky," Steve said softly, wondering if Darcy was even awake anymore. She had her head against his chest, her arms wrapped around him as they sat in the pilot's chair under the emergency blanket. They had moved very little in the past few hours and Steve had been talking non-stop.
Talking about Peggy. About what life was like back then. About how strange it had been to go from his old body to his new body and what that meant in terms of women WANTING him. About waking up over six decades later and having the woman he had JUST said goodbye to be on her deathbed in the blink of HIS eye.

At one point he had wondered if the wetness against his chest was drool or tears. Darcy had been absolutely quiet as a mouse since the verbal feelings floodgates had opened. She had asked him a few questions in the beginning, but since then, he had just been talking, the sound of his voice in his own ears drowning out the sound of whatever Natasha and Bucky were doing to one another in the closet.

"I don't know that it was fair to her. Kissing her," Steve said quietly. "It was grief and sadness and feelings from seventy years ago bleeding into the moment. It was---it was a mistake. But I don't know how SHE feels."

He'd never talked about himself so damned much. It felt really nice to let it all go. The feeling being lifted off of his shoulders helped counteract the horrible feeling of knowing he had done a disservice to Sharon in kissing her. A very large disservice.

“ I think….I think that in order to know what is going on, you need to have a discussion with Agent 13,” Darcy said softly, her lips moving against his skin. She nodded and made an internal resolution of her own. Of course she knew why Laura had chosen to push her out of the plane to follow Natasha and the super soldiers. If Laura weren’t so damned fun to be around, she might be labeled as meddlesome.

But after hearing Steve’s tale of Peggy, of losing Peggy for good less than a week ago, and then transferring his feelings for Peggy onto her niece? Yeah. Darcy might be in a good place to start dating/looking for Mr. Right. And Laura and Clint had certainly decided that Steve could be her Mr. Right.

But he definitely wasn’t Mr. Right Now. There was far too much on his plate at the moment. And she felt an incredible sadness rolling around her gut at the thought of it.

She slowly inched off of Steve’s lap, careful not to look at his face, which was full of genuine worry. She pulled the emergency blanket and made herself a quick toga to provide some sense of modesty.
“Are you alright?” Steve asked quietly.

“I’m good. Thanks for warming me up,” Darcy smiled before sitting down in the co-pilot’s chair. She looked to the utility closet and wondered, “Do you think they’re almost done?”

Steve shrugged and could sense a difference in Darcy’s attitude. It was as if a fountain of flirtatious energy had been pouring out of her since they had met. Truth be told, he had really enjoyed it. Quite a lot. More than he had thought reasonable. But now, there was only a friendly smile. He couldn’t help but feel the loss of something more and he immediately regretted telling her everything.

“I hope they’ll be done soon.”

“M’sorry.”

“James, you never need to apologize for what we do together,” Natasha whispered, feeling lazy and a little bit sluggish as her hands combed through Bucky’s hair. She hadn’t felt that way in decades, really.

“Do you think it’s broken? The trigger?” Bucky wondered.

“No,” Natasha answered. “Unless I can crash you and a helicopter into a river when it’s happening, it will take a lot longer to break. Even then, I don’t know. All of your other triggers are built around pain, this one is not. It’s tricky.”

“Shit,” Bucky sighed. “It’s going to be happening a lot.”

“The trigger?” Natasha questioned.

“It’s embarrassing,” Bucky grumbled as he kissed her shoulder before rolling over and going to his feet, realizing that he had left his clothing in a heap outside of the closet.
“James, you are currently standing in front of me, nude. I think that we don’t have to worry about embarrassing situations,” Natasha promised. “I’m the trigger. When you are---attracted to me?”

“More than that,” Bucky said softly. “They took the feelings I had for you. When I am---excessively fond of you, I’ll---”

“I understand,” Natasha nodded, a small smile playing on her lips as she held out her hands to him, allowing him to pull her up from the ground. She had had her suspicions. “So, when you are feeling excessively fond, we will find ways of doing this again. Giving you your agency back is helpful, obviously. You are in control now.”

“Natalia, are you sure?” Bucky furrowed his brow.

“James, there has been no one that I have been...so excessively fond of,” Natasha said with a smirk as she began to get dressed. “I’m sure.”

She walked out of the closet and threw Bucky’s clothing back towards him before breezing towards the medical supply cabinet and pulling out bottles of water. She took specific note of the guarded way in which Darcy was seated, watching her carefully. She handed off a bottle to the girl who was swathed in shiny silver fabric.

“You’re well?” Natasha asked with a smile.

“I’m great. Steve’s been a great friend while you---were busy,” Darcy shrugged.

Natasha nodded, knowing that Darcy spoke many languages, but the most impressive language was by far her ability to speak Natasha. She got more information from Darcy’s simple statement than she would have gotten from a five page essay. Darcy had decided that Steve was not ready to be in a relationship. Natasha mostly agreed with her on that point.

Bucky came out fully clothed and caught the bottle of water Natasha threw him before he went to stand beside Steve in the cockpit. He looked down at his best friend and furrowed his brow at the forlorn look on Steve’s face.

“You okay, pal?” he whispered.
“Good, eager to get to our final destination,” Steve shrugged, clearly not telling the whole truth. He couldn’t help but feel like he had screwed something up. But it had been so easy to talk to Darcy, and he felt better now, lighter. But his eyes looked at Darcy quickly, where she was peeling at the label on her bottle of water. She looked...subdued. He didn’t like it. He needed to figure out a way to bring back that wildly, inappropriate flirtatious girl. He looked up at Bucky appraisingly. “Are you okay?”

“Never better,” Bucky promised.

“Yo!”

Clint’s voice could be heard throughout the whole quinjet. “Laura worked out the communications systems. And we have something to communicate if all shenanigans are at an end.”

“What do you have, Barton?” Steve asked.

“We picked up something off a news wire,” Sam cut in. “It’s Carter, Steve. She’s been arrested.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I might not have computer access until later on Sunday, so the next chapter won't be up until then. At least.

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you had some fun!
Chapter Notes

New chapter! Yay!

And Prom was a lot of fun. Weird. But fun. What is it about formal wear that makes people goofy and maudlin and weird? So much drama (I like watching drama though. Totally entertaining).

Also, my hair lasted until 7 am the next morning. IT WAS AWESOME.

Thanks for all the well wishes last time. You guys are super nice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eight: The Rescuers Part Deux

November 2013, London

“Do you have an appointment?”

Sharon Carter looked down on the short woman in front of her. Darcy Lewis. Unpaid intern to Dr. Jane Foster. She had been warned by a multitude of people on her way to London that if she were to come into contact with Darcy Lewis, she should probably, definitely run away in the opposite direction. Maria Hill had warned her that Darcy could smell fear. Fury has even given Sharon a smirk when Sitwell had assigned her to London cleanup.

Sharon had been expecting a mean, evil, beast of a woman.

She had not been prepared for a small, curvy young woman, dressed in a pair of teenage mutant ninja turtle footie pajamas, with taped together glasses on her face and a wide, friendly smile on her mouth.
“No?” Sharon shook her head. “I didn’t know how to call to get an appointment.”

“Did Natasha send you?” Darcy asked, seeming friendly enough.

“No, she’s not available,” Sharon answered.

“Okay, then I’ll see you later,” Darcy waved cheerfully before she closed the door to Jane Foster’s apartment in the SHIELD agent’s face.

Sharon stood there, feeling the slightest bit dumbfounded at the breezy dismissal. She knocked on the door again and waited a full thirty seconds before Darcy opened up the door once more.

“You’re not the pizza guy,” Darcy sighed in disappointment.

“Miss Lewis, I really need to debrief Thor,” Sharon said with a lot of patience.

“Why? He was barely there,” Darcy shrugged. “I mean, me and my intern and Erik loaded the bases. He just came in at the last minute and hit a home run with Mew Mew, really. Feel free to quote me on that in your report. And also, I like your hair.”

“Thank you?” Sharon blinked as Darcy shut the door on her again.

She was tempting fate. She knew she was. No good could come from knocking on the apartment door again.

But she did it anyway.

“Look,” she said, when Darcy opened the door again, a full ninety seconds later with a hopeful look on her face, only to have it crash into disappointment when she realized that Sharon wasn’t the pizza delivery man. “Miss Lewis. I don’t want to annoy you, but my commanding officer is Sitwell. Do you remember him?”

“Ew,” Darcy wrinkled her nose.
“Yeah,” Sharon nodded. “Help a girl out?”

“You have a very nice face,” Darcy shrugged. She let out a sigh. “Thor is indisposed at the moment. It might be like...an hour, maybe an hour and half before he’s available for talking that doesn’t involve grunting and moaning and shouting about the cure for cancer Jane must keep between her thighs.”

“Oh,” Sharon’s eyes widened.

“I really hate Sitwell,” Darcy wrinkled her nose. “Sorry you have to work for him.”

“Yeah,” Sharon nodded. “I heard about what you did to him. The glasses? That was brilliant.”

“The glasses?” Darcy cocked her head to the side. A look of recognition lit up her face. “That wasn’t that great. I just switched out his prescription. I mean, making him think that he got injected with super soldier serum and his eyesight had been restored and he had super strength and super healing and super hotness? Yeah, that was pretty good. I had no idea he’d go into a sparring match versus that douchey faced Strike dude. That was excellent.”

“You---you made him think he’d had exposure to the super soldier serum?” Sharon repeated.

“Yeee-ees?” Darcy broke the syllable into two. She shrugged. “I sold it to him on the black market, actually. Used the money to keep me and Janie alive for a whole year after New Mexico.”

Sharon gaped at her like a fish for an extended period of time. The pizza delivery guy came and went and Darcy had to pull Sharon inside the apartment while she got her bearings around her. And if Darcy stole the woman’s cell phone and wrote in a code that would let her hack into it in the future while she was in her shocked state, well, that was just a good practice to get into. You never knew when boredom would strike.

“Agent 13? Pizza?” Darcy waved a fresh slice in front of Sharon’s face, breaking her out of her daze.

Sharon nodded and gave Darcy a very small smile. Completely missing the fact that she had never
given Darcy her agent number, “Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

“Oh, Agent 13, I really don’t have a bad side.”

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**Present Day, Paris, France**

It had been decided that the Barton’s quinjet should head straight to Wakanda, letting Natasha and Darcy deal with busting Sharon out of jail while Bucky and Steve remained resolutely hidden on the quinjet. Steve hadn’t liked the idea at all. It had been his fault that Sharon was in jail, using her to get his and Sam’s equipment back. He felt that he should do something to help.

Natasha had obtained clothing for Darcy, as well as some food and drink for Steve and Bucky before she and Darcy left the quinjet together, not giving Steve or Bucky one hint about the plan, lest they try to follow and help. They’d been warned that they were two of the world’s most wanted men, and that no baseball cap and pair of aviator sunglasses would be able to disguise them this time.

“Worried about your girl?” Bucky wondered, carefully unwrapping one of the chocolate bars that Natasha had obtained for them. She had remembered his sweet tooth, and had provided plenty of rich European chocolate for him. Her face had been carefully blank when she had given it to him. The last thing she wanted to do was set him off into compliance mode again, which was probably one of the reasons that he had been forbidden from following after them. It was definitely too dangerous to see her in action.

“Uhm,” Steve replied eloquently.

“Which girl?” Bucky shrugged. “Natalia promises that your dishy brunette is plenty capable. And I can’t remember fighting with your willowy blonde, but she’s alive, so she’s plenty competent.”

“What’s not---let’s not talk about Natalia,” Bucky said quickly. “Not about what she’s---she’s capable
“Alright,” Steve nodded. “Is that part of the trigger?”

“They took what I loved most about her,” Bucky said softly. “How she was so good at what she did, but was still soft for me. They took my feelings for her and made it into a trigger.”

“Your feelings for her,” Steve nodded. “Buck--do you love Natasha?”

“I know it seems strange to you, but you have to understand that we were each other’s salvation,” Bucky explained, his voice soft and quiet, his eyes getting a far off look in them. “For nearly two years, we were the other’s line to sanity. To the closest thing resembling normalcy any of us could ever have. It was the longest amount of time I’d been out of cryofreeeze...she was my only source of light back then.”

“And Hydra tried to take it away from you,” Steve sighed, looking down at his hands.

“I go into compliance mode,” Bucky explained.

“Like in Berlin,” Steve nodded. “Did she hit you to get you out of it?”

“No pal, she didn’t hit me,” Bucky laughed. “She gives me my choice back. Forcing me to choose like that, and having it be her that does it...it short circuits the programming. And I come back.”

“So, she gives you your choice back and you choose to…” Steve trailed off and gave Bucky a wink.

“Steven Grant Rogers, don’t be crass about that,” Bucky scolded, looking shocked and dismayed. It lasted all of five seconds before he smiled, “I would have to be the world’s stupidest idiot not to.”

“Nat’s one hell of a lady,” Steve agreed.

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed, trying not to dwell on it, careful to try and keep his wits about him. “Enough about it. What’s going on with you, punk? What were you up to while Natalia and I were...busy?”
“Darcy had hypothermia, that’s why we were naked,” Steve said quickly, a flush immediately appearing on his cheeks.

“That makes sense,” Bucky nodded. “Good plan.”

“We just talked. No, I just talked,” Steve corrected. “Told her everything. And pal, I do mean everything. It’s like I couldn’t stop talking after not having talked for so long.”

“Little Rainbow Widow has a friendly face,” Bucky figured. “She seems to be able to get people talking, alright. Has a lot of friends to show for it.”

“Yeah, but I think I said too much,” Steve sighed. “Felt different before you guys came out. Like she wasn’t very much interested anymore.”

“You talked for four hours?” Bucky sighed. “About everything?”

“Yeah. That was a mistake, huh?” Steve guessed.

“Stevie, a mistake for what?” Bucky asked. He gave him a rueful smile and reminded his best friend helpfully, “You just met Darcy.”

“You have to understand, I’ve been hearing about her for a long time. For years. My friends have been trying to set us up on dates. Guess they thought we’d be well matched,” Steve shrugged.

“Well, I ain’t gonna lie, I thought the same thing,” Bucky admitted easily. “But Stevie, you just kissed the blonde agent.”

“Yeah, I did,” Steve nodded.

“So maybe the little Rainbow Widow thinks you need to some time to work through your shit,” Bucky guessed. “For both of the Carter ladies. Seems like a smart idea. And looks like you’re going to get a chance to work through everything. You know, since the blonde is about to be our
Sharon Carter very rarely made bad choices. She had always been that person in her group of friends, peers, and relatives who could be relied on to choose the right thing. It was why when she made the decision to follow in her Aunt’s footsteps in her career, everyone but Aunt Peggy had been distraught. Aunt Peggy, God rest her soul, had given her a wry smirk, patted her on the head and told her *It’s about time you started thinking for yourself*.

Even after making the questionable choice of working for SHIELD, Sharon was still level headed. She rose through the ranks, becoming a numbered agent faster than any other woman before her. Because she followed the rules. She listened to orders. She went by the book.

Until Steve Rogers took over the PA system two years ago at the Triskellion and made a rousing speech about freedom. And suddenly, everything her Aunt Peggy had said about the legendary Steve Rogers suddenly made sense. And Sharon understood why Peggy was so loyal to Steve.

Romantic intentions aside, she could understand how someone would risk their career and their own personal well being in order to help him out.

It was why she was currently in a Parisian holding cell. Granted, she had been a wanted fugitive for stealing Captain America and the Falcon’s gear already. But then she had to get caught trying to liberate the rest of Team Cap’s gear in an underground vault in Paris. If said team hadn’t just been busted from the most maximum security prison on Earth fifteen minutes before her failed attempt, she might have succeeded. No. She absolutely knows that she would have succeeded without a doubt. She really wishes she had been kept in the loop on the raft breakout to better time her own nefarious deeds.

“You look like you’re knee deep in deep, deep thoughts. It’s giving me anxiety, and I don’t think I can keep this up if I’m all squicky and anxious.”

Sharon looked up, ready to give scowl to whatever former co-worker was here to gloat over her now. She’d been told that she’d been thinking with her Lady Carter Box in a snide tone by more than one task force member. She hadn’t been though. She’d been thinking with the part of her brain where a worshipful small Sharon Carter sat on Peggy’s knee and heard about the time she and Howard Stark had flown into unfriendly skies to help out Steve Rogers.
In a way, she felt like risking it all to help Steve Rogers was paying her respects to Peggy. And her way of apologizing for kissing him. Because *that* had been a huge mistake.

“Want to make another joke about trading one Carter for another?” Sharon grumbled, looking to the door to her cell.

“Someone said that to you?” Darcy Lewis had a seriously pissed off look on her face and was a lot more formally attired than the last time Sharon had seen her. The slightly younger woman was dressed like any other task force agent out there, along with the credentials pinned to her black dress pants. “WHO?”

“Uhm...nobody,” Sharon shook her head. “What are you---what are you doing here?”

“Oh, I’m here to, you know, bust you out,” Darcy grinned. She looked to the camera in the corner, “We have six more minutes of camera looping, and I have this magic card that will open your cell. So, you ready?”

“I’m, wait, what? Yes, I’m ready,” Sharon shook her head. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought that I explained that already,” Darcy frowned a little before swiping the card on the security panel. The panel’s lights began to go haywire and some smoke started to spill out. “Okay, we gotta go now. They’re going to try to transfer you to the raft in half an hour. And Nat’s gonna need help carrying all that stuff.”

“All what stuff?”

Natasha didn’t need help with carrying anything. She pulled a small Fiat up to the service entrance that Darcy had led Sharon to the moment they had exited the door. Both ladies had climbed in, with Darcy going to the backseat where all of the confiscated gear was. Natasha said nothing when Darcy began fiddling with Sam’s jetpack, but Sharon stared at the young woman warily.
“Do you know what you’re doing there, Miss Lewis?” Sharon asked quietly.

“It’s a good rule of thumb to have contingencies,” Darcy answered back easily. "You never know when you'll have to pull a prank card on someone."

“Like hacking my phone back in London three years ago?” Sharon smirked. Sure, it had been embarrassing for her to be compromised in such a way, but Fury had taken some pity on her. She wasn’t the first or the last person to get duped by Darcy Lewis, after all. Fury had given her the cherry detail of guarding Steve Rogers as a sort of condolence prize for falling victim to Darcy then.

“That had to be done,” Darcy shrugged. “I didn’t like the way Agent 11 questioned my little baby intern at the time. Made the poor little thing cry.”

Natasha snorted, getting Sharon to look at the infamous Black Widow in curiousity. She hadn’t been aware that the former Russian assassin could make a noise like that.

“So, what’s the plan?” Sharon asked, her eyes darting between Natasha, who was speeding them out of the city quickly, and Darcy who had moved on to messing around with Scott’s suit.

“Wakanda,” Natasha answered. “At least until the smoke clears, then I can help you with covers if you want to head back into the world. And I hope that you do, because we’re going to need a capable agent on the outside. It’ll be a while before the exposure on my face dies down, and Hill can’t do all of this by herself.”


“FYI, we’re heading to the quinjet where we left Captain America and the Winter Soldier,” Darcy said cheerfully as she did something that made Scott’s suit vibrate. “Oh, that’ll be useful someday.”

“Oh,” Sharon blinked. “Okay.”

“Is that a problem?” Natasha wondered.

“Just...awkward,” Sharon shrugged.
“Cause of kissing Rogers?” Natasha ventured.

“Of course you know that. Does everyone? I’m assuming everyone knows because big mouth Falcon was watching like a creeper,” Sharon huffed out.

“He’s in your corner, if that makes you feel any better,” Natasha smirked.

“My corner?” Sharon blinked. “Who is in the other corner?”

“Me,” Darcy wiggled her fingers before moving on to Clint’s gear. “When we get to Wakanda, a short brunette with too much personal investment in my non-existent love life may try to set you up with anyone else that isn’t Steve Rogers. She may even try to convince you that you’re bisexual. She’s kind of stubborn. But if she starts to annoy you, just say the following words Pink Moscato, and she’ll leave you alone.”

“I---what?” Sharon blinked rapidly. “I thought the worst thing to happen to me had already happened this morning when I was arrested. And now, what, I’m in a love triangle cliche?”

“Square, really,” Darcy shrugged. “Because Peggy is still there.”

Natasha’s eyes darted to where Darcy was reprogramming Clint’s arrow selector. Darcy studiously avoided her eyes. It was true that as much as the idea of Darcy had been talked up to Steve, the idea of Steve had been sold pretty hard to Darcy. And Natasha had never been able to train the dreamer out of Darcy, not that she would ever want to completely. Darcy had probably been very happy to finally meet the man that nearly all of her friends and acquaintances had declared her perfect match.

But she seemed disappointed now, and Natasha could definitely hazard a guess as to why.

“No offense, but you can knock that back to a triangle,” Sharon gave a sigh. “Because I was able to figure out a few things in the last two days. And one of those things is that I didn’t really know what I was doing when I kissed Steve.”

“And when you risked your career and freedom for him,” Natasha supplied helpfully.
“And when I gave up my career and freedom for him,” Sharon chuckled ruefully. “Aunt Peggy talked about Steve a lot. A lot.”

“The man didn’t live up to the legend?” Natasha wondered.

“No, the man surpassed the legend,” Sharon shook her head. “But look at me. I got arrested for trying to steal evidence back. For what? To continue to be useful to Steve Rogers?”

“I wouldn’t make any hasty decisions today,” Darcy put Clint’s gear down and went for Wanda’s jacket. “We can all enjoy a very uncomfortable flight to Wakanda, hopefully get a delicious meal and a nice warm shower, and figure these things out at a later date.”

The trio of women drove in silence then, the only sound was Darcy’s messing with the leather on Wanda’s jacket for future nefarious reasons. Natasha kept her peace, knowing that once they were all safely in Wakanda, they would have plenty of time to iron out the very complicated details. And if the parties involved didn’t want to do so, there were plenty of other interested parties waiting for them in Africa who would press the issue.

Natasha pulled the Fiat right up to within ten feet of the quinjet’s cloaked hiding place, and Darcy and Sharon grabbed the gear while Natasha wiped down the car. She led them on to the quinjet where Steve and Bucky were waiting anxiously, in various states of worry.

“Let’s head out,” Natasha nodded at them, going straight for the cockpit. She was confident that they had another fifteen minutes before Sharon’s absence was noted, but she didn't want to risk getting any kind of tail on the way to their final destination.

Sharon and Darcy dumped the gear on one of the rolling storage units Bucky had previously removed from the utility closet. Darcy’s touch lingered on Scott’s skin tight suit and she wondered vaguely if she could get it up and over her hips. Sharon gave her a stern look and shook her head in an effort to dissuade her.

“Don’t even think of it, Little Rainbow Widow,” Bucky chuckled.

“But... tiny little Rainbow Widow,” Darcy looked up at him cajolingly.
“C’mon, kitten, come and help me eat the rest of these chocolate bars. You haven’t eaten in awhile, you must be starved,” Bucky put his hand on her shoulder and steered her away from Steve and Sharon, who were now staring at each other warily.

“I’m sorry this happened to you,” Steve said to Sharon earnestly.

“I don’t want us to be a romantic thing,” Sharon blurted with forceful conviction.

“Woah,” Bucky breathed out, stopping dead in his tracks, even as Darcy tried to hightail it to the cockpit. His grip on her shoulder stopped her however and she made a wrinkled nose grimacing face at him in her obvious discomfort.

“Oh...kay,” Steve nodded. “That’s---that’s probably for the best.”

“Yeah, friends,” Sharon nodded.

“Friends,” Steve smiled at her. “I can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done, Sharon. And I promise, I’ll do whatever I can to clear your name.”

“Thanks,” Sharon gave him a small genuine smile. She looked at Bucky curiously and said, “You said you had chocolate?”

“Sure, yeah,” Bucky nodded, gesturing towards the bench he and Steve had been sitting on earlier while they waited. He walked with both Darcy and Sharon, sparing a stunned Steve a shrug before his friend wandered up to the cockpit.

“Thoughts?” Natasha asked quietly.

“Did I just---I think I got rejected twice today,” Steve gave her a self-deprecating smile.

“Yes. Yes you did,” Natasha smiled back at him. “Clean slate, though. Free for all sorts of kinds of doodles. Or maybe even a permanent, well done painting.”
“Sarge, you lame ass fuck noodle!”

Darcy’s laugh echoed throughout the jet and Steve took a deep breath and looked down at his shoes. He composed his thoughts as best as he could while Darcy shouted inventive obscenities at his best friend. Two whole minutes passed before Steve looked back up to a gently smiling and knowing Natasha.

“Got any advice? I’d...I’d be happy to hear it,” Steve admitted, essentially putting himself in her very capable hands with that simple declaration.

“Your match is not a foregone conclusion,” Natasha reminded him. “No matter what the Barton’s say.”

“I know that,” Steve insisted. “I really know that, Nat. But—”

Natasha got the quinjet up into the atmosphere before Steve finally worked up the courage to say what he wanted to say.

“I want it to be the conclusion,” Steve whispered. “I’d like to earn the match that everyone else says was meant to be. I know she's shut the door on the idea, but I want to romance her. I like her, a lot, already.”

“Alright,” Natasha smiled. “Step one. Go back there, eat a chocolate bar, and be the smarmy, smart ass troll that I know you can be.”

“I can do that.”

Chapter End Notes

Is this a slow enough burn to warrant the slow burn tag? (This is my way of asking if I can stop having it be slow now. Like...next chapter can it be over? Is that enough?)

But seriously, this is like the end cap of the first little story arc, all of our peoples are going to be in the same place. The next one is all planned out and I hope you guys will enjoy it, I'm having a lot of fun planning and writing it.
Thanks so much for reading! I'm so lucky to have you guys here.
"REVELS! GLORIOUS REVELS! WE HAVE SLAYED THE BEASTS AND SENT THEM CRYING INTO THE BOSONS OF THEIR GHASTLY MOTHERS! AND NOW WE ENJOY THE SPOILS OF VICTORY! LOOK UPON THE LAND AND BEHOLD WHAT WE HAVE SAVED!"

"A pile of rubble."

Darcy took a delicate sip of her meade as she watched the interaction between Jane and Thor with definite interest. Something was definitely not right, and she totally suspected the absolutely delicious, butterscotch flavored Asgardian drink that Thor had poured into a little plastic cup with Smurfette on it for her. He had asked her what it tasted like to her and he advised her to drink it very slowly. The sudden strangeness definitely had something to do with the meade.

"YET IT IS OUR PILE OF RUBBLE MY DEAR ONE! ALL OF LONDON'S RUBBLE ALL FOR OUR PERUSAL!" Jane practically shouted.

Thor gave Jane an indulgent look as she opened her small arms wide as he, Jane and Darcy had wrapped themselves in blankets and took in the chilly first night of the year in London. The diminutive Doctor had had quite a bit of meade, almost as much as him. The effect was nearly
He felt...calmer. And also his good humor was much different. More sarcastic. More sardonic. Less buoyant and more sharp. It was lovely.

And Jane...

"To Tony of the Starks---not, not the Starks of Winterfell, the Starks of---"

"Manhattan?" Thor offered helpfully, mouth smirking and eyes twinkling.

"Aye! Manhattan!" Jane shook her fists in agreement. "To Tony of the Manhattan Starks for faxing my girl Darcy the contracts this very morning that will keep me from the prying eyes of SHIELD! AND AMASS ME RICHES!"

"And put you squarely in the care of Tony Stark, who will have a science boner for you," Thor shook his head, amused at the very Jane-like words coming out of his mouth. "Jane, I don’t give one small rat’s ass about money, but I know that you working for Stark is probably a good thing. At the very least, you will have Natasha to help you and assist you when I’m not around. And that will be good to keep our little sister from her normal bad behavior."

"Who me?" Darcy looked up with mock innocence. It was an expression that was very, very different from her usual guilty amusement. Where there was usually mirth and gleeful irreverence, there was now a subversive, dry humor and it all lay behind a smile that said butter would not melt in her mouth.

"You look dangerous, Darcy," Jane shook her head. She shrugged and said, "We haven't been in danger in days, I am looking forward to any adventure you would like to place us in!"

"So what's the story behind this, Thor?" Darcy held up her nearly half full cup. "The magic meade made you switch personalities?"

"When drunk in large amounts, the meade will pull your tethered heart match closer. The string that binds you to your beloved is pulled tighter," Thor answered. Jane threw herself at him and he caught her in his arms with an unfamiliar smirk on his face. "In proximity and in personality. It's meant to mirror what your heart requires in the person best to give it to you, but in a sort of ridiculous,
"Don't really care much about the specifics, nerd-Thor," Darcy shook her head. She looked into her cup, she could feel a difference just starting to tingle in the tips of her toes and fingers, a seriousness that she couldn't help but revel in. She could so very rarely find her serious side, that it felt kind of nice. And she definitely felt an almost ingrained need for a slow burning kind of mischief, similar to her usual need for blatant and blaring mischief. "My heart match is a troll. EXCELLENT."

Thor winked at her. Jane gave a loud noise that sounded like a battle cry as she held her fist in the air.

"So...what'd happen if I drank all of this at once?" Darcy wondered fearlessly, tossing back the liquid before Thor could answer.

"Well... shit," Thor cursed, to which Jane gave another mighty battle cry of delight at his nearly perfect Jane Foster impersonation before grabbing the sides of his face and kissing him heartily.

The Starkphone that Thor had received from Tony that morning began to ring immediately and Thor sighed before answering it.

"Good evening Ca---ah, uh...honored shield buddy?" Thor sounded absolutely perplexed as he tried to hide whoever was calling from a quietly curious Darcy and a VERY curious Jane. Because Jane may have switched her usual smarts with Thor due to the mead, but she had picked up on Thor’s own considerable, but different smarts. Whoever had called was Darcy’s heart match. She knew it and she wanted to give the phone to Darcy so that she could be just as happy as her. Jane’s hands began making a play for the phone even as she searched out ticklish spots on his neck. "Jane, quit it, I’m freaking busy."

"Sounds strange coming out of that mouth," Darcy shook her head, her comment made for herself only. She stared down at the empty cup in fascination and felt a weight settle on her shoulders. It was pressing and horrible and terrifying all of a sudden. Some part of her brain that was still all Darcy felt a swell of compassion for this heart match of hers. He was feeling an awful lot of terrifying responsibility. She sighed and could feel a sadness down to her bones. She watched Jane pester Thor more and smiled sadly, feeling so lonely she was sure it would crush her.

"No, that doesn't seem necessary, can't Stark just find a way to cobble up a way to get himself out of the damned sewers?" Thor demanded in annoyance, sounding just like Jane did when Darcy demanded she take a break. (Can't the lunch just eat itself, Darce?!)
"If Tony of the Manhattan Starks is in danger, then surely we should go and come to his aid!" Jane shouted.

Darcy stood at that. Purpose filling her, making the loneliness and sadness and darkness just a little less.

"I'll get him," she announced before taking off quickly for the fire escape of the roof. The sound of her feet landing half a story down on the metal of the steps echoed through the night as she jumped down each flight of stairs with reckless abandon.

"Darcy! Get back here!" Thor shouted. He heard something from the other end of the phone. "No, Steven, I insist you stay where you are, there's no need to land the quinjet, we have this handled. CALM. YOUR. TITS."

Jane gave her largest, happiest roar yet and somehow used the leverage of her tiny body to have Thor sprawled flat on his back on the roof, tiny, capable hands shedding clothing quickly. He couldn't help but give her a small grin, knowing that the only thing that could distract him from the current situation was a mighty ravishing at her hands.

"Send Natasha, my...uhm, you know, sister of the lightning doth need help," Thor's tried to get his words back to normal and might have gone a little too far. "Steven, make sure you alert Natasha that she is reckless and foolish at the moment. And it is best if you stay away from her for now."

Present Day, Wakanda

"Welcome to Wakanda. Please, do not touch anything."

"Why's she looking at me that way?" Darcy whispered to Natasha.

"Maybe she's clairvoyant," Steve quipped.
"Hey!" Darcy looked at him with a furrowed brow which gave way into an appreciative smile and a thumbs up. "Nice one."

Unburdening his long, sad story had done something for Steve. While he was sure, in his heart of hearts, that it had made Darcy decide to close the door firmly on any and all romantic thoughts she may have previously harbored for him, it had also allowed him to loosen up a little. Darcy now knew everything about him. Every thought, feeling, dream and nightmare of the last seventy years, give or take a few. He'd unburdened everything on her, and she hadn't jumped from the plane.

She'd put immediate physical distance between them, but that was to be understood as she HAD been straddling his lap while they were in their underwear. But the pressure of years and years of hearing about how Darcy was his perfect match had lifted as soon as he realized he no longer had a chance with her as a boyfriend. He felt a pang for it, because now that he had actually met her, he could honestly say that his friends were right. She was lovely and light and fun. And so beautiful. But he was obviously more trouble than Darcy was willing to sign up for romantically. He really wanted to change her mind about that.

Natasha had told him to show his humor. So he was doing his best to do that.

The addition of Sharon to their merry party hadn't curbed it. His sarcastic nature had been set free, and he had been muttering things under his breath at every opportunity, getting her to laugh.

It was nice.

"I am not clairvoyant Captain Rogers, I am Shuri, younger sister to my King, T'Challa," the woman, dressed much like Pepper Potts in a smart black paintsuit and impossibly high heels, gave him a smile. "I have simply been forewarned by Dr. Jane Foster."

"Oh," Darcy sighed.

"And Mrs. Laura Barton," Shuri continued.

"Dang," Darcy heaved a sigh.
"And Mr. Clint Barton," Shuri nodded, unable to keep from smirking prettily.

"Well...that's just--"

"And Mr. Samuel Wilson," Shuri arched a perfectly manicured eyebrow.

"Hey! He just met me, and I rescued him," Darcy disputed.

"He advised you would need a highly competent escort to take you to your final destination," Shuri shrugged. "Something along the lines of a chaperone. In his words, you and the Captain are to leave room for Jesus."

"That's not---nope," Steve shook his head, blushing a bit.

“I see Mr. Samuel Wilson has won a wager,” Shuri nodded. She held out a hand in a beckoning gesture and a well-meaning assistant approached with a wheelchair. “Mr. Samuel Wilson said you had an elderly member of the party that would need assistance getting to your final destination...a Mr. Ducky Darnes?”

Bucky heaved a sigh and gave a smirking Natasha an unimpressed look.

“Fucking Wilson.”

“It’s about time you got here, PARADISE BABY!” little Cooper Barton crowed in excitement.

The quintet of newly arrived fugitives and Darcy each cocked their head slightly to the right as they entered the palatial vacation home of the royal family of Wakanda. It was a short boat ride away from the main island, and was about a quarter the size of Wakanda itself. A large, lovely mansion sat in the middle of it, and a few outlying buildings that Shuri had explained were labs and training facilities Except for the tropical climate, and the style of the beautiful buildings (T’Chaka had been a fan of Italian Villas, apparently), it didn’t seem all that different in concept from the Avenger’s
Facility in upstate New York.

And obviously, Sam, Scott and Cooper had been enjoying all that their gracious hosts had been offering them. They were all in swimming trunks, with straw hats on their head and sunglasses on their faces. Sam had a large mixed drink in his hand, Scott had an ice cold bottle of something frosty and even Cooper had a little glass full of milk with an umbrella straw. They were dancing to music that was playing softly in the background, and not at all well. Scott in particular was a large embarrassment, but he seemed to be enjoying himself, so no one told him to stop.

“Man, I think I pledge my fealty to T’Challa, now. He kicks Barnes’ ass all day long PLUS he has the hookup,” Sam shook his head in amazement. He smiled at Shuri and waggled his eyebrows, “Sup girl.”

“Sammy,” Laura came out of literally nowhere and gripped Sam’s ear. “She’s our lovely host in this, our time of need, and also? ROYALTY. Go and flirt with that statue of a panther out back by the pool.”

“Yes mommy,” Sam mocked. He gave one last look at the new arrivals and nodded in approval at their positioning. Steve and Darcy were as far apart as possible, with Sharon standing directly next to Steve. “Your husband owes me five bucks. Told you so.

“Shuri, thank you so much,” Natasha said respectfully, talking over Sam’s victorious teasing. “And please extend our thanks to your brother, I don’t know what we would do without his kindness.”

“He is currently in Berlin, making sure that the villain who is responsible for my father’s death is brought to justice,” Shuri nodded. “And I feel free to speak for him to say that it is our pleasure, since you all worked to expose the man who had taken so much from us.”

“Thank you,” Steve said earnestly.

“You’re welcome. I have many matters to attend to away from home,” Shuri excused herself. “But I look forward to seeing you all again. Please feel free to make use of this island as your home. But please, stay on the island, if you need to leave, you can contact me and we will arrange your transport.”

“Please, if there’s anything we can do,” Natasha said softly. “We are in your debt, and we’ll be too happy to repay you.”
Shuri’s beautiful face went from complacent to thoughtful for a moment, obviously considering something before she shook herself from her thoughts, giving the guests a smile and a nod before going on her way back to the boat to take her to Wakanda. Natasha gave a look to Steve and he nodded slightly. There was something there. But Shuri hadn’t wanted to say anything and they were in no position to pry.

“Thanks for giving me hypothermia,” Darcy glared at Laura as best as she could. Darcy usually had a great glare. Mean. Nasty. Dangerous. But there was something about Laura’s face that made it next to impossible to maintain it. She was glare-proof.

“It all worked out, I guess,” Laura shrugged, giving a glance Sharon’s way. “There’s a hot tub out back to make up for it, if you’d like?”

“And?” Darcy demanded.

“And a lot of really delicious food,” Laura smiled.

“And?” Darcy continued.

“And free booze?” Laura put out hopefully.

“Fine.”

“I think now is as good of a time as any to break out the good stuff.”

Twenty-four hours had passed since the Carter rescue squad had landed in Wakanda. After settling in, having a good meal and a good night’s sleep, everyone but the Barton’s were sitting poolside. Cooper and Lila had been distraught when Laura had reminded them that their home schooling would have to be finished up for the year. They were all sequestered in a quiet study on the opposite side of the mansion, trying to finish up their testing so they could rejoin the fun in the sun.
“I’m sorry, I just had a coconut full of the finest rum to have ever existed,” Sam disputed with Jane as she and Darcy sat by the edge of the pool. As nice as it had been to find weather appropriate clothing in his size, Sam supposed that it didn’t happen for everyone. Because Darcy was currently popping out of her one piece suit, which might have looked modest on another woman, but only made her look like a real life Jessica Rabbit at the beach.

He didn’t know what had gone down on the plane that Darcy had been on, but a quick glance at Steve showed that every other breath had him taking a quick peek at Darcy. Meanwhile, Sharon Carter was in deep conference with Natasha, already planning quick exits and for every contingency in the book. Steve had come to some kind of a crossroads on who to choose (Sam the Steven Rogers fanboy refused to believe that Sharon had opted out of the non-existent competition), but Darcy didn’t seem to be having any of it.

Jane hopped out of the pool and went for her bug out bag, reaching in and pulling out a bottle of beautiful blue liquid. She took it to the bar and poured out a few shot glasses with it, handing it out to all who had previously been drinking the fine rum.

“Bottoms up,” she advised. Sam, Darcy, Steve, Wanda and Jane all emptied their glasses.

Scott looked up from the place he had been sleeping and pretended to drink from an imaginary glass before promptly falling back to sleep.

Darcy’s eyes widened in recognition of the delicious butterscotch taste. She looked at Jane in worry. The last time she had drunk any of that particular Asgardian meade, she had wound up in the sewers of London, rescuing her bosses’ new boss from gigantic rats, and then rushing off to find more adventure, narrowly missing running into Captain America. Literally. She had dodged him at the exit of the sewers and run fast and far.

“This tastes amazing. Like...lemonade,” Sam furrowed his brow as he looked down at his empty glass. His eyes went unfocused and he felt a very controlled calm take over him. Regimented, disciplined calm. It was practiced and it was necessary, because there was absolutely terrifying danger without it. It was nice, if not a little terrifying. “I dislike lemonade.”

“Mine does not taste like lemonade, I would much prefer that to this,” Wanda frowned, looking at her glass. “I don’t even like beer, dammit.”

“Swear jar,” Darcy whispered, then immediately put a hand over her mouth to stop herself from
saying anything else. She glared at a grinning Jane.

“STEVEN! CAPTAIN OF AMERICA!” Jane boomed out with a hearty laugh. “What does your glorious meade remind you of?”

“Hot chocolate,” Steve smiled down at his empty glass. He remembered having the drink before. Blue. And tasting of really rich hot chocolate. He looked up with a beaming smile. “S’good. Can I have some more?”

“NAY!” Jane announced, her voice still loud and booming. “For if you were to have more, the string that tethers you to your heart match would grow tighter. Causing your heart match to fall into your lap! And fornicate gleefully with reckless abandon.”

“What. the. Fuck?” Wanda grumbled, looking back down at her drink. She was feeling... cocky. She was never this confident. Ever. “This is some straight up jacked up shit, Doc.”

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my fucking god,” Steve whispered, staring at Wanda with widened eyes. He glared at Sam, who looked confused and lost and innocent, “Oh, I’m gonna make you pay. And it’s going to hurt a lot and for a long time. And then I’m telling Barton. And then he’s gonna tell Laura.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Sam declared his innocence, sounding very much like a wrongfully accused lamb being led to slaughter.

“Yet,” Darcy said out of the side of her mouth before she again slapped her hand over her mouth, lest any more ridiculous Steve Rogers-esque smart aleck remarks come out. She glared at Jane, and it was a righteous glare of indignation coming out of Darcy’s face, so Jane merely boomed with laughter that was not quite her own.

Bucky chose that moment to hop over the wrought iron fence that was separating the pool area from the wilds of T’Challa’s backyard. Darcy shot to her feet and made a whimpering noise behind her hand and then glared at Jane again.

“Little Rainbow Widow?” Bucky gave her a curious look.

“Hey Buck,” Darcy smiled before turning on her heel and running for the pool, canon balling in.
“Hell to the yes,” Wanda’s eyes lit up and she quickly followed Darcy into the pool with her own spectacular cannonball.

Bucky watched them for a split second, remembering that Darcy was not an excellent swimmer. He shrugged and ditched the tank top he had donned before going to do a (totally unnecessary) perimeter walk. He jumped into the pool as well, for some reason it felt right to follow Darcy’s lead at that moment. And also he landed right next to her when she remembered how much she hated swimming and began to flail.

“Just hold on,” he whispered before maneuvering himself onto his back to float, putting her hand on his knee so she could have something solid to keep her above water.

“Always saving my bacon, thanks pal,” Darcy gave him a wry grin.

“Strange,” Bucky shrugged before avidly floating around the pool, Darcy clinging to his knee.

“Get the hell out of here, man!” Wanda grumbled when she resurfaced and saw Bucky floating lazily on his back. “You’re getting your old man stank in the pool!”

“Wanda!” Darcy shook her head in genuine disappointment. “C’mon, Wanda, try to be nice.”

“What are they doing?” Sharon whispered to Natasha. She'd had that meade before. It had been interesting.

“Jane is testing a theory out,” Natasha answered. “A theory involving Asgardian meade that makes people behave... strangely. Also, she’s proving a point to Wilson, I believe.”

“Try to be nice,” Wanda repeated petulantly. “I need better damned friends. Sharon! Will you be my friend? All of the ones I have suck.”

“So salty, witchy woman,” Steve grinned as he watched the girls, and a nonplussed Bucky in the pool. His eyes went to the poolside bar, where Jane had left a half of a bottle full of the blue stuff. His eyes lit up with mischief and he was up out of his chair like a rocket.
“Steven, no!” Jane called out, far too late. Because even if Steve was sounding and acting a lot like Darcy, he still *moved* like Steve, and he had the bottle to his lips in no time, gulping down three strong pulls of the stuff. She rolled her eyes fondly and sighed, “You fool.”

“Holy shitballs,” Steve breathed out when he finally stopped drinking.

Darcy’s eyes widened warily and she did the only thing she could think of. She pushed Bucky so that he was no longer floating, but standing in the pool and hid behind his shoulders, gripping the still duct-taped end to his left arm. Steve leered at her and she couldn’t help but blush beet red. Literally, she couldn’t help it, as normally that would have been Steve’s response.

“Buck, you gotta help me out here,” Darcy said softly. “This is all gonna go south real soon. You gotta keep Steve away from me, please, pal?”

“What in the hell?” Bucky furrowed his brow, trying to turn in the water to get a proper look at Darcy, who would only follow his movements so that she remained firmly behind his back. He remembered a small Steve Rogers saying almost exactly those words to him when awful Edith Nolan chased him around for a kiss when they were twelve. To hear them come out of Darcy’s mouth was odd, to say the least.

“I want---I want an adventure,” Steve said suddenly. His gaze left Darcy and her attempts at hiding behind a confused Bucky. Instead he surveyed the lush, gorgeous surroundings of T’Challa’s home. He pointed into the distance and said, “Someone is out there. I’m gonna go see who it is.”

“You cannot forage alone, Steven!” Jane ordered.

“Allright,” Steve nodded, looking down at Darcy knowingly. “It’d probably suck a lot if I went off by myself and got myself into trouble. Disastrous for all of us really. If only I had someone to help. You know. Protect me and what not.”

“Nat, you seem plenty responsible and totally sober,” Darcy called out hopefully. The itching need to provide Steve assistance and protection was overwhelming. And he *knew* she was itching for an adventure ever since drinking the meade. That Darcified trollbag knew exactly what he was doing. “You and Bucky should take him for a walk. Get out the excess energy before something---something happens.”
“Stop fighting it,” Natasha called out in Farsi. “It’ll only get worse if you do.”

“Little Rainbow Widow, what is going on?” Bucky asked her again, turning his head to catch a glimpse of her steadily reddening face. She had a strange look on her face. One of resolute reluctance. It was overwhelmingly familiar to him.

“Tick Tock, cutie,” Steve grinned.

Bucky looked at Steve curiously and his mouth fell open when Steve winked at him and shot two finger guns at him with little pew pew noises.

“Damn,” Darcy whispered. “Buck, I’m taking Steve out for an adventure. Don’t follow us, but if we don’t hear from us every twenty-four hours, then maybe...well then yeah, follow us.”

She then climbed out of the pool as gracefully as she could before grabbing her sarong and her bug out bag before making her way to the bar.

“If I’m doing this, I’m doing it right,” Darcy nodded to herself before taking the bottle of Asgardian mead and taking two big swigs from it.

“Oh Frigga, what have I wrought?” Jane shook her head in shock. “May their blessed babes be strong and clever and powerful.”

“You wanted an adventure, sweetheart?” Darcy smirked at Steve before grabbing his hand and pulling him away at a fast pace, her grin growing wider at the sound of Steve’s whoops of laughter as they made their way away from their friends to mysterious adventures beyond.

Sam cocked his head to the right, a complete look of bewilderment on his face. He looked to Jane, who had already accepted that Steve and Darcy were going to do whatever the hell they wanted.

“Not very normal, Samuel, Son of Wil, is it?” Jane’s eyes twinkled as her lips moved upwards in a wry smirk.

A brilliant beam of light flashed on the patio from above and Jane clapped her hands together
gleefully.

“And this, dear friends, is where I leave you for now, I shall return when my own heart tether has been satisfied,” Jane walked calmly towards what everyone had recognized as being one of Heimdall’s portals. She gave a warrior-esque nod to a smirking Natasha before Heimdall beamed her up.

“That bottle was more empty two minutes ago,” Sam said softly, staring at the bottle that Darcy and Steve had drained to drops. An inch of liquid was now swirling in the bottom of the bottle. “Very strange. Very fascinating.”

“I would assume because Jane no longer needs the meade, she’s completed what it wanted her to do,” Natasha said in a distracted tone. “Speedy.”

“Ugh, Barnes, I blame you for this,” Wanda rolled her eyes before splashing an energy enhanced wave of water at his face.

Bucky shook his head in disbelief as he shook the water from his face. Wanda was being a little shit, Sam was looking soft and friendly, Darcy was acting like Steve and Steve was...Steve was being seriously strange. He looked to Natasha in confusion and wondered, “What in the hell is goin’ on here? I was gone for fifteen damned minutes!”

Chapter End Notes

Excited? A little? I'm excited. a lot.

Thank you guys so much for your amazing support and feedback. I still don't think it's entirely warranted, but I'm definitely still going to snuggle it close and give it soft forehead kisses.

(Side note, I have a busy couple of days coming up, so I probably will not be posting again until later in the week. Hopefully Thursday at some point)
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Chapter Notes

This is pretty heavily Steve and Darcy's chapter. And the next few might be pretty
heavily Steve and Darcy. But don't worry, we'll get back to the ensemble and see what
they were up to as well!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Ten: The Excellent Adventures of Little Rainbow Widow and the Retired Captain
America

Twenty-Seventeen Days Later, Wakanda

“So. Do either of you want to tell us what happened?”

Steve and Darcy sat side by side on the beach, their hands clutched tightly together. Natasha and
Bucky looked down on them, having found the returned pair on their evening perimeter check/stroll
away from the chaos of the Royal Mansion. Darcy had Steve’s shield held in the hand that wasn’t
attached to Steve. The quinjet that they had commandeered and flown away twenty-seven days ago
was docked in an inlet of the island about fifty yards away from their place in the sand.

“Well?” Natasha asked, looking at them both very carefully, drinking in every detail.

Steve had a the beginnings of a thick beard on his face, and his hair was just a little darker than it
normally would be. He looked... well-rested for a man who most likely had spent the better part of
the last month avoiding the law. He was in blue flannel pajama bottoms and a tight white t-shirt,
looking like he had just rolled out of bed, actually. Darcy looked very much the same as she always
did, but gone were the island wear of swimsuit and sarong she had left with. Instead she was dressed
in the remains of what looked to be a very fancy navy blue party dress, which was now in tatters and covered in wide stripes of dirt.

They looked entirely comfortable with their physical closeness. Their thighs were squashed against each other’s, their clutch hands had their fingers interlocked, and the side of Darcy’s head was against Steve’s bicep. Twenty-seven days ago, Darcy had been keeping her distance and Steve had been stealing glances at her whenever he could. And here they sat, looking quite comfortable and very cozy.

“What do you have to say for yourselves?” Natasha repeated. “Twenty-seven days.”

“Did you bring me back anything nice?” Bucky wondered with a smirk.

“Souvenirs are in the quinjet’s utility closet,” Darcy answered back helpfully.

“You were in New York?” Natasha looked down at Steve’s shield, knowing that it had last been with Tony at the Avenger’s facility.

“For a little while,” Steve answered back, pleasantly enough. His free hand reached out and wiped a smudge of dirt from Darcy’s cheek, giving her a warm smile.

“You can either tell me what happened, or I can bring Laura down to interrogate you,” Natasha said simply.

“No...no, that’s okay,” Darcy said quickly. As fearsome as Natasha was as an interrogator, Laura was somehow worse. It had to be something to do with having kids. And Clint. “So...the me version of Steve wanted an adventure…”

Twenty-Seven Days Earlier
“You’re really pretty.”

“Can’t you just hold your hand over your mouth, like what I’m doing?”

“Like...super pretty. Like not just the va-va-va-voom of you, because daayum, that’s a lot of va-va-va and voom you have going on, but you’re pretty. Beautiful really,” Steve sighed as he watched Darcy trying to catch her breath after their mile long dash into the interior of the island.

He rather liked having Darcy’s personality overriding his own instincts at the moment. She said whatever she felt and he was having no problem with finding hundreds of words at the moment. “You’re the kind of beautiful that a person could never get sick of looking at. I’m going to apply for the job of staring at you all day. You don’t even have to pay me. I’ll do it for free. I’ll make it my new life’s work, cause I kind of just got fired from my old job…”

“Please stop talking,” Darcy blushed. It was embarrassing to see her special brand of word vomit coming out of Captain America’s mouth. So wrong, yet he appeared to be having the best time with it.

“I’ve had the meade before, just once,” Steve revealed out of the blue. “A year ago. During some revels with Thor.”

“Thor does enjoy his revels,” Darcy nodded. They had both seen the portal open up a few minutes ago as they were running from the mansion. The meade made the the person your heart was intended for come to you. She remembered stealing a limo the night Ultron was hatched in May, trying to drive from Sacramento, California to New York City for no other reason than she really wanted to go to Stark Tower. Now at least she knew it was because Steve had had the meade. Darcy smirked, “He’s enjoying the revels as we speak, I bet.”

“Mmmhmm,” Steve nodded, slinking his way towards Darcy’s resting spot by a tree. “Revels are a fun time for everyone. The world needs more revels, if you ask me.”

“Well, I didn’t ask you, but your opinion has been noted,” Darcy sassed back, feeling her blush intensify as Steve loomed above her, looking down at her with a flirty look that Darcy hadn’t used for years. “You wanted an adventure. Remember that sweetheart?”

“Oh cutie, you are an adventure,” Steve promised, downright grinning when Darcy made a strangled noise. “You’re the kind of adventure that I don’t think ever ends, like a never ending roller coaster.
Not that I’d want it to end.”

“According to the made for tv movie about you, you threw up the first time you rode a roller coaster,” Darcy reminded him helpfully.

“You watching my movies, cutie? That means you wanted to know more about me,” Steve wagered.

“This isn’t my first go around with the meade either,” Darcy said softly, looking up at Steve through her lashes.

“Oh that look should be illegal,” Steve whispered, his hand going out to brush against her cheek.

“You should know about illegal, being the vigilante and all,” Darcy fired back. “We could probably do this back and forth all day, Rogers.”

“I could do a lot of things all day,” Steve volleyed back. And he really could. Whether their personalities reverted back soon or not, it was obvious that they could banter back and forth playfully for a very long period of time. Nothing sounded better to Steve at the moment. Well, he’d like to combine the sassy words with hands and mouths and tongues, but he would take whatever he could get at the moment.

He understood the meade now. It brought your heart match closer, and it gave you their personality. And he could say beyond the shadow of a doubt that he really was enjoying Darcy’s personality. Brash and fearless and flirty. He was currently dreaming up a million different ways to get Darcy out of that second skin she called a swimsuit. He had to appreciate the way her mind worked.

“I have to say, vajayjayville?” Steve suddenly blurted. He liked the way the barest wind of a thought hit his brain and it just came right out of his mouth.

“Oh no,” Darcy breathed. Everyone in her life had warned her that one day her heedless prankery would come back to bite her in the ass. Now was that time. “It’s---you know, still...unoccupied.”

“You wrote that memo and made me read it. Out loud. To people,” Steve reminded her.
“Yeah, apparently I’m an incorrigible asshole,” Darcy dryly asserted.

“I like incorrigible assholes,” Steve shrugged, the smirk on his mouth nearly catlike.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” Darcy announced suddenly. “I mean...can I---can I kiss you now?”

“I think that you are the gal with a plan,” Steve nodded, his thumb stroking at her cheek. His eyes darted for one millisecond away from her, to something in the distance that had moved. Someone was there.

It was all the movement she needed, because she disengaged herself from him entirely and spun to look in the direction he had glanced.

“Someone is out there?” she wondered.

“No,” Steve lied. Badly. “There’s just us and the kissing, all of the kissing and then me helping you get that swimsuit off.”

“No, you wanted an adventure,” Darcy insisted, grabbing Steve’s hand and dragging him in the direction of the movement. “This is what you wanted, doll.”

They ran towards where Steve had seen a glimpse of someone and soon found themselves looking down on the expertly camouflaged entrance to an underground tunnel smack dab in the middle of the island. Darcy didn’t know if it was a comfort or a worry that even with Steve’s personality taking her impulses and mannerisms for a ride, she still had little to no impulse control. She gave Steve a knowing smirk and he simply shrugged, an impish little grin taking over his features.

"The lightning dude would say we're well matched, too, huh?" Steve wondered.

"He did say he wanted to be there when I finally met...my, you know," Darcy shrugged, cheeks pinking again. She wondered if she could retain the ability to blush, practically on cue. She’d save so much time and money on makeup.
"Boyfriend, slash, Future boink, slash, husband, slash father of your young---"

"STEVE!" Darcy gaped at him in disbelief. "I really have no filter."

"I really love it," Steve admitted, holding up two enthusiastic thumbs up. "I don't know how fast this is going to run out of my system, but I feel like I should start taking advantage of the inability to stop anything in my brain from coming out of my mouth."

"How about you open this door so we can follow whoever was sneaking around on King T'Challa's private island?" Darcy bent down and inspected the cover closely. She pointed at a slight divot and nodded, "Get your fingers into there---"

Steve made a slightly strangled, high pitched noise as he stared at Darcy bent over in her very tight swimsuit. The sarong was meant to provide a little modesty, but it had ridden up and Steve was unabashedly staring at Darcy's bottom as she bent at the waist.

"I'll put my fingers wherever you want, cutie."

"Really?" Darcy looked up, requisite blush still there as she arched an eyebrow in sarcastic disbelief.

"Fuck, you're perfect," Steve sighed. He reached out a hand to touch, then pulled it back with a shake of his head. "Whatever I did to get to this point in my life, I'd gladly do it again, cause you're without a doubt, the most perfect woman that I've ever put my eyes on. Like---kudos, dude."

"Stop talking with my words, it's...it's adorable and distracting," Darcy sighed as he finally knelt and put his hands where she had directed him to.
"Would you believe me if I said I needed a kiss to get the super soldier muscles powered up?" Steve wondered hopefully.

Darcy rolled her eyes, and bit at the inside of her cheek in an effort to keep the absolutely pleased sunshiney smile from coming out. The misplaced reaction that was all Steve Rogers was absolutely doing awful things to her self-control. Those Asgardians knew what they were doing, because every single Steve-thing she did, she found herself liking him more and more. She reached out with both hands and popped a soft kiss on his forehead before looking down at the entrance cover expectantly.

"That'll work for now," Steve grinned. He popped the entranceway door easily with a few flexes of his fingers and revealed what looked to be the top of an enclosed slide. "Awesome, let's do this, cutie."

He popped to his feet, reached for her arms so that they wrapped around his waist before they both sat on the ground above the tunnel. Darcy squeezed her arms and shimmed against his back, ignoring that high pitched strangled sound he made as her curves flattened against his back. She brought her legs up so that she was essentially piggy backed as Steve didn't hesitate in pushing off, riding down the dark, ridiculously inclined slide into the ground.

Darcy brought one hand up to Steve's mouth, clasping it over his lips just as he was about to let out a very Darcy-like shriek of delight. The ride down was AWESOME but very quick before Steve landed moving feet first, trotting out their momentum. They were in a small, slick little room, all stainless steel and cool lighting. There was another little tunnel, roughly Steve sized and Darcy hopped off of Steve to go inspect it further.

She took a step back when a platform zoomed towards her, large enough for maybe Steve to stand on by himself. She took a deep breath and sighed, wondering what the fates were playing at here. She was half a second away from stripping Steve down to his bare skin and climbing aboard without all of these close proximity strange modes of transport.

"I always knew these muscles would come in handy some day," Steve joked. He held out his hands and said, "You got a ride on the back, care to try out the front?"
"So wrong," Darcy shook her head, seriously gnawing on the inside of her cheek so she wouldn't grin slyly at him. Her Steve-brain was feeding her all kinds of ways they could make this very interesting and she had to wonder why Stark always insisted that Captain America was a virgin. He was a secret perv, really, and Darcy couldn't deny actually really liking it.

"The meade really wants us to do the sexing with each other, huh?" Steve wondered, gesturing "Like, if this throws us out into a honeymoon suite, I wouldn't be surprised."

"Jane warned you not to drink more," Darcy told him helpfully.

“Says little Miss I had to drink more because Steve drank more and I don’t want to be left out ,” Steve rambled. “Now I’ve got a case of the want to touch you’s and you’re going to climb aboard the Steve Rogers express and how am I not supposed to touch your ass? Have you SEEN your ass?”

“Have you see yours?” Darcy countered.

“Touche, I’ve seen the websites devoted to it,” Steve shrugged. He grinned down at her, big and beaming and he felt a little twitch low in his stomach as she aimed a familiar looking smirk back up at him. He held out his arms and said, “All aboard?”

Darcy chuckled before taking a deep breath and hopping onto Steve. For all his bluster about her ass, one arm still went respectfully around her waist and the other carefully gripped at her thigh as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and clung to him as he stepped onto the platform.

“Now what?” he wondered.

Darcy looked down and saw that a light started blinking on the far right corner of the two foot by two foot metal platform. She heard the sound of something winding up, like a hydraulic machine getting ready to----

“Wooooohoooo!” Steve called out before Darcy managed to press her cheek to his mouth so that he’d stop shouting like an adrenaline junkie maniac. She clung to him tighter as the wind in the tunnel whipped past them while the platform went from zero to sixty miles an hour in just a few seconds.

Steve’s mouth went from being awkwardly pressed against her cheek, to placing little, teasing open
mouthed kisses along her jaw as they whizzed at least a mile or two, presumably under the water that separated the main island of Wakanda from the Royal home. Darcy blushed but felt a sudden jolt of desire burn through her like an inferno.

“Holy hell, Steve, when you get turned on, you really don’t do things halfway,” Darcy sighed, feeling the hazy want burn through her. She shimmied against his hold and managed to get her hands on either side of his face, breathing heavily through her nose as she stared at his tempting lips. “Fuck it.”

She pulled his face to hers and planted her lips on his with bruising force. One of her hands drifted to the back of his head and grasped at his hair as his mouth opened under her ministrations. The hand he had on her thigh began creeping up ever so slowly as their kiss deepened and intensified, even as the platform began to slow down as they reached their final destination.

The platform stopped and they both knew it. They were aware that the wind that had been rushing around them had stopped, but they couldn’t be bothered to care about such paltry things as stepping off a platform, continuing their adventure or even breathing as their tongues were wriggling and flicking and stroking against each other as if they were two overly randy teenagers who had been left alone together for the first time. It may have lacked finesse, but it made up for it in earnest passion and Darcy knew inherently that she would never get bored kissing the man who was holding her tight against him.

The hydraulic system began winding up again and they broke apart quickly.

“Go!” Darcy yelled.

Steve took a giant leap off the platform, and they landed in a heap in a new room, much larger than the room they had entered on the private island. It was an airplane hangar, actually. The two quinjets that had transported the Avengers’ refugees to Wakanda were docked next to each other. But there was another jet, this one sleek and black and looking like it was built for maximum speed for the lone pilot.

Darcy rooted around in her bug out bag and handed Steve a small shiny purple disc of metal.

“Throw it at that jet if you want to be able to follow it,” Darcy advised. Steve did as he was told, just in time, as the seriously advanced plane darted out of the hangar and went immediately airborne, climbing into the sky.
“What was that?” Steve wondered.

“Vanaheim magnet, there’s only one on Earth, and I can track it,” Darcy pulled out her phone. “Usually I put it on Mew Mew to watch her go on her adventures when she’s not in Thor’s fist.”

“Amazing,” Steve nodded. He frowned. “Think the meade is wearing off already.”

“Well, yeah, a little,” Darcy shrugged. “Cause of the lip smooshing.”

“Damn,” Steve sighed, getting up to his feet and holding out his hands to pluck Darcy off of the ground. “I liked the feeling of it.”

“Don’t worry, the effect will fade when the meade realizes we’re not you know, smashing our bits together,” Darcy admitted. “When I had it in London, I was a crazy, adrenaline seeking smart ass for at least six hours.”

“I remember that,” Steve nodded as they walked towards the quinjet that had brought them to Wakanda. “Well, I remember a small, red hat wearing young lady goose me on the way out of the sewers.”

“Well---I mean, I---for science?” Darcy stuttered, feeling her Steve-ism come back again.

“I think I owe you one, cutie,” Steve waggled his eyebrows at her. He grinned and rejoiced, “It’s back! So, kudos on the smooshing. I really liked kissing you and I’d like to do it again. And often. And do we really have to go and follow this mysterious person right now? Or can we make out for five more hours? Because I vote with making out for five more hours. I’ll vote twice for it.”

“We should see who was casing King T’Challa’s private residence,” Darcy gave a heavy sigh. Making out for a few hours sounded excellent. But there was that darned responsibility of Steve’s flaring in her chest. It was attractive and she had to admit that she really liked that he cared so damned much about doing the right thing. “But, we should wait a good half hour before following. And you know...autopilot.”

“Sweet,” Steve rejoiced as he sat in the pilot’s chair. He licked at his bottom lip before crooking a finger at her. “C’mere.”
“Yes, sir,” Darcy grinned, hopping into his lap. “Remind me to give Jane a hug next time I see her.”

“Yeah, I owe her.”

Present Day, Wakanda

“And so when we left the pool, we saw something suspicious and followed it and we found an underground tunnel and then we got in the quinjet and waited a half hour and then took off,” Darcy rattled off to Natasha and Bucky very quickly. “And then we---”

“Now hold on just a minute there, little Rainbow Widow,” Bucky held up his right hand. He watched Steve trying to will a blush not to rise up on his face and he looked between the two of them knowingly. “I have the feeling you’re leaving some details out.”

“Buck,” Steve said quietly. “S’private.”

“We made out and grinded on each other for thirty-seven minutes before taking off,” Darcy blurted.

“Thought so,” Bucky grinned.

“Where did you go?” Natasha demanded. She had her own suspicions but wanted them validated by the pair sitting so comfortably in front of her. “Twenty-seven days. You were gone for twenty-seven days.”

“Well, we were following the plane...but then we got the distress call somewhere over Spain.”

Twenty-seven days earlier, Somewhere over Spain
“FYI, I don’t think I should set up a sausage stand in Vajayjayville yet.”

Darcy’s eyes bugged out of her head and her mouth twisted into a pained smile. She shifted in Steve’s lap and felt the hard length of him and she arched a skeptical eyebrow.

“I’m not a liar,” Darcy clarified. “You shouldn’t be a liar right now, Darcy-Steve.”

“No, but you are important,” Steve said softly, feeling the effects of the meade fading away thanks to his super serum. He’d been feeling it fading slowly over the last hour as they sat in the pilot’s chair, necking like a couple of kids up to no good. He gave her a soft smile and brushed her hair out of her face and tucked it behind her ear. “I want to, God, do I want to. But, we have all the time in the world, Darcy. Technically I’m retired now.”

“People who retire often will pick up new hobbies,” Darcy nodded, smiling when he kissed the tip of her chin.

“Well, I don’t particularly care for fishing,” Steve said dryly. “I want to know everything about you. I want to know why you’re fearless. And when did you realize you were so darned funny. And why do you think about roasted marshmallows so much? I told you everything about me when we were on the quinjet together the other day. Now---now I’d like to hear everything about you.”

“I’m just Darcy,” she shrugged, the modesty wasn’t a borrowed trait from Steve. That was all her. And it was tinged with a fierce bit of insecurity. She sighed, “It’s going away. I’m going to miss it. You were fun to have in my head.”

“I’m nothing special,” Steve assured her, his hands squeezing at her biceps and then rubbing up and down the lengths of her arms.

“It was nice though,” she insisted. “Having a feeling of purpose. Of knowing what’s right. I like your seriousness.”

“Well I like your everything,” Steve admitted. “I know that---I know that when I did all the talking, I probably said too much to scare you off like I did. But, I promise, I’m straightening it out. Talking it out really helped. And I feel like I have some closure with Peggy now---”
“It’s alright,” Darcy insisted, wiggling off of Steve’s lap in a move reminiscent of two days ago. She made to walk to the co-pilot’s chair when Steve reached out and grabbed her hand.

“I really like you, Darcy. And I want to keep getting to know you,” Steve said earnestly.

Any fledgling insecurity that had been building in her gut at the mere mention of all the history Steve had dumped on her was pushed down as he gripped her fingers in his. She gave him a big, genuine smile and nodded.

“If anyone is out there...Natasha...Clint...I need help.”

Steve furrowed his brow as both he and Darcy stared at the Laura Barton enhanced communications system. She’d upgraded it so it only spoke with certain frequencies. Friendly frequencies.

“God dammit, is there anyone out there? Or have all you fucking idiots smashed each other’s heads in over a damned principle?”

“Fury?” Darcy opened up the communications system with a press of a button. “Saint Nick, is that you?”

“Oh hell, of all the people in all the world, I get Lewis?” Fury huffed over the line. “She’s going to end up starting a mutiny.”

“Fury, where are you, what’s wrong?” Steve demanded, his hand squeezing Darcy’s.

“Rogers? So...you’re there with Lewis,” Fury said with forced nonchalance. “How’re things going then? Would you like some privacy to get back to business?”

“Fury, what’s wrong?” Steve demanded in his no nonsense Captain America is too Patriotic for your Bullshit voice.

“I need an extraction. Coulson’s team is unavailable and Hill is deep underground trying to build some kind of infrastructure after your little dust up.”
Gunfire interrupted Fury’s words and they could hear his muffled and annoyed cursing.

“Alright, I don’t want to interrupt any special time between the two of you but I could really use some help here. And Rogers, I know it’ll be hard seeing as you’re you, but try and make sure Darcy doesn’t get into any international incidents. The last thing you need is to get on anyone’s radar.”

“So what you’re saying is I can’t start a coup today?” Darcy asked impishly.

Gunfire and more swears answered her.

“We’re on our way, Nick.”

Chapter End Notes

What on Earth did they DO for twenty-seven days? What do YOU think they did?

I hope to get another chapter to you by Sunday.

Thank you all so very much for the amazing encouragement you’ve provided. It is so appreciated!
Chapter Notes

Happy Memorial Day to everyone who is USA-er! I hope you're having a good cookout day.

I had wanted to get this out yesterday, but it was being a little difficult, so it's a day late but a little longer for your troubles!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Eleven: A Half-Dozen Captain Americas and one Darcy Change the World

Present Day, Wakanda

"So that was you...in Granada," Natasha gave Darcy a small smile, her head shaking imperceptibly.

"Wait---what?" Bucky looked between a definitely proud Natasha, a shrugging Darcy and a very anxious looking Steve. "The uprising? It was all over the papers that they bring us, I thought it was just some lookalikes stoking the fire."

"To be fair, the uprising was happening before I got there," Darcy clarified. "I just---I might have given a suggestion or two so we could get Fury out of there. Never underestimate the power of good publicity."

"We should have hired you a long time ago," Steve sighed.

"They were protesting the Sokovia Accords," Natasha nodded. "Due to a very preventable disaster
involving some mystics fighting in the mountains and playing a little too hard with the boulders."

"Ten children and their school teacher died on a hike, because some ---magic sorcerers were hashing out a disagreement," Steve sighed. "By the time the UN had managed to call in the nearest sanctioned squad, it was---it was too late. If Wanda and Vision had been able to---they used to be able to catch these things before something bad happened. Now, there's no one and innocent people are getting hurt."

"And Nicky got caught in the middle when he was tracking the mystics, trying to figure out what was going on," Darcy nodded, leaning in a little more heavily on Steve's arm, knowing that feeling her solid and warm against him was a balm to his battered heart. She grinned up at Natasha and revealed, "I call him Nicky now. He and I are best buds since I saved his bacon."

"Yeah, I'm stuck on that," Bucky furrowed his brow, trying to get a read on Steve. His best friend was torn between pride and culpability, blue eyes crinkled under the weight of his dichotomous emotions. "You let her lead a revolt against heavily armed UN soldiers."

"I didn't LET her do anything, pal," Steve shook his head ruefully. If Steve had learned anything in the last month it was that Darcy Lewis was definitely her own person, and she was going to do exactly what she wanted to do, whenever she wanted to do it. "We needed a plan to get Fury out of there."

Twenty-six Days earlier, Granada Spain

"Fucking Stark," Nick Fury grumbled as he felt another mortar land half a block away from him. He knew the man had cleaned up his ways and was constantly trying to make amends, but Stark Industries had spent decades building the weapons that the ambitious insurgents were using to blast at the government buildings in the previously lovely little city in Spain.
What had started out as protesting soon morphed into something much uglier with the addition of insurgents who were keen to turn tragedy into momentum against the government. Fury was caught with only a glock and a bullet proof vest on the very line of the violence. The Stark Industries shells had been rattling on his last good nerve for the last eighteen hours. The sun had set with the sound of explosions and then had gone off again, like a rooster crowing in the yard at dawn.

Fury was trapped in the building, unable to move to either side. The insurgents would view him as a threat and the UN led forces would take him into custody. He wasn't enhanced and he wasn’t a hero, but he hadn't signed the accords either, and Secretary Ross would only be too keen to bring him in, Fury knew that.

He pulled out his nearly dead phone and brought up the communicator that would speak to friendly sound systems across the globe.

"ETA on your arrival, lovebirds?"

Steve glared at the nearest speaker as he finished buttoning up another bullet proof vest on Darcy. He looked down at her and shook his head.

"I think we need another one on there."

"Steve!" Darcy giggled. "I barely have any range of motion as it is. I'm safe from bullets now...three vests ought to do it. And no amount of kevlar is going to stop a mortar shell."

Steve blew out a quick, harsh burst of air. He looked to be in physical pain at the thought of Darcy going out there by herself. When Darcy had told him her plan to get to Fury and extract him, Steve hadn't spoken for fifteen whole minutes for fear that his brain would have exploded. He wasn't used to being forced to sit on the sidelines. And he really wasn't used to sending in an innocent civilian to do the dirty work for him.
"Are you sure you want to make this statement?" Darcy wondered.

"I do, I need for the world to see this," Steve nodded. "I just wish you didn't have to go out and do it."

"Stop making that face," Darcy ordered. "I like a protective papa bear as much as the next girl who grew up with western media informing her romantic preferences, but this is easy. I can do this."

"I should be doing this for you," Steve insisted.

"You're retired, remember?" Darcy reached out and grabbed his hand, squeezing it in hers.

"I'm useless," Steve whispered.

"Shut your mouth or I'll be forced to occupy it in other ways, and Nicky sounds anxious," Darcy advised. "This is just like the raft or Paris, you trusted me to go out and get the job done then."

"I was with you on the raft. And Natasha was there for you in Paris," Steve reminded her.

"TICK FUCKING TOCK, ROGERS!" Fury shouted over the communications device.

"I understand you're having a hard time with this," Darcy leaned in to him, even with all three bulletproof vests she could still feel the heat of him seeping towards her. His hand that wasn't entangled in hers went up and wrapped around her shoulders, clinging to her. "But if this---if US, even as friends, is going to work, you're going to have to trust in me. I promise you that if I need help, I ask for it, but when I can do something on my own, I'm going to."
"Darcy," Steve sighed. "I trust you. I really do. You're a helluva dame, with enough smarts and bravery and moxie to fill up the Atlantic Ocean. It's everyone else I don't trust."

"I like that...MOXIE," Darcy grinned up at him.

"SERIOUSLY? I WOULD HAVE CALLED STARK IF I THOUGHT IT WOULD GET ME OUT OF HERE FASTER THAN YOU TWO!"

"Okay, Steve, helmet me up," Darcy nodded.

He grimaced, taking the helmet from his uniform and strapping it on Darcy's head. It was way too large and she had to bring her hands up to hold it in place in order for her to see out of the eyeholes. He bent down and placed a chaste and gentle kiss on her lips, enjoying the little soft hum of approval she made.

"Captain Darcy to the rescue," she whispered before backing away from him.

When the story was told, and retold, and tweeted, and blogged about, and re-told again and again on every twenty-four hour news channel in the country, it was always a grainy picture of a very small person, possibly even a child, wearing a too large uniform on their body and a bullet proof vest, their face obscured by the large Captain America helmet on their head. They had their hand out, gripping the hand of small child, pulling them away from smoking and smoldering rubble.

The nameless person dressed in the too large, too dirty and too blood-stained Captain America costume walked fearlessly through a city that was under extreme duress. They were weaponless and without the Shield, but they walked with a head held high and immediately began helping those that
"What are you doing, playing dress up? Get out of here crazy child!" one of the older men they had helped pull from the rubble of a shelled building looked at them and kept telling them in Spanish to go home.

"I can't," the mystery rescuer answered back in Spanish. "You need help. He would want to help if he could."

It took less than ten minutes for the insurgents to stop firing randomly at the city. It took fifteen minutes for the people who had lost so much in the past twenty-four hours to use the brave, fearless person as a rallying point. And it took less than twenty minutes for the streets to fill with protesters, shouting and chanting for the heroes to be set free and for the Sokovia Accords to be repealed.

Nick Fury wasn't mentally prepared for the sudden shift from violence to peaceful protesting, and he certainly wasn't prepared for Darcy Lewis in Captain America's uniform to hop through the window of the nearly destroyed building he had been trapped in. She popped off the helmet as soon as she had closed the door, her hand going to the top of her skull and rubbing at it absently.

"That thing is heavy and now I have a headache," she complained, although there was a mischievous smile on her face.

"I always said that if you channeled your energy to good instead of chaotic neutral chaos, that you'd be a numbered agent in half a day," Fury gave her a slow smirk once the shock had dissipated. He watched as she stripped the uniform off, revealing a sarong that she had fashioned into a dress.

She handed off the uniform to Fury and advised, "Fold them up and put them under your shirt."

"You leaving the helmet?" Fury wondered.
"Nope," Darcy smirked as she brought the helmet under her sarong and made it look like the overly rounded swell of a pregnant belly. She rubbed at it fondly and chuckled, "If Jane-Thor could see me now!"

"Vests?" Fury picked up the bulletproof vests she had pulled off and turned them inside out. Each vest had a piece of paper taped inside of it. Two with the crude drawing of Captain America's Shield and one with the A symbol that had been on Avenger's tower for nearly four years. "You do know what you're doing, don't you Lewis? Rogers is down for this?"

"Striking a match?" Darcy wondered. "And I know I just met him, but I can already tell that retired life won’t suit him that well."

"Shoulda recruited you," Fury smiled. "This would have never happened."

"C'mon, Steve's waiting. If I’m not back in the next half hour, he’s going to come running in to rescue the damsel in distress. And the damsel is you, by they way," Darcy took one of the vests and fashioned it over her arm to make it look like she was carrying a facsimile of the shield. Her other hand went to her stomach and she marched out of Fury's hidey hole with the man following, holding the vests up for all to see, obscuring a good portion of his face.

"So...you and Rogers, huh?" Fury wondered.

"Nicky Fury...gossip junkie," Darcy muttered.

"Nicky? Really?" Fury huffed a sigh.

"I just saved your bacon, so I get to call you anything I want," Darcy wagered. "You're lucky I'm not calling you my adorable leather clad cyclops, dude."
"Thank goodness for small miracles," Fury nodded as they made their way through the throngs where, just as Fury had thought, copycat signs of Cap's shield and the Avenger's A were being drawn and held up in the air by other members of the peaceful, but loud and powerful protest.

He followed Darcy as she walked back to through the city, meandering towards the edge where building met forest. They were quick, silent and unnoticed and Fury had never been so happy to see a quinjet in his entire life. Steve was standing at the bottom of the bay doors and his entire face lit up like the sun at the sight of Darcy trudging through the woods.

"So...you and Rogers," Fury repeated.

"Shut up, Nicky," Darcy advised as Steve broke out in a sprint as he went for her, picking her up and wrapping her up in a tight embrace, with his helmet still under her makeshift dress pressing hard against both of them. She kissed him just as gently and chastely as he had before she had left and when she pulled away they both looked down.

"The only reason that I'm going to let that slide is because technically, I owe you now," Nick smirked as Darcy's hands left Steve's shoulders and yanked the helmet from underneath her skirt and popped it back on her head askew.

"Where can we drop you, Nicky?" Steve looked over at Fury with that infuriating smirk on his lips.

"Take me to New York City, someone needs to start working with Hill on getting this whole mess sorted out."

Present Day, Wakanda
"For the record, punk? When a person sends you fifty text letters a day asking what you and the little Rainbow Widow are up to? The proper answer would be *starting a revolution* and not *spending nice quality time getting to know each other,*" Bucky scolded.

"Buck---" Steve tried to interject.

"You were telling me what kind of food you were eating for every damned meal. You were telling me about your fun hammock set up in the jet. You were telling me about Darcy trying to teach you Russian," Bucky listed off, running his hands through his hair at his out of place worry. It was a day late and a dollar short. Darcy and Steve had charged out into danger and come back whole, but Bucky couldn't help his reaction if he tried. "But not, you know, telling me you spent the last twenty-seven days in the quinjet while you let the little Rainbow Widow go out and change the damned world!"

"Are you doubting her abilities?" Natasha turned steely blue eyes Bucky's way and he made an audible gulping sound.

"I didn't say anything like that, Natalia," he managed to spit out after a moment of composing himself. The last thing he needed was to go into compliance mode. He'd miss Steve and Darcy's whole story, and then would lose any advantage he had over Wilson. "Just thinkin' how hard it is for my boy here, being left out of the action."

"We figured it out," Steve assured him.

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**Twenty-five days ago, Helicarrier over New York**

"This is either the smartest thing that's ever been done, or the stupidest."
"I vote smartest," Darcy nodded, looking over at the five highly trained ex-Shield agents and Steve. Five of Fury's most loyal people, who had stuck beside him through thick and thin. Five people who had devoted their lives to Fury's agenda, who had been living on the helicarrier when Darcy and Steve had landed eighteen hours ago.

Five capable Shield agents and Steve, all dressed in a variation of the Captain America uniform.

Darcy walked right up to Steve, smiling up at him with a sort of softness and seriousness that she very rarely let out. She reached out and brushed imaginary dust off of the shoulders of his washed and repaired uniform.

"Thought you were retired," she said softly.

"I can't have you going out there by yourself," Steve said simply. "Not because you can't handle yourself, I know you can. But I'm going to be bored."

"You sure you don't want a shield, Steve?" Fury gestured to the weapons tech that was divvying out the replicas of Steve's shield to the other volunteers.

"No...I'll handle that," Darcy promised.

"I wanted to thank you," Steve spoke up suddenly. He looked at each of his doppelgangers, none of them built like him, none of them looking just like him. Each one just slightly different. His hand brushed over his chin strap, feeling some stubble there. It wouldn't be long before he didn't look like Captain America either. "Not everyone out there will want to see you looking like this, and a lot of people are going to be confused. But I promise, that I've done everything in my power to make sure that uniform is respected. And you'll find that most people view it as hope."

"Not my first speech from Cap," one of the doppelgangers smirked at one of his teammates who was
tearing up. "You get used to it."

"Thank you for going out there and putting your lives on the line," Steve continued. "It's an honor to be working with you."

"Alright, alright," Fury gave him an indulgent smirk. "Communicators are set to one frequency. It took my R&D eighteen straight hours to figure out what LadyBird B did in less than an hour, you sure I can't move her and the school yard to the helicarrier?"

Darcy gave the former Director of Shield a deeply unimpressed look.

"I'll even take Birdnose back if it means getting her as part of the deal," Fury offered.

"He's retired," Steve reminded him.

"That's not something that really sticks around here."

———

**Present Day, Wakanda**

"Okay, score me," Natasha looked at Darcy and the girl instantly understood her meaning. She wanted to see if her instincts were right about what Steve and Darcy were responsible for out in the world and which was a result of the impostors.

"Shoot for the stars, high flyer," Darcy nodded.
"Refugee rescue in the Caribbean," Natasha held up a finger with each of the incidents she was sure had been done by Darcy and Steve. "Tsunami evacuation and clean up in the Pacific. The mutated flamingos in Wisconsin. And the break in at the Avenger's facility."

"You missed one," Steve smirked at Natasha's brief disappointed look.


"To be fair, we had help," Darcy admitted.

"So you spent the last month traveling the world, posing as a Captain America look-alike, stirring the anti-Accord sentiment," Natasha nodded. "What about the tracker on the jet from Wakanda?"

"That was the help," Darcy smiled ruefully.

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**Ten Days Ago, England**

"I can't believe that I'm finally going to sleep in a real bed tonight and not a hammock strung up in the middle of a quinjet bay."

Darcy pranced through the seriously tiny little cottage that had once belonged to Falsworth and had once housed all of the Howling Commandos in its small 500 square feet of space. It had only been their third week of working together, and nothing really cemented a brotherhood like sleeping ass to face with each other. No one had ever let Dum-Dum touch anything fried after that night again.
Steve looked over the space, remembering Bucky, who had been skittish and quiet ever since being rescued. He had sat up on that little bit of floor right there over 70 years ago, spewing out curse words and condemning Dum-Dum's unfortunate gassy self to the bowels of hell for all eternity.

*Jesus Christ you ripe bastard! Did something crawl up into you die, get reincarnated and then die all over again?*

Fury had sent them the coordinates of the safe house for some down time. Darcy and Steve had been going non-stop since leaving the helicarrier and dispersing to the winds with the other Captain America impostors. Steve couldn't help but revel in what they were doing. They were *helping*. Going to where they were needed and offering assistance, blatantly giving the accords and any who signed and followed the accords the metaphorical middle finger. He had meant what he said to Tony over a year ago. It was generally impossible to prevent bad things from happening in the world, but what they could do was respond and help.

Those that were still diametrically opposed to him were still harping about him being a vigilante, and he supposed that he was now. But he and the five other Cap impostors out there were doing good. They were responding to situations big and small and helping. It was what the Avengers were supposed to be about.

The world was on the edge. Seventy-five countries who had initially signed the Accords had now rescinded their agreement. One of those countries being good ole England. Darcy and Steve had watched the news coverage from a bar in Toronto. People had flooded the streets with homemade signs, *CAPTAIN AMERICA IS WELCOME HERE. CAP COME BACK.* So they had eaten a nice meal, climbed back onto the quinjet and made their way to England. Darcy had tracked the Vanahem magnet and it showed to be in England, so off they went.

"Sweetheart, you enjoy the hell out of that bed, but I'm gonna miss the view," Steve grinned at her. He had strung up the hammocks in the quinjet the first night they had traveled to New York, letting Fury fly the plane while he got some shut eye with Darcy suspended in the surprisingly comfortable netting above him.

"Hmmm," Darcy nodded, kicking off her shoes and walking through the common space into the
closet like bedroom that had one barely full sized bed taking up the entirety of the space. "I've always been more of a hands on girl, tactile beats the view every time."

She grabbed him by a fistful of t-shirt once he was standing next to her and used some sort of amazing leverage and inherent understanding of physics to have him off balance and then suddenly on his back on the bed.

They'd perfected the art of the heated make-out in the last two weeks. The meade had long flushed out of their systems, but it felt very much like it was still there. Darcy hadn’t been exaggerating when she called their lips magnets that time they had rushed aboard the quinjet after defeating those awful flamingos in Wisconsin and as soon as the quinjet bay doors had closed, Steve had two handfuls of Darcy and her lips pressed to his. It hadn’t even mattered that they were both covered in slimy pink feathers.

Darcy hadn’t even minded when Steve started calling her a sweet little magnet, and even going so far as calling her Maggie when they were in the field. It was kind of cute, and definitely a unique little nickname. And every time he used the nickname, he got an adorable, soft look on his face. So she had to kiss him. It was a never ending cycle, really. Darcy did something fearless and awesome. Steve called her his amazing/sweet/perfect little magnet. Lips smashed together. Repeat ad nauseum.

And Steve was trying to get at those little, hidden parts of Darcy that held onto her insecurities. Because he knew they were there, and they flared up whenever one of them would bring up Peggy. The decision to go to England had been a tough one, really, for Steve. Darcy’s face had set into one of determination when she had tracked the Wakandan jet to England. But Steve knew that aside from the amazing and heated kisses they shared so frequently, that the foundation of their relationship was still very new.

But he wanted it to last. He hadn’t wanted something like that in a very long time.

He let her press him into the bed and climb aboard, his hands automatically going for her waist as she straddled his body and peppered his neck with searing presses of her mouth.

“Nghh,” he managed to get a sound to echo out of the back of his throat, rasping and needy.

“It’s an awful lot of fun to get you to go non-verbal, Steve,” Darcy grinned against the side of his neck before avidly trying to give him a hickey.
“It’s an awful lot of fun getting to that state,” Steve managed to mumble out. His hands squeezed her gently and he managed to whisper, “Can we go do something?”

“We are doing something right now,” Darcy promised him.

“No, can I---can I take you someplace?” Steve wondered. “It’s important.”

“Okay, cutie,” Darcy sighed, placing one last kiss against his lips before rolling off of him and falling off the small bed entirely, landing on her bottom with a small howl of indignation.

“Smooth,” Steve couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Keep it up, Rogers, and I will incapacitate you, steal the jet and leave you here while I go find one of your five impersonators that might treat me nicer!” Darcy threatened playfully as Steve maneuvered himself off the bed and somehow got into the small space that Darcy had fallen in. He plucked her off the ground and threw her over his shoulder with practiced ease. It hadn’t been the first time and it would not be the last.

Darcy’s phone began chirping and she giggled when Steve took it out of the back pocket of her jeans.

“Bucky?” she wondered.

“Yeah,” Steve smiled.

Bucky had text messaged Darcy from Natasha’s telephone less than eighteen hours after their initial departure from King T’Challa’s residence. Just a Okay there, little rainbow widow? From Bucky Barnes.

Darcy had handed the phone off to Steve, and though she didn’t read all of the texts they sent each other daily, Steve would read her a few of them, mainly the ones where Bucky complained about Sam and Scott’s obnoxious behavior. What Darcy did learn from the texts was that the super soldiers were pretty adorable with them, treating each message box as a letter, with appropriate greetings and farewells.
It was pretty cute.

“He wants to know when we’re coming back, because Scott and Barton have started to show signs of boredom,” Steve relayed as he walked out of the small little cottage, with Darcy still thrown over his shoulder happily. “Apparently, they’re annoying the living daylights out of Sharon with pranks.”

“I’m missing a prank war?!?” Darcy lamented as Steve eased her into the passenger seat of a small car that Fury had obtained for the safe house. “My whole life has been wasted.”

“I doubt that,” Steve rolled his eyes at her as he started up the car and took off just a little bit faster than the speed limit.

“WASTED!” Darcy cried out dramatically. She looked around at the beautiful English countryside and wondered, “Where are we going, anyway?”

“Just to do something important,” Steve said mysteriously.

They drove for about a half an hour, Darcy had been messing around the with the radio dial, zipping through stations so quickly that Steve had trouble believing she was actually hearing any of the songs. Finally she came upon something she liked, explaining that it was a station that played excellent songs from the eighties and nineties. He kept looking away from the road, stealing little glimpses of her as she sang slightly off key and danced in her seat to each song that came on.

When she started singing about liking big butts and not being able to lie about it, he laughed, reached for her hand and laced their fingers together.

“You took me to a graveyard,” she said softly as he pulled into a parking space. She pulled her hand away and looked down in her lap as he got out of the car and went to open her door for her.

“I’d like to introduce you to someone,” Steve said softly, holding out his hand once more.

“Steve,” Darcy shook her head and looked up at him with wary eyes.

“Please?” he asked earnestly, big blue eyes looking impossibly round and beseeching.
She had no choice but to comply, taking his hand and letting him lead her down a small little gravel path. She wasn’t surprised when they ended up in front of a fairly new grave, with an over abundance of flowers in front of the tombstone.

“Hey Peg,” Steve said softly. He took a deep breath when Darcy squeezed his hand, offering her wordless support. “I wanted to say goodbye. Properly. We had a lot of good talks since I came out of the ice. I’m happy now, Peg, to know that you got a chance at a happy life. That you and Daniel found each other, and lived a happy and full life. And I know you were worried about me in this new world, but I’ve found a place. I have people again, Peg. I have Bucky and Sam and friends. Friends who have already given me so much. And I’m finding what I was meant to do.”

He paused for a moment and looked away from the grave to give a soft smile to Darcy.

“I used to think that I needed a war. That it was the only thing I was good at. But in the past two weeks, I’ve started to do things differently. It’s not about fighting. And it’s not about good and evil. It’s about helping. Doing what’s right. I wanted that before, when you were cursing at me for not being able to do more than three push-ups in a row back at Camp Lehigh. I wanted to do good. And I lost that in fighting Hydra somehow. Doing good turned into fighting the enemy. It should have been both. And I’m finding my way back, with a lot of help from my friends.”

Steve squeezed Darcy’s hand this time, and pulled just a little so that she was standing closer, their arms touching. He leaned down and gave Darcy a soft kiss on her temple.

“The other reason that I wanted to come was to introduce you to someone really special,” Steve looked back at the grave with a big, hopeful smile. “Fury outlawed the two of you meeting before you passed. I think because if it had happened, somehow the two of you would have overthrown him and taken over SHIELD yourselves. This is Darcy Lewis, and she’s amazing, Peggy. She’s smart, and brave and funny and kind.”

Darcy bit at her bottom lip at the platitudes. Steve saw the doubt in her eyes, the insecurity just barely there. He placed another kiss against her temple and gave her an earnest smile.

“She’s my best girl, Peg. And I’m so happy I finally found her,” Steve brought up his free hand and wiped at a tear that had suddenly escaped from Darcy’s watery eyes. “And I promise, I’m not going to do anything this time to muck it all up, as you would say. She’s a keeper. Hey, even your godson Tony told me that three years ago.”
“He just said you’d appreciate my boobs,” Darcy rolled her eyes.

“And he wasn’t wrong ,” Steve said with a sly little smile. “There’s a lot more I appreciate about you, though Darcy. A helluva lot.”

“Thanks,” Darcy said sincerely. She turned to the grave and smiled sadly, “And thank you Peggy Carter. For everything you did to help Steve and get him right here, right now. And also for being a badass supreme. Mostly thanks for being a badass supreme.”

“Thanks, Peg,” Steve nodded. He took a deep, resolving breath. “And goodbye.”

Steve finally disentangled their fingers and instead wrapped his arm around Darcy’s shoulder, tucking her into his body. She melted into it, taking a moment to grin up at him knowingly.

“So I’m your best girl, now?”

“I shoulda asked, I know,” Steve sighed. “Bucky told me I shoulda asked, and I was planning on it, but then it just came out.”

“You and Barnes and your Jane Austen style texting,” Darcy wrapped her arm around his waist as they walked slowly back to their car. “So damned adorable.”

“You’re adorable, Magnet,” Steve promised. He pulled her in for a quick, chaste kiss, not fully pulling back, just staring down at her in wonder. “I’m going to--this is it, right? This is, we’re going to get the Accords nullified, we’re going to clear our friends and you and me...we’re going to be happy, Darcy.”

“Yeah, we are,” Darcy couldn’t help but grin. Steve’s adorable, stunned acceptance of his future happiness was awe inspiring. She pulled him by his shirt front in for a more forceful kiss, getting so distracted that neither of them noticed they had company.

A man cleared his throat and they pulled away to see none other than King T’Challa, accompanied by a member of his Dora Milaje as well as a young man that Darcy and Steve had not yet met.
“Captain Rogers,” T’Challa greeted with a knowing smirk. “You have been following us.”

Chapter End Notes

So what did you think? I have a lot of opinions about the Sokovia Accords. To say that I landed on Team Cap in the whole situation is an understatement, sorry for any of you who truly believe in the accords, this might not be a friendly space for you!

Thank you so much for reading!

I hope to have the next chapter up by Wednesday.
Chapter Notes

Hi!

This chapter is very different from any other chapters in the story. I hope you still enjoy it, as it was very fun to write!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twelve: A Series of Text Messages Between Two Men Out of Time

Dear Bucky,

This is Steve. Darcy handed me her phone and told me to converse with the adorable shaggy haired dinosaur who was checking in.

Thank you for checking in. I hope this text message finds you well. I didn't mean for Darcy and my adventure to take us so far away from you all, but I know that you are safe and recuperating. We're going off to save someone right now who is not so safe.

Darcy came up with a plan. I gotta say that this dame is one hundred percent excellent at plans. If it works, and I really think it will, the restrictions that the accords placed on us should be gone within six months or a year. The people in this world who need help will make their voices heard, and before you know it, we all won't have to hide anymore.

But to answer your original question, yeah, we're okay. We're safe. I miss you pal, but I'm trying to make it okay for you to go back into the world and not need to hide. Because you're a good man, Bucky. You are. And you shouldn't have to hide away because of what they did to you.

Your best pal,

Steve
Dear Steve,

Thanks for the flowery written speech.

You answered my first question, which was if you were safe. But you didn't answer my second question.

Did you kiss her?

Hoping your technique has improved since you kissed both Carters,

Bucky

---

Dear Jerk,

Shut up. It's private and none of your business.

from a guy who isn't thrown into a walking comatose state whenever he thinks about a special dame too hard,

Steve

---

Dear Bucky,
I'm sorry, that was rude. Darcy scolded me when I asked her if I had gone too far. 'Cause apparently joking about ripping your other arm off is fine, but teasing about how much you love Natasha is not "coolio dude".

But I have to remind you that when you were sixteen-years-old, you bragged to me that your heart was immune to the mushy feelings that I was feeling about Eileen Burns, and no dame would ever be able to infect it with their poison.

I mean, Natasha is an expert with poisons, so I'm not surprised.

Yours truly,

Steve

Dear asshole,

Fuck off.

Also, is the Little Rainbow Widow alright? If she's getting sick of your smarmy bastard stench, I'm sure it won't take much to convince Natalia to welcome her into the loving embrace of Mother Russia.

With all the love and venom in my heart,

Bucky

Dear Bucky,
She's busy right now.

Also, stay away from my girl. This isn't 1932.

From,

your favorite asshole, Steve

---

Dear Steve,

What do you mean, she's busy? Ain't she sitting right next to you on that quinjet?

From a very worried,

Bucky

---

Dear stupid Steve,

Hello? Where did she get to? Did you lose her? Natalia is going to string you up by your toenails.

From a very, very worried,

Bucky
Dear really, really stupid Steve,

You have ten minutes to write me back and let me know what's going on, or I will get myself off this island and come find you.

Packing as we speak,

Bucky

---

Dear Bucky,

Calm down, pal. She's right here now. She was doing an errand. Picking something up we needed. We're in the air again, heading to New York City to drop something off.

Hey, how did you string up those double hammocks that night after Dum-Dum's gas attack on us?

Thanks,

Steve

---

Dear Sly Dog,

Now, I know you're not thinking of going on the top hammock, cause the last thing I would want for the little Rainbow Widow is to be crushed beneath your giant, old ass. So you're gonna take the bottom bunk and stare at her all through the night, ain't ya?
I'm only gonna tell you this once, you keep your hands away from tiny-Rogers, no matter how those plush little hips press against the netting. I like the little Rainbow Widow, and you're to keep your hands where Reverend O'Leary would approve. You hear? At least until you've courted her proper. Stealing a quinjet and flying around the world doesn't count as courting.

Natalia is helping me take a picture of the instructions on how to set it up. It took me damned near an hour to remember, and I think I only managed cause fucking Wilson came by and let one rip right in my face. It jogged my sense memory of that awful night. I think he and Dum-Dum might be secretly related.

Here's hoping you're keeping your perverted hands to yourself!

your pal who has eyes everywhere,

Bucky

P.S. Here's that picture of the instructions. Loop that anchor line tight or she's gonna come crashing down on you, and I don't want that happening no matter how much you might want it to, ya dog.

P.P.S. Here's a picture of Natalia threatening to feed Wilson air freshener since she got a whiff of his stench. If I stare at it too long I go a little blank around the edges.

Dear the original Sly Dog,

Thanks, the hammock is great. Darcy says it's like sleeping on a fluffy cloud, but she could do without the netting putting crease marks all over. You'll be happy to know that I stopped myself from asking for proof of crease marks all over. I'm not as perverted as you think.
Your memory might still need help in getting things straight, cause I was always the good one and you were always the pervert. All those poor girls back in Brooklyn, left broken hearted by one James Buchanan Barnes. You best be careful, jerk, some of those dames might still be alive and come hunting you down.

Darcy is cooking dinner for us tonight. We're at a safe, stable place with what she had called truly fucking impressive industrial sized kitchens. She said she was gonna make me cookies. Cause she's a sweetheart, a real first class prize. Don't really know why she wants to spend time with me, but I'm not gonna complain and I'm not gonna try to change her mind.

We're gonna be a few more days at least. We're going to start visiting a few places here and there. Get some things straight before we come back. You just get to know your Natalia all over again. And hey, maybe when me and Darcy get back, we can go on a double.

(Seriously though, Buck, are you okay? If you want us to come home, we will.)

Your pal til the end of the line,

Steve

Dear Bucky,

You haven't answered my text message in over six hours. What'd you get up to?

Worried,

Steve
Dear Bucky,

Seriously, Darcy and I are getting the quinjet ready. We'll be there in five hours.

See you soon,

Steve

- **From unknown number**: Tell Rogers to calm the fuck down, I tripped Bucky into compliance mode when he realized I had sewn small packets of potpourri into Wilson's underwear. He is currently very, very occupied.

- **From Apprentice**: I bow down to you in supplication and fear. (GET IT GIRL. Wait, we say get it girl, right? Bucky boinking you to rid himself of brainwashing is a good thing, yes? Not creepy at all?)

- **From unknown number (forty-five minutes later)**: Very. Good. Thing.

- **From Apprentice**: Details? Rated Mature details please?

- **From unknown number**: Go make your own details.

- **From Apprentice**: How do you know I haven't already?? It's been a whole nine days of close contact with the hottest man in the world.

- **From unknown number**: *EYEROLL EMOJI*
Dear Stevie,

Sorry about that, had something to take care of.

You go on your adventure with the little Rainbow Widow. I'm plenty occupied. We haven't seen our hosts since you left, but we don't want for nothing here. A safe little piece of paradise and good people (and Wilson), and it's not like these instant letters aren't keeping you right in my pocket.

And I think it's helping not having your face here. No offense, but I kind of use your face as a crutch to remember things. Not having you here to hold my hand is forcing my brain to work harder. Natalia says it's a good thing.

Also, it's good to know you've been keeping your hands in appropriate places. You treat that little dish with respect or you're gonna answer to some big scary guy that can control lightning according to the kids. They like to talk about that time the big guy was zooming them around in the air with a hammer. Apparently Wilson and his wings can't compare. I like reminding him of that from time to time.

But seriously, I'm looking out for you pal. Don't want you taking a hammer to tiny-Rogers. You might need him someday.

Your biggest fan,

Bucky

Dear Buck,

How would you know what Darcy and I have or haven't done? And stop talking about her that way.
And you don't know what we've gotten up to.

And fuck off.

And I'm glad you're doing well. If you ever need my face, just know that it's probably pressed against the face of the sweetest dame in the world at any given moment.

And also, fuck you, you don't know anything.

Love,

Steve

Dear Steve,

I know. Trust me on this one, punk. I know you haven't done the deed with the girl. It's not a bad thing, and I'm not picking at you. I think you should get to know each other real well before you jump headfirst into the sack with her.

Love,

the all-seeing, all-amazing Bucky

Dear Bucky,
This is not meant to make you feel vindicated about assuming things about me and Darcy. You shouldn't be assuming things about what goes on with us out in the real world.

But you were right, we haven't gone much farther than kissing. Kissing a lot. I've taken to calling her a little magnet, because anytime we're near each other (a lot), her lips are just zipping right to mine or mine are drawn to hers.

It's real nice.

I can see why Phillips never let any of the girls from HQ come along on missions though. Can you imagine Jones' sweetheart coming out with us into the field? I mean, she was a helluva shot, and real good with languages, but definitely wouldn't have done anything for Gabe's right hook.

As for me, doing this stuff with Darcy is amazing, but I do get distracted. She's something.

Buck, she's everything.

Please don't make fun of me. I know you always said I fell in love at the drop of a hat and got my heart crushed even quicker, but this is different. I promise. I really like how she always has a joke on her lips to make me smile when it seems like I'm down. I really like how she cares so much for everyone out here in the world. I saw her tearing up over a little distressed duckling that had gotten covered in slimy pink feathers yesterday. No joke. It was the sweetest thing.

She's got a heart the size of the moon and it's five hundred times more beautiful than it too.

I do need advice though.

Sometimes, I think she gets a little far away from me, especially if I mention Peggy when I'm talking about the old days. I think she's thinking I'm comparing them somehow? But I'm not, I swear it. They're two different people in two different spaces in my life. Sure, I loved Peg. But time took us away from each other. She lived her life and now I'm ready to start living mine, and I want this amazing girl to be there with me every step of the way.
So how do I make her feel better about it without outright telling her I'm falling head over heels in love with her?

Please don't tell Wilson or Barton about this. They'll never let me live it down.

Thanks,
Steve

Dear Stevie,

Oh you little lost lamb. You're "falling" in love with her? More like fell and fallen and IN love with her. You never did give anything in this world less than a hundred and ten percent, pal. I didn't expect love to be one of them. The fact that it took you over two weeks to admit it to me is impressive though. I thought it would’ve been sooner.

So I didn't tell Wilson or Barton. I'd never tell them and Laura assures me that neither of them have the skill to get the phone or the messages off of the phone. But I did talk to Natalia and Laura, cause my option of "Tell her you love her and shove your tongue in her mouth" would go against previous advice I've given you.

They said that you need to obtain closure. Apparently that's a thing in the twenty-first century. You need to give Darcy proof of closure so that she can fall head first into you too.

Now I thought the other gal having lived nearly a hundred years before passing on was closure enough, but you need to go a step above that.

Laura says if your life wasn't completely fucked up, the easiest way to give Darcy that closure would be to introduce her to your ex and prove that you're devoted to Darcy only.

But that's kind of difficult since your ex is living with the angels right now. So, maybe you
should just go with my original idea. Tell her you want her to have your mini-Captain America’s. Do it when you’re shirtless, that might help.

Love,

Bucky

P.S. Seriously? Keep on doing what you're doing and give it time. Just cause your heart fell fast doesn't mean that everything is going to fall fast, including her walls. Be patient, Stevie.

Dear Bucky,

Thanks pal. I owe you one.

How is everyone else? How is Wanda doing? Lila and Cooper?

I miss them, and Darcy does too. Tell them that. And tell them that Darcy and I have two more things to do, and then we’re coming home.

Home. The last real home I had was that awful apartment with you right before you got drafted. Remember how cold it got in February?

Love,

Steve

Dear Steve,

Everyone is fine. The kids are done with their homeschooling and spend every waking
moment they can in the pool. Lila asked me to remind you that you need to take her waterskiing? Nathaniel called me Buddy this morning at breakfast. Wilson is sore that he said my name first. I keep telling him that stupid face is too hard to say for a baby.

Any---hold on, what are you doing?

Stevie! What are you doing?

I know exactly what you’re doing. Stop that. You’re supposed to go slow!

Dear Bucky,

I wasn’t doing anything. Darcy and I just had a nice, peaceful trip on the quinjet for the last ten hours is all.

We just played some cards and the phone was charging up. Sorry I missed your letters.

Yours truly,

Steve
Dear Lying Asshole,

Every time Captain America lies, a baby eagle loses a feather.

From a true patriot,

Bucky Barnes

Dear Bucky,

Weren’t you a communist?

From,

The original patriot

Dear Steve,

I’m gonna make you pay when you come back. I hope Darcy is ready to be a widower.

Sharpening my knives as we speak,

Bucky
Dear Bucky,

Darcy’s gone. I don’t know where she is. Can you get Nat? I need help. Please.

---

- **From unknown number:** Calm down, Steve. She’s fine. She’ll be back to you in approximately four hours.

---

Dear Steve,

Did you get Natalia’s message? Is the little Rainbow Widow back yet?

Worried,

Bucky

---

Deaarr bduckly,

Yaes. she homee now.busycan’t typee…

Stweeeeb
Dear Steve,

Disgusting. Poor little Rainbow Widow, having to have you paw at her.

She’s still welcome in the open arms of Team Russia. I checked with Natalia, she’s in agreement with me.

You coming home soon?

Love,

Bucky

Dear Bucky,

Yes, we’ll be home real soon.

Love,

Steve

Chapter End Notes

So while this wasn't ALL of Steve and Bucky's texts messages, it is the important stuff to bring us into the last two adventures of Darcy and Steve.

So, I'm in the middle of my finals and also have some graduation stuff coming up. So I'm going to do my best to post again sometime this weekend. But I can't make any promises.

Thank you everyone for reading, kudoing and commenting. It's really amazing and very appreciated!
"You gonna pout all day? Cause we could be going to the dance hall and finding a new dame for you to pout over proper."

Steve stubbornly sat at the small dinner table, his chin in his hand, slumped over small scraps of paper he had been doodling on. Bucky looked down at him expectantly, a patient smile stretching his lips as Steve sullenly drew little devil horns on sketched pictures of a cute little lady. He'd spent hours drawing the girl in question over the last few weeks, declaring to Bucky that she was the prettiest girl in the whole world and no one would ever compare to her.

"You gotta stop falling so fast, pal," Bucky advised as one drawing got devil horns and a pitched tail. "It just means that your heart gets busted up even faster."

"You never fall," Steve accused lowly. "You can't give advice if you never felt what I'm feeling."

"You're twenty-two years old. What you're feeling? It's called puppy love, and you trip over thin air
into it nine times outta ten," Bucky advised.

It was true. Steve was usually in some state of wonder about a girl and had been since they had seen The Maltese Falcon in 1931. At the tender age of 13, he had decided he was in love with Bebe Daniels. Every year, it had been another dame, each one just as untouchable as the next. Bucky kind of thought that Steve picked girls he had no chance with for safety reasons. If he had no chance with so much as meeting a dame, there was also no chance of having his heart stomped on.

But a couple of weeks ago, he'd finally picked one that was actually attainable. Mimi seemed to like Steve way more than Bucky, which was a pitiful rarity. Bucky couldn't mind though, and gleefully gave them the time and space to get to know each other better. Including overnight stays.

And then three days ago, Bucky came home to the apartment he shared with Steve, expecting to see Mimi slinking out after her first night in Steve's bed. Instead, he found Steve sitting at the kitchen table in a surprisingly empty apartment.

"She took everything," Steve had sighed. "No wonder she went chasing after me, she was a thief."

Their things could be replaced. Steve's confidence in himself and his ability to interact with a pretty girl? Well, getting those things back would take time.

"I'm never gonna fall in love again, I swear," Steve promised.

Bucky tried his best to bring Steve back around straight up until the night before he shipped off to England. He set up double dates galore with any gal that was chasing after him who had a nice friend. But nothing stuck. At least not until Peggy Carter.

Present Day, Wakanda

"You alright, Magnet?" Steve murmured to Darcy as her head pressed against his arm a little harder.
"Sleepy," Darcy answered, her blinks prolonged and lazy.

"Alright, we'll go back to the mansion and get us settled in a room," Steve promised.

Bucky looked to Natasha very quickly with a questioning flick of his eyebrow. He knew that once Steve had his heart set on someone, he didn't have any notion of a brake pedal, but he didn't know how Darcy was. Natasha answered him neatly with a blink that somehow relayed that this was fine and expected and not too fast at all. Bucky looked back as Steve rose to his feet and then pulled Darcy up as well, tucking her under his arm and pulling her close as the quartet began to walk slowly towards T'Challa's home.

"Souvenirs!" Darcy turned and waved the hand carrying Steve's shield towards the quinjet.

"I'll come back and get them later," Steve promised.

"I'm not facing the Barton kids without presents. They'll overpower me and duct tape me to a ceiling," Darcy shook her head. She looked at Natasha with a knowing smile and said, "Besides, Nat's head is going to explode if she doesn't hear the end of the story."

"You need to sleep, you've been up for a very long time," Steve reminded her patiently.

"And I will sleep as soon as we finish our fun-filled adventure tale," Darcy smiled at Steve winningly.

He turned to Bucky and Natasha and said very, very quickly and impatiently,
"We met up with T'Challa in England. We had misunderstood the threat when we originally set out from Wakanda. Together, we put down a small Doom-bot attack, and then Darcy and I went to New York and she wanted to get my shield back and then when she went to talk to Tony without me, she nearly got blown up for her troubles and then we came back here."

"Tony did that?" Natasha looked at the state of Darcy's dress, it was covered in soot, ripped and bore evidence of scorch marks. It almost looked like she had been actually blown up. Not nearly blown up.

"No, it was...complicated," Darcy sighed.

"Explain complicated," Bucky requested as politely as he could. He had first hand experience with how upset Tony Stark could get and while he knew that he himself deserved whatever Tony could dish out to him and then some, he highly doubted Darcy deserved to be exploded.

"So, okay, going back to the beginning, we thought that there was an intruder on the island and both were worried that someone was trying to do something to T'Challa or his family," Darcy began. "We were idiots."

Ten Days Ago, England

"Miss Lewis, I believe this belongs to you," T'Challa held up the small disc that Steve had lojacked the jet with. "I have to say, it is a fascinating material. Forgive me, but I ran a few tests on it while we waited for the two of you to catch up with us."

"Vanaheim magnet," Darcy explained. She was able to recognize the signs of genius, especially after working with so many of them. She could understand T'Challa's burning curiosity and thirst for knowledge. "You're lucky you weren't able to melt it, cause I think that might have caused the polar caps to switch or something. Thor would be able to explain it better."
"I look forward to meeting him," T'Challa smiled. "Forgive me, we've not been introduced formally. I'm T'Challa, this is Teela, my most trusted member of the Dora Milaje. And my oldest friend and adviser, W'Kabi. It is he who you followed from Wakanda."

"Darcy Lewis, it's a pleasure to meet you all," Darcy smiled. "Sorry about the following. We were worried someone was trying to spy on you."

"I'm sorry for startling you, I was just making sure you were settled finally and didn't want to disturb you after your trials," W'kabi said with a warm, pleasant smile on his face.

"Obviously, we were starved for more heroic adventures," Steve said sheepishly.

"Indeed, I've been keeping my eye on your actions," T'Challa gave Steve a knowing smirk. "You've been quite busy, Captain Rogers. Is there something wrong with my island and hospitality that you would not want to stay and relax?"

"I'm not very good at relaxing," Steve full out smiled at the king of Wakanda.

"That's good to know," W'Kabi laughed. "We feel that there is trouble about to arrive."

"You do not have your shield," T'Challa noticed.

"Haven't gotten around to getting that back yet," Darcy nodded.

"We have one half of an hour before the menace arrives," Teela announced, looking down at a smart phone. She looked Darcy over from head to toe, a slow smile forming when Darcy automatically shifted her stance into a more Black Widow approved line. "You are capable?"

"Most of the time," Darcy shrugged.
"Come with me, little one," Teela full out smiled now. Modesty was an advanced weapon, and it seemed that Captain America's little companion knew how to wield it. "You shall assist me in the real work while the men get dressed in their frilly ceremonial outfits."

"Oh, we're going to be the best of friends," Darcy grinned. She turned to Steve, got up on her tiptoes and gave him a quick little kiss against his own smiling mouth. "Do good work, cutie."

"Be good, Magnet," Steve said seriously.

"Never!" Darcy cackled.

The men watched the women leave before T'Challa turned to face Steve,

"She is your intended, then?"

Steve laughed and took a deep breath, "Yeah. I was about to tell her that when you showed up. She's my intended. I really need to get around to making that crystal clear to her."

"Does King T'Challa realize he's making a statement fighting side by side with Steve?" Darcy wondered as she and Teela went to work on the ground, smashing the doombots that fell to the ground as T'Challa and Steve seemed to be having a parkour competition in the air, using the small jet that W'Kabi was flying low as a jumping off point as they took out the flying robots in spectacular fashion. Darcy and three other members of T'Challa's Dora Milaje had been tasked with evacuating civilians and clearing a perimeter around the action, to ensure that no civilians were hurt.

"My King is wise," Teela answered. She arched a sarcastic eyebrow though and shrugged, "He may have had to be reminded of the repercussions before we came to find the two of you for assistance. He knows what he's doing. Now."
"Good," Darcy nodded. T'Challa was one of the few superheroes still standing after defying the Accords. He had been walking the fine line since then, laying low. But obviously, he was here, at that moment in London, without permission from the UN, fighting side by side with a vigilante. "It'll be an excellent image to help the cause."

"Indeed," Teela agreed. "I was not aware that Americans had their own version of the Dora Milaje, little one."

"Oh, we don't," Darcy shook her head.

"But you protect your King," Teela motioned her head towards Steve. "And the other little one with the red hair protects him as well. I have heard the story of her catching T'Challa off guard with her clever treachery. She is lucky that I was not there."

"Steve's not my king," Darcy made a motion to laugh but then thought about it, and got a thoughtful look on her face.

"You are devoted to him. You serve and share his cause. You have protected him and his own people. He trusts you with all that is important in his life."

"Huh...Steve's my king," Darcy blinked, looking up as the man in question jumped from the wing of the jet, taking out a doombot with a strong clothesline motion before falling gracefully on a rooftop.

"It is a noble calling to protect such men."

"It really is."

"Darcy look out!"

Steve's shout was zooming towards her as he rode the metal carcass of a useless doombot towards the ground, straight towards the two women who had been doing the important work of keeping civilians safe. Darcy looked up with wide eyes and hesitated for a split second, wondering if she
could do something to buffer Steve's fall. Teela yanked on her arm, pulling her to safety as Steve crashed to the ground. Debris exploded from Steve's crash and Darcy flinched as a small piece of metal sliced against her hand that shielded her face.

"Darcy," Steve groaned, pulling himself to his feet and stumbling blindly to the corner where Teela and Darcy had turned into to avoid the crash. He saw her blood and his stomach dropped as he rushed for her, bending at the knee as he assessed her injuries. "You okay, Magnet? What hurts?"

"She is fine," Teela answered as Steve's hands ran over as much of Darcy as he could. Teela swatted him away and placed a small, clean piece of cloth over the slice on Darcy's hand, it bonded instantly to her skin and Darcy took a little gasp as it immediately went to work on mending her skin. "Go and assist King T'Challa, Captain."

"Go on, Steve," Darcy smiled up at him. "Finish up, because I'm getting kind of hungry."

"Alright," Steve nodded, before placing a chaste kiss but lingering kiss against the top of her head. "Be careful, Magnet."

"Hmmm," Darcy pushed him gently away. Teela was clearly staring at her. "What?"

"Your King is in love with you."

"Yeah...I sort of...I kind of guessed that."

After a quick cleanup and an even quicker getaway, the heroes spent a quiet dinner together in a way
too fancy restaurant that had been cleared out in honor of the King of Wakanda.

T’Challa had advised Steve to obtain his shield as quickly as possible so that they could work together more efficiently. He proposed using his private island in Wakanda as a base where they and the rest of Steve’s friends could recuperate in between work. Darcy didn’t think she had seen anyone so excited to scribble new building sketches onto napkins before. To their credit, Teela and W’Kabi only smiled indulgently at their king’s enthusiasm.

“The shield is crucial, Captain Rogers,” T’Challa repeated. “While you fought well without it today, I have seen you fight with it, and there is no comparison.”

"Tony did have a point, though. His father made that shield and gave it to me to use, but technically, it is his," Steve shrugged. "If anything can make him feel better about his parents, I'm not going to take it from him."

"A gift is something that cannot be undone," T’Challa advised. "And by your reasoning, Captain, the shield may have been created by the senior Stark, but the vibranium comes from my land and therefore would belong to me. And I choose for you to have it."

"He just wants you to have it back so that you would spar with him at his home and he won't be undone by it ever again," W’Kabi advised.

"Respect your King," T’Challa admonished playfully. “Captain Rogers, if it is a new shield you require, we can create one.”

"I'll get it back," Darcy promised T’Challa. "Don't worry."

"I would not worry, little one," T’Challa nodded. "Teela finds you quite capable."

"Huh, most people just call me a pain in the ass," Darcy joked before they all went back to their delicious dinner and pleasant conversation.

"Stay safe my friends," T’Challa practically ordered as they said their farewells. "I look forward to seeing you back at home."
"Yeah, home," Steve smiled, the idea of it thrilling him immensely. He wrapped an arm around Darcy's shoulders and turned a more tender smile her way. "Where to now, Magnet?"

Darcy had been checking her phone and nodded. "To New York. It's time."

She threw him her phone as they approached their quinjet again and said, "It's a Dear Steve letter from your pal."

Steve answered Bucky's text message patiently while Darcy busied herself around the little camp they had turned the quinjet into. He had them in the air and on auto-pilot in no time before he meandered back towards the hammock.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I know you wanted a real bed, and I promise, someday we're going to come back here and make proper use of that little cott---oh."

Darcy grinned from the floor of the quinjet, where she had set up a little oasis of blankets and pillows. She struck quite the pretty pose as she lay back on her elbows, looking up at him with a lovely little smirk. She was wearing some sort of gauzy, flimsy looking deep blue negligee that barely covered anything on her. His fingers itched as he watched a tiny, skinny strap fall down her shoulder.

"Wow," Steve breathed.

"You sure do know how to make a girl feel wanted," Darcy bit at her bottom lip to contain the big grin that was fighting to explode on her face. She extended her leg and nudged his shin with her toe. "Do something, cutie."

Steve dropped to his knees and crawled towards her slowly, his eyes darting all over her body and face, never quite stopping, taking in every curve, every detail, every inch of pale skin that was on display. He kept going back to those beautiful eyes, crinkled in laughter, pupils rapidly dilating as his fingers drifted from her ankle up the line of her leg, resting on her hip as he moved his body up over hers. His lips landed on her collarbone before working a steady, persistent path up, until his mouth slanted against hers.
She hummed when he pulled away from her mouth to place more little, worshipful kisses on her face.

"You love me," she accused with a soft playfulness.

Steve froze and looked down at her, looking a little sheepish.

"I---I'm sorry, I'm not. Sorry that is," Steve shook his head. He shrugged and said, "Bucky always made fun of me for falling fast. And yeah, maybe when I was a kid that was a dumb way to go about things, but I don't care if I fell fast this time. I've been hearing about you for five years, sweetheart, and probably fell halfway in love with you when I read that memo to Laura Barton. Yeah. Yes. I love you."

Darcy smiled at him and arched up for another kiss against his mouth, teasing and playful.

"Don't tell Bucky, because I don't want him making fun of me," Darcy warned, batting her eyelashes at him as a pretty pink blush fell across the bridge of her nose. "But I always fall pretty fast too."

"Fallen for many fellas, Magnet?" Steve asked playfully.

“Well, just this one fella, so far. I’d been hearing a lot about him from our friends too, but it was still pretty darned fast."

Present Day, Wakanda
"And then we said goodbye to T'Challa and left London and flew to New York," Steve gave the heavily edited version of their trip from London to New York. "Played some cards and took a nap during the trip, is all."

"Sounds boring," Natasha arched an eyebrow Darcy's way, taking some measure of delight as the girl turned a little pink across the bridge of her nose.

"Definitely not boring even a little bit," Darcy promised, taking a big bag full of stuff that Steve couldn't physically maneuver into his grip and turning to trail him out of the quinjet.

Bucky gave Natasha a smirk.

"Do you think we should tell them that the Asgardian meade came back in the bottle the night after the doombot attack?" Bucky wondered. Natasha had figured out quickly that once the heart match was consummated, the meade returned to the bottle.

When Darcy and Steve left Wakanda, there was barely an inch of the blue liquid in it. After the doombot attack, there was three quarters of a bottle, exactly the amount that Darcy and Steve had guzzled down over the years.

"No, let's let them think they're keeping their physical relationship a secret for now," Natasha shrugged. "Besides, now we can open up the betting on when they'll be discovered in a compromising position."

"Hell yes. And also, can we manage it that Wilson is the one to find them in said compromising position? I'd like to rub it in his smarmy face a little."

"I think that could be arranged."

Chapter End Notes

So...I should not have tagged the slow burn. Sorry if I misled you and brought you in for something you aren't getting (although maybe a slow burn for another couple!)
In my head, Teela is of course the badass woman from Civil war (Also, she was in this reality show last year where people tried to be warriors and she was badass in that too). And W'Kabi is Michael B Jordan. Because he was cast in Black Panther, but we don't know what for yet, and I think it would be awesome (for my eyeballs) to see Michael B Jordan and Chadwick Boseman on screen together being adorable and smiling.

Thanks so much for reading!!
Hi everyone!

So. The dreaded Tony chapter. I will be honest here, I like Tony very much. (But I love Bucky very much.) So this was a difficult chapter to write for me.

I hope it meets with your expectations!

Chapter Fourteen: Tick, Tick, Boom

Summer 2014, New York City

"Pepper, Pepper, Pepper! We need your security override for JARVIS for reasons that are not illegal but are really important and ---it's actually to get revenge upon your significant other, and may result in him thinking that he's slept for five years and everything has changed. Please, please please--- oh..."

Darcy's rapid fire pleas died on her lips as she and Jane stood in front of Pepper's desk, both women unnerved to watch as the usually implacable CEO of Stark Industries hurriedly wiped under her eyes and took a long sniff.

"Pepper? You alright?" Jane asked softly as she and Darcy took a seat in front of Pepper's desk. "Is Tony, okay? He seemed fine when he was picking on us five minutes ago, but you never know."


Darcy got up and went towards the small bar that was kept in Pepper's office on Tony's insistence. She found the hidden compartment that kept the mini-fridge that Tony didn't know about and pulled out the cheap Seagram's wine coolers that she kept stocked for times just like these, when one of her
ladies of the tower needed a little help. Even Natasha respected the wine cooler. Even Clint swore by its psychological healing powers.

She handed them out and twisted off the top of hers before taking a big swallow, watching as Pepper and Jane did the same.

"Hero stuff," Pepper sighed. Jane gave a nod of agreement and Pepper looked at Darcy ruefully, "You'll understand eventually, Darcy. You know, when you let me throw that mysterious Stark Industries Gala where you can finally meet you know who."

"He seems a little busy, actually," Darcy demurred. Captain America had been very busy. Between saving all three of the women from being targets of Project Insight earlier that spring when he took down the SHIELD helicarriers, and then going out to search for his back from the dead best friend, it seemed that Steve wouldn't have much time to attend a gala. Darcy errantly wondered if Steve had the time to sleep, eat or breathe.

"Thor has been on the rampage since the Hydra reveal. Especially since Loki's scepter went missing," Jane nodded. "I mean, I don't worry about his safety, the guy is basically indestructible. But the guilt? He beats himself up, for letting down Loki, for letting down Frigga, for letting down all the nine realms. If I could bodily shake him, I would."

"I thought he was done," Pepper sighed, opening a folder on her desk marked classified and paging through it. "The Iron Legion. Mark 42. And what he has so cleverly named a hulkbuster suit. He'll never be done."

They remained silent for a little while longer, sipping at their drinks.

"If he was getting some kind of help, I could---it would be better," Pepper admitted. "But he doesn't talk about Afghanistan. Or New York. Or Malibu. Or Anything. He just keeps building robots and drones and suits. He just keeps going and he's going to wind up going off a cliff and I can't follow him."

Jane went for the second round of wine coolers this time and Darcy went for a new box of tissues. Pepper grabbed for Darcy's hand and a small, sad smile bent Pepper's mouth as she stared at Darcy in sudden concern.
"Please don't let this scare you off of you know who , I'm just having a bad day and all of these projects landed on my desk and I'm just---tired," Pepper sighed.

"Who and the huh now?" Jane asked.

"Nothing," Pepper rolled her eyes. Jane had always been a little blind to the matchmaking schemes being thrown at Darcy constantly. "Just trying to make sure that if Darcy found a hero of her own someday, she wouldn't be turned off based on my own issues with Tony."

"Pfft," Jane blew a raspberry. "If Darcy ever finds a hero brave enough to take her on, she's gonna be the one being yanked back from the fire. Lord help the hero who would hope to hold what Thor calls her mighty heart."

---

**Nine days ago, Secaucus, New Jersey**

"Open your eyes or I will be forced to do awful things to you in order for them to open."

There was no response from the human furnace who was currently pinning Darcy to the lovely little nest of blankets and pillows on the floor to the quinjet. They'd finally run out of steam in their amorous endeavors five hours ago, when a blissfully nude Steve had landed them in Fury's designated hidden space in a garage in Secaucus, New Jersey. Steve had then stumbled, still nude, back to the little nest, painted Darcy's neck with sloppy, exhausted kisses before gathering her up in his arms and falling asleep finally.

Darcy was a stationary starfish sleeper, limbs going everywhere and staying there. Steve was more of a mover and a shaker in his sleep, and he had ended up sprawled out on his stomach over half of her, his face buried in her breasts, his arms still wrapped around her torso in thick, heavy, immovable bands.
She must have really tuckered him out, a little thought that made her immensely proud, but did nothing to get him to roll off of her so that she could use the bathroom.

"Wake up, cutie," Darcy grumbled, wriggling in his grasp to get more mobility. She grinned wickedly as her right hand managed to squeeze under his left arm. She let her fingers dance along his rib cage and frowned when he didn't even squirm. If anything, he relaxed into her touch more and fell deeper into sleepy dream land. "Oh no you don't mister. I've gotta pee."

She wedged her hand between their bodies and went to grasp around his semi-erect length. Someone was having a nice dream.

"Darcy--yyy," he rasped out, still dead asleep and dreaming pleasantly of the perfect lovemaking they had done five hours ago.

"Rise and shine, tiger," Darcy ordered, stroking him a little harder. He was now hard and pulsing in her grasp, his hips giving a little stutter against her. "You know, Barnes is a right bastard for calling you tiny. I claim false advertisement."

"Mmm, love you," he mumbled happily in his sleep.

Yeah, definitely a replay of last night. He had whispered that plenty during their first time together. And their second time together. And then their third time together.

"If you love me, you'll let me go to the bathroom," Darcy insisted. She blew out an exasperated breath, ruffling the hair on Steve's head that they had colored during their first trip to New York City a few weeks ago. He needed a touch up, because blonde roots were showing up beneath the darker brown color he had chosen in order to go incognito, along with the healthily growing beard. She wriggled beneath him again and paused the machinations of her hand, grinning when he chased the feeling with his hips, rising up and down and up---

She let go of him completely in a flash and brought her legs up so that her knees were pushing against his mid-section. He let out a groan as he quickly woke up and she pushed his no longer sleep heavy body away, twisting out from underneath him and rushing towards the bathroom.

"Sorry!" Steve called out. He rolled around in the nest of blankets, trying to reorient himself and ignore the unfulfilled erection demanding his attention. Instead, he went for her phone, which was blinking with unread messages and he grimaced as he saw that Bucky was making wild accusations
about what he and Darcy had been doing. Accusations that were totally true.

He typed out a quick letter back, full of lies about how he and Darcy had played cards instead of the truth about how they had rolled around on the floor of the quinjet for a few hours getting to know each other much, much better.

Bucky replied back, calling him a liar, so Steve contented himself with deflecting the attention away from whatever Bucky thought he knew until he felt a familiar little hand dancing along his torso. He grinned at her lazily and tossed the phone aside, pulling her back into their little nest.

"Good morning, beautiful," he mumbled against her skin.

"You wanna keep writing epic love letters to your bestie?" Darcy wondered playfully. "Or do you wanna make the most of the next hour before your stomach starts growling and I have to go see someone about a shield?"

"I want breakfast first," Steve smirked.

"Oh?" Darcy pouted. Steve rolled them over and began a slow path of kisses down her torso. "OH. Gotcha."

"Thank you for meeting me," Darcy smiled as she sat down in front of Pepper's desk in the Tower. She wasn't surprised to see wine coolers sitting there.

"He didn't even notice that you and Jane are gone yet," Pepper said coolly. "Too wrapped up in figuring out how to make things right for Rhody. He's also been at the beck and call of the UN, since he's one of the only sanctioned heroes. And he's still scrambling to find a way to salvage the accords, to make them right some how."
“Well, I’ve been kind of working on not salvaging them,” Darcy admitted.

“I noticed,” Pepper smiled. “So, I didn’t need that gala after all?”

“Actually, maybe,” Darcy pursed her lips thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t ask this if I had any other options, Pepper, I promise. I’d like to speak to Tony.”

“Darcy, don’t worry about it. Can you give me a few days to set things up?” Pepper wondered.

“Yeah, we have a few things to work out, namely talking to a lawyer in the states to work on getting Scott Lang exonerated so he can be able to see his kid,” Darcy revealed.

“I know a great defense attorney who might be helpful,” Pepper went to her phone and began scrolling through contacts.

“Thanks,” Darcy nodded. She took a deep breath and said softly, “Pepper, I’m sorry. I know that once Tony realizes what’s going on he’s going to be upset.”

Pepper shook her head. “It has to happen. This friendly, icy break has lasted long enough. Maybe we need to just blow up and rebuild from there. I’ve pouted long enough. It’s time that I try to at least spend an hour or two in the same room with him again without wanting to run away. Sometimes it’s better to start from scratch.”

“Yeah,” Darcy nodded. She saw that Pepper’s usually clear blue eyes were tinged with red and she reached out a hand, stilling Pepper’s from ripping at the label of her bottle. “It’s not weak or bad that you can’t walk away.”

“Ironic, isn't it? He can't walk away from this, this desperation to keep fixing what he thinks are his mistakes,” Pepper sighed. “He keeps trying to make things right, even before they’ve gone bad some times. And he can’t walk away. And I can’t be witness to his slow destruction, or god forbid his quick destruction. But I can’t walk away either. Not from him.”

“You two have a lot to talk about,” Darcy guessed.
"Will you take some unbidden advice from someone who has been down this road?" Pepper squeezed at Darcy's fingertips. "Always tell the truth, no matter how hard it hurts. Don't bottle anything."

"Pepper, you know me. I'm incapable of bottling anything, really," Darcy shook her head ruefully. "And if Steve ever tries to bottle up, I'll just grab some more of that magic meade and give him a good ole case of the Darcy Lewis verbal diarrhea."

“Magic meade? I sense a story there, Darcy.”

---

*Forty-eight hours ago, Upstate New York*

As nice as their cozy little set up in the quinjet was, Steve couldn't have been happier when they landed in a nice little motel in upstate New York. The things that he could do with a springy mattress underneath them were absolutely awe-inspiring. Darcy might have encouraged him to give it his all heartily.

And she might have made sure he couldn't pin her down with his sleepy cuddles afterwards. And then she might have slipped out of the motel and borrowed (hotwired) a car and drove forty miles towards the facility she had abandoned a month ago with Jane.

And that was probably why she was standing in a crowd of unappealing movers and shakers at the visitor's center in the upstate Avenger's Facility, dressed in a lovely blue dress that Pepper had had waiting for her at their motel. She walked confidently through the room, ignoring lecherous stares and confused looks, going straight for the corner were Tony and Pepper were standing, talking earnestly and quietly.

"Lewis...hey. Where've you been? Hiding out with Foster, looking at the stars?" Tony wondered.

"Not quite," Darcy shook her head with an exasperated smile.
Pepper tensed slightly next to Tony and he looked between the two women suspiciously.

"Friday, where has Darcy been the last month?" Tony wondered.

"Miss Lewis has been out of my areas of surveillance for the last month, boss," Friday answered dutifully.

"A month, huh?" Tony nodded, starting to look a little peeved. "Right about the time the raft was emptied of all types of heroes? You know, when my security tech was obliterated by someone with clever misguided fingers? Congrats on finally getting around my security, kid. Can’t say that I approve of why you did it."

"Tony," Pepper said gently.

"No, come on," Tony shook his head slightly. He gave Pepper a tight smile. "We just promised truths to each other."

"We did," Pepper agreed. "I set up the fundraiser to give Darcy this opportunity. And I thought it was time that we talked, really talked."

"Thanks," Tony said flatly. He turned his glare to Darcy and the pendant around her neck caught his eye. Resting in the hollow of her neck was a tiny little circle of silver with the indentation of Steve’s shield on it. She had bought it days ago after her meeting in New York City with Pepper and had chosen to wear it for the first time. "So what, he's a bad boy now, so you take all of our advice and jump aboard the Captain America express?"

"Tony," Darcy said firmly. "Three years ago you were dying to set me up with Steve."

"That's before I knew what he was capable of," Tony ground out between clenched teeth. "Did he tell you the truth? That he knew all along that that thing killed my parents?"

"Tony," Darcy repeated his name with soft but clear conviction. "I've always been sorry that you lost your parents. Remember, it was one of those things we talked about when you were having a panic attack a few years ago. We have that in common, Tony."
"Your parents actually died in a car accident. Mine were brutally murdered by your boyfriend's other boyfriend," Tony's voice started to pitch upwards in volume.

"And there is nothing that can be done to make that NOT true," Darcy said softly. "You can either have Bucky prosecuted, which you know, you know Tony in your heart of hearts, that the man that calls himself Bucky right now is not the same person who did those awful things and you know the charges wouldn't stick. Or you can try to find some peace and let Bucky try to pay for the sins he still holds as his own, in the only way he can, by protecting this world. But you can't go around taking an eye for an eye. That's not how the world should work for heroes."

"Get out," Tony pointed to the front door.

"Tony," Pepper tried to interject.

"Both of you can get out," Tony snapped at them before storming away.

"I'm sorry, Darcy," Pepper said as they watched him go. "Rhodey had thought he would be approachable. When he got that burner phone from Steve, he was in a better place for a little while."

"I know," Darcy sighed. "I'll make it right. Just---can you override the security clearance?"

"Of course," Pepper smiled. She reached for Darcy and gave her a tight hug, "Good luck."

Steve woke up in the motel clinging to a large body pillow that was approximately Darcy sized, but definitely wasn't Darcy. He climbed out of the lovely bed and went to the bathroom, knowing that she had spoken at length about how much she desperately wanted an hour long hot shower. He was
disappointed to see that she wasn't in there.

He felt a gnawing in his gut, but tried to push it down. She was probably just out and about getting them food. She did that whenever they stopped, being the least visible of the two of them. He forced himself to trust her and sat down, going over the maps for approximately ten minutes before he couldn't stand it anymore.

He grabbed her phone and sent a desperate text off to Bucky as he quickly got dressed in the only clothing available. Apparently, she had taken his traveling clothing and only left him with pajamas. He was storming out of the room, ready to go and find her when Natasha texted him back, telling him when she'd return.

He knew how far away they were from the Avenger's facility. He knew she had a plan to get his shield back that she hadn't shared with him. He pocketed the phone and rushed out of the motel, tearing off through the woods to the clearing where they had left the quinjet.

His hands were shaking with worry as he put the bird in the air, zooming towards where he knew Darcy was and wondering just what kind of danger she might be in if Tony was still being particularly unfriendly.

"You know, I'm kind of glad you're not working for me anymore, Lewis. You're kind of shit at taking direction. Get out usually means, vacate the premises," Tony grumbled as he viciously stabbed at a metal panel on a pile of parts on his workbench.

Darcy walked into his lab and took a seat on top of the table, kicking her legs in the air. It was as if they had gone back three years, where Darcy would meander into Tony's workshop, hop up on a table and demand to know what the man would eat for lunch. But this wasn't the Tower, and it certainly wasn't three years ago any longer.

Tony radiated bitter tension, and for once, Darcy's innate need to poke at angry bears was kept at bay as she watched him mindlessly pull apart a robot only to put it back together again. There was a slight tremor in his right hand that he couldn't quite control, and she noticed that his left eyelid was twitching every once in awhile. He was exhausted. He looked like he was about to topple over at the slightest wind.
Twenty minutes went by, Darcy just observing him work out his anger as he began building things so quickly that he didn't even know what he was doing. When the small cube shaped robot, no bigger than a lunchbox, began to hover in the air he threw his small pen shaped blow torch down and took a deep, heaving sigh.

"The shield is buried under that pile of junk over there, take it and go."

The burning anger was gone from his voice. Instead, a tired resignation and a deep bitterness tinged his words. He looked up when Darcy didn't move.

"Your boyfriend needs that shield," he reminded her.

"No, he doesn't," Darcy shook her head. "He said less than a week ago that you should keep it if it makes you feel even just a little bit better. That you deserve all the recompense you can get."

"Then why'd he stop me from getting it?" Tony countered.

"Tony, killing Bucky would have done nothing for you," Darcy shook her head. "You're a good man. You are. You keep chasing redemption that you don't need, because you are a good man. Not enough people in your life have told you that. They should have. So what, you're a little rough around the edges? Sure, but the best kinds of people have rough edges. It makes the smooth parts that much better."

"You're dating Cap for a month and already you're spewing out dumb speeches," Tony rolled his eyes. They remained silent for a few more minutes, watching as the little robot hovered around in the air. Tony cleared his throat and shrugged, "You get Barton his wife and kids?"

"They're all fine," Darcy assured him, smiling slightly when a bit of relief went through Tony's eyes.

"I never thought they'd be put on the raft," Tony said quietly. "Like monsters. I wouldn’t want---I didn’t want that."
"Tony, it was General Ross. Look at what he tried to do to Bruce," Darcy said quietly. "I'm worried about you working so closely with him. One of these days he's going to try to harness you completely."

"I'd like to see him try," Tony chuckled. He took another deep sigh and walked towards the pile of spare parts he had told her the shield was under. He kicked and pushed away piles of metal until the familiar shiny red, white and blue could be seen. He picked it up disdainfully, looking down at it and saying quietly, "My Dad thought Steve could do no wrong. It's good to know that the old man was wrong about a few things. Gives me hope for the things he said about me."

"Tony---"

"He KNEW, Darcy. He knew about what Barnes did and he didn't bother trying to break it to me gently," Tony told her. "Not to try to take the shine off of your new fella, but he's not all truth and honesty like the cartoons made him out to be."

"Tony!" Darcy hopped off of the table and walked towards him, grabbing the shield that he was clenching tightly in his hands. "He found out what Bucky had done after Bucky had been triggered in Berlin. The next time he got an opportunity to talk to you was at the airport, where you were both auditioning for extreme superhero MMA fighting. When did he get the opportunity to tell you?"

"I don't like your human logic, Lewis," Tony rolled his eyes.

"I've never had human logic," Darcy laughed, walking back towards the table and putting her hand gently on the little flying robot, pushing it slightly away from her. "Troll Logic, remember?"

"Yeah," Tony took a deep breath. "I don't want to see Barnes' face ever again in my life, Darcy. I'm telling you that now. I might be able to forgive Steve someday. But I can't look at that monst---"

The little hovering droid bot let out a low pitched whining noise before rapidly beeping.

"Shit," Tony cursed, reaching out for Darcy and yanking her backwards away from the robot. He definitely shouldn't have put the probationary fuel cell in there. Not in an uncontrolled environment at least. Rule number one in Stark Labs, never tinker while angry.
The fuel cell was probationary because it had been incredibly difficult to get the arc reactors so miniscule to fit into the small bots. Apparently, the smaller the arc reactor, the more terrific the explosion.

Darcy brought the shield up to cover their faces and Tony managed to twist the both of their bodies as the explosion ripped through the lab and pushed both of them to the ground.

"Oh..." Darcy grumbled. "I haven't been exploded in a really long time. If I don't get an explosion bonus in my account within two weeks, I'm suing."

"Sorry," Tony rasped out as he managed to pull himself into a sitting position. "Friday?"

"Recovery support and Ms. Potts are on their way, boss. Structure integrity holds true at 98 percent. You'll be happy to know that the soundproofing and shock absorption worked. The partygoers didn't even realize there was anything amiss."

"Ha! Take that Thor, I've finally managed to come up with something that won't let the entire facility know that you're boning Foster!" Tony held out a fist to Darcy to let her bump it.

"Also," Friday cut in. "A quinjet is descending on the front lawn, it matches the quinjet missing in Berlin."

"Shit!" Darcy cursed, hopping to her feet as quickly as her minor aches and pains would let her. "He's gonna come tearing through here, right through the lobby full of important government officials."

"Go on, get," Tony waved her off. "Friday, reinforce the doors with all the power we have until Lewis gets up there."

Darcy wrapped her free arm around Tony's shoulders and squeezed as hard as she could. She pulled away to see tears in his eyes and gave him an earnest little smile.
"You know where we are. Don't be a stranger, Tony. And thank you."

"Get out of here, Lewis," Tony said softly. "Oh, and tell Cap that the burner phone is shit. I had to build a power cord for it, that's how old it is."

"Who's idea did you think that was?" Darcy laughed as she began to hustle out of the lab.

"HEY! If there's wagering going on about when you and Cap get hitched, I want in!" Tony shouted after her.

Darcy quickly rushed through the halls, wondering how long it would take for Steve to pry open the doors at the main entrance to the facility. She turned a corner when a very hard, very stationary, maroon mass phased through the wall. She couldn't stop her momentum, instead clipping Vision in the shoulder with the shield and going flying to the side, her body spinning before she crashed on her butt, her hands steady on the shield at all times.

"Fuck, dude, seriously?" Darcy winced. She felt as if she had broken every bone in her butt cheeks, which was ridiculous because people didn't have bones in their butt cheeks, but still.

"Come with me, Miss Lewis," Vision nodded, picking her up off the ground and carrying her bridal style as he floated to a window that opened for him unbidden. He ignored Darcy's little curse words as she wriggled in his hold in obvious pain, instead, he tried to focus on the words he wanted to say. "Would you deliver a message to Wanda for me, Miss Lewis?"

"Sure, sure, message me, big purple," Darcy grumbled as he quickly flew them towards the main entrance, where Darcy could hear the creaking of metal being bent against its will.

"I would...I would apologize to her," Vision admitted. "And would want her to know how lonely it is without her here."

"Sure, Vision. I can do that," Darcy nodded. "I'll omit the part that you're still absolute shit about walking through walls on people."
"Thank you," Vision nodded as they made their descent. "Captain Rogers."

Steve was standing at the front doors clad in cozy and comfortable pajamas, his hands gripped around the metal edge of a doorway, pulling with all of his considerable strength to try and get inside. He paused in his efforts and turned, seeing Darcy being carried in Vision's arms, looking disheveled and hurt. He let go of the door immediately, and the extra power that FRIDAY had fed into the system to keep Steve out caused the door to slam with a loud booming sound.

"Darcy!" Steve called out, rushing to where Vision had landed. He pulled the shield out of her arms and threw it to the side before taking her out of Vision's hold, his eyes wild as he looked over her repeatedly. She was covered in soot and dirt, her dress looked like it had seen better days, and there was a small burn mark on her right shoulder. His voice was softer than it had ever been when he whispered, "Are you alright?"

"I'm okay, Steve, I promise," Darcy nodded.

"What'd he do to you?" Steve's voice was no longer soft. Steve's voice was a deadly low sound as his eyes finally stopped roving over her to look towards the facility. He gently placed her on the ground and turned back to the building, intent on getting inside.

"Steve, no, let's go, it was an accident. I'll explain on the plane," Darcy promised, reaching out for his hand. She wove her fingers in his and pulled, and to Steve's credit he let her have her way, confusion settled on his face as she bent to pick up the shield and winced, but hoisted it up anyway and marched them back towards the quinjet he had barely been able to land on the facility grounds.

"You're hurt," he said softly as she definitely showed some pain in her steps. "You shouldn't have gone in by yourself, Magnet."

"Yeah, getting blown up will do that to you," Darcy nodded. She let out a whoop of joy when he reached for her again, picking her up and carrying her back to the quinjet. His lips pressed next to the little burn mark on her otherwise perfect skin and she sighed. "Kissing booboos is kind of a turn on."

"I'll kiss all of them," Steve promised earnestly.

"Oh good, my butt hurts. Start there."
Chapter End Notes

*Badumdum shhhh*

(that is the drum thing comedians have after they tell a zinger. That's what should be after that line, really).

I am leaving for the shore tomorrow for graduation revels. But I will hopefully still have laptop time when everyone else is passed out from cheap beer. So I hope to update some time this weekend. And I'm hoping to get a lot of writing in.

Thanks so much for reading! I think you are all amazing!
Chapter Notes

So...we finally come to the end of Darcy and Steve's big adventure.

I'm still at the shore, but I'm getting a lot of fun writing done, and hope to update the story by Wednesday again. (I'm working on a regular posting schedule for this one. Sunday's and Wednesdays).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Fifteen: Yaes. she homee now.busycan't typee...Stweeb

2011, New Mexico

"Villain! Stop sniffing the air like a dog in heat!"

Fandral looked up guiltily as Thor bellowed his order at him. They had arrived at the small scientist's place of work to find Thor, in all of his Midgardian glory and in the company of three absolutely fascinating Midgardians. The tiny lady who Thor constantly looked to with ridiculously soft eyes full of worship was a force to be reckoned with and had already threatened to hog tie Volstaag into a shower and had smacked Hogun's hand for touching something he wasn't supposed to touch. The tall Midgardian elder was ACTUALLY talking to Sif and not exhibiting pants wetting fear. Instead, he was sitting and speaking with the warrior, asking question after question about everything he could possibly think of, his eyes large and fascinated.

And the other tiny lady, well she was keeping the hearth. She was assembling new refreshments since dropping her own at their arrival. The others were trying to come up with a battle plan now, but the little, buxom hearthkeeper was rooting around in cabinets and storage bins, placing tiny sweet cakes in a pile amongst many varied and well used mugs of a strong black brew.
"Hearth keeper, tell me your name," Fandral smiled at her winningly as he pulled a cake off of the plate and bit into it. His eyes went wide in wonder and looked down at the small yellow confection.

"It's a twinkie," Darcy smiled as she lifted the tray and went back to the planning party. "Don't eat more than one, or you'll regret it. DEFINITELY don't eat five in a row, because then you'll puke and be turned off of them forever."

"That was ONE time, Darcy!" Jane shouted out in her defense. "And I had just taken a giant shot of tequila!"

"Twinkie, Janie?" Darcy waved the seemingly innocent treat under her nose. Big blue eyes twinkled with mirth as Jane fought back a gag reflex.

"Delightful," Fandral grinned lecherously as he watched the buxom little one they called Darcy ply her guests with food, drink and winning conversation, interjecting tiny nuggets of wisdom into their planning.

"Villain," Thor warned, pulling Fandral by the shoulder and off to the side. He only called Fandral such a thing when he wanted him to keep his hands off of the local finery.

"She would be a most excellent consort. If you weren't infatuated with the scientist woman, you would see that," Fandral defended himself quietly. He could sense these things. If Thor had had the power of lightning, and Heimdall the power to see all, then certainly, Fandral had his own special power. He could sense when a potential bedmate would be highly adept at said bedmate activities. "I would wed her proper if it would make you feel better."

"She is not your heart's match," Thor insisted. "I've seen you drunk on the meade. You wander to Heimdall certainly for transport, but you do so severely. Lady Darcy is the opposite of severity."

"Still, she is a cunning and capable hearthkeeper with good humor and promises to be delightfully wicked once divested of her ridiculous Midgardian finery," Fandral watched as Darcy poked at Sif's bicep in wonder. "Please can I woo her? If only for a moment?"
"Villain," Thor repeated. "She is meant for greater love than what you could find in the bowels of your small, black heart. Her heart is pure and she is fierce and loyal. The one who wins her heart shall have to be formidable."

"I fear the man who is her match," Fandral said honestly. "I will not attempt to woo her. Much. I value my life too much to have it taken someday by a fearsomely devoted heart match to such a hearthkeeper."

---

_Forty hours ago, Quinjet above New York_

Steve had the quinjet in the air again, heading back to Secaucus for the time being. He had never used auto pilot so very much in his whole career with Shield as he did during his month with Darcy. He was hovering outside of the small bathroom where Darcy was trying to get cleaned up.

"Steve?" she called out.

"Right here, are you alright? What do you need?" Steve put his palm on the door that separated them.

"Clothing?" she requested after she was done giggling at his over attentiveness.

"Oh...uhm...right," Steve looked around and knew that the quinjet wasn't equipped with clothing. And their bag of clothing they had taken off the quinjet and that he couldn’t find for the life of him when he left the motel was...

In the laundry at the motel.

"Well, sweetheart, that's a funny story," the side of Steve's mouth went up in a self deprecating smirk.
The bathroom door opened slightly and Darcy squinted up at him.

"Entertain me, Captain," she muttered lowly.

"Well, when I woke up, you weren't there," Steve revealed and then shrugged, as if that was explanation enough.

"Steve...is my favorite bra really in that motel's washing machine right now?" Darcy's face was rapidly going from an annoyed kind of amused to a heartbroken kind of annoyed.

"I love you?" he offered hopefully. "And the idea that you had been taken or hurt or needing help made me lose my brain a little."

Darcy looked up at him appraisingly. He was so damned adorable, that it actually wasn't fair. She sighed before opening the door fully, revealing that she was only wearing a pair of panties. Her dirty and torn dress lay in a crumpled heap on the floor, along with the strapless bra that she had insisted was created by the devil.

"You're really very pretty," Steve sighed happily, looking down at her as he felt all the blood leave his brain and rush to his cheeks and his groin. His hand reached out to touch petal soft skin and she did a quick little step to get away from him. He full on pouted, making an accompanying wounded noise.

"Nuh uh, buster, we're getting some things clear here," Darcy crossed her arms under her chest, grinning wickedly when Steve made a creaking, groaning noise in response. "You chased me."

"Magnet, I'm always gonna chase you," Steve gave her an earnest smile, shrugging a little. "Think about how magnets work."

"Smartass," Darcy rolled her eyes. "I had it under control. Natasha must have told you when I would be back."

"You were exploded," Steve reminded her.
"I had it under control," Darcy repeated confidently. "I don't jump into things that I can't handle."

"I heard a story about you jumping into a portal once and winding up in Australia," Steve said thoughtfully. "Natasha had to go rescue you."

"That was ONE time," Darcy scoffed.

"I heard another story about the time you were waiting in the bushes for Barton to walk by outside of the Triskellion on the day that the President visited," Steve did his level best not to smile, just looked down at her with a neutral and pleasant face. "You were taken in by the Secret Service and were on the bus to Guantanamo Bay before Natasha stole you away again."

"Two times," Darcy wrinkled her nose at him.

"And there was the time that you wanted to adopt a baby bilgesnipe---"

"Don't you dare bring Manuel The Fluffy into this!" Darcy gasped.

"Sweetheart, you know what our lives are like. You know what my life is like. When I wake up without a note, or any idea where you are, I can't trust that someone bad didn't come and try to take you from me. I need clear instructions and I promise, I will do my best to follow them. Or make Bucky make me follow them," Steve offered with a grin as he stepped closer to her, his hands going out and rubbing up and down on her arms. "Okay?"

"I've always been fine on my own," Darcy disputed petulantly.

"Completely on your own?"

"Alright, on my own with liberal assists from Natasha and once from Thor when Manuel The Fluffy tried to eat that ambulance," Darcy wrinkled her nose. "I don't like being told what I can or can't do."
"Darcy, I promise you with all that I am that I will never, ever tell you what you can or can’t do,” Steve swore. She opened her mouth to argue and he brought his hands up to cup her face, his thumbs running over her lips. "I just want to make sure that you're safe. Always safe. So yeah, sometimes I’m going to need to know when you might be leaving me by my lonesome in a motel room for four hours or so, just so I know that Hydra didn't come to snatch you up. And in return I will give you absolute honesty in return."

"That’s an even exchange," Darcy unclenched a fraction and leaned into him, wrapping her arms around his torso and placing a kiss on his chest, right where his heart was steadily beating.

"Was this our first argument?” Steve wondered.

"Yeah, a little one,” Darcy looked up at him with a little grin.

"So—now comes the making up, right?” Steve nodded. "I mean, help your fella out, Magnet, he's not up to date on modern living. I remember Laura and Nat talking one weekend about something happening when the making up happens. Laura seemed to think it was amazing."

"You troll," Darcy laughed, going up on her tiptoes and smashing her mouth against his. To his credit, Steve ran with it, his hands going for her thighs, hoisting her up until she wrapped her legs around his waist.

He had managed to divest himself of his shirt and Darcy had made quick work of his pants, the soft blue flannel material falling to the quinjet floor in a puddle. He went towards their little nest of blankets and pillows and Darcy pulled away and shook her head.

"Makeup sex means location change, pal. Somewhere special where the anger can be expelled."

"But m'not angry with you, sweetheart," Steve disputed.

"Bucky Barnes is a boogerfaced jerkwad with a pretty face!” Darcy said quickly. Her eyes widened with hope. "Angry, now?"

"Hmmm, nope," Steve grinned, stalking towards the cockpit and putting her on the ground before his hands reached out and pulled her panties down. He then pulled his own boxer briefs off before
sitting in the pilot's chair and giving her a sultry little arch of his eyebrow.

"Ugh, I love you," Darcy groaned in annoyance, rolling her eyes and climbing onto his lap. She let out a lovely moan then when Steve's fingertips danced up the insides of her thighs, settling at her core and stroking at her already wet flesh tenderly. "You're doing makeup sex wrong."

"Doubt it, but enlighten me," Steve kissed against her jaw, his eyes glued to the little shapes she was making with her mouth as he continued to pet her.

"Supposed to be angry," Darcy squeaked out. "All passion and no foreplay and just--just---"

"We'll try for next time," Steve promised as she babbled nonsensical things to get him angry. Most of it insulting to America and Bucky. "Sweetheart, stop moaning Bucky's name like that. S'just not right when another fella has you halfway to seeing stars."

"Mmmhmmm, Bucky," Darcy taunted playfully, gasping when he did a wicked sort of turn of his fingers. Her hips moved on their own, chasing the feelings he was giving her.

"Minx," Steve scolded, watching intently as she found a quick and fierce little climax. He flat out grinned when she began kissing his neck avidly in the aftermath. She had just reached for the twitching, hardness of him against her leg when her phone made a beeping noise at them from it's charging place on the dock.

"Better let Nat know you're okay," Steve advised, groaning when she sank down on him.

"Not Nat, when I tell her to give me five hours, she listens," Darcy insisted. She arched backwards and grabbed the phone, yanking it off the charger and grinning. "Dear Steve."

"Shit," Steve mumbled as she danced in his lap, his hands roaming over her body even as she tried to push the phone at him. He managed to type out some kind of message before Darcy started to really work him over and the phone fell with a clatter to the floor.

A message came in pretty quickly, but both Steve and Darcy were far too occupied to bother with it. Eventually, some time later, Steve managed to shift Darcy as she slept against him and picked up the phone again, reading Bucky's message to him.
You coming home, soon?

He looked down at the sleeping woman in his arms, and he felt his gut fill with a swirling, tingling warmth. His best friend, his best girl, all of the people he trusted most, all in a beautiful paradise that was safe and warm.

He couldn't wait to go home now.

Twenty-four hours ago, Virginia

“Are you ready for this?”

“Yes, Magnet. It’s Mrs. Wilson, she likes me, I promise,” Steve smiled at her reassuringly. He was back in his pajamas and she had put back on the blue dress that was dirty and torn. He had wanted to go straight from the Avenger’s facility back to Wakanda, but Darcy had insisted they had one last thing to do before disappearing again.

That one last thing was delivering a burner phone to Sam’s mother Darlene Wilson.

“Her son followed you into an international incident and became a vigilante,” Darcy reminded him. “She may harbor some animosity.”

“You’ve never met her,” Steve shook his head. “She’s really nice, are you sure you don’t want to come with me?”

“Steve, I look like I got exploded,” Darcy laughed. She longed for the comfortable loungewear that was probably still in the washing machine back at their hotel. “And trust me, even if she’s not mad at you, she’s still going to be mad.”
Steve kissed her tenderly before walking down the ramp to the quinjet. Luckily he wouldn’t have to walk far. Sam’s mother lived on a nice little spot of land with plenty of cover. He ambled up to her back porch and knocked on the door, a friendly smile on his face.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Captain America,” Darlene greeted from the other side, her arms sternly crossed over her chest.

“Hi Mrs. Wilson,” Steve’s smile faltered just a step. He held out the phone and said, “This is to get in touch with your son.”

“Boy, the only way I want to get in touch with my son is to smack him upside his dumbass head,” Darlene Wilson shook her head at him. “Not one call to his mother to let her know that he was following you into the most ridiculous argument of all time.”

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Wilson,’ Steve began.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for,” she shook her head ruefully. “My stupid son is the one who let himself get put on a floating prison meant for dangerous criminals. If he can’t manage to not get himself arrested, then he’s the dumbass. I can see that you were not arrested, Steve.”

“No, ma’am, thanks to your son---”

“And I don’t imagine that the handsome young man with the metal arm was arrested either,” Darlene guessed.

“No ma’am---”

“So I would imagine that my clever damned son should have come up with a way NOT to get arrested,” Darlene concluded. “Don’t get me wrong, Steve, I’m proud of you and him and everything you’ve done. But he got arrested. Do you know how embarrassing that was for me to discuss at book club?”

“No, I can’t---”
“Do you know how absolutely humiliating it is when reporters track me down and ask for exclusives about my vigilante son?” Darlene continued. “His great grand Uncle has not stopped calling me, every day, four times a day wondering how it feels to have a kid in the slammer. The first in our family to get arrested.”

“Well, he’s not in the slammer anymore,” Steve managed to interject. “And I’m working on clearing everyone’s names.”

“I know, Stevie, I know,” Darlene sighed. She looked him over a few times and said, “I like the beard. The hickey on your neck is pretty obnoxious too.”

“Oh, I---”

“It’s nice to see that you finally found someone, Stevie,” Darlene smiled softly. “Is it the girl that Sam said you went out for drinks with in England a few weeks ago? He texted me all proud that he managed to set you up finally.”

“Ah..uhm, no,” Steve shook his head. He opened the screen door and handed the phone to Darlene, giving her a quick hug. The last thing he needed to do was try to explain what had happened in the last month. “I’ll make sure Sam calls you on that. See you, Mrs. Wilson!”

One hour ago, Wakanda

"Real bed, real bed, real bed!!!!"

"Can we--hold on, just, wait a second," Steve said softly as Darcy waded her way through the still waters as they hopped off the docked quinjet. Darcy stopped and turned to Steve with a small smile and walked a few feet away from the jet, plopping down in the sand, her hands still wrapped around his shield.

Steve smiled softly and sat down next to her, wrapping his hand in hers. He took a deep even breath when she lay her head on his arm, taking quite a lot of comfort as they sat in silence for at least fifteen minutes, watching the sun go down.
"Thank you for my adventure," Steve said softly, when the sky was losing the beautiful purples and oranges and being replaced with twilight blues and grays. "I---it's been a real rough couple of years, Magnet."

"I know," Darcy nodded, turning and putting a small kiss against his shoulder.

"I didn't know how much I needed you until you were right there," Steve whispered. "I never had so much fun since waking up. Never had so much happiness right there in the palm of my hand. Thank you."

"Hey," Darcy nudged him with her chin and he looked down at her with glassy eyes. "It was a team effort there. You gave me just as much fun as I gave you. So thank you."

"I love you," Steve said earnestly. "I know it was fast. But I do. You're smart and funny and kind and beautiful. I know that more than a few people will look at us like we're nuts."

"Sam. I'm betting it's mostly going to be Sam," Darcy smirked.

"Yeah, mostly Sam," Steve huffed out a sigh. "Everyone else will probably be pretty happy that their matchmaking finally paid off."

"Probably," Darcy agreed. She looked down the beach and huffed a sigh when she saw Natasha and Bucky heading towards them. "Are you ready to end our adventure?"

"Ready to start a new one?" Steve proposed.

"Absolutely."

Present Day, Wakanda
"And that's it. We came home and got in a few hours ago and just sat on the beach and watched the sun go down," Steve finished. He dropped boxes and bags at the door, watching as Darcy blearily did the same before looking down at her in concern. She really did look tired. Without further preamble he scooped her up and looked to Bucky, "Which room is ours?"

"I'll take you," Bucky promised, leading the way. When he brought them to the room opposite his, with all of Steve's stuff in he watched as Steve placed a sleeping Darcy in the bed before saying, "I'll gather up the little Rainbow Widow's things and bring them over, if that's what you think she'll want?"

"Yeah, that'd be real good, Buck," Steve nodded. Bucky turned around when Steve started to take Darcy's ruined dress off, and he remained turned around until Steve joined him after tucking Darcy in. The men walked from the room and Steve put a hand on Bucky's shoulders, looking him over from head to toe. His friend was clean shaven, his hair was clean and looked neat, pulled back from his face in a little bun. There were no dark circles under his eyes and his eyes were clear and focused. "You look real good, Buck."


"God, I love her so much," Steve sighed. He shrugged and gave Bucky a self-deprecating smile. "Even when we were being shot at, it was still the best time cause she was right there, being her and just. I love her."

"You were---you...hold on a second," Bucky held up his hand and tried to control his very visceral reaction to Steve's casual reminder of their dangerous situation of the last twenty-seven days. He could feel his blood pressure sky rocketing. Finally he couldn't take it any longer and reached up his hand and slapped it against the side of Steve's head. "Fucking punk."

"Stupid jerk," Steve countered easily. His easy grin turned into a yawn, but he tried to blink to banish the sleep from his eyes.

"Go on, go and keep the little Rainbow Widow warm," Bucky pushed at his shoulder.

"Alright," Steve agreed easily, he grabbed Bucky's hand and pulled him into a tight hug. "Love you, pal."
"Yeah, love you too, Stevie," Bucky took a deep, measured breath, trying to contain his own happiness. The only thing Bucky from 1939 ever wanted for his best friend was happiness. And here he’d finally gone and found it right after the world had taken everything of his old, sad, dangerous life away. "Go on, get to sleep. Me and Carter are on breakfast duty tomorrow. She makes ridiculously healthy smoothies, and I'm gonna make something fried in a lot of butter."

"I'll take butter fried in butter," Steve said seriously.

"Good night, Stevie."

"Night Buck."

Bucky walked back down to the foyer of the mansion, and saw Natasha picking through the souvenirs, placing them around the breakfast table where the entire congregation of Team Cap would be meeting up in the early light of dawn. She held up a small, old fashioned phone for Bucky to take.

"That's Sam's," she smirked. "And apparently, he already has fifty text messages from his mother on it."

"Oh, excellent," Bucky grinned, placing a thankful, quick kiss on Natasha's temple before taking off.

Natasha watched him go, biting her lip to stifle the grin on her face. Bucky's memory recovery had gone so well without Steve right in front of him to force all of the memories to the surface. He could pick out nearly anything now. Steve's absence had been well-timed, but now that he was back, there was a peace on Bucky's face that had been missing for a month.

It made Natasha absolutely flush with happy warmth to see it returned there.

She looked out towards the twinkling stars of Wakanda and nodded. For the first time in a long time, it felt like everything was going to be just fine.
"Mama, I gotta go, I gotta go see a man about a strangulation. I love you too."

Sam absentmindedly hung up the telephone that had woken him up at five in the morning to constant text message notifications and ringing. Apparently, it was his mother. Apparently, Steve had delivered his mother a phone with only one number programmed into it. Apparently, Steve had returned to give him the other phone, and hadn't even bothered to wake him up to say howdy.

He went to the room that had been empty with Steve's absence and barged right on in, no knock or announcement necessary.

"Yes, yes, Steve, right there!"

"Awwwww hell," Sam grumbled, turning around immediately. One half second of Captain America's star spangled booty mid thrust was all he needed. He saw Barnes walk by the bedroom in the hallway, looking up at the ceiling and whistling happily. "Barnes, get back here you son of a bitch!"

Chapter End Notes

I'm super excited about the next chapter. Twenty-seven days Darcy and Steve were away from the Island Refugees. I wonder what they got up to...

Thanks so much for reading! I hope that you enjoyed it!
Chapter Notes

I'm a day late! I'm so sorry! We lost power in the beach house yesterday for like, eight hours, so I didn't get a chance to post.

Will a 6000 word chapter buy my forgiveness?

So. Steve and Darcy were gone for 27 days. Let's see what the rest of the crew got up to.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Sixteen: 27 Days without Auntie Dar-Dar and Uncle Steve

** Day one **

"HEY! Where's Uncle Steve? He said he'd toss us into deep end of the pool!" Cooper looked around in annoyance as he and Lila were sprayed with sun tan lotion from head to toe by an overly enthusiastic Auntie Nat.

Auntie Nat got one of those funny little expressions on her face. One that the kids were getting to know meant she had a secret she wasn't about to tell.

"Where's Auntie Dar-Dar? She said she'd braid my hair like a mermaid," Lila pouted.

"Where's Doctor Foster?" Cooper added.

"Doctor Foster went to Asgard," Sam answered helpfully.

"To go and get her some," Wanda added with a slick little smirk.
"Stop that," Sam ordered. "It's disconcerting."

"Yeah, I can understand that. I mean, I've had to deal with you for a whole year now, you're all kinds of disconcerting," Wanda answered back cheekily, the clever little smirk on her face not quite right.

"What the hell is goin' on there?" Clint demanded as he walked onto the patio. His kids had finally finished all their tests, which meant that they were all free to enjoy paradise now. He looked from a chuckling Natasha to a blasé Sharon to a sleeping Scott and then back to the very curious pair of Wanda and Sam. Sam was sitting primly on the edge of the pool, staring down at Wanda with a petulant pout. And Wanda was--- Sam.

"Oh no," Laura breathed as she got a much quicker read on the situation. "I saw the portal earlier. I take it Jane's gone?"

"Yes," Natasha answered.

Bucky was standing by the bar, sniffing a nearly empty bottle of blue liquid curiously. "Apple cider?"

"Cinnamon apple cider," Natasha answered with a soft smile. She patted the disappointed children on the head and walked to Bucky, taking a sniff of the bottle herself. It was chocolatey and she couldn't place it.

"Egg cream?" Laura guessed from the other side of the bar.

"That's my favorite drink," Bucky said softly, shaking his head in amusement. "I didn't know that this morning."

"Is that the meade?" Clint caught on finally. He had taken some of the meade a year ago, and Natasha had had to tie him down to keep him from stealing a quinjet to get to Laura. "Did Jane have the fucking meade?"

"JAR!" Lila called out from the pool, where Wanda was doing her level best to replace Steve,
throwing the children with little blasts of energy and whoops of delight that didn't sound like her at all.

"She not only had the meade," Natasha answered. "She handed it out for all to partake."

"So Darcy and Steve are out there somewhere doing ---you know, foraging?" Clint wondered, his eyes sliding to his kids warily.

"Presumably they will be eventually," Natasha nodded, that victorious little knowing smirk on her face. "They did drink an awful lot."

"Damn, I would have liked to get a glimpse of that," Laura sighed.

"Now hold on just a god damned second. All?" Clint looked to Sam and Wanda and shook his head. "She gave Sam and Wanda the meade."

"Yes," Natasha nodded, her expression completely unreadable. Bucky was still confused as to what the damn drink did so she leaned in a said in a low tone only he could hear, "Asgardian in nature, seems magical but there's actual science behind it. It brings the heart match close, and makes you behave like said heart match. The drink tastes like your match’s favorite drink."

"So that's why the little Rainbow Widow reminded me of Steve from 1939," Bucky chuckled to himself. His face went blank and he looked back to the pool, where Sam was inching himself around the perimeter, keeping himself right behind Wanda as she frolicked in the pool with the children. "Oh."

"I'm gonna kill him!" Clint roared, rushing towards Sam.

The poor man's eyes turned into the size of saucers and he scrambled to his feet, running away and proclaiming his innocence for all to hear.

"I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING!" Sam wailed plaintively. "GO AWAY! I'M GOING TO TELL STEVE ON YOU, CLINT!"
"S'been twenty-four hours," Bucky sat down next to Natasha on the couch as she cuddled a sleeping Nathaniel against her chest. He brought his hand up and ruffled the baby's downy fine blond hair. "Little Rainbow Widow said I should go on after her."

"Reach in my back pocket, carefully. I don't want to wake the baby. Laura has him on a semi-normal sleeping pattern already, and if we derail it she'll punish us," Natasha advised.

Bucky couldn't help the little quirk of his lips as he leaned into Natasha's space and put his hand around her hips, fingers splayed out and definitely fondling as he went for the phone in Natasha's back pocket.

"Don't linger, James," Natasha warned. "If you wake the baby, you will be responsible for getting him back to sleep."

"Not lingering, can't get a handle on what you want me to," Bucky grinned at her impishly, his hands groping at her backside happily. He went to lean in for a kiss, when one lock of his overgrown hair tickled Nathaniel's head just so and in less than three seconds, the one year old was wailing at the top of his lungs at his sleep being disturbed. "Shit."

"Jar," Lila called out from the other room.

"Little punk," Bucky sighed, grabbing the phone out of Natasha's pocket. He soon found a wriggling, unhappy baby against his chest and Bucky looked up at Natasha in distress. "I can't take care of a baby, Natasha."

"You can build a bomb, dismantle a government, and speak six languages, but you can't take care of a baby?" Natasha shook her head in disbelief. "Also, text them to see if they need help. You can keep the phone. It's yours, and the only number in it is Darcy's."
"Wait," Bucky called out as she walked away, leaving him with the baby and the phone. He adjusted the now silent baby against his chest and watched in wonder as the child fell back into sleep. He then looked to the phone, knowing that he had had to use one on missions prior, but couldn't for the life of him remember how. He looked back down at the drooling baby against his chest and nodded, "The baby is definitely easier to handle. Who knew?"

** Day Three **

"I still don't understand why he chased you," Wanda sat on the edge of the pool, her feet dangling in the water as she looked down at Sam, who was launching the kids in the air as high as his normal, non-serumed muscles could. Lila and Cooper certainly had no complaints.

"Hell if I know. That meade that Foster gave us was weird as shit," Sam shrugged, taking advantage of Lila being underwater in order to swear.

"Yeah, totally weird!" Scott agreed, taking a big slurp out of a straw that was in a big, slushy filled glass before promptly passing out face first on the lounge chair again.

"It's your turn to flip his ass," Sam insisted, smirking when Wanda did so with her powers, to ensure that one side of Scott did not turn much darker than the other side of Scott. He held up his hand for a high five and said, "10 out of 10 for creativity, Tiny Dancer!"

"WILSON!" Clint roared from inside the mansion. "Wanda, don't touch him!"

"We didn't do anything!" Wanda cried out in annoyance. "You're all being crazy!"

"HANDS WHERE I CAN SEE THEM!" Clint ordered before stalking off.

"Yeah, totally weird!" Scott mumbled again. He pretended to slurp from his straw again before singing one line, "SHE BLINDED ME WITH SCIENCE!"

And Scott promptly passed out once more.
"It's raining."

Bucky looked down at the two children who had announced the weather to him.

"I know that," Bucky nodded. "Where are your parents?"

"Mommy and Daddy are busy," Cooper shrugged.


"We're not supposed to watch tv during the day," Cooper reminded Bucky. "And Doctor Foster isn't here to do science with."

"Can you tell us a story?" Lila wondered.

"Uhm, sure....how about the time the Howling Commandos rescued Steve's bacon from an over zealous elderly Princess?"

** Day Five **

Scott stumbled into the kitchen, looking incredibly brown and incredibly well rested. He blinked blearily at the Bartons, who were assembling lunch for everyone.

"What day is it?" he asked in a raspy voice.

"Saturday," Lila offered helpfully.
"Month?" Scott scratched at his nose distractedly.

"May," Cooper answered, a small smile pulling at his face, eerily reminiscent of his father.

"Year?" Scott wondered, looking at the family of people in front of him in confusion.

"Get out, Lang!" Laura ordered. "I promise to wake you up before 2017 hits."

** Day Six **

"Dinner is served!" Sam called out to the mansion. The entire crew had worked out a schedule to rotate meal preparation. Their Wakandan hosts had been delivering massive amounts of food every other day, but it was up to them on the when and how of feeding themselves.

Sam was perfectly content with grilling meats and vegetables and calling it a proper meal. And thankfully, everyone who was currently residing in the mansion with him agreed wholeheartedly. He placed a big platter of grilled chicken skewers in front of Bucky, but put his hand on his shoulder to stop him from grabbing any.

"Hold on a second Barnes, I fixed you up something special," Sam said quickly, placing a tall glass full of a murky brown liquid in front of Bucky. "I know how the elderly senior citizens have a hard time chewing and digesting, so I blended yours up for you."

"GROSS!" Lila whined.

"EW!" Cooper agreed.

"You're an idiot," Bucky stared at Sam with creepily calm eyes. He looked around to the other members of the makeshift family and said, "Who votes that Wilson has to do cleanup tonight?"
"Sounds good," Laura said quickly, reaching out and taking the platter of food away from the table and whisking it outside to the table on the patio.

"Watch this kids," Bucky encouraged as he took the tall glass of mystery milkshake and tossed it down his open throat. It wasn't half bad, if a little heavy on the sour cream. Hydra had certainly forced him to eat worse.

"OH MY GOD!" Cooper gasped, before doubling over and vomiting on the floor, with Lila quick to follow.

"Thanks for dinner, Wilson," Bucky clapped the man on the shoulder, unable to keep himself from leaving a foul smelling burp in his face before leaving him to clean up the sick from the two children.

Sam sighed and watched as Bucky walked out with the rest of the dinner crowd, his remaining hand going to pat the quickly recovering children on their heads.

"I hate you, Barnes!"

** Day Seven **

"I think we're being taken advantage of," Bucky announced as he leaned back on the couch with the baby on his chest. Nathaniel had quickly decided that he would only nap on Bucky, and so there they were, Nathaniel, Bucky and Natasha sitting on the couch during nap time while Clint and Laura had grown up time.

"This is the longest stretch of time that the Bartons have had where Clint didn't have to leave out on a mission," Natasha shrugged. "I'm all about giving them their time."

"Yeah, but, what happens when they make another little Barton?" Bucky wondered, leaning down and taking a long sniff of the top of Nathaniel's head. "How're we gonna manage that?"

"I think we probably have to worry more about Darcy and Steve than Laura and Clint," Natasha smirked.
"Hey now, Steve's a standup guy, he'd never get a gal into trouble like that," Bucky disputed.

"Well Clint wouldn't get Laura into trouble like that either," Natasha shrugged.

"How can you be so sure?" Bucky shook his head at her.

"Because he's had a vasectomy. I'd say the Bartons are done having babies."

"Ouch." Bucky winced as Natasha made a gleeful snipping motion with her fingers. His expression turned thoughtful, "You don't think Steve would be stupid enough to knock up the little Rainbow Widow without marrying her, do you?"

"Oh, James," Natasha laughed. "I truly find you delightful."

Bucky winked at her and sighed as she settled in closer to him. "Feeling’s mutual, doll."

**Day Eight**

"Mr. Lang? Mr. Lang? If you can hear me, blink twice."

Sharon stood over a passed out Scott, looking at him worriedly. To say that Scott had treated the last seven days as an all inclusive vacation was putting it mildly. Wanda had insisted that he was fine, the closest thing to happy he could be in the current situation, but Sharon could swear that Scott hadn't actually moved in the last twenty-four hours.

At all.

"I'm okay, just...fun in the sun," Scott mumbled. "wooo."
"You have to move around, your muscles are going to atrophy," Sharon insisted.

"Vacation," Scott snuggled deeper into the lounge chair.

"Tic tac!" Sam shouted out.

"Mnppppfh."

"Karaoke?" Sam suggested.

"HECK YEA! DIBS!" Scott was standing in the blink of an eye, and Sharon swore she saw cartoon plumes of smoke in his wake as he rushed into the mansion.

"What in the hell?" Sharon questioned.

"Guy has two switches," Sam explained helpfully. "On or off. You just have to know how to flip the switch."

** Day Nine **

"I think I'd like more of that meade," Wanda said thoughtfully as Laura painted her toenails. "Do you think Jane will bring back more?"

"Uhm...no, that's pretty special meade," Natasha answered her from the bed where Lila was painting both her and Sharon's toenails. "It doesn't need a refill."

"It's empty though," Sharon disputed.

"It'll refill itself when it's done its job," Natasha answered mysteriously. "I give them seven days."
Bucky walked into the room and put a newly awaked baby Nathaniel in his mother’s arms before he sat down in front of Lila, holding out his right hand so that she could give him the manicure she had demanded she be able to give him at breakfast that morning. Natasha smiled at them. Lila was such a good, kind soul, knowing that the man she had rapidly begun calling Uncle Bucky was incapable of filing his own nails down due to his missing arm. Lila held up two nail polishes and Bucky gave the girl a smile before choosing the bright electric blue color.

"Why do you want more of the meade anyway?" Laura asked cautiously, staring up at Wanda with curious eyes.

"After much consideration, I decided that I quite liked being so confident and...brash," Wanda nodded.

"HELL NO!" came the shout from just outside the door. Clint's shout shook the walls of the mansion. "WILSON! WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU, YOU VILE BASTARD?"

** Day Ten **

"Where's Uncle Bucky?" Lila demanded. "He said I could braid his hair today."

"Uncle Bucky isn't feeling well, he'll come play when he's feeling better," Laura answered.

"Fucking Barnes," Sam huffed a sigh, pulling out a dollar and handing it to Lila before she could even admonish him for his cursing. "I want to go into compliance mode every once in awhile if it means I can get out of it like that."

"No you don't, Sammy," Laura shook her head. "He has no control."

"Yeah...I guess. Still... Natasha ."

"You have skewed priorities."
** Day Eleven **

"I JUST WANNA SEE YOU I JUST WANNA SEE YOU I WANNA SEE YOU BE BRAVE!"

"Shoot me," Sharon begged of the ceiling.

"You insulting my kid, 13?" Clint asked as Scott and Lila sang their hearts out, choreography included as they indulged in their third straight day of karaoke.

"Not at all, it's the other one, the gigantic ten year old currently vogueing and singing at the top of his lungs," Sharon insisted.

"I think the song is nice," Bucky shrugged. "Lang has enthusiasm and isn't that half of being a good singer?"

"You've been brainwashed for the last seventy years, you don't know what you're saying," Sharon insisted.

"And now...we sing for you the amazing soundtrack, from the absolutely classic Disney animated feature...ladies and gentlemen...the Princess and the Frog," Scott announced dramatically.

"Wooo!" Bucky clapped loudly and then let out a high pitched whistle right in Sharon's ear. "Bravo! Encore!"

** Day Twelve **
"GIMME THAT PHONE, NAT!"

Bucky's eyes widened as baby Nathaniel stirred against his chest. He gently patted the baby's bottom and hummed a wordless lullaby as Clint stormed after Natasha into the large den of the mansion.

"No," Natasha answered simply.

"She messed with my arrows. AGAIN, I'm going to call her up and cuss her out," Clint insisted.

"No," Natasha repeated. "We don't know what they're doing. You aren't interrupting a potentially dangerous situation with complaining about how she's managed to dupe you again."

"I will have my revenge," Clint promised.

Bucky was about to ask what had happened, when Clint turned on his heel, revealing a cut off arrow sticking out of his right butt cheek.

"Let's hope he forgets about the pain of getting that taken out before Darcy and Steve come back," Natasha sighed. "She's going to be so sorry she missed it."

Bucky arched a brow at her.

"Good thing I got it on video."

**Day Thirteen**

Bucky noticed very quickly that Wanda never let herself be alone with him. She would even flee the room when she entered it and he was only holding the baby or had one of the kids with him.
"Don't think your little lady is quite comfortable with me Wilson," Bucky admitted one day as Sam grilled meat and vegetables for dinner.

"Who in the what now?" Sam grumbled. "I don't speak old timer."

"Wanda, she skitters away every time she sees me," Bucky said sadly. "I don't blame her, but if you could—maybe you could just make sure she's not scared. I wouldn't want to make her scared."

Sam closed the grill and took a deep heavy sigh.

"I'm going to start this off with a, YOU SUCK, just generically cause it makes what I'm about to say feel better to me," Sam said quickly. "Wanda isn't scared of you. She's a telepath. She actually thinks you were really funny whenever you know, you're picking on me, and she thinks it's sweet that you're so good with the kids. But she can get into your head, even if she doesn't want to, and she doesn't think it's a good idea to go tripping around up there without someone who is strong enough to subdue you close by."

"Oh...oh, yeah, that's a good plan. Solid thinking there," Bucky nodded, feeling immense relief flood over him. He had been truly scared that he was making Wanda uncomfortable.

"Now—what did you mean, my little lady?" Sam questioned. "Is that why Barton keeps trying to kick my ass?"

"What? Uhm...memory loss," Bucky pointed to his head and shrugged. "Dementia in my old age...where am I?"

"...I fucking hate you, Barnes."

** Day Fourteen **
"HE HAD IT COMING! HE HAD IT COMING! HE HAD IT COMING ALLL ALLLOOOOONG!"

Sharon pinched at the bridge of her nose as Scott, Barton, Cooper and Wanda sang along to the Cell Block Tango.

"This hardly feels like age appropriate material," she sighed.

"Carter, loosen up, it's a lot of fun," Bucky insisted, dancing a little in his seat as the quartet sang their hearts out.

Sharon sighed deeply. Out of everyone in the mansion that she could have counted on to have some sense regarding karaoke, it had been Barnes.

Drastic measures clearly needed to be taken.

** Day Fifteen **

"I've never been on vacation so long. I think I'm about to kill someone."

Natasha looked up to see Sharon's desperate announcement and she looked to Laura with no small amount of concern.

"Please don't kill my children. They were a bitch to potty train," Laura drolly shrugged. "I vote if you have to kill anyone, it should be either Barnes or Wilson."

"No, seriously---I---did a bad thing," Sharon admitted, holding up a bunch of frayed wires. "What have I become? I'm a joy thief. I just took joy away from Lang and the kids and fucking Bucky Barnes!"

"Sharon, calm down," Laura urged. "I can fix it..."
"I threw the karaoke machine in the ocean," Sharon admitted.

"Shit."

** Day Sixteen **

"Tic Tac. Talk to me, come on man, it'll be alright," Sam promised as Scott floated face down in the pool, the very picture of misery and depression.

"Life isn't worth living!" Scott turned his head and called out, the words sounding blurred and watery before going back to face down in the pool. He stayed that way for another thirty seconds before he ran out of air again and he petulantly rolled over to float on his back, calling out into the sky. "No Cassie. No Captain America. No Luis. No karaoke. She might as well have thrown ME in the ocean!"

"Lang," Barton called out, hopping over the fence and crouching down next to the pool. "You had Captain America's back when he needed help the most. You put your life on the line. You gave up your freedom to make sure that evil could be defeated. You are an Avenger."

"Really?" Scott asked hopefully, kicking his legs gracelessly in the pool until he was standing, looking up at Clint in amazement. "You have the power to do that, just go around and make people Avengers? That's AWESOME. Because you should probably meet my garbage man, he's really cool and would make a great Avenger."

"He used to be better at making people Avengers," Wanda turned her head to the right in a thoughtful gesture as she appeared out of thin air next to Sam.

"Where the hell--" Sam jumped and looked at her warily. He took three gigantic steps to put space in between them. "You stay on your side of the imaginary buffer between us."

Wanda furrowed her brow in disappointment and hurt, not understanding why Sam was so insistent on putting so much space between them recently. She sighed and looked back in the pool, where Scott was pulling himself out with Clint's help.
"You're an Avenger now, Lang," Clint nodded. "You ready to start avenging?"

"Yes," Scott nodded with big, hopeful, wide hazel eyes. "I will avenge my karaoke machine!"

** Day Seventeen **

Bucky pulled out the phone he sent letters to Steve with, typing out some of the day's events, talking about how Scott and Clint had begun driving Sharon Carter up a wall when he noticed something out of the corner of his eye.

The bottle of meade that Laura had put high enough to keep her children away from was slowly but surely filling back up again, all on its own.

"Natalia!" Bucky called out. She rushed from the kitchen and followed to where he was pointing in amazement.

"Oh...right," Natasha nodded. "Steve and Darcy have consummated their relationship. The meade had finally done its job and can return."

"Hold on, what?" Bucky furrowed his brow.

"The meade wants the heart match close. The effect may fade, but it lingers in the ether until sexual intercourse is achieved," Natasha clinically explained. "Steve Rogers has finally gotten laid in the twenty-first century, and it's with his soul mate. Good for him."

Bucky huffed a sigh, thinking only of poor Darcy's reputation as he shot off very quick text messages to Steve. Natasha watched him with a smirk on her face.

"He's not taking advantage of her," Natasha promised. "Darcy is very good at fending off unwanted advances. If anything, she's probably taking advantage of him a little."
"Seventeen days is not a proper courtship with a dame he should be intending on marrying!" Bucky grumbled, sending text after text. "Punk used to give me all kinds of shit about bedding sweet dames when I was eighteen, and nineteen...and well, up until I fell from a train. And he thinks he can---"

Natasha cut him off with a kiss on his lips, soft and gentle and sweet.

"You're adorable," she smiled when she pulled away. She took his phone from him and put it in her back pocket before pulling his hand and leading him upstairs to her bedroom. "Permission to take advantage of you without you being in compliance mode?"

"Ready to fuckin’ comply, Natalia."

*** Day Eighteen ***

"SERIOUSLY?"

Sharon's shout could be heard all over the island. She stomped into the den, where the ladies were lounging and watching something on the television while they attempted to knit without their knitting instructor in Darcy being there. Sharon held out her hand to Natasha impatiently. She said nothing about being covered in pink glitter from head to toe.

"Phone, please," she said quietly. She huffed out a determined breath when she found Darcy's number and called it. "Lewis? It's Carter. Tell me what you did to Lang's suit and tell me how I can do it. Please."

*** Day Nineteen ***

"You're texting less than you usually do," Laura arched an eyebrow at Bucky as he settled into the couch for Nathaniel's afternoon nap.
Bucky shrugged in response.

"It can't be because you have less to say. Sharon is in an all out war with my husband and Scott," Laura guessed, tapping her finger against her lips. "Not to mention that Sam wiped out spectacularly with Shuri yesterday when she came to visit."

"That was a lot of fun," Bucky nodded.

"So...Steve must be too busy," Laura concluded. "And the only thing he could possibly be busy at is Darcy."

"Did you ever think about going to work for the KGB?" Bucky wondered.

"Are they progressing?" Laura asked hopefully. "Did I win?"

"Jesus," Bucky huffed a sigh. He didn't think he would ever get used to the way Steve's friends—his friends now, got so spectacularly entangled into each other's lives. "Yeah, okay, just---don't tell Wilson, yet."

"FUCK RIGHT!" Laura fist pumped.

"MOMMY! JAR!"

** Day Twenty **

"Uncle Bucky!" Lila called out.

"Yeah, honey?" Bucky ducked his head out of the patio doors to see that Lila was holding out her hand, where Scott Lang was in his suit, shrunken to ant-man size, and vibrating uncontrollably.
"He won't stop dancing," Lila shrugged.

"Jesus Lang, what have you gotten yourself into?" Bucky smirked, taking the shaking man from Lila's grasp.

"I---rrreeegggreeettttt---no-no--nottthingegegggg." 

** ** Day Twenty-One ** **

Sam didn't know how Bucky was doing what he was doing, but he was really sick of it.

Every time he woke up in his woefully empty bed, there was a little knitted doll clutched in his hands. When he took a hot, steamy shower and looked into the mirror, two words were written hastily with a finger through the steam.

CRADLE ROBBER.

And now, he was finding that any time he was alone, a confused and befuddled Wanda would march up to him and demand what he wanted this time.

He didn't feel that way about Wanda. She was a kid, for god's sake. Twenty-three. Or Twenty-four. He wasn't sure which. But definitely too young and sweet and innocent for the kinds of things that a thirty year old man like Sam Wilson liked to do.

And he really didn't want to have to deal with the over protective nature of Steve and Clint.

And he REALLY didn't want to have to deal with the ex-boyfriend of Vision.

And he didn't feel that way about Wanda. Sure, the meade made sense for Dr. Foster and Thor. And if pressed, Sam would even admit that it made sense for Darcy and Steve. They were
obviously made for each other if their three week long vacation/abandonment of their friends had anything to say about it.


He thanked his lucky stars that Wanda didn't realize what the meade was supposed to indicate. The last thing he needed was misplaced romanticism in a girl who was barely out of her teens.

Twenty-four. In one month. Whatever.

He watched as she played with Lila Barton by the pool, throwing her head back laughing, brown curls tinged with gold hanging heavily down to her waist.

She was a beautiful lady.

"No, nope, nyet," Sam backed away. He turned and jumped in his skin when Clint was standing at the doorway, an arrow notched and aimed for what Sam was entirely certain was his groin.

"No worries, big daddy," Sam whispered, as if dealing with a super angry wild horse. "Just---nope."

"Move it along, Wilson," Clint ordered.

"Peace."

** Day Twenty-Two **

"So then, when I'm sure that I'm done for---dead, goner, send my ashes home with my mama in a jar--then out of nowhere comes this amazing blur of black kevlar and flaming red hair. And every single Hydra operative that had pinned me down goes down, one by one by one..."
Sam took a deep breath and gave Scott a questioning look.

"Oh, yeah, he's been zoned out like a zombie for the last fifteen minutes," Scott nodded.

"Then why didn't you stop me?" Sam wondered.

"I like hearing the stories," Scott shrugged.

Sam turned around and grinned at seeing Bucky completely blank, staring into nothingness. The twenty-five minutes of talking about how amazing Natasha was had clearly been worth it.

"Whaddup Winter Soldier," Sam grinned.

"Ready to comply," Bucky answered in Russian.

"Okay, here's how it's gonna go down. You're gonna stop torturing me about Wanda and heart matches and magic meade," Sam ordered. "And also...you're gonna do my laundry."

"Mission accepted."

** Day Twenty-Three **

"You should probably hide," Wanda said helpfully.

"I am hiding," Sam whispered from his place in the closet next to the Barton's room.

"Hide better," Wanda advised. "Natasha will come searching for you when she is done helping Bucky out of his state."
"Don't sound so disappointed in me," Sam ordered, the voice muffled and petulant.

"You forced a friend into a zombie like state, then had him do your laundry, and made him clean your room," Wanda shook her head. "It's a very rude thing to have done."

"Could have been worse," Sam shrugged. "I really didn’t think it would work at all, it was just a joke to tease him really, and when it worked I just—ran with it. I'm fucking awful."

"You are awful," Wanda rolled her eyes. "You should apologize. And also, you should hide better."

"There is no hiding from the Black Widow when she's pissed."

** Day Twenty-Four **

"Where did your hair go?" Lila wondered.

"Natasha," Sam answered back bitterly.

"Why are you wearing that?" Cooper gestured to the very uncomfortable looking speedo.

"Natasha," Sam answered.

"Why are you tied to a tree?" Lila asked.

"Natasha," Sam answered.

A shot rang out and one single paint pellet hit Sam directly on his chest. The paint splatters had started on his forehead, and a different colored splatter appeared every half inch. Every two minutes, another paint pellet landed lower. It was only a matter of time before they reached whatever Sam's
"Mr. Wilson?" Shuri questioned as she walked towards the tree that Sam was tied to.

"Awesome," Sam sighed in resignation.

"Hi, Miss Shuri!" Cooper waved excitedly before grabbing Lila by the hand and taking off.

"You're tied to a tree," Shuri furrowed her brow. A pain pellet expertly whizzed by her, landing painfully against Sam's skin. "Are you being tortured, Mr. Wilson?"

"No...more like, paying penance," Sam sighed. "Guess there's no way you're ever gonna want to date me now, is there?"

"Mr. Wilson," Shuri laughed. "I am betrothed, I would never want to date you."

"Awesome."

** Day Twenty-Five **

"Cause the players gonna play play play play play and the haters gonna hate hate hate hate hate..."

"Told you I'd fix it," Laura smiled at Sharon, whose hair was still pink, and who still had glitter randomly speckled throughout her body.

"Thanks," Sharon said shortly as she watched Scott singing and dancing with Wanda and Lila.

"Natasha said that when Darcy and Steve get back, she'd like you to head towards wherever Maria is."
"Thank fuck," Sharon sighed.

"Swear jar!" Scott announced loudly into the microphone, pointing at Sharon obnoxiously. "Swear jar, hahahaha, mean Sharon gets to put a dollar in the swear jar!"

** Day Twenty-Six **

"No. You're wrong. That needs to be three centimeters smaller."

Clint's eyes widened at the sound of his son's decisive declaration. He poked his head around the doorway and saw Cooper standing next to Laura as they went over some blueprints spread out on the desk in the downstairs study.

"Very good, Cooper. You're right," Laura grinned down at her son. She ruffled his hair and sighed. "How did you get so darned smart?"

"He got it from his ma, she's a real smartypants," Clint announced his arrival. He looked down at the desk and furrowed his brow at what he recognized. "This was your summer science project?"

"Yup," Cooper grinned. He pointed to the diagram of a mechanized arm prosthetic. "Mommy figured out that if we can get vibranium for the casing, and use those smelting discs inside for the right amount of weight, Uncle Bucky will be as good as new."

"Even better," Laura shrugged. "The smelting discs of Jane's will give him more feeling and less feedback."

"Amazing," Clint blew out a breath at the brilliance of both his wife and his kid. "So...did you tell him about it yet?"
"We were waiting for King T'Challa to come back," Laura admitted. "Can't build an arm without being gifted the vibranium for it."

"Shuri visited this morning, said the King will be returning in less than a week," Clint nodded. "Hopefully our fearless leader and her sidekick superhero get back before then."

** Day Twenty-Seven **

"I LOVE YOU A BUSHEL AND A PECK A BUSHEL AND A PECK AND A HUG AROUND THE NECK A HUG AROUND THE NECK..."

Bucky watched in amusement as Scott led the typical after dinner sing along session. Laura had even managed to yank Sharon up, who begrudgingly sang and danced along to the musical of the night, even if Scott refused to give her a microphone, lest she try to destroy the machine again.

Sam, Bucky and Natasha were the only members of the audience, as most of the other refugees were acting out the songs under Scott's surprisingly thoughtful direction.

"They gonna be home soon?" Sam mumbled, looking between Natasha and Bucky with the hint of jealousy tinging his words. "I mean, I don't hear anything from Steve, so...you know. Kind of in the dark here."

"Soon, I think," Bucky nodded, thinking of his last message from Steve.

"Good to know," Sam huffed out a sigh. His hand rubbed at his newly bald scalp and he turned to Bucky completely and said, "I'm sorry I put you into compliance mode. That was rude."

"Yeah, it was," Bucky nodded. "But kind of nice...in a rude way."

"Explain?" Sam gave him an incredulous look.
"I think it's...good the way you treat me," Bucky admitted, his voice halting and unsure. "You treat me normally, not like a ticking time bomb. I appreciate that."

"Well...cool," Sam nodded. "I still hate you."

"Yeah, and that's alright," Bucky nodded. "It's still kind of good. In a strange way. And I hate you too."

Natasha watched them with no small amount of interest, her eyes rolling in a painfully slow manner. Neither of the men knew that hate did not equal the playful animosity they currently shared.

"Let's not explain to Stevie that we have an agreement," Bucky said thoughtfully. "It'll be nice to put the punk between a rock and a hard place."

"Awesome," Sam nodded. He took a deep breath and nodded before getting up with a determined look on his face. "Alright, I'm about to go kick Sit Down You're Rocking the Boat's ass. Take notes and try not to be too intimidated by how awesome I am."

Bucky gave Natasha a put upon look and she patted his thigh.

"Want to go on our perimeter walk?" she said quietly.

"Oh god, yes."

Chapter End Notes

The blame for this chapter lies with my best friend, who makes me watch all the slice of life animes.

So, this storyline is pretty much finished. But I have like, two or three more that I know that I want to get to in this universe. So, yeah, not ending anytime soon!

Thanks so much for reading!
Chapter Seventeen: A Girlfriend of a Friend

Monte Carlo, August 2014

"Move it along highlights, nothing to see here."

Steve smirked as Sam made easy work of the ladies that had descended upon them the minute they had set foot in the seedy little bar in Monte Carlo. They were following up on a lead on Bucky, sent to them by Natasha. Apparently a Hydra safehouse, or safe mansion, as it were, was cleared of money and weapons. Most of the money had then been left on the steps of a local shelter.

"Nice of your pal to be donating cash to the needy," Sam rolled his eyes.

"Bucky always had a pretty giving heart," Steve shrugged. "Used to spend most of his paycheck on miracle cures for my asthma back in the thirties."

"Yeah, yeah, your pal Bucky from the thirties was the greatest, except now he's got a metal arm and a mind for murder," Sam shook his head in amusement.

"There haven't been any reports of Hydra agents turning up with evidence of metal armed murder," Steve disputed. "Most of them are tied up with their cyanide capsules taken out. Hill says she wishes he'd just kill them so she wouldn't have so much paperwork."
"Drink your beer," Sam advised, pushing the cold and frosty brew Steve's way. "Stop talking shop. Look natural while we wait for Natasha’s informant."

Unfortunately, looking natural meant that two very good looking young men were leaning against a bar, sipping beer and looking very...good looking. It took less than two seconds for a woman to approach Steve and four seconds for another to approach Sam.

"You're wasting your time ladies, we're taken," Sam grinned at them.

"uhm," Steve furrowed his brow as someone got handsy.

A strong arm was suddenly wrapped around his shoulders and Sam got in the face of the handsy woman.

"We're very taken," he insisted, smacking a loud and noisy kiss on Steve's cheek.

The women slunk off, and Sam kept his arm wrapped around Steve's shoulder.

"Sam?" Steve questioned a few minutes later.

"Chillax, dude. I'm a modern man confident in my sexuality, this is just to keep the over zealous ladies away while we finish this up," Sam said coolly. "After, I totally think we should go to a classier bar and find some comfort for the night."

"No, that's alright, you can...you can do that," Steve nodded. He gave Sam an easy, grateful grin and patted the hand on his shoulder. "Thanks for this?"

"Sure, I'm your wingman," Sam insisted. "You can always trust me, Steve, to help you out in a bad situation."
"Your hair is gone," Steve gave Sam a sideways look at the breakfast table the next day.

"Good job, Captain Obvious," Sam rolled his eyes at him.

"The sky is blue too," Darcy grinned at Steve teasingly, poking his cheeks when he blushed.

Sam huffed an annoyed sigh, glared at Darcy before grabbing his ringing phone and answering with a put upon, "Yes, mama. Yeah, Stevie is back. No, it's not the girl I talked to you about."

He walked away from the table, but his voice could still be heard.

"Some other girl. No, I don't. She's just...I don't like it."

Darcy looked down at her lap and her shoulders drooped a fraction of an inch. Steve looked down at her in concern before looking back up at Sam with a furrowed brow. Bucky nudged Steve with his shoulder and gave him a stern shake of the head.

"So, now that you're back and Sharon is leaving, we should divy up the cooking chores again," Laura announced, sensing the tense environment that Sam, Steve and Darcy were generating.

"Stevie can help me with breakfast in Sharon's place," Bucky insisted.

"Maybe Darcy can help out on Sam's dinner nights. We could use some complex carbs with his caveman food," Laura said softly.

Sam heaved a put upon sigh and slammed the refrigerator door closed with a little too much force before storms out of the room. Steve tensed up next to Darcy and got to his feet, intent on chasing Sam down and giving him a talking to.
Steve and Darcy had been welcomed back that morning with a lot of joy from everyone else. Sharon, in particular, had started to babble and get a little teary eyed to realize that she was one step closer to escaping the endless vacation that was slowly sapping her will to live. The children had screeched their heads off in delight. Lila had gone into euphoric, joyful raptures when she saw her Auntie Dar-Dar and Uncle Steve share a soft kiss before entering the dining room. Even baby Nathaniel had been incredibly excited to see his Uncle Steve, inch worming out of Bucky’s hold to get to Steve's slightly poofier and more comfortable chest.

But Sam had given Darcy a disdainful look and had sulked all through breakfast, making catty comments.

"Steve, no," Darcy said softly.

Steve looked down to see that Darcy’s face was flushed and her eyes looked a little glassy. He felt his stomach roll over at the sight of such sadness. He'd never glimpsed it before in the last month, even when she had been in the throes of insecurity. He shook his head and pulled her along with him toward the patio outside of the dining room.

"Magnet, I'm sorry," he whispered. "Sam is kind of---he's protective of me. We spent two years on the road, where he had to look out for me."

"I get it," Darcy gave him a tremulous brave smile.

"I'll talk to him," Steve insisted, leaning down and kissing her forehead. "I don't like seeing you upset, sweetheart."

"NO, it's alright," Darcy insisted. "I'll---I'll handle it."

"You sure?" Steve furrowed his brow.

"Trust me," Darcy nodded.

"With the world, and you know it."

It was decided that Sharon would be flown to the helicarrier in two days. She would be the direct liaison between the Wakandan enclave and Fury's people. With an end date to her vacation in sight, Sharon found that she was actually able to start enjoying it. She had taught all the tricks her Aunt Peggy had taught her to little Lila, and the girl was more than happy to add the shooting tricks to her already impressive vault of spy tricks that her Aunt Nat had taught her.

Wanda was busy watching Sharon guide Lila through target practice, the young girl using the paint gun her mother and brother had built her to knock little targets off of distant perches. Wanda felt a warmth approaching her, more than physical. It was a blanket of security and faith and contentment and Wanda found herself immersed in it. It wasn't hers, but it was beautiful to feel for a moment. Bone crushing contentment. Hazy warm love. Absolute surety and hope.

Steve took a seat next to Wanda and gave her a small smile.

"So this is what you feel like when you're happy and in love," Wanda said softly.

"Sorry," Steve gave her a shrug. He knew that Wanda usually kept a connection open to him when they were physically close enough. It helped her to know what was going on, when she would be needed, what state any particular mission was in. In the weeks after losing Pietro, she had latched onto Steve. At the time, his steadfast calmness had been exactly what she had needed. This was certainly nothing like the even steadiness of Steve from a year ago.

"It's lovely," Wanda promised, feeling her mouth tilt upwards in a smile. "I will tell you that we need a code for when I should shut down the connection. This morning was---"

"Yeah, mornings aren't good for the connection to be open," Steve said quickly. Darcy was a fan of morning activities.

"Noted," Wanda stifled a giggle.

"Also, most nights after 10 pm, maybe, shut it off?" Steve asked hopefully.

"Absolutely," Wanda's giggling became a little more pronounced as Steve started to turn red.
"Also, if she ever says It's time for a nap old timer --"

"Steve, I understand," Wanda laughed. "Darcy and I will work out a messaging system."

"Thanks," Steve smiled sheepishly. "So, now that I'm back..."

"You'd like to start working on taking the programming out of Bucky's mind," Wanda nodded.

"Thank you for waiting for me," Steve nodded. "I think it helped to be away. His memory is fantastic right now. He really can recall almost everything without any prompting."

"He's been working very hard," Wanda nodded. "We will try once Sharon has been delivered to the helicarrier. I'd like to get used to this completely overwhelming happiness you're exuding first."

"Sorry," Steve apologized again, not meaning it in the least.

"Don't be, it really is lovely," Wanda insisted. She felt a slight bitterness wafting her way and she shut it down quickly with a shiver.

"Sam?" Steve asked knowingly.

"When you are gone, he is the steadiest base feeling around," Wanda said carefully. She knew that Clint was being hyper vigilant regarding how she and Sam interacted, although for the life of her, she didn't know why. "Even more so than Clint. Clint is torn in a lot of directions. Sam is steady."

"Yeah, he can be pretty focused," Steve said delicately. "It's hard to change his mind once he's made it. Pretty stubborn."

"It's not that he doesn't like Darcy," Wanda said softly, reading between the lines.
"She never did anything to him to dislike her," Steve sighed.

"He's jealous, Steve," Wanda whispered. "He's your best friend."

"Bucky is my best friend too, and he's not jealous of her, he's pretty happy that I finally found someone," Steve smiled. It helped that Bucky thought Darcy was a pretty swell dame as well. Natasha's influence there probably helped.

"You should talk about this with Sam," Wanda said delicately. "It's not fair for me to give you things he's not willing to admit out loud."

"Alright, I will," Steve promised, he put a large hand on Wanda's shoulder and gave her a reassuring squeeze. "Thank you, Wanda."

"You're welcome," Wanda nodded.

"Oh--and, maybe tune me out in about a half hour---Darcy's gonna---"

"Go away, Steve."

"You ready to get the hell off of crazy island?" Sam wondered as he did his pre-flight check of the quinjet. He had convinced Clint and Natasha that he needed a little break from said crazy island and had been awarded the opportunity to fly Sharon to New York.

"I'm gonna miss it," Sharon admitted. "Eventually, once the terror fades away."

"We'll work out a way you can video call in for some of the karaoke nights," Sam rolled his eyes as he quickly put the bird in the sky.

"Yeah, doubt I'll have the time," Sharon shook her head, looking at the thick file folder of work that she and Natasha had managed to put together.
The words that Zemo had used to trigger Bucky hadn't been the only triggers pushed into his brain. There was of course, Natasha, the very idea of her could push Bucky into compliance mode. Natasha had insisted she was making progress on that front, his downtime getting much shorter each time. And according to Bucky there was at least two other triggers. One built into him by the Germans in the 40's and one built into him by the American Hydra members in the early 2000's.

They'd have to be tracked down to handlers, just as Zemo had tracked the Russian triggers back to the primary Russian handler. The German handler was certainly dead and gone by now, so it was a matter of going through artifacts and possessions handed down through generations. But the American handler was more nebulous. It obviously hadn't been Pierce, Bucky had insisted that he had never been involved in the actual programming. He had just shown up to give orders.

It was going to be an incredible amount of work, which suited Sharon just fine. She did love her work.

She decided to focus on the American handler, as the leads were still fresh, just a little over three years old at that point. As far as Sharon could tell, it hadn't been a Hydra operative. She and Natasha had uncovered a contract from 17 years ago, enlisting a company with the name redacted that was to rebuild the conditioning that the Russians had did for the Americans. She followed the paper trail for now, knowing it would be easier once she got on the helicarrier and had access to all of the Shield data dump.

"You're really kind of kick ass, you know that?" Sam wondered as he finally interrupted Sharon's intensive work and reading.

"Hmm?" Sharon looked up.

"You've been working for seven hours non-stop. We're---well, we're here," Sam smirked at her. He had carefully docked the quinjet and stood up to stretch as Sharon did the same. He didn't want to stay on the helicarrier too long. He was only supposed to be away from the island for twenty-four hours, and he figured he could get in a quick visit to his mother in Virginia before heading back to Wakanda.

But that didn't mean he didn't want to check in on Uncle Nick.

Fury hadn't exactly loved the fact that Sam had declared himself Fury's nephew. But he had to concede that nephew was better than son. And this time it had just taken one small smirk from Sam
"Sup, Uncle Fury."

to have Fury pointing to the door with an impatient growl. Sam took it in stride, going back to the quinjet, intent on getting to his mother and letting the woman smack him upside the head to her heart's content. He had the jet detached from the helicarrier before setting his course when he heard a soft sighing sound coming from the utility closet.

"Oh hell to the no, if that's a child or a Shield escapee, you best be coming out and showing yourself," Sam announced loudly. "I shoot first and ask questions later, just like Steve Rogers taught me to."

"Steve doesn't shoot things, he's bad with guns," came the dispute as the utility supply closet opened and Darcy walked through it, giving Sam a tentative wave.

"What in the fuck are you doing here?" Sam demanded.

"Uhm...befriending you? Hopefully?" Darcy shrugged, walking up to the cockpit where Sam had actually been standing defensively before she had revealed herself. His posture didn't let up one bit. "Or just maybe sort of...coming to some kind of peaceful understanding?"

"Does Steve know you're here?" Sam asked in bewilderment. The pair of them had been attached at the hip for the forty-eight hours they had been back in Wakanda. Where Steve went, so went Darcy's nation.

Sam didn't quite realize that it was Steve following Darcy around like a little puppy everywhere.

"Of course," Darcy shrugged. "We have an agreement about these kinds of things. He thought it was a good idea."

"No offense, but this is the stupidest idea you've ever had," Sam shook his head, turning back to the controls of the jet, immediately scrapping his plans to go and visit his mother and reprogramming the course for Wakanda. The faster they got back, the better.
"You don't know me that well, I once tried to 'rescue' a baby bilgesnipe. That? Was a stupid idea. Wanting to win you over to the point where you don't physically cringe when you see me? That's a great idea," Darcy informed him. She watched him cancel the course of the quinjet and asked, "Wait, where are you going?"

"To take you back to Steve!" Sam insisted.

"But you said you were going to visit your mom. You told Wanda you were looking forward to it," Darcy reminded him.

"So you're spying on my private conversations now?" Sam shook his head in annoyance. "Seriously, do you have a mode where you butt out of like—anything?"

"No," Darcy shrugged. "Where's the fun in that?"

"Unbelievable," Sam sighed. He swatted Darcy's hands when she went for the control panel, intent on reprogramming the flight pattern back to what he'd just cancelled.

"You should go see your mom, Sam," Darcy insisted. "Steve said she was upset."

"You should mind your own business," Sam grumbled, pressing the cancel button again.

"I'll stay on the plane, if you want while you go to see her," Darcy promised, undoing his cancel.

"Oh, yeah, that'll be great. Then when you wind up kidnapped by Hydra or arrested by the government, Steve can blame me!" Sam nodded, pressing cancel yet again.

"Fine, then I'll go with you to say hello to your mother," Darcy shrugged, pressing the buttons again.

"Sure, let's introduce you to my mother, and you can do your voodoo on yet another person important to me, convincing them that you're a reincarnated Shirley Temple angel and are just a loveable scamp that needs attention and cuddles!" Sam spat out, his hand slamming down on the cancel button.
"Either way, you're not going back to Wakanda yet. You deserve to see your mother!" Darcy insisted.

"I'm not gonna be the guy who Captain America puts in a chokehold for getting you hurt!" Sam insisted. "I'm taking you back to him so you can continue your lovey-dovey shit in between break times with him cuddling with Bucky."

"Fuck you, dude! What are you, a jealous five year old?" Darcy shouted back at him. "For the record, Steve totally trusts you to keep me safe, and helpful hint, I'm not that easy to keep safe, so that's pretty big trust right there!"

"God dammit," Sam hissed out an angry breath, feeling some of that inexplicable annoyance leave him at Darcy's truthful declaration.

"Jesus, dude!" Darcy stepped back as the control panel began to spark at their continued abuse of it. The plane bucked in the air, and veered to the left so hard that both Darcy and Sam were thrown against the unforgiving wall of the quinjet.

"Autopilot is down," Sam groaned, pulling himself up even as the plane began to do a slow barrel roll. He managed to keep himself upright by holding on to the overhead support, years of using his wings had given him the ability to plank for pretty amazing intervals as a non-enhanced human.

Darcy was obviously not gifted with that strong of core muscles as the turbulent, tossing plane had her body slamming against the roof of the quinjet in a sickening sound. Sam threw himself towards the controls and cursed as he got the plane under control.

"Darcy?" he questioned. "Talk to me."

There was only silence from her and Sam cursed again, taking his eye off the road in the sky to look back at her, crumpled in a heap on ground, blood trickling from her forehead. His heartbeat stuttered in a small amount of relief when he saw her back moving with signs of her breathing.

"Darcy? Come on, I can't pull off the controls, wake up," Sam asked hopefully. "Shit. Steve is going to fucking kill me, please wake up."
Sam reached for his phone in his utility belt and called the only number in it.

"Mama? Can you meet me in---" he checked the navigation unit and nodded. "Remember that camp ground outside of Arlington? In fifteen minutes? I'm in trouble and I need help...bring the first aid kit...It's Steve's girl."

Chapter End Notes

And I think this is my first cliffhanger? is it? I think it is. Thank you so much for reading!
Memories...in the Corner of my---wait, what?

Chapter Notes

And we're back!

I'd like to thank everyone for the lovely support on the last chapter. You all are the best and you seriously make me want to keep writing this behemoth.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eighteen: Memories...in the Corner of my---wait, what?

2011, Washington DC

"Sammy? Baby? You in here?"

Darlene Wilson let herself into her son's condo unit with the spare key he had given her the day he had bought the small space he had bought less than a year ago in preparation for his tour being over.

The bachelor friendly space was supposed to look a lot different at the moment. For one thing, it was supposed to have more belongings in it. Twice as many.

Riley and Sam had bragged to her about finally living the high life once they returned from active duty. They were to share the space and the highs and lows of civilian bachelor life. Sam had written her a lot of emails about big plans they had for a hot tub. A homemade, customized bar. A ridiculous Stark designed home theater system that they each planned to blow one of their entire hazard pay checks on.

But those plans were scrapped now.

Darlene climbed the stairs to the sad and empty space, heading towards her son's room, smiling sadly when she saw him crumpled into a ball on top of his bed, his arms curled protectively around his head.
"Sammy?" she said softly.

"It shoulda been me," Sam said, his voice sounding hoarse and unused. He looked up at his mother and looked absolutely broken. He shook his head and shrugged. "I'm sorry, mama, but it shoulda been me."

Darlene felt her throat tighten and she swept to Sam's bed, putting a steady hand on his back.

"I know you haven't been to church in an awful long time, Sammy, but you remember the lessons you learned," Darlene implored him. "Is it cruel to have Riley taken from us so soon? Yes, yes it was. We don't know why, and I promise that when I get up to the pearly white gates first, I will be asking those questions. But---Riley didn't have any family left, Sammy. You were it. You were his brother."

"He saved my life," Sam sniffed, laying his head in his mother's lap as tears leaked out of the corner of his eyes.

"He was your brother, and I am so grateful to him and so proud of him," Darlene nodded. "But I need you Sammy, so don't for one second belittle Riley's decision here. He made his choice. And I am going to be grateful to him forever for it. You're still here with me. You still have a purpose to fill Sammy. We don't know what it is yet, but I'm going to bet it is very important."

They remained silent for a few minutes, Darlene soothingly rubbing her son's back as he tried to crawl out of the desolate pit he had fallen into.

"I want you to go down to the VA and I want you to make sure you're signing up for whatever help you need to sign up for. I'm not losing you, Sammy, not after your brother did what he did to keep you on this Earth," Darlene ordered.

"Alright, mama," Sam acquiesced easily. He couldn't imagine wasting the gift Riley had given him.

"Come on, get yourself a shower, and I'll fix you something," Darlene insisted. "I bet you didn't even hear about New Mexico, shutting yourself up like this in the dark."
"What happened in New Mexico?" Sam furrowed his brow.

"An alien invasion...and I saw a picture of him, he was fine as hell," Darlene smirked.

"Mama."

Present Day, Arlington Virginia

Darlene Wilson had been really proud of her son for the entirety of his life. From the first breath he had taken after an excruciating twelve hours of labor, to the time he enlisted right out of high school, to when he had accidentally adopted Captain America as a brother in arms. Right up until the moment he got arrested, really.

But when she approached the quinjet with her hands holding onto one of the very thorough and well-stocked first aid kits that her son had insisted on stocking her house and her car and her garage with, she couldn't help but feel a surge of annoyance. She stalked up the quinjet ramp to see Sam bent over a small, crumpled figure, carefully checking her over for broken bones with one hand while another hand held a bandage to a wound on the girl's head.

Steve's girl.

Steve's girl that Darlene already knew Sam did not think too highly of.

"What in the hell did you do?" Darlene demanded. "Boy, I raised you better than to hit a girl."

"No, we had...turbulence," Sam lied.

"Talk to me out of the other side of your mouth or I will not hesitate to slap you," Darlene warned him.
"We argued," Sam admitted, taking supplies from his mother as he placed liquid adhesive designed by Helen Cho on Darcy's head, watching as the cut sealed itself so perfectly that there wasn't a chance of scarring. "The auto pilot went down when we were arguing and she smacked her head on the roof. Shit! Steve's gonna murder me."

"I am going to murder you, Sammy," Darlene informed him as her son went through a very well worn routine of checking vitals. He had always been the one to check for vitals when he and Riley were on a mission while Riley provided cover. "What were you arguing with her for?"

"I don't like her," Sam insisted stubbornly.

"Bull shit," Darlene insisted.

"Mama!"

"When you told me her name, I checked out her twitter account. Her sense of humor is right up your alley. She's obviously a good enough person that Steve likes her so much," Darlene guessed.

"He loves her," Sam sighed. He checked Darcy's pulse again, strong and steady, thank God. He swallowed deeply and shrugged, "27 days with her and they come back in love and I'm pretty sure ready to get married."

"Steve's a member of the greatest generation," Darlene reminded her son. "Your grandfather married your grandmother two days after meeting her and thirty-six hours before he had to ship out. And they were married for sixty-five years before my daddy passed."

"I know that. And I also know that Steve doesn't live in 1943 anymore. It's 2016," Sam sighed. "And Darcy is definitely a lady from 2016."

"So you don't trust that she loves him just as much as he loves her?" Darlene shook her head at her son.

"Mama, I was on the road with him for two damned years. I saw how the girls acted," Sam packed away the medical supplies and went to check Darcy's pulse again. "It didn't matter if they had a ring on their finger, they'd come at him, losing all sense in their heads for a chance to throw themselves at Captain America. Steve's never even had a girlfriend in the twenty-first century, and now he just
decides this girl is his soulmate and jumps head first into a relationship with her? He's got no sense and can't be trusted to see past glowing recommendations and a pretty face---"

"Shut up, Samuel," Darlene ordered, shaking her head in bitter disappointment. "Steve is not Riley and he doesn't need you to second guess his decisions. He wasn't jumping into any foolhardy one night stands for two years before you met him, I'm pretty sure he's a grown ass man who knows what he's doing."

Riley had always had pretty terrible taste in guys. That much was true. Sam had helped him out of many a heartache since they had become fast friends at the age of 13.

"I know that," Sam said petulantly.

"Then what else is it?" Darlene demanded, eager to get this ironed out before Darcy woke up with one hell of a headache. Sam frowned decisively and remained resolutely silent. "Don't make me guess at it, Sammy."

"He doesn't need me anymore," Sam said sullenly, but honestly. "He's got Bucky back. He's got his girl. He went away for a month, texting with Bucky, being with Darcy and not a word to me. For three years I was his right hand man, and then all of a sudden...nothing."

"Sammy," Darlene sighed with a shake of her head. "You need to talk these things out with Steve, not put blame and hatred on his innocent girlfriend."

"What? Tell Captain America I'm jealous that he doesn't need me anymore?" Sam scoffed. "That'll go over well. Nothing like inspiring the Captain America is disappointed in you face."

"Captain America," Darcy mumbled as she came to. She half sang, half mumbled, "Who'll finish what they began? who'll kick the Krauts to Japan? The start something what, huh? Where am I?"

"Darcy? You alright?" Sam questioned. He held up three fingers in front of her face. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three," Darcy answered.
"Oh good, no blurred vision," Sam nodded in relief. No blurred vision probably meant no concussion.

"Coolio," Darcy managed a nod, blinking heavily. She looked at Sam curiously and wondered, "Who are you again? Also, just a small thing, really. Who am I?"

"Hey."

Natasha looked up from her research to see Laura standing in front of her, fretting in a way she hadn't been in quite some time. The last time Natasha had witnessed the biting of the lip, the wringing of the hands and the nervous twitching on Laura Barton was when she had been three days overdue with Lila.

Natasha immediately reached for the phone she had on the desk, quickly sending a text message.

"Where's the quinjet?" she demanded.

"Tracking puts it in Arlington, Virginia," Laura answered. "The alert system said she had a rough landing after the auto-pilot went completely bonkers."

Natasha's eyes widened. Completely bonkers was a very clinical term for Laura Barton. She used it when things had been absolutely broken and useless. She used the term to describe Clint after he had three shots of tequila on nights out before the children came.

"Do we tell Steve?" Laura whispered.

"No, no," Natasha shook her head. Steve knew that Darcy was out and about with Sam, and he definitely didn't need to know that things might have gone south, he’d start swimming to get to Darcy and Sam. Her phone buzzed and Natasha looked down. "Oh God."

"That's not good, don't say that, come on, dude, I'm freaking out!" Laura panicked.
"She hit her head, can't remember anything," Natasha said quietly, holding up her phone for Laura's perusal.

WHY ARE YOU TEXTING ME IN RUSSIAN? WHO IS BADASS BITCH SUPREME IN MY PHONE? WHO IS THIS CUTE DUDE I'M WITH? WHY CAN'T I REMEMBER ANYTHING?

"What do we do?" Laura kept panicking, adding pacing to her routine. "I can juice up the other quinjet, get you there faster..."

"Sam's coming home," Natasha read another text. "Bringing her back. They think it's---it's temporary. She'll get it back before she gets home."

The I Hope was left unsaid.

"Hey ladies, breakfast is ready!" Steve announced happily from the doorway. The nearly euphoric happiness on his face ebbed slowly as he saw Laura visibly panicked and Natasha damn near panicking, her mouth hanging open as she drew deep breaths in through her parted lips. "What's wrong? Sam and Darcy? What happened?"

"No. No, I missed my period," Laura blurted very quickly.

"OH, Ohhhh," Steve nodded. "Congratulations?"

"Yeah, uh huh," Laura nodded holding up two thumbs up and a panicked grin. "Super excited. Just sort of...surprised and a little overwhelmed with joy."

"I'm so happy for you and Clint," Steve gave her a small, honest grin. "It'll be so nice for Nathaniel to have a playmate."

"Yup," Laura nodded.

"So amazing," Steve sighed happily. He gave them a quick wave, "I'm gonna borrow Bucky's
phone and send a text to Darcy."


Natasha swatted at her head. "Is Clint's idiocy wearing off on you?"

"I panicked! I can't tell Steve that his beloved girlfriend slash Asgardian meade approved soulmate lost her memory of him after his other best friend crashed them in a quinjet!" Laura blurted.

"So you told him you were pregnant, and now he's going to go congratulate a very confused, vasectomized Clint, and text his girlfriend who can't remember him?" Natasha wondered. She shook her head. "Lila!"

"Yes, Aunt Nat?" Lila questioned from just outside, hiding on the patio.

"Action plan four oh five charlie," Natasha advised.

"ROGER ROGER!" Lila called out, rushing into the room and heading right out of the door at a dead sprint, screaming, "UNCLE STEVE!"

"What are you going to do?" Laura wondered.

"Go and get that phone off of Barnes, you go tell Clint not to blow it with the baby lie," Natasha said lowly. She jumped out of the window that Lila had come in through, putting skills to use that had not been for over a month at that point. She sailed through the kitchen windows, doing a neat and elegant roll before looking up at Bucky with a flip of her hair.

"Uh oh," Bucky managed to get out, feeling himself go a little fuzzy around the edges.

Natasha leapt upwards, reached for the knife block and in the span of a one second had a blade whizzed to her right, landing neatly in Scott's board shorts and pinning him to the wall.

"Ready to comply," Bucky said softly, completely in compliance mode.
"Come along, lover," Natasha nodded, pulling Bucky out of the kitchen before Steve could get away from a distracting Lila. She pulled out her cellphone again and texted to Sam and his mother this time.

*Get her back before you come home. This will break Steve.*

Scott looked down at the knife that had him pinned to the wall. He shrugged and called out,

"Okay, I'll just stay here then!"

"Dude. I don't know where you think you're taking me, but let me assure you, that if you're kidnapping me, it's not going to work out well for you. I might not remember my name right now, but I'm fairly certain that I'm a handful and a half."

"We're not kidnapping you!" Sam huffed out in annoyance as he had his hands on the controls of the quinjet, seeing as the auto-pilot was in desperate need of some love from Laura Barton. It wouldn't matter if it had worked, really. He couldn't go back to Wakanda with Darcy being...

"That's exactly what a kidnapper would say. I would imagine," Darcy shrugged. She looked to Darlene and pursed her lips. "You're not a typical kidnapper."

"That's because I'm not a kidnapper," Darlene answered patiently. "Darcy, can you tell me what you remember?"

Silence fell over the quinjet and Sam winced from the pilot's seat. The quiet lasted a few minutes before Darlene put a gentle hand on Darcy's shoulder and the young woman looked at Sam's mother with a confused look.

"OH SHIT, I'm Darcy, that's right. I keep forgetting," Darcy nodded. "Hmmm...what do I remember? Uhm. That I woke up on this plane. How to tie shoelaces. The first fifteen digits of Pi. All the words to the Dawson's Creek theme song..."
"Do you remember Steve Rogers?" Sam demanded, his patience wearing thin. It was clear that with or without her memory, Darcy Lewis was still very much Darcy Lewis. Under normal circumstances he would have been fighting to hide a smile. This was hardly normal.

Darlene glared at her son while Darcy pursed her lips in thought.

"I---I have the feeling that I should know that," Darcy nodded. She shrugged and gave Darlene an apologetic look. Her voice was much smaller than it had been, soft and pleading, "I should remember Steve Rogers, shouldn't I?"

"Let's start smaller," Darlene gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. "A few years ago you were in a desert in New Mexico and something very unusual and special happened. Do you remember that?"

2011, New Mexico

"Grape!"

"Cherry!"

"MOUNTAIN DEW!"

The girls cackled as they switched slurpees again. They had forced their new SHIELD guards/lackies to run to the seven-eleven, since they were sequestered ever since Thor had taken off into the sky.

Their safety and Jane's work was now a matter of national security.

Barton had come back with eight sixty-four ounce mugs filled to the brim with every flavor of slurpee that the convenience store had to offer. Darcy and Jane were contenting themselves at the moment with ingesting massive amounts of high fructose corn syrup.
Erik watched them fondly before walking up to them with a small, sad smile on his face.

"Brain freeze! MAH BRAIN IS FROZED!" Darcy yelled out in terror.

"OH FUCKING GOD NO!" Jane shouted in pain as she too succumbed to the pain in her head.

"Girls," Erik said softly.

They both looked up and managed two pained smiles at their friend, even giving one to Barton, who was standing behind Erik patiently. Erik nodded and shuffled his feet.

"Darcy...Jane...I'm going to be leaving you now," Erik announced.

"What?" Darcy furrowed her brow as Jane immediately began to tear up. Darcy glared back at Clint and pointed a finger at him. "Are you making him do this? Is this your shady jack booted thug organization's doing? Because let me tell you something, mister, I will track down that dude with the awesome leather duster and the eye patch and I will Change. His. Mind."

Clint held up his hands in his innocence and Erik chuckled. "No, Darcy. There's a work opportunity for me. Research of something new, and interesting."

"I like new and interesting things," Jane disputed. "Why didn't they ask me?"

"Directory Fury thought you'd want to work on your own research with the portals," Clint finally spoke up. He then turned to Darcy with a smirk and shrugged. "And I may have heard through the grapevine that Fury wasn't interested in letting your intern run around a SHIELD base on her own."

"Bull shit! That's bull shit!" Darcy scoffed. "Fury's a pansy assed lily flower."

"Either way, you two have to clean up shop here in New Mexico and head back to Culver," Clint told them. "And you have a lot of funding offers to look over. One of them might even be from Tony Stark."
"EW," Jane shivered. "His manscaped face gives me the heebies."

"And the jeebies," Darcy nodded. She shrugged and gave Jane a scrunch of her nose. "But he does come with a lot of money and toys. And Pepper Potts."

"Pepper Potts," Jane said with slow awe.

"I leave tomorrow," Erik brought them back to him. He reached out for one of the giant mugs full of slushie and pulled out a flask from his back pocket. "Let's say goodbye properly. Thor would approve."

Present Day

"OH! I KNOW A NORSE GOD!" Darcy clapped her hands together suddenly. "And a brilliant Janie. And a pantsless Erik. And fucking Barton! And I know how to make Fury whimper. Like I totally did that in 2013. It was AWESOME. I'm Darcy Fucking Lewis."

"Yes, but Steve, do you remember Steve?" Sam demanded. He was panicked. Nothing said end of friendship like having to say 'Hey, I was being petty and your girlfriend got her head smashed and now she not only can't remember that she loves you, she actually can't remember you at all. Want to go out and get some beers?"

"Steve," Darcy concentrated hard. She knew something was there. So many things were making themselves known in her foggy head. Like little sheets being ripped off of covered objects. One sheet and there was Pepper, smiling at Darcy like she knew a secret Darcy didn't. Another sheet flew away and there was Tony Freaking Stark, curious manscaping and rolling eyes and smirking mouth and all.

The Barton's were there, two little kids running around and calling her Auntie Dar-Dar.

Natasha, a cool and complacent smile on her face like a mask, but with twinkling eyes full of mischief and affection.
"I speak Russian," Darcy said just that in Russian. "What happened? Where are we?"

"We're on a quinjet," Darlene answered. "Darcy, do you know what year it is?"

"Uhm...2016?" Darcy ventured hopefully.

"Good, yes, it's 2016, and Steve," Sam nodded hopefully. He began to steer the quinjet immediately for Wakanda. Darcy had been muddling with her memory for almost two hours, but things were rapidly coming back. By the time they landed, he was sure she'd remember everything. "You know Steve, right?"

"I---I'm sorry," Darcy bit at her bottom lip, knowing it was important to the cute dude flying the plane they were on, but she couldn't remember for the life of her. Everyone was running around in her brain, but there were a few things still covered up and one of them seemed big. And important. And warm. She wanted to remember that, desperately, because she knew she'd feel better once she did. She sniffled suddenly and shrugged, "M'sorry."

"Aww, babygirl, it's okay," Darlene soothed her, pulling her into a warm embrace.

Sam rolled his eyes. Once the 'baby girl' came out of his mother's mouth, he knew there was no hope. Darcy Lewis had gotten her hooks into another important person in his life.

"Just keep trying," Sam said shortly, checking his watch. He figured they could be back in Wakanda in five hours. Hopefully, she'd remember by then. If not, he would definitely have to get a favor from Wanda. He was sure somewhere in Wanda's bag of tricks there was some kind of memory retrieval, even if she hadn’t been brave enough to try it with the Winter Soldier.

“Oh shit, I know like, two Russian assassins!”

Clint stormed into Natasha's room, with his wife running after him. Luckily, Bucky was out cold face down on the bed, his face smashed into a pillow as he lay with limbs akimbo.
"Yes, please, feel free to just barge in," Natasha rolled her eyes. "Five minutes earlier and you would have been getting quite the eye full."

"Cut the crap, Tash," Clint ordered. He looked between his best friend and his wife. Natasha wore her interrogation face, which was unusual to see outside of the interrogation room. But her lips were parted and she was taking deep, measured breaths through her mouth.

Laura on the other hand was bright red, like a tomato, her hands wrapped up in the hem of her t-shirt, fighting the start of a fidget. His wife was a lot of things, and one of the best things about her, was that she was shit at being a liar. The last time she had done the shirt fidget dance was when she had tried to blame the busted rain spout on a powerful wind. It had actually been Laura taking a science project with Cooper a little too far. The little robot they had built didn't need wings and certainly didn't need to be flown around the farm.

"Lucy," he looked at Laura, then turned to Natasha. "Ethel."

"Hey, she's the redhead!" Laura disputed.

"Don't argue with him, he's right," Natasha rolled her eyes.

"What's going on?" Clint demanded. "Cause Steve just made me smoke a cigar and patted me on my back so hard that I think he cracked a rib. Then he talked about baby names and made moon eyes into the sky for the last hour."

"Ohhhh, really?" Laura's fidgeting stopped and her brown eyes shone with the delight that only a true matchmaker could feel. "Do you think he's that far along? Because we can start asking Shuri about the jewelry options for engagement rings."

"Lucy," Clint warned.

"He has an engagement ring. His mother's," Natasha revealed. "In a safe deposit box in New York City."

"An antique? Darcy will love it!" Laura grinned.
"Yeah, she's pretty fond of antiques," Clint drawled out. "I mean, she is dating the antique."

Natasha blinked.

"Hold up, what was that!" Clint pointed at Natasha, wary to the point of hysteria in an instant, thanks to one simple blink from the red-head. "What was that? What's wrong? What happened to Darcy?"

"Nothing," Natasha shook her head.

"The plane's controls went out and Darcy bumped her head and can't remember a damned thing!" Laura blurted.

"REALLY LUCY?" Natasha gave Laura a disbelieving look.

"I teach my kids every day that honesty is good and being a liar is bad," Laura defended herself. "I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't tell my husband the truth about Darcy not remembering a damned thing about Steve."

"What now?" Bucky grumbled, twisting in the bed and sitting up so that the bed sheet that Natasha had thrown over him after he passed out fell by the wayside, giving both Laura and Clint a full frontal view. "What happened to the little Rainbow Widow?"

"Hubba hubba," Laura muttered, her eyes going wide at the sight of Bucky's nudity.

"Standing right here, smarty pants," Clint reminded her.

"I know that dummy, and even you have to admit, I mean...look at him," Laura sighed wistfully.

"Yeah, I see the appeal," Clint shrugged.

"Hey, let's talk less about my body and more about Steve's gal not remembering him!" Bucky pulled
at the sheet now, not even bothering to spare a moment to blush. "What in the hell happened? Why aren't we on a quinjet right now heading to Darcy?"

"Well, you're naked, and post coital, sooooo," Clint shrugged.

"We're not telling Steve," Natasha said simply. "Sam's mother just texted me and told me that she's starting to remember some things. She remembers you, for one."

"Just not Stevie," Bucky clarified.

"We don't know," Natasha looked down at her phone. She nodded, "Yeah, just not Steve."

"Well, shit."

"Who are you texting?" Darcy asked Darlene warily. The woman who had explained herself as 'having birthed the idiot that was flying the plane' was indeed rapid fire texting to someone for the last few hours as they flew steadily on to freaking AFRICA.

Darcy was super excited about Wakanda for a lot of different reasons. All of her favorite people were there. She remembered them all now, except for the mysterious Steve that Sam kept asking her about. Also, as a political science major, Wakanda was intensely fascinating to her. They had been an entirely secluded country for a very long time and were just starting to reintegrate themselves into the world. She was sure there were going to be all kinds of fascinating political behaviors to observe.

And also, the Winter freaking Soldier was there. And Darcy remembered looking at the composite sketches of what the man should look like now. And what he looked like was super dreamy.

"So, why are we all in Wakanda again?" Darcy wondered as she walked towards the cockpit and sat herself down in the co-pilot chair. "Not that I'm complaining. I saw the short film about King T'Chaka and his decision to open up their borders. It looks like paradise...but...why?"

"Because of Steve, you remember Steve, right?" Sam said casually.
"Dude, if I could remember Steve, I totally would," Darcy promised him. "Just to get that constipated look off your face. You seriously look like a lamb being led to slaughter."

"I will be," Sam sighed. "How can you know who the Winter Soldier is and not know Steve?"

"Because for some reason Janie and I had to take safety courses about him two years ago," Darcy shrugged. "Someone decided that anyone associated with the Avengers could be used as leverage by Hydra. And if we ran into the Winter Soldier, we were supposed to treat him like a murderous kitten and carefully lure him back to---back to..."

Sam looked away from the controls to Darcy with no small amount of worry. She was quickly getting frustrated, a small line appearing between her furrowed brows as she tried to remember why and how she knew who the Winter Soldier was. Sam knew why. Sam had helped in designing the protocol if the civilians and un-enhanced individuals associated with the Avengers would run into Bucky Barnes back in 2014. Natasha had focused on what to do if a rogue Hydra agent tried to take you hostage. And Sam had focused on ways to appear non-threatening to a recently freed murder machine suffering from severe PTSD and memory loss.

The humans and unenhanced individuals that associated with the Avengers hadn't been very great in number. A few lab techs. A few desk jockeys that worked for Maria and Fury. And of course, Jane Foster and Darcy Lewis.

Sam hadn't had to administer their lesson, that dubious honor lay with Maria Hill. He had had to look over her work. He hadn't been impressed with her doodling all the ways she could lure the Winter Soldier out of hiding at the time. It had been a lot of little cutely drawn cartoons, showing Darcy luring out Bucky by dressing like a pinup, or holding up cupcakes and bacon, or carrying around a stuffed Captain America teddy bear. His favorite doodle had been a cartoonized woman holding up a sign saying Free Kisses.

She hadn't taken the lesson seriously at all, and thank God she hadn't actually been the one to make first contact with Bucky back then, because Sam was sure now that she would have tried all of her poorly thought out cartoons. Including the one that had a doodled Captain America with a sign saying Free Kisses.

"Darcy," Sam said gently. It was time to try something else. "Do you remember Captain America?"

"Dude, who doesn't remember Captain America?" Darcy gave him a puzzled look. She shrugged
and said, "Dat ass."

"Yeah, I hear that a lot," Sam rolled his eyes. "Do you know that the Winter Soldier is Bucky Barnes?"

"Yup," Darcy nodded, kicking her feet back and forth. "Hot in the forties with the handsome uniform and the jawline for days. Hot in the now with the murder glint in his eyes and the jawline for days."

"Can you take anything seriously?" Sam wondered, not heatedly at all, just sort of curious.

"There's no fun in that, man," Darcy shook her head. "Unclench. I bet you're a fun dude when you stop harping about some guy named Steve."

"Yeah, I used to be fun," Sam rolled his eyes.

"Okay, let's do this," Darlene announced as she walked into the cockpit, ducking underneath the low beam that had been responsible for Darcy's knock to the head. She looked down at the phone for Natasha's recently arrived instructions. "You remember Natasha?"

"My Russian soulmate, yes," Darcy nodded. "She taught me Russian and how to turn a shoelace into a weapon."

"Do you remember what you did with Natasha last Valentine's day?" Darlene looked up from her phone with a hopeful look on her face. She had been steadily texting Natasha with every last detail of what Darcy remembered.

It was clear there was simply a block in her head where Steve was concerned. Every time they tried to bring up something involving Steve, Darcy simply floundered in a way that made Darlene physically hurt for the girl. Sam was doing no better, truly in a miserable panic over what had occurred.

He knew that he had been an asshole to the girl so far, and that he had put his anger at Steve's sudden neglect squarely on an innocent person's shoulders. It was easy to look back on the last few days and realize what an asshole he had been to Darcy. But it was next to impossible to have recognized it during the actual assholing.
"I visited the compound while Jane visited Thor in Asgard," Darcy had a soft smile on her face. "Me and Natasha and Wanda watched Gilmore Girls for two days straight, and then---"

"You filled someone's room with one whole ton of chocolates," Darlene prompted.

Sam nodded, remembering coming back to the compound three days after Valentine's day and Steve shoving a huge bag full of chocolate into his arms before walking off red faced.

"I don't remember," Darcy whispered. She looked between Sam and Darlene with big, tear filled eyes and shrugged. "What's wrong with me? Why can't I remember?"

"I don't know, Darcy, and I'm so sorry this is happening to you," Sam said honestly. He looked at the radar and knew they were less than two hours away from Wakanda at that point. "But we're going to figure out a way for you to remember. I promise you, you're going to remember."

"When they land, they're going to need more time, and Wanda," Natasha said softly in Laura's ear, knowing that both Bucky and Clint could read her lips at the breakfast table.

"When's Auntie Dar Dar coming back?" Lila questioned her Uncle Steve.

"I think by the end of the day, after they're done visiting Sam's mom," Steve told the girl with a smile.

"Do you miss her a lot?" Cooper wondered.

"Are you gonna marry her soon?" Lila asked.

"Do you think Uncle Sam stopped being all sour faced around her?" Cooper pursed his little mouth thoughtfully.
"Can I be the flower girl?" Lila clapped her hands together in excitement.

"Uncle Sam gave me a lecture one day about not treating Nathaniel with respect cause I called him an awful poop machine," Cooper revealed. "But I think he's a hypocrite cause I saw him make Auntie Dar-Dar sniffle when he ignored her at the pool yesterday."

"When are you going to have babies with Auntie Dar-Dar?" Lila asked shrewdly. "You should name one of them Samantha so that Uncle Sam stops being butthurt about you not being his bestest friend forever anymore."

Natasha watched as the children interrogated Steve and gave him no time to answer any of their rapid-fire questions. She gave an impressed raise of an eyebrow to Laura, who only shrugged in response.

"They're homeschooled and have no filters," Laura whispered. "Also, they're Bartons."

"I'm going to go track down Wanda and Scott," Clint announced suddenly. "Target practice time."

Bucky gave Natasha a nod, somehow conveying that he would stay here with Scott, Steve and the kids to keep Steve occupied as the rest of the crew worked on getting Sam the help he needed to bring Darcy's memories of Steve back.

Steve reached out for Laura's plate full of melon and pulled it away from her.

"You looked a little queasy," Steve said thoughtfully. "We'll start a list in the kitchen of the things that might make you sick."

"What?" Cooper looked at his mother suspiciously. He turned to Lila and said, "Operation three of a kind has failed!"

"WHAT?" Lila screeched. She glared at her mother openly and said, "But you told Auntie Dar-Dar that three was the most perfect number! WE DON'T NEED ANOTHER BABY!"

"What's a vasectomy mean if it doesn't work?!?" Cooper hollered.
"Uhm...uh," Laura turned bright red, being physically incapable of lying to her children.

Natasha reached out and touched a pressure point on the side of her torso that had her doubling over with a sudden wave of dizziness and nausea. She reached down for Laura and yanked her out of her seat, rushing her out of the kitchen quickly. She could hear Steve's patient scolding of the children as they were leaving and couldn't help but feel a wave of panic for the man.

They really had to figure this out before Steve saw Darcy.

"Hey Darcy?" Sam questioned as he brought the plane down through the atmosphere as they approached Wakanda and Sam's certain public disgrace. Darcy remembered everything, except for Steve. It was clear as day now. He'd driven what should be one of the most important people in her life out of Darcy's brain.

"Whaddup Sammy-Sams?" Darcy wondered as she tore her eyes away from the fluffy clouds and gave him an honest and open smile.

"You single, girl?" Sam wondered, trying one last thing. He flinched when his mother snorted from her seat on the bench in back. She had done that to him the first time he had attempted to flirt with the neighbor's visiting granddaughter the summer he turned thirteen, too. Apparently, his technique hadn't improved. "Got anybody tying you down? Cause...hey, we're about to land on this island and I'm thinking it might be nice to spend some time together."

Darcy blinked at him owlishly and then her cheeks started to turn a little pink.

"What and the who know?" she managed to squeak out.

"I'm just saying. I'm young and single and cute, and you're young and cute and hopefully single," Sam gave her a confident little wink. "I think we really might click, you know, now that you have your memory back."
Darcy opened her mouth as her face went a bright scarlet and made a squeaking sound.

"I've heard stuff about you from our shared friends and acquaintances," Sam gave her a genuinely flirty smile.

"That can't be good," Darcy shook her head. "You didn't hear about that time I made Thor enter a fake bodybuilding contest so that Jane and I used a case of olive oil to make him shiny, did you?"

"Jesus," Sam huffed out a genuine laugh.

"It was for science," Darcy defended herself, bringing her legs up and under herself in the chair.

"You seem like a confident enough lady according to our friends," Sam said. "Why are you all pink and shy on me now, cutie?"

"Meep."

Darcy wrinkled her nose and shrugged.

"I mean, you should know you're fabulous. Even Captain America thinks you're pretty as hell," Sam promised her. "Matter of fact, if I'm not your type, he might be..."

"HA! PLEASE!" Darcy scoffed out with explosive laughter.

"Darcy, Steve is not out of your league," Sam insisted.

"Dude, he's not even in a league. He and I are not even playing the same game," Darcy disputed. "Like I'm playing tic tac toe and he's playing the Captain America is Awesome game, and guess what? He's totally winning!"

"Darcy!" Darlene spoke up from the bay of the quinjet. "You just remembered that Captain America is Steve."

"You know a lot of our friends think that you two would be good together," Sam said with the slightest bit of hope as they were less than fifteen minutes away from landing in Wakanda.

"That's crazy talk!" Darcy laughed. She stopped laughing completely, shivered and then started laughing again. "Crazy."

"You know, Steve isn't some untouchable hunky adonis, he leaves towels on the floor. He wears sneakers without socks sometimes. He is an incredibly loud chewer!" Sam huffed out. He took one of his hands off the controls and ran it over his face in frustration. His mother was rapid fire texting again, he could hear the swooshing and swishing of incoming and outgoing messages.

This was a grade A disaster. He was fifteen minutes away from having to admit to all of his friends and Bucky that he had singlehandedly ruined Steve's best chance for happiness. All because he had been a jealous prick with a mean girl streak.

Darcy was speaking again, her voice full of amusement and mocking and he tuned her back in to hear that she was speaking about herself.

"I'm a sloth unless ice cream or trouble is up for grabs, I don't know how to use a modern dishwasher, I cheat at trivia crack, and I haven't painted my toenails in like, three months, I'm pretty sure that I..."

"Darcy!" Sam cut in harshly. It was time for a hail mary pass. "You hit your head because we were arguing, you lost your memory. Of Steve. Of your boyfriend Steve. You're DATING Steve Rogers, aka Captain America, aka number one pain in my ass. You are his heart match according to Asgardian meade and every one who has ever met either of you."

They were silent for three straight minutes, the only sound was the sound of his mother texting, Darcy's heavy mouth breathing and the noise of the plane as it made its descent. Finally, Darcy blew a raspberry out of her mouth.

"Back the nope train straight into shut the fuck up ville!"
"It's the truth," Sam insisted. "For a month now."

"Okay dude, I have a bridge in Asgard I'd like to sell you," Darcy chortled.

"Darcy, it's true," Darlene confirmed. "I saw Steve a few days ago, and he was so happy with you. And he had some pretty impressive hickies. So you know, with the super serum and getting those to show up...I mean, damn girl."

"Mama," Sam huffed out a sigh.

"That's just not possible," Darcy waved them away with a nervous laugh.

"And why not?" Sam demanded.

"Because I'm not good enough for Captain America."

Chapter End Notes

Oh boy. Poor Steve. Everyone he cares about is doomed to forget him at some point.

Thanks for reading! Look for an update Sunday, hopefully!
Chapter Notes

Hi Everyone!

Buckle up, buttercups. This chapter gets a little rough.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Nineteen: Last Ditch Efforts

Fort Worth, Texas, 2008

"Dude. You can't hide in there forever."

"Fuck you, man. I can do whatever I want. This is 'Murica."

Sam rolled his eyes at Riley's dramatics. His best friend had locked himself in his quarters at the barracks three hours ago, the picture of despair that was bordering right along the edge of hysteria. Yet another relationship gone south. Riley seemed to have three or four of those a year. Sam never thought he would say this, but dating girls was so much easier than dating boys.

"What was the story this time?" Sam wondered.

"Same old same old," Riley sighed from the other side of the door. "You know, R.Kelly style."

Sam nodded. Being in the military and being gay was definitely not the easiest thing in the world to pull off. Being in the military and being gay and being absolutely awful at picking out men to date was just about the worst thing in the entire world. You weren't supposed to talk about it, but everyone knew that Riley was gay.
The men Riley choose to date, whether they be military or not, well, most of them were still trapped in the closet. Riley definitely had a type. And that type always led to absolute heartbreak.

"I can't do anything to make this suck less for you," Sam said honestly.

"Then what good are you?" Riley chuckled, a good sign, to say the least.

"Here's what I'm good at, I'm good at getting your ass out of that room. I'm good at driving us down to the pizza shop on Main street that you like so much. And I'm good at making sure the hot Italian dude that works the pizza paddle is front and center for your viewing pleasure," Sam promised.

"I do love looking at the hot Italian dude," Riley acknowledged.

"Well then, all right. That's what we'll do," Sam promised.

"Thanks Sammy," Riley said softly. "Hey Sammy?"

"Yeah, Riles?"

"When am I ever going to be good enough?"

Sam furrowed his brow and felt his heart clench a little bit at Riley's soft words of self doubt.

"You are good enough," Sam said insistently. "You're the hottest dude on this base, and seeing how I'm on this base, that's a really high compliment. And you're good and funny and smart. And if every asshole who has taken advantage of that good, gigantic heart of yours is too dumb to treat you like they should...well then they're just dumb assholes who are dumb, Riles. You deserve EVERYTHING."

"Thanks Sam."
"Darcy, I don't know what you're--you're good enough for Steve. You're more than good enough," Sam said softly.

"No, I get the feeling that I'm not," Darcy shook her head, her joking demeanor gone as she fidgeted in the co-pilot chair. "There's something there in my brain...I can't remember."

Sam swallowed a lump in his throat. It had been him. He had been the one to make Darcy feel like she wasn't good enough for Steve by being a heinous little brat to her over the last few days.

The moment they landed, and the quinjet bay doors had started to open, was the moment that Natasha was suddenly on the plane, rushing to Darcy and kneeling in front of her even before Darcy could get unstrapped. (One accident had sold Sam on the need for airplane safety. He wasn't going to risk her slamming her head on the jet's roof again).

"Do you remember me, little sister?" Natasha asked in Russian.

"Of course," Darcy answered back in Russian. "I remember everything now."

"Oh thank God," Natasha sighed out in English. "I didn't want to see that hurt puppy face. It gives me nightmares."

"What hurt puppy face?" Darcy shrugged, turning and waving at Laura as she walked on board as well. "Sam and I broke the controls. We were arguing about something but I don't remember what."

Natasha let out a long string of curse words and Laura, who had been introducing herself to Darlene, immediately sat herself down on the floor of the jet and put her head in her hands as she visibly and audibly panicked.

"We're taking you to see, Wanda," Natasha insisted, unbuckling Darcy and hauling her to her feet. The redhead stole a glance at Sam and pointed a finger at him. "You and I are going to have so many words later."
"Okay ladies and gentlemen, and by ladies and gentlemen, I mean Lila and Cooper," Scott gave a wink and a finger gun to the two children sitting in his audience by the pool. "Thank you for coming to the show today. I hope you're having a great time. Hope you enjoyed the buffet."

"Yum!" Cooper held up the defeated bones of the chicken wings he was in the process of demolishing. Scott made the best chicken wings.

"Welcome to yet another amazing installment of your favorite game show, say it with me now..."

" CAN! UNCLE STEVE! BREAK THAT! "

Steve huffed out a laugh as the children applauded him as he walked to stand next to Scott. Scott put his imaginary microphone away and held out his hand to Steve, who went to shake it when Scott quickly decided to go in for the hug instead.

"Thank you for coming, buddy," Scott said softly. "It really means a lot."

"Uhm, sure," Steve nodded, waving to a raucously cheering Lila and Cooper.

"We are so happy to have you here today, Captain America, aka Steve Rogers, aka Uncle Steve," Scott rambled in his game show host voice. He paused for a second, stared at Steve seriously and asked in a sotto whisper, "Can I call you Uncle Steve, too?"

"Sure?" Steve wondered.

Scott looked to Bucky, who was waiting in the wings.

"Can I--?"
"Don't finish that request," Bucky advised.

"Of course Sergeant, I'm sorry Sergeant, won't happen again Sergeant," Scott nodded. He composed himself for a full forty seconds before grinning cheesily again and pointing to the imaginary camera, "We've got a great surprise in store for you, audience, not only is the Captain of America here to break things, but we're adding a surprise element to the game. Surprise element...come on down!"

Bucky walked to stand next to Steve and gave Scott a slight smile and an indulgent shake of his head.

"First, we have this lovely pineapple," Scott produced a pineapple from behind his back. He spun in a circle and grabbed a second pineapple. "Audience, do you think Uncle Steve and the good Sergeant can break it?"

"YES!" the kids chorused.

"Alright, alright," Scott nodded. "The surprise element then...is who can break it BETTER? GET YOUR PONCHOS KIDS!"

Cooper and Lila brought up the plastic material they had obtained from Shuri two days ago and put on their swimming goggles as Scott handed the pineapples to the World War II veterans.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaanand," Scott drawled the syllable out before very quickly shouting out, "Three-two-one GO!"

Steve squished the pineapple between both hands easily and the kids were hit with flying fruit. Bucky glared at Steve and then down to the spot where his metal hand should be before holding up the pineapple and smashing it against Steve's hard head, showering the kids with more pineapple.

"STYLE POINTS!" Scott called out excitedly. "SERGEANT COOL WINS BY STYLE POINTS ALONE!"
"Give her the meade."

"I'm not giving her the meade."

"She'll be all hot for Steve and you know, be like Steve and then she'll remember," Clint insisted. "Give her the meade."

"I am not giving her the meade," Natasha said resolutely. "It will draw him to her like a magnet, and she'll only be confused when he tries to eat her face off."

"Guys? I can hear you!" Darcy called out, looking around the little building they had drug her to after the plane had landed. It was like a tiny little bungalow set up near the beach. "This place is nice."

"You should know, you were here yesterday morning," Laura huffed out a sigh.

"What? No I wasn't, I'd remember that bed, it looks smooshy," Darcy shook her head, pointing to the decadent looking bed in the little bedroom past the main room.

"You definitely should remember that bed," Natasha told her. She and Steve had spent ten hours in that bed after Wanda had kicked them out of the mansion until she could get the proper blocks up in her mind.

Speaking of Wanda, she walked into the bungalow suddenly, followed by Sam and his mother. She looked at Darcy curiously and tilted her head to the right. Tears formed in her eyes nearly instantly and she put a delicate hand over her mouth as her balance disintegrated and Sam reached out to steady her, pulling her into a soft embrace.

"No, no no," Wanda whispered. "Where'd it go?"
"What?" Darcy furrowed her brow, clearly panicking very quickly.

"It's gone, it's gone, where is it?" Wanda turned to Sam, big blue eyes full of devastation. The warmth, the contentment, the *love*. All gone and only a harsh, glaring hurt remained.

"I'm sorry," Sam whispered.

"Witchy woman, what's the matter?" Darcy wondered in concern, walking up to stand next to Wanda. She reached out for her and Wanda flinched. "What happened?"

"I can't...I can't," Wanda shook her head. She looked to Clint and Laura and felt tears slip from her eyes. "Poor Steve."

She ran outside, and Sam was quick on her heels, rushing after her as she flew towards the beach and the docked quinjet. Wisps of her signature red energy were spiraling out of her fingertips and Sam could feel a squeeze around his heart. He had seen that happen to her a few times in the last year. When she was grieving. When she was desolate. When her heart was breaking. The last time he had seen it was on the quinjet ride back from Lagos.

She had been so devastated by what she had inadvertently caused that even Steve couldn’t bring her down to calm. Sam had sat himself next to her then, and he did the same thing now as she sank into the sand, tear filled eyes looking out at the ocean. He put his hand on her shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze just as he had done then and offered as much silent strength to her as he could.

“Where did it go?” Wanda whispered. “The love she has for him, it had been so powerful before you left and now it’s gone, I can’t feel it.”

“She hit her head," Sam said softly. “I was an asshole and was arguing with her, and didn’t want her around and she hit her head.”

“*Steve,*” Wanda turned teary, red eyes to look at Sam’s miserable, anxious face.

“I know,” Sam huffed out a harsh, wavering breath. “I was hoping that you could help. I---Jesus, I just fucked it all up, and I’m fucking ashamed of myself. She thinks she’s not good enough, and yeah, part of that is her being insecure, but I played on that. I did it intentionally to hurt her feelings. I took everything out on her, all the jealousy and hurt feelings and just...Sorry isn’t enough, tiny
dancer. It’s just not.”

Sam had tears sliding down his face and Wanda leaned into him, her arms going around his torso and her head landing on his chest. She siphoned off some of his hurt, and she couldn’t quite tell if she had meant to or not.

“We can make it right,” Wanda insisted. “You’re going to apologize to her when she has her full memory back.”

“Yes, absolutely,” Sam nodded.

“And not just because of Steve,” Wanda tightened her hold on him in a wordless warning.

“No, not just because of Steve,” Sam whispered. “I was a brat, and I know it.”

“I’ll do my best with bringing the memories of Steve back,” Wanda said softly. She took a deep breath when Sam squeezed his arm around her shoulders. “But I need to center myself. That was overwhelming to see. The blankness there where Steve should be.”

“Recenter, tiny dancer,” Sam nodded. “And thank you.”

"Hey, I need to go run something by Natalia," Bucky said softly to Steve. "You gonna be okay here on your own?"

Steve looked up from where he was playing the Nathaniel on the floor. Steve was building up a tower of blocks and Nathaniel was swatting it down at every opportunity and then giving a full out baby cackle of destructive glee. Steve was grinning like an idiot, and rushing to build the tower of blocks even higher before Nathaniel could reach out and swipe at it again.

"I'm fine with the kids," Steve waved Bucky off with one hand while the other tickled at Nathaniel's tummy so that he would have more time to build with the blocks.
"HAAAAAAAAAAHAHAH!" Nathaniel cackled and the blocks went flying.

"I've watched them plenty of times on my own before when Laura and Clint needed alone time in the barn," Steve smirked.

"UNCLE STEVE! GROSS!" Lila shouted.

"Sorry kiddo," Steve said sincerely as he began building the tower again.

"Well pal, it's not exactly the little kids that I'm worried about you handling," Bucky said sincerely.

Steve had just gotten the blocks up to five high when suddenly they were toppled by seemingly nothing. They heard a tiny, maniacal cackling though, and sure enough, ant-man sized Scott had been under the blocks and was now running around in excited circles as he waved his arms around at the enthralled baby with excited glee.

Nathaniel reached out for the tiny, alive toy and gripped him in a chubby fist before quickly bringing him to his drooling mouth.

"I have made a terrible miscalculation!" Scott screamed, the sound of it small and tinny to Steve and Bucky's enhanced hearing. "HELP ME, UNCLE STEVE!"

The memories were there. Wanda had found them safe and hidden under a very mysterious, very stubborn blanket in Darcy's mind. When she realized that they were there, she had been so excited that she had clapped her hands together excitedly, red sparks flying from her fingertips unbidden. Sam had taken his first relieved breath in over sixteen hours, but it was short lived.

Because now Wanda had been trying to get that covering off of the memories, and it was proving impossible. She had been working hard for the last three hours, to no avail, except for both Darcy and Wanda getting drained and frustrated.
"Fifteen days ago, you were in Aruba," Wanda said softly. She smiled when she saw the lovely rose colored memory from Darcy's point of view. After a hard day's work helping out a community who had seen an awful storm destroy their homes, Darcy had settled on the beach, hand in hand with Steve, sharing something refreshing and cold along with a sack of delicious treats that a grateful woman had pushed at them.

"Whaaaaaaaat, for reals? I am so jealous of full memory me," Darcy laughed.

Sam fidgeted by the door, his eyes looking at the wood paneling of the floor, studiously avoiding Natasha and the Bartons. He could tell that Darcy's laugh was not genuine. He didn't need Natasha's eyebrow raise or Laura's full on frown to realize that. He knew that Darcy was getting tired. He didn't need to see the protective concern in the downturn of Clint's mouth to know that. She was reaching the end of her rope. There were more than a month's worth of memories blocked in Darcy's brain.

Anything that had to do with Steve, especially anything regarding Steve's attraction to her was gone. Whole conversations Laura had had with Darcy were gone. And Laura had managed to have quite a few delightfully annoying and invasive conversations with Darcy regarding how perfect Steve was for her. It was the reason Darcy had distributed that obnoxious memo last year, after all. All gone.

Wanda sighed, and Sam looked up at that, giving her an earnest look. He tried to wordlessly give her encouragement. But it wasn't easy.

"You had polenta and you made Steve eat all of it because you didn't like the looks of it," Wanda said softly. "And he was so eager to comply that he stuffed his face with it."

"Polenta is gross, I don't care what you say. It's mush," Darcy quipped, looking down at her hands as her lips quivered.

"His cheeks were so full of the stuff that you thought of him as a---" Wanda looked over the adorable little memory and tried to come up with the animal that Darcy had categorized Steve as in that moment. "A chipmunk."

"Yeah, uh huh," Darcy muttered.
"It's such a lovely, joyful memory, Darcy, can't you try to see it, it's right there," Wanda encouraged her. "Just behind the block, it's there."

"Believe me, I'm trying!" Darcy crossed her arms across her chest and slumped in her chair. "Don't you think I'd want to know about these awesome things? I got to make out and salute the flag with Captain America? Shit that sounds awesome, of course I want to remember it!"

"Then why can't you?" Wanda wondered.

"You're the one who can read minds, you tell me!" Darcy demanded with a desperate, tear filled voice. She put her face in her hands and the sound of her choking back tears made everyone in the room flinch. "Can we please stop now? It's not working."

"Hey there, little Rainbow Widow," Bucky said softly as he walked into the room. He gave a nod to Barton and Laura and they each rose from their seat on the couch. Bucky watched as each of them gave Darcy a reassuring hug and a kiss to the top of her head.

She barely reacted. Bucky remembered Steve, tiny and sick and wheezing and having a particularly low moment. Bucky did then what he did now. He cringed at the sorry state of her and moved immediately, going to her cushy arm chair and pushing her gently to the side to make room for himself. Once he had sat himself down, he pulled at her with his hand to get her on his lap, his fingers pushing her head to rest against his shoulder as if she were Nathaniel in need of a comforting nap.

"Hey Sarge," Darcy whispered. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be babysitting?"

"Someone's got it handled, apparently. And you know that I know a thing or two about not having your memories, kitten," Bucky said softly. He didn't add that they both had the misfortune of not remembering Steve.

"This hardly compares," Darcy shook her head. "You lost seventy years worth, I just lost a month and all my friends are freaking out like it's the end of the damned world. I just want to take a nap and not have to deal with this right now."

"I know," Bucky nodded. "But that month you lost was real important. Real damned important. It's
not fair to you that you can't remember it. So we're all going to do what we can to get it back for you."

"Alright," Darcy sighed, wrapping her arms around his rock hard torso. "Ugh, you feel perfect."

"I'm not even the best super soldier out there," Bucky gave her a wink. "I think you've felt better by now."

"Blasphemy!" Darcy managed a soft laugh.

"You ready to try again?" Bucky wondered.

"Fine," she sighed.

"Okay, remember that time we broke everyone out of an underwater prison together?"

When Laura and Clint had made it back to the main house, Nathaniel was napping on Steve's chest, while Lila and Cooper were working over something feverishly at the dining room table. Scott was nowhere to be found. Which both Clint and Laura had learned quickly was never a good thing.

"Hey Cap," Clint said cheerfully, pulling upon all of his training to provide Steve with a happy face. For Clint, it was happy enough looking. More scowling than petrified.

Laura ran from the room immediately, having been instructed by Clint to not even try to engage Steve. Any lies she may have tried to tell would have been useless, as his wife couldn't lie. She was to just feign morning sickness and make a run for it. Steve watched her go in concern and he stood to follow.

"It's alright, Steve," Clint shook his head. "She's a beast when she's vomiting. Can't stand to have people watch her do it."
“Oh, okay,” Steve nodded, patting Nathaniel on his diapered bottom to soothe him back into the deeper sleep he had been in before the movement. Steve gave Clint a euphoric little smile, “Seriously, I'm so happy for you guys.”

“Yeah,” Clint nodded, uncomfortable down to his bones with fibbing to Captain America. He reached a hand out and smoothed at Nathaniel's hair. "You think that you and Darcy will ever? You know..."

Steve took a deep, shuddering, joyful breath in immediate answer. And Clint swore he could feel a giant wave of hope and happiness and the future ebb off of the taller man.

"Someday," Steve said softly. "We ah...we talked about it."

"No shit!" Clint's eyes widened, seeing Laura in the doorway hiding.

His wife did an excited, silent Snoopy dance for a full fifteen seconds before abruptly stopping and bursting into silent tears at the realization of what might happen if Darcy couldn't remember. Lila looked up from whatever she and Cooper were doing and her bottom lip trembled but then she went back to her work with her brother with renewed focus.

"Yeah, we did," Steve leaned down to sniff Nathaniel's hair. When he looked back up at Clint, the euphoric expression on Steve's face made Clint want to jump off the roof of the building. "Obviously, if something unexpected should happen, it'd be amazing..."

"Cooper wasn't planned at all, definitely a blessing," Clint nodded.

"But, barring any happy accidents, we have a two year plan," Steve nodded. "Spent three whole days mapping it out on napkins she grabbed from a taco truck in Texas."

"One year if the birth control fails," Clint mumbled, shaking his head. "Have you ever been so happy, Cap?"

Clint didn't know why he asked that, other than the fact that he might have just been a straight up
"You know, what? No, never," Steve answered honestly. "I have everything that I ever wanted right now, right here. Before, it was always a trade. I had Bucky, but I was at death's door. Then I was a super soldier, but I lost Bucky, and then I lost 1945. Then I find you guys and Sam, and---"

Steve shrugged. Clint's eyes darted to Laura, who was slumped in the doorway, her hand over her mouth, tears streaming down her face. Cooper and Lila silently got up from the table, Cooper going to his mother and Lila taking the book they had been working on and heading outside.

"No more tradeoffs. Friends that are family, love and doing good with what I've been given. That's my life now, and I'm so happy with it," Steve said resolutely. He gave a little shrug and said, "I hope Sam and Darcy get back soon."

"Why'd you let them go alone?" Clint wondered.

"Why not?" Steve retorted with a self-assured smile.

"They don't exactly get along, Cap," Clint said gently. "He was pretty awful to her for a few days there."

"I wanted to talk to him about it, but Darcy made me promise not to," Steve's lips turned down for a second. "Said he would feel even worse if I gave him the sad Captain Puppy Eyes."

"I know you're still new to the significant other thing, and I know you enjoy strong women and being told what to do by strong women," Clint said with absolutely zero tact. "But sometimes you have to yank Darcy back from a ledge. Sam is stubborn and he really didn't seem to LIKE her."

"That's just cause Sam's a little sore about being wrong about you know, the girl for me. He doesn't have that kind of meanness in him to keep that up. And Darcy asked to have some time alone to win him over," Steve revealed. "And she's Darcy. She could win over a stack of bricks if she had to."

"Yeah."
"And it's Sam," Steve had a lopsided smirk on his face. "No offense to you, but if I'm going to trust anyone with keeping Darcy safe, it's Sam."

"Yeah," Clint nodded. He needed a change in subject. "Hey, where is Lang? We try to keep a close watch on him."

"Oh, we were playing hide and seek," Steve said sheepishly.

"And?" Clint prodded.

"He was a little too hyper for me, I needed a break," Steve mumbled. "So I let him hide, and just---haven't found him yet."

"You're going to make a fucking awesome dad, some day, Steve."

"Please, I can't!" Darcy whimpered.

Wanda let out a harsh breath as she sagged in her own chair, her energy depleting quickly as she continued to poke and prod into Darcy's mind. Sam reached out and put a hand on Wanda's shoulder, trying to give her anything. Strength. Reassurance. Thanks. Just anything.

Bucky gave Natasha a concerned look. His shirt front was completely wet, from a compilation of Darcy's tears and sweat. This was really excruciating work, apparently, and it made him more resolute that Wanda would never attempt to remove the triggers from his brain. He wouldn't put the young woman through all that. They'd do it the old fashioned, unenhanced way. With a good, hard knock to the brain.

Wanda was white as a sheet and visibly weakened. Darcy was still sitting in his lap two hours later, and she felt boneless and small against his chest.
"Why are you being so stubborn?" Natasha demanded of Darcy harshly.

"Natalia," Bucky scolded. His next words came out in Russian, "This isn't easy. Find your gentleness here."

"No, the time for gentleness has passed," Natasha answered back in Russian.

"Don't argue," Darcy whispered. She turned in Bucky's lap and looked at Natasha with a blank face. "Say what you want to say."

"You're holding on to this block with both hands," Natasha accused. "The girl who chased down dark elves, who superglued Rumlow's hands to his own ass, who arm wrestled Volstaag and won...you are this girl, aren't you?"

"Yes," Darcy said stiffly.

"You are everything Steve has ever wanted," Natasha said softly. "His happiness with finally finding you, with finally being with you is embarrassingly large and obnoxious and BEAUTIFUL, Darcy."

"Who is Steve?" Darcy said with blatant defiance.

"He LOVES you, Auntie Dar Dar," Lila ran into the room and put a book in Darcy's lap. Bucky opened it for her and smiled, because it was full of little cartoons of heavily edited versions of Darcy and Steve's adventures away from the island. The kids had been asking Steve about it for twenty-four hours straight, after all.

"Well he's stupid then," Darcy shrugged.

"You are not this person!" Natasha yelled at her in Russian.

"Natalia!" Bucky yelled back.
"Let's--- we'll go again," Wanda tried to cut in weakly, pushing Sam's hand off of her shoulder.

"Who gave you this idea? Who told you that you weren't good enough for him?" Natasha demanded, and Sam couldn't understand the Russian words, but the glare Natasha threw him told him it wasn't good. "Do you want me to prove him wrong?"

"Natalia," Bucky warned again, softer this time.

Darlene Wilson came into the room, looking around warily. She had been taking a nap in the bedroom, not quite used to international travel, and desperately tired after her adventure to Africa. She hadn't gotten much sleep though, and she'd heard everything. She gave a soft look to Sam, whose eyes were darting around the room in a pained panic.

"Get out!" Wanda ordered Natasha. She reached for Darcy's hand, who batted her away and turned to Bucky again, breaking into a pained sob. Wanda wouldn't be deterred though and she nodded resolutely and said, "Let's try again."

"NO."

It was Sam that spoke. And everyone but Darcy turned toward him. He shook his head and stuck his chin out defiantly. His mother was the only one in the room giving him a smile.

"We're done here. Let's go. I'm telling Steve everything. It's time for me to face the music."

Chapter End Notes

I can't believe the next chapter will be the twentieth chapter already. This has been whizzing right along!

Thanks so much for reading! I'm going camping this week, but it's not REAL camping (Camping with WIFI and electricity! YES!). I hope to have an update by Wednesday.
Hi everyone!

So I have a problem. I hear random song lyrics, remember half of them, and then decide it should be a song title. But then I don't now the song to recommend it to you. This is the case with this chapter title (And the title of the story, actually, but that mystery was solved, Panic at the disco, yay!). so if anyone recognizes a half remembered lyric, please tell me where I heard it, because I'd like to listen to it again some time!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty: Every Right Thing Will Find Its Right Place

Arlington, Virginia, 2014

"Caw Caw."

"This is ridiculous," Steve huffed out from his place outside the empty and fire damaged building.

"CAW CAW."

"NO," Steve grumbled towards where the sound came from before shooting a glare at a snickering Sam standing next to him.

"CAW CAW MOTHERFUCKERS!"
Sam smirked at an annoyed Steve before cupping his hands over his mouth and making a bird noise, so that Clint would stop with his ridiculous caw cawing.

Sam had met Clint exactly twenty minutes ago when he rendezvoused with he and Captain Freaking America, three months into their search for Bucky Barnes. And in that twenty minutes, Sam and Clint had managed to annoy the living hell out of Steve with what he had called their bird brained antics.

Hence the bird calls as they walked towards what Clint had brought to their attention. The former Shield agent had refused to tell them WHERE he had gotten this very useful tip, but they weren’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. They’d been chasing a shadow for three months. Bucky Barnes did NOT want to be found.

A very recently dismantled Hydra base was a gift to the search party. And it was VERY recently dismantled. Some of the walls were still smoldering from the fires set around the building.

The three men met at the side door and Clint nodded for Steve to go first. They carefully walked through empty, barren, destroyed hallways until they came to a big room, with the door blasted off its hinges. Inside was the remains of a machine. Steve didn't need it to be put together to realize what it was.

It was the chair they strapped Bucky in every time they wanted to wipe the memories out of his brain. Every time they required a new, fresh, blank sheet of murderouse paper. One of the torture machines they had used for Bucky for decades was in ruins in front of them. The clang of a metal rod was still echoing in the otherwise silent room. Clint gave a nod to Sam, who backed out of the room. Whoever had ripped apart the machine couldn't have gotten far.

Steve was faster, of course, rushing off in one direction to search for Bucky. Clint and Sam went in separate directions as well, each eager to get a hold of Bucky for Steve's sake.

Sam carefully looked over the top floor, checking in on every room until he got to the end of a long hallway. He felt the cool metal against his throat and froze.

"Tell him to stop looking."
"He---he needs you," Sam managed to gasp out.

"I'm not what he needs. I'm nothing," the growling voice was right next to Sam's ear. "Tell him to stop looking. I'm not that person anymore."

The next thing Sam remembered was waking up in Clint's nearest safehouse.

"That was quite a fall you took there," Clint said softly. "Clumsy of you."

"Yeah," Sam nodded. "Two left feet."

"Was it him?" Clint wondered.

"Yeah," Sam confirmed.

"Steve thinks that you fell through a trapdoor. You gonna tell him the truth?"

"Hell no."

---

**Wakanda, Present Day**

Bucky had Darcy off of him in a flash and had his hand on Sam's shoulder, manhandling him out of the little bungalow completely. Once they were both on the porch and the door had closed behind them, Bucky pushed at Sam's shoulder with a low, angry noise.

"There is no chance in hell I'm letting you do that to Steve," Bucky whispered.
"It's already been done, man," Sam shrugged, calling on some sense of inner calm. "It's my fault. I messed with her head the past couple of days, and I'm the one that let her get hurt. And she's still in there, hurting because I want to protect myself from Steve's well deserved anger and disappointment. So I'm doing what I should have done before this all happened. I'm manning up and telling Steve the truth."

"Please," Bucky said with sudden softness. "She's strong, she can work harder at it, I know she can. Just give her some more time."

"No," Sam said resolutely. "I'm through with seeing her and Wanda in pain over something I did. The only way you're stopping me from going to Steve right now is finding another floor to throw me through."

Bucky frowned and the memory instantly resurfaced, the wind blowing out of his sails for the moment. He'd come a long way. From that dark, scary, messy scattered brain that wanted to push Steve far, far away. To this, this warmth and need to protect him from hurt.

Lila darted past them suddenly, running for the main house.

"Kid, get back here!" Bucky shouted, pushing Sam back into the door frame, face first, causing no small amount of pain to Sam's previously perfect face, before taking off like a rocket after the small girl who was seriously, wickedly fast. "What are they feeding that kid?"

"Okay and then, you're all hype and stuff for this little thing to you know, take over the world and be a real good cop. And you think sure, she's gonna do great, but then SURPRISE, it's like she's too little and like not good. Like REALLY not good. And yo, I totally forgot to tell you, like everyone else is all big and powerful and dangerous, and she's just trying to get by, you know. And when she's at a low point, like ready to give up, BOOM, all of a sudden she's like NAAAAAH FAILURE I AM NOT YOUR BITCH TODAY! TAKE THAT SON! WHAT?!!"

"And then what?" Cooper asked as Luis paused to take a breath after five solid minutes of rambling about a movie that Cooper hadn't been able to see yet.

Steve gave a tentative smile as he adjusted the laptop slightly so that he could move his legs. He, Cooper and Scott were all squashed together on a loveseat, with the laptop on the coffee table in
front of them projecting the image of Scott's friend. Natasha had managed to get a secure connection for them to use, and every other day, Scott would skype with Luis, getting a check in on his daughter, his friends and of course, whatever the hell Luis wanted to give him an update on.

Today it was the cartoon movie *Zootopia*, and Scott, Steve and Cooper were listening, transfixed.

"So she totally is a badass now, like super cop bunny girl, like she got the super serum and all of a sudden is like a super soldier! And for real though, it SPOKE to me, man, like, on another level. Cause it's like, you, Captain Steve America, just like you, don't count out the little guy or girl, right?"

"That's right, son," Steve gave him a rueful little smile.

The crystal clear picture and connection seemed to be malfunctioning, because the screen was full of a paused Luis, looking stunned, his mouth hanging open with no sound coming out. Which was seriously unusual.

"Scottie?" Luis asked.

"Yeah?" Scott wondered.

"Yo, did I just get son'd by Captain Steve America?" Luis breathed out just barely.

"IT'S AWESOME RIGHT?" Scott nodded with his usual blend of wonderment and awe. "First time he did it to me, I peed myself. I was in the pool, but still."

"DUDE," Cooper gave him a disgusted look. "Stop peeing in the pool!"

"Uncle Steve!" Lila shouted. She ran into the house, immediately pulling a rope she and Cooper had hidden in the curtains.

Outside on the patio they heard a slightly panicked shout and the whirring of something large moving upwards very quickly.
"Was that Bucky?" Steve wondered.

"Huh? What? NO! AUNTIE DAR DAR IS HOME!" Lila announced.

Laura ran from her hiding place into the room and looked around wildly. She gave Lila a big smile.

"She's back, she's really, really back?" Laura wondered.

"Uh huh," Lila nodded. She reached out her hand for Steve and said, "C'mon, let's go."

The rest of the refugees rushed from the room, following Lila and Steve.

"Steve, hold on!" Bucky called out from the roof. Lila had set a trap and he had fallen for it completely. The elegant little rope system and net had catapulted him up three stories onto the roof of the mansion. He knew that Lila and Cooper had been working together on ingenious little inventions, but he had no idea they had been implementing them around the estate. He began hopping down carefully, intent on catching them and tackling Steve to the ground and rendering him unconscious if need be.

Halfway across the world, Luis knocked his fist against his computer screen.

"Hello? Who is Auntie Dar Dar? Is she fine? Can I meet her? You got the hookup?"

"C'mon, let's go," Sam held out his hand to Darcy, his other hand holding a small towel to the little cut on the side of his face courtesy of Bucky. Natasha rose and stood calmly between Sam and Darcy. "Please, Nat, this isn't working. I'm not going to have both Wanda and Darcy completely wrecked with trying to do something that isn't ever going to work."

"I am not letting you do this to Steve," Natasha said calmly.
"It's already been done," Sam said in a pained voice.

"Apologize to her," Natasha ordered. She knew Lila had made a run for Steve, but she trusted Bucky to make sure the little girl didn't spill the well hidden beans.

"I did that," Sam insisted.

"Do it, again," Natasha said in a low, even voice.

"Sam," Darlene interrupted. "Go on, we'll give you some privacy."

Wanda stood and gave Sam a quick hug, before letting a band of energy wrap around a stubbornly unmoving Natasha and moving her forcibly. Natasha gave Wanda a glare and the younger woman nodded.

"I know, I'll pay for this in physical training later, I realize," Wanda said in a tired voice. She walked them both over to Darlene, who gave Wanda a bright smile.

"You need a snack, come on, babygirl," Darlene wrapped an arm around Wanda's shoulders.

"Oh that can't be good," Sam whispered.

"What?" Darcy wondered.

"Nothing, it's nothing, Asgardian Meade is a helluva thing, Lewis," Sam shuffled his feet. "You ever had it?"

"Yeah, a couple of times," Darcy nodded.

"What's it taste like to you?" Sam wondered. "Mine is lemonade."
"Butterscotch," Darcy whispered, her brow furrowing. "Butterscotch. Who drinks stuff that tastes like butterscotch? The Asgardians must think my heart's match is a seventy-five year old grandpa."

"Close," Sam muttered under his breath.

"What's it make you feel like?" Darcy wondered curiously, her defeated nature sliding a bit as she finally found some calm without Wanda poking around in her brain and demanding that she remember things that she physically couldn't.

"Dangerous," Sam shrugged. "Innocent. Quietly sarcastic. Scared. But so brave. Really brave. And I felt like...I should only be doing good. Everything in me just wanted to do good. It was exhausting, and kind of eye opening. She devotes every single second of her life trying to make other people feel better because she’s trying to make up for past mistakes. It's...admirable. And beautiful."

"Yeah," Darcy nodded.

"What's it like for you?" Sam wondered, trying not to get his hopes up as Darcy got a thoughtful look on her face.

"There's strength and purpose and a ridiculous amount of courage," Darcy smiled softly. "More than my brand of heedless absence of thought. Real courage. The idea that you would do anything to make something right. The very idea that anything can be MADE right if you try hard enough. And a smart ass sense of humor to top it all off. I really like feeling like that. I loved feeling like that."

"Want to go grab some? We have a bottle back in the main house," Sam said hesitantly.

"NO," Darcy shook her head.

"Why not? I liked feeling like that too," Sam shrugged. "Even if I don't like lemonade very much."

"Just no," Darcy whispered.
"Because you know it'll bring him to you?" Sam guessed. Darcy remained resolutely silent. "You know, that it's Steve, right?"

"Yeah," Darcy nodded. "I guessed as much."

"You don't remember right now, and that's okay. It's gonna hurt him, I can't lie and say that it won't," Sam admitted. "But that's on me."

"We were both arguing on that plane, Sam," Darcy smiled ruefully. "I'm pretty sure my bump to the head is both of our faults."

"But it's not the bump on your head that made you forget Steve," Sam insisted softly. "It was me. I was jealous. And that jealousy made me behave really badly to you. And you took the fact that I didn't want to believe in you, or you and Steve either, and your brain ran with it."

"It's not your fault, I've always been a lot insecure," Darcy whispered. "I just cover it up with a lot of bravado and humor and flashy pranks."

"You can say it's not my fault all you want, but I know that I can shoulder the blame here," Sam smiled. "My mama raised a better boy than the boy that was rude to you these past few days. I'm so sorry for my behavior, Darcy."

"I forgive you," Darcy said earnestly. "I really do."

They remained silent for a few extended moments before Sam sighed and put out his hand again, "Come on. I'd like to introduce you to Steve. He's going to love you."

"Liles, is everything okay?" Steve said softly as they ran down the beach towards the bungalow that he and Darcy had spent the night in before Sam had taken Sharon to the helicarrier.

"Uh huh," Lila nodded, staring straight ahead as she made Steve work a little to keep up with her. The child was seriously like a little deer. She stopped dead in her tracks thirty feet away from the
bungalow and looked up at Steve with beseeching eyes. "Hey, Uncle Steve?"

"Yeah, Liles?" Steve wondered.

"When you see Auntie Dar-Dar, can you do a Disney movie kiss? You know, the special kind when they run to the princess and scoop her up and kiss her?" Lila wondered with extra large Bambi eyes. She was awfully good at working the various members of the Avengers into getting what she wanted. "I never saw it before, and I want to draw it later and give it to Auntie Dar Dar as a birthday present."

"Well then, just try and stop me," Steve smiled.

Lila gave a deep relieved breath and watched as the door to the bungalow opened. She ignored her Uncle Steve's confused look and instead pushed at the small of his back. She had a theory. And she was absolutely sure it was going to work.

"Magnet," Steve said softly as Sam walked out of the bungalow with Sam's hand in hers. Her eyes were red with tears, and she looked tired. But Sam and Darcy were looking friendly enough, so something must have worked.

All of her family and friends were intent on keeping Uncle Steve away from Auntie Dar Dar for fear that he'd be sad. But maybe the thing Auntie Dar Dar needed most to remember was what they were keeping from her. Uncle Steve.

"Go, go now," Lila whispered, pushing Steve as hard as she could.

Steve moved, sure steps turning into a trot as his vision narrowed. He took a moment of confusion from looking at Sam's incredibly worried face, to look only at Darcy.

At the sight of him rushing towards her, her eyes got huge, emphasizing the bloodshot, teary look. Her bottom lip trembled and she looked terrified for a split second.

But then it melted.
And those pouty lips turned upwards just slightly.

And he saw tension bleed from the set of her shoulders in a rush.

And those previously tear streaked eyes suddenly turned sparkling again just as he reached an arm around her waist and picked her up to hear a delighted laugh.

"Missed you, magnet," he whispered before kissing her lips.

Lila was at Sam's side in a moment, and pulled him away so that he was no longer awkwardly holding Darcy's hand. When he dropped it, Darcy wrapped both arms around Steve's shoulders as they kissed. And it was exactly what Lila had asked for. The only thing missing was the rising crescendo of romantic music as they embraced.

The rest of the refugees were watching. Clint, Laura, Cooper and Scott were further down the beach, all with big smiles on their face. The remainder of the audience was crammed around the front door to the bungalow.

Wanda had a huge smile on her face. Everything was there. No blanket. No wall shielding Darcy from the memory of Steve. The young woman turned to look at Sam, mouthing HOW. Sam could only shrug in response, holding out his hands in a way of saying he didn't quite KNOW what had happened.

"Thank God," Bucky breathed, looking battered and a little dirty as he walked to stand next to Clint. He pointed between Clint and Laura, "Your girl is a menace."

"Duh," Clint rolled his eyes.

"Mmpph, Steve, we have an audience," Darcy mumbled against his lips, pulling away as far as he would let her go.

"Don't care," Steve shook his head, peppering kisses against her cheek and jaw. "You alright there Magnet?"
"Peachy keen," Darcy promised. She turned and gave a smile to Sam. "It was a good trip. We brought back Sam's mom."

"Darlene?" Steve turned slightly and smiled as Sam's mother waved with a big, relieved grin on her face. "Welcome! I'm glad to see you."

"Steve...I need to say---" Sam started, but Wanda sent a blast of energy his way, wrapping him up in a cocoon and pushing him away completely from the bungalow porch. She followed, and soon they were at least 100 yards down the beach away from everyone else.

"I like her," Darlene said softly. "She’s fiesty."

“You are a first class idiot!” Wanda hissed in an angry whisper. “Don’t you dare open your mouth about this to Steve!”

She stopped their movement once they were far enough down on the beach, but kept Sam’s arms and legs immobile with swirls of friendly, tickling red energy. He gave her an earnest look and she shook her head.

“Absolutely not!” she ordered.

“Remember when you accidentally set fire to the golf cart shed at the upstate facility?” Sam wondered. Wanda rolled her eyes in response. “Remember how much better it was to not lie about what you did?”

“This hardly equals your situation. We were in a laser tag war, and I got overzealous in trying to shoot Viz,” Wanda scoffed indignantly. “This could end your friendship with Steve forever.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Sam shook his head. “Tiny Dancer, I have to make this right. It’s not right to leave things fester.”
Wanda was hit with a wave of admiration for his absolutely idiotic, stubborn upstanding nature. His lips turned upwards into a soft, determined smile and she blew out a slow, exasperated breath. His eyes widened just a small amount when Wanda leaned in, but to his credit he didn’t flinch away, but actually felt his head moving towards her.

“Ohhhh,” Wanda closed her eyes tightly in annoyance and put her hands on the sides of her head. “Oh no, I didn’t put the blocks up, I didn’t get them up and they’re...oh no!”

Sam winced and turned his body to face her fully, putting his hands over her own.

“Block it out, block it out,” Sam encouraged her, knowing what she was trying to block. Their friends had obviously left Steve and Darcy in the bungalow to be reunited properly. And by the way Wanda’s face was heating up and her knees were weak, Steve and Darcy were reuniting in a biblical kind of way.

“Alright, come on, we’re getting out of here,” Sam insisted, pulling his hands off of her and grabbing her by the waist, popping her up and over his shoulder. He took off further down the beach away from the bungalow, in the direction of the quinjet. “How high up until you can’t feel the good love mojo?”

Wanda shook her head as he ran with her with astonishing speed. She usually never tried to connect with Darcy’s mind. The two of them would be far too much trouble together. But she had just spent the last few hours crawling around in Darcy’s mind, so the connection was not only open, it was very, very strong. And Darcy was beyond happiness and love and desire. The newly revealed memories of Steve had made everything right and good again.

The combination of Darcy and Steve were going to have Wanda spontaneously combusting.

“I’m thinking the moon might be far enough.”

Chapter End Notes

So...there you go. I hope that you liked it!
Thanks so much for reading! (And look for the next chapter, hopefully Sunday.)
Chapter Notes

Just a short little chapter this time. I'm trying something out here. This chapter is a little more...mature than the others? Maybe. I don't know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-One: Comfort

Helicarrier, 2012

"I don't care what you have to do in order to get her on that plane, you get her on that plane. And you get her and Foster to Norway. Do you understand, Sitwell, that you are very close to not only being shown up by a 23 year old unpaid intern, but you are also very close to getting demoted?"

Steve's eyebrows rose into his hairline as they walked off of the recently landed quinjet onto the helicarrier. He didn't know what to be more shocked at. The grandiose floating city in the sky, or the fact that Agent Coulson was not quite the mild-mannered, adorably awkward fan he had been on the ride to the helicarrier. The Agent was all teeth now, looking exasperated and annoyed with whoever he was hissing at on the phone.

"What have you---she's video calling me now, excellent job on being entirely mediocre, Sitwell," Coulson huffed out, hanging up on the agent and pulling up the video. His angry facade melted into one that Steve could guess was reluctant admiration. "Miss Lewis. This phone doesn't have video calling capability, and I'm fairly certain the number is unlisted."

Steve got one glimpse of a very pretty face, with an unholy looking devilish smirk on her pouty lips as Coulson took off like he had the hounds of hell on his heels. The woman on the phone looked from Coulson, to the figure who Coulson was desperately trying to get away from, and her own eyes went wide for a split second. Steve didn't quite know what the expression was, but he might have remembered Bucky doing that a few times to girls at the dance hall. Steve might have even seen it a time or two during his USO tour.
Apparently, the girl giving Agent Coulson so much trouble on the phone found him attractive.

Another quinjet made its landing on the helicarrier and Steve shook himself out of thinking about those pretty blue eyes going wide with interest. He saw a very capable, very attractive redhead make her way to him and he got himself into a different mindset. It was time to go to work.

Present Day

"Where'd everyone go?"

Darcy's words were whispered and against his neck when they had finally stopped kissing long enough for a seriously dazed looking Darcy to realize their surroundings. Steve had waved everyone else away before pulling her body into a tight embrace taking her back into the bungalow as they continued to kiss heatedly. They were now in the luxurious bed they had spent a happy ten hours in before Darcy's trip with Sam. Steve cradled Darcy in his lap, his hands in her hair as he pressed little wet kisses along the column of her throat.

"They had things to do," Steve mumbled, looking down at a faded mark on her collarbone that he had been too happy to put there a few days ago. He grinned before pushing his lips against her skin, eager to refresh the hickey like the little caveman he actually was.

Darcy shifted in his lap, giggling when Steve made a little whining noise when she moved so that his proprietary, lecherous kisses had to be paused. She straddled his legs and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, fingers dancing at the back of his neck until they grasped onto the hair at the back of his head, pulling until he was looking up into her face.

"Missed you, Magnet," he pouted at her with absolutely genuine affection. He stretched and placed a sloppy little kiss on her chin. "Next time I'm coming along, I don't care what you say about me being needy and you being able to do things your way."

"Steve," Darcy said softly.
"Okay, I do care what you say about being able to do things your way," Steve amended. "I care about everything you say."

"Steve," she repeated, letting go of his hair and shifting again, so that she could bury her face in his neck, taking little soft breaths.

"Sweetheart?" Steve wondered. He could feel the tension in her body all of a sudden. She had been loose and soft a moment ago and now she was stiff and unyielding. "Magnet, what's wrong?"

Darcy sniffled against his skin, and he felt the hot splash of her tears, which made him worry. A lot.

"I thought everything went okay, you and Sam seemed friendly enough," Steve furrowed his brow.

"It's okay now," Darcy put his mind at ease.

She couldn't quite put into words what she was feeling at the moment. Steve had been gone and out of her mind less than ten minutes ago. The love and passion and strength of him was just completely gone. It had been painful and desolate and miserable and she had hated every second of it. And now it was all back in a rush and Darcy was having trouble balancing between the two vastly different circumstances.

"I love you," Darcy whispered, pressing her lips to the soft skin of his shoulder.

"I love you, too," Steve promised.

Darcy pulled back and Steve took a breath at the look on her face. If he had to guess, he would wager she looked a little angry. He had no way of knowing that she WAS angry. Angry that she had forgotten him for even one little second. She looked determined too. And the determination on her face made her entirely beguiling to him.

"Magnet, you look like you're fixing to do something reckless," Steve murmured. He quite liked that look.
She pushed against his chest, and ever eager to please, he let her, falling backwards on the pillows of
the bed as she slanted her lips against his, her tongue tickling against the seam of his lips for just a
second before he opened up to her and nearly melted into the fabric of the mattress as Darcy, who
was normally a highly enthusiastic and adept kisser, called on some inner reserve of hidden ability.

Steve felt like he was drunk off of it, her teeth dragging on his lower lip, her tongue dancing in
unpredictable patterns against his, all the while she gripped his torso between her thighs. And her
hands...her hands were everywhere all at once. Nails against his scalp making him feel boneless. His
shirt was rucked up his body and he smiled into her kiss when her hands ran up and down his torso.
And she had somehow managed to push his pants down as well, pressing down into the predictable
tent in his shorts and making him jolt at the pleasing buzz starting at the base of his spine.

"Darcy, what's the hurry?" Steve laughed as she took a break from her physical affections and
stripped him down before doing the same for herself. She got stuck in the neck hole of her shirt and
he patiently reached up and got her out of it.

"I missed you," Darcy insisted, tearing at the rest of her clothing until she was once again, straddling
his prone body, both of them properly nude.

"I know, I missed you too," Steve agreed.

"No, you---" Darcy bit at her bottom lip before shaking her head and going on the offensive again,
placing a hard and hasty kiss on his mouth before moving down his body, the same needy, desperate
kisses down his throat, down the center line of his body.

"Oh god," Steve moaned out at the first flick of her tongue against his hard arousal. She went from a
small touch to avidly trying to destroy his higher brain functions and his hands went for the crisp
white bedsheets and gripped as tight as he dared as she worked him over with her mouth. "Please,
sweetheart, please."

Darcy didn't need clarification on what he was begging for, she pulled her mouth away and
shimmied up his legs before wasting no time in sinking down on top of him.

"Oh god, oh god. You feel so good," Steve murmured as his hands shot out and gripped at her hips
as she eased herself up ever so slightly, taking three little sharp gasps for air with each of the three
passes of her hips until he was nestled deep inside of her plush, wet warmth. Steve squeezed at her
hips and looked up at her in an awe he didn't ever think he would get over. "My sweet little
Darcy didn't dare open her eyes. She knew that if she looked down at him and saw that all encompassing love she'd break apart into a million tiny pieces. Instead she placed her hands firmly on his pecs, and rocked herself against him at a fast and punishing pace, taking as much comfort from him as she could. He was so solid underneath her hands, the thrum of his heartbeat beneath her fingertips. He was real. He wanted her. He loved her.

"Open your eyes, Darcy," Steve requested sweetly, even as he was fighting to keep his own eyes open to stare up at her as she sought to bring pleasure to them both. He absolutely loved they way she looked at him when they were together like this. So happy and excited and downright delighted.

"I missed you," Darcy whispered desperately, keeping her eyes tightly closed as she moved up and down his length faster as she chased that lovely release.

"I know, Magnet, I missed you too," Steve reminded her. He groaned and let his hips buck up into her on the next downturn of her hips.

"Steve!" she whimpered out as he continued to meet her thrust for thrust. Her nails dragged against his chest hard enough to leave marks as her thighs began to shake and she lost her rhythm completely, her body moving to its own cadence as it tried to extend that wonderful feeling of completion.

Steve stilled his own movements, letting out a low moan as he felt her quivering around him in her release. He felt a pleasant, twisting heaviness low in his gut that only Darcy had been able to inspire in his life. He lived for that feeling now. The butterfly fluttering that only she could give him.

"I missed you," she whispered again when she'd recovered some of her faculties.

Steve furrowed his brow when she began crying openly. He pulled out of her, his worry only growing when she began crying harder at the sudden loss of his warm, firm presence. He twisted their bodies in the bed so that he lay mostly on top of her. Her absolute distress was bringing out some sort of animalistic instinct, and he tried to give her some sort of reassurance by blanketing her with his body, skin to skin.

"Magnet, please, shhh, tell me what's wrong," Steve soothed her with a hand running up and down the line of her body from her hip to her chest. He pressed kiss after soft kiss on her forehead as she
struggled to get control of her tears.

"I forgot you," Darcy whimpered. She stopped the worst of the sobbing after a full minute of reassuring touches from Steve. She sniffled and shrugged and could only squeak out miserably, "It was the worst."

Steve shook his head in confusion.

"You forgot me?" he asked softly.

"I hit my head and forgot you," Darcy nodded. "I just remembered everything when I saw you. I was...it was so stinking awful. And now I just---I need you."

"You have me Darcy Lewis, I promise," Steve kissed her forehead one more time, tenderly. He shook his head when her hands groped at his unfulfilled erection again. "Magnet, it's alright."

"No, I need you," Darcy insisted. She no longer spoke from the desperation to know that he was real, but her normal, desperate desire for him. She shifted her leg underneath him, her soft inner thigh rubbing against his stiff arousal and she managed a wicked little smile, "Please, baby?"

"Like I could say no to you," Steve smiled at her before settling himself between her parted thighs. His smile grew wider when she pulled her legs up high around his waist, and their bodies slotted against each other with comforting familiarity. "I especially like it when you call me baby."

"Baby, baby, baby," Darcy chanted, accentuating every off rhythm, unpredictable thrust with another soft babble of the pet name.

Steve was absolutely set on giving her the opposite of what she had just given him. Where Darcy had taken him hard and fast, he was slow and deep, taking the time to let his hands and lips wander. At one point he remained motionless, just nestled inside of her warmth as he lazily kissed marks onto her collarbone. He lived for that little hitching noise she made when he surprised her by pulling and pushing within her in a cadence all his own.

Her eyes were open now, staring up at him as if he were everything important in the world and without warning, he quickened the movement of his hips, and she let out a lovely little moan as the sudden rush of intense pleasure had her past her breaking point again. Steve was quick to follow
her, whispering her name as he pulsed inside of her.

"Love you," she whispered when he got a soft cloth and cleaned them up before tucking her under the covers with a soft kiss to her lips. She was out like a light in no time and Steve gave her one last squeeze before slowly climbing out of the bed, looking for his discarded clothing.

He needed to have a talk with Sam.

Chapter End Notes

*Runs away to Captain America's birthday celebrations and hides*

Thanks for reading!
Chapter Notes

And again, I am left with some confusion regarding the song I used for the chapter title. It isn't my fault that there are so many songs with work repeated over and over and over in the chorus. (I love all of these songs and can't help myself!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Work Work Work Work Work Work

Some Weeks Earlier, Berlin Airport

"So, tell me again, how that worked, because I was too busy being blinded by the biceps of America to see it happening."

"Go on, show Tic Tac how you did it," Sam encouraged with a downright wicked grin.

“No,” Bucky said simply, standing next to the tiny Volkswagen Beetle he had been trapped in with Steve and Wilson for the last few hours. Scott wanted to know how he got in and out of the small vehicle.

The answer was with a great amount of difficulty and an absence of grace.

“Just get back in the back seat and come back out, he’s not asking for much,” Sam shrugged. “A good teammate would do ---”

"Stop that," Wanda pinched Sam's side, thankfully with her real fingers and not her magic swirly red stuff of doom.
"God damn, tiny dancer, you have fingers of steel," Sam winced, sparing a glare Bucky's way when the much, much older man made a very brief chortle of insulting laughter. Sam turned to Wanda, who was glaring up at him with her hands on her hips and a frown across her lips. "It's all that finger dancing you do, definitely makes for strong ass fingers."

"Get changed!" Steve called out as he and Scott finished going over the logistics of where an Ant-man sized Scott could hide on the shield.

"Aye Aye, Captain America!" Scott grinned, immediately stripping out of his shirt.

Sam chuckled and did the same, his eyebrows raising as Wanda let out a small, shocked squeaking noise. He couldn't help but tighten his posture up a bit, holding his arms at such an angle that would properly display his guns, which may not have been super soldier guns, but were still pretty damned super.

"Like what you see, Tiny Dancer?" Sam waggled his eyebrows at her before going for his pants.

An arrow whizzed by his ear and clattered on the ground and Sam immediately went into a standing position and turned to glare at Clint, who was idly futzing with his bow. The archer shrugged and cocked his head to one side.

"Sorry, I'm outta practice. That one slipped."

"Slipped my ass, you know---"

Suddenly, Steve was right there, and practically threw Wanda over his shoulder before depositing her into the van and throwing her bag with her uniform in after her. He then turned to Sam and pointed a finger at him.

"Be a gentleman around Wanda, or I'm calling your mother," Steve forcefully suggested.

"Uh oh, that sounds bad," Bucky muttered off towards the side.
"Shut up, Gramps, your dementia is acting up again," Sam sourly retorted. He caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye back at the van, just a little flash of skin as Wanda reached out a hand. Clint was there in no time, handing her a small red stringed bracelet, something Sam knew she did to honor Pietro during missions.

"Eyes on me, Wilson," Steve said with soft authority.

"Eyes on my clothes, cause you know, I have to get in them," Sam sassed back. "No offense, but watching YOU change isn't that fun anymore."

To his credit, Steve was used to the sass and the rest of the men got dressed in quick and practiced silence. Steve was fiddling with his gloves and Sam was programming a few last minute defensive patterns into Red Wing when Steve finally spoke up again.

"Thank you."

"What for?" Sam wondered. His grin turned teasing and said, "For finally giving you enough pep talks to go for that kiss with Carter?"

Steve's brow went a little wrinkled and Sam caught the discomfort flitter across his face.

"I don't mean to tease, man, it's just, you've had a really long dry spell," Sam acknowledged. "And it's nice to see that you had some success. You know. With a real lady and not someone that was made up by overly imaginative housewives."

"Fuck off, Wilson," Clint grumbled from the side.

"It's not that," Steve shook his head. "Thanks for being right here. For doing everything you've done for me these past three years. It's appreciated."
"You don't have to thank me man, I'm always gonna be here for you."

Present Day, Wakanda

It took Wanda a full five hours to get the blocks in her brain in place. By that time, they were both starving, so they quickly landed the quinjet in the little harbor and were surprised to have Laura waiting for them, a picnic basket in hand.

"You missed lunch," she had explained, handing the basket off to Sam. She gave the pair of them an appraising look and nodded to herself. She grabbed onto Wanda's arm and led her off, waving at Sam and advising him, "Take that to the bungalow. There's enough in there for all three of you. C'mon, Wanda, Cooper made you a dessert pizza."

"Gummy worms on top of chocolate pudding and cake?" Wanda asked hopefully.

"Of course."

Sam watched them go for a little bit longer than necessary, his lips twitching upwards when Wanda turned about fifty yards away to give him a small smile and a wave. He took some strength from that and took a deep breath before walking back towards the bungalow that was framed in the pretty light of the late afternoon sun. He hoped that the hours that they had been given had been enough for Darcy and Steve. He'd rather go back on the quinjet again than have to sit and wait for them to finish up.

His worries were short lived, and new worry bloomed when Steve stepped outside of the bungalow, closing the door carefully and quietly behind him. The look on his face was one full of concern and distraction, and when it shifted to Sam and recognized him, the sort of constipated distraction faded, and Sam saw something very familiar etch itself into Steve's eyes.

Trust.

"Hey man," Sam nodded at him, taking a deep swallow before holding up the very full picnic basket.
"Late lunch?"

"Yeah, later," Steve nodded. He looked back at the closed door to the bungalow and then back at Sam curiously. "What happened?"

The question was without animosity and Sam knew that Darcy was probably still trying to cover for him.

"She hit her head," Sam explained. "Because we were arguing about her being there."

"You might need to explain that to me a bit clearer, Sam," Steve gave Sam a disbelieving look.

"I didn't want her there. Man...I didn't want her ANYWHERE. And there she was, on the quinjet and I was so annoyed and between the both of us slamming on them, the autopilot broke and the plane barrel rolled," Sam said quickly. "I held on, but Darcy went flying. She hit her head, got knocked out."

Steve remained silent, digesting that information for a few seconds, his face blank. Sam soldiered on.

"She woke up and she couldn't remember anything at first," Sam admitted. "But then things started to come back quick. Except for one thing."

"Me," Steve nodded.

"I'm so sorry, Steve," Sam admitted. "I was being...petty and rude to her. She put up some kind of block. Wanda couldn't even break it. All memories of you were just gone for the last twelve hours or so. It was rough. And I can't say I'm sorry enough. I was an ass---"

"Sam, you were HUMAN," Steve shook his head. "Did I want to knock you upside the head a couple days ago for how you acted towards her? Hell yes, I did. And you have her to thank for the fact that I didn't."
"I don't think I've been mean to a girl like that since before I was in the fourth grade," Sam admitted. "Don't even know why I did it."

"I do," Steve nodded. "Sam...I think--no, I know I've been taking you for granted. I was caught up in having Bucky back and then, finding Darcy, I got caught up. I know that now."

"Yeah? Who hinted at that?" Sam gave him a soft smile. "You been talking to my momma?"

"Scott, actually," Steve laughed. "He still calls his friend Luis, religiously, and he explained it as not wanting Luis to feel left out, you know? With all of us being his new friends and teammates and coworkers, he wanted to make sure the friend who always had his back when no one else did knew that he was important."

"Tic Tac hides a lot of his brains behind that goofy smile," Sam shook his head in disbelief.

"Yeah, he does," Steve nodded. "I'm sorry Sam. I really am. I was taking you for granted. You were always right there for me, and it became something I expected instead of being thankful for. But you are important to me. I wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for you. And even if I would be, I would be an empty shell. A lifeless fighting machine with no friends and no family."

"I'm still sorry. I was a dick to your girl," Sam said firmly. "But next time, instead of letting her invade my personal space, maybe you and I can just talk it out."

"That sounds like a plan," Steve nodded.

"So---are we good?" Sam wondered.

"Yeah, Sam. We're good," Steve promised with a soft smile. It melted instantaneously though and the cold, stern look from Steve gave Sam shivers up and down his back. "This is something I'm going to tell everyone else, so don't think I'm singling you out."

Sam gulped, because Steve had put a hand on his shoulder. A very strong hand with a firm grip that was just shy of being able to bruise at that point.
"If any of you try to keep the fact that Darcy was hurt away from me again, we are going to have some problems," Steve said, sounding very much like Captain America going into battle. "She's been in pain for hours, and no one told me, thinking it was better to fix it before I could find out. I'm not some breakable flower, Sam. When things are going bad, I need to know."

"Alright man, I'm sorry," Sam nodded. "We were going to go find you, if it's any consolation."

"It is, a little," Steve took his hand off of Sam's shoulder and his smile was back. "But I knew that your quinjet got back six hours ago. So that was six hours of putting Wanda and Darcy through hell to protect me from the truth. That doesn't happen anymore. Things go bad? You tell me."

"Okay," Sam nodded. He held up the basket and said, "Lunch? Lewis hasn't eaten in quite some time."

"Yeah, let me go wake her up and get her dressed," Steve gave Sam a sly, little smile.

"Don't give me that, Rogers, you're gonna go and sex her up again while I sit on the porch and wait like a damn fool! Wait a minute—is this revenge for that time in Toronto when you were trapped in the bathroom while I had the---Steve, get back here!"

When Sam, Steve and Darcy made their way back to the main house just in time for evening karaoke, Darcy ran straight for Scott, who was standing next to the chair holding the laptop where Luis and Scott were singing an inspiring duet of Jailhouse Rock. Darcy danced around in enjoyment, pulling up the kids to dance along with her while she patiently waited her turn to make the duet into a trio.

"Heeeeedddddyyyy, guys," Laura said warily, looking between Sam and Steve. "How's things?"

"Yes, how are things?" Natasha demanded as the karaoke machine instantly began playing 'I Wanna Dance with Somebody' and Darcy jumped up and down in excitement, causing Luis and Scott to do the same as the trio babbled about being musical soulmates. Nat openly glared at Sam, suspecting that he had already spilled the beans and knew that she was about to get scolded.
“Natasha,” Steve gave her that unimpressed Dad look that he had somehow managed to perfect, even though he didn't have children. He put that look on each member of his team not actively involved in karaoke. "Lila was the only one willing to tell me the truth. She's a child and I know now that she believes in me more than my entire family here."

"Sorry Steve," Clint muttered.

"I'm made of sterner stuff than you think, obviously," Steve gave them a sad little head shake. "You can't protect me from everything. Next time something happens, I want to know."

"Sorry Steve," Laura folded quickly.

"Sorry Steve," Wanda pouted forlornly.

Steve gave Natasha a very level, very questioning look. She returned it. For the remainder of the song.

"Yoooooo, what is going on out there, they are just having a hard core staring contest, aren't they?" Luis asked as Darcy and Scott pored over the song collection. "Man, I would not want to be in the middle of that. Like, your head would explode or something. Oh shit, that's the fine ass lady spy. Hey girl. I've missed you, you don't call, you don't write. Sup."

“Lozado,” Natasha turned and gave him a single arch of her eyebrow.

“Yes ma’am,” Luis smiled obediently, immediately shutting his trap.

“You have a last name?” Scott whispered to the laptop. He wasn’t surprised that the Black Widow knew who his friend was, even though she had never met him on the laptop sessions before. But the last name thing threw him for a loop.


“Sorry,” Scott apologized sincerely. “I thought you were like Madonna. Or Prince.”
“Oh, totally awesome,” Luis’ eyes lit up.

“Guys,” Darcy nudged Scott with her elbow. Steve looked like he wanted to speak, but the two friends kept talking to each other every time Steve opened his mouth.

“I’m not sorry,” Natasha announced with something akin to pride shading her voice.

“Me neither, Stevie,” Bucky shrugged, standing tall and proud next to Natasha.

“I have to know these things, I have to know when any of you are hurting or in danger,” Steve insisted.

“And it’s my job as your best friend to make sure you aren’t hurt,” Bucky insisted. “I’ve always had your back, punk. And I always will.”

Steve went to open his mouth and Bucky shook his head.

“Don’t give me that line of bull, Stevie. You would do the same for me, and you know it,” Bucky insisted. “I’ll never lie to you outright, but I’ll always try to protect you from getting hurt when I can. I’ll tell you when there’s an enemy on the way, but telling you that the girl you love forgot all about you? If I could have I would have hidden that from you until she remembered every moment.”

“This is a really circular argument, so why don’t you revisit it later?” Laura cut in diplomatically, her eyes edging towards the kids, who were watching in rapt attention. She looked to Sam and asked, “How was Sharon settling in?”

“She was in five hundred percent productivity mode by the time we lifted out of Wakanda,” Sam smiled. He shrugged and said, “She’ll have Steve’s overprotective boyfriend back to normal in no time.”

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*Helicarrier*
“So I told him that he just wasn’t threesome material. I mean, he wore crocs on his down time. That’s completely unacceptable. Not to mention the fact that we both completely out rank him, it would be ridiculous. I know that we work together and keep our private life private, but I can’t risk adding another loose cannon, no matter how pretty his ears are.”

“Sure, that sounds nice,” Sharon mumbled as she looked over printouts of ledgers from Hydra’s financial department from fifty years ago. She’d been on the helicarrier less than a day and she’d already made so much progress. It had almost wiped the memory of fun and sun and sand and karaoke straight from her brain, thankfully.

Maria Hill rolled her eyes. It was obviously going to take bigger guns to break Sharon out of her eighteen hour straight work coma.

“So you made out with Rogers?” Maria put out blithely. “I’d be offended at your blatant cheating, but it’s Rogers, and I can understand the need to stray. I mean. That star spangled ass.”

“What?” Sharon looked up, completely confused and bewildered. She gave a soft, put upon smile to her superior officer and nodded, “Maria. When did you get in here?”

“Twenty minutes ago,” Maria deadpanned. “Good to know that becoming a felon hasn’t changed you one bit, Carter. One of the many things that make you so damned attractive.”

Sharon blushed and shook her head slightly. Maria Hill was a lot of things. Deadly competent. Ridiculously dangerous. Brilliant to the point of genius. And she also was an incredible tease. Rumlow had made the joke once that Hill and Carter were ‘lezzing out’ together and needed a male to balance out the estrogen. Maria had retaliated by making Rumlow and company as absolutely uncomfortable as she could. By first reciting a well thought out fifteen minute list of why none of the Strike team could ever be considered to complete their threesome. And she reminded them of their unfortunate joke at every opportunity she could. This equated into flirting horrendously with Sharon at all times.

Even if Rumlow was fricasseed with his ashes scattered to the winds, it was a habit Maria kept up. It was the only thing she ever did that went against company regulations. Fury had chastised her for it, and Carter had actually told Fury to cram it and that she didn’t mind. So Maria happily continued in her mild sexual harassment.

She did like it when Carter got flustered.
“So. Rogers finally has to deal with Lewis firsthand?” Maria wondered. “I can’t wait to see what color she makes his hair.”

“She died it brown already. Oh God, please don’t make me talk about it,” Sharon huffed a sigh.

Maria’s eyebrows crept up her forehead a small amount. The last thing she expected the badass blonde in front of her to be was jealous of Darcy Lewis’ inevitable coupling with Steve Rogers. It wasn’t like her at all.

“I’ve had enough of this gossip crap on the Vacation from Hell,” Sharon huffed out. “Would they come back married, would they come back pregnant, would they come back pregnant and married? You know what? I had to have Darcy Lewis’ birth control delivered to Norway a few years ago, it’s designed by Betty Ross, it’s NOT going to fail. And Thor and Jane Foster would lock her in a closet if she got married without them right by their side, so all those well-meaning idiots on that island are wrong. They get married in a year and she’ll be six months pregnant in two years time and when that comes to pass, THEN, Barton is going to owe me all of his kid’s college tuition money he has squirreled away under the hood of a tractor somewhere!”

Maria pulled out her phone and sent a quick text to FRIDAY, who was organizing the betting.

“Thanks for the tips, Carter, you just made me a mint,” Maria smiled at her. “So, what are you working on? The German trigger or the American trigger?”

“The America trigger. The German one has lain dormant for decades, we need to focus on the bigger threat, which is all of those American Hydra members that we pissed off two years ago,” Sharon revealed. She stood up and stretched out tense muscles, she had been sitting down for far too long. “First things first, I’m researching the funding, but we’re going to need to bring in someone who was around when Barnes was programmed recently.”

“He already brought in all the lab techs that might have witnessed anything,” Maria admitted. Barnes had been quietly and peacefully rounding up Hydra lab techs for two years, leaving them as gifts for Steve to bring back. “They’ve been relentlessly interrogated and they know nothing.”

“Not lab techs,” Sharon shook her head. She pulled up a sheet of paper and handed it to Maria. It was the Strike team lineup from two years ago, “We need to bring in Jack Rollins.”
All I’m saying is that it’s important. And right. And so necessary for the common good.”

“I agree with your lady here, Steve. You need to talk some sense into Barnes. This is what needs to happen,” Sam backed up Darcy with all the genuineness in his heart.

“I already talked to Cooper, and he agrees. He’s even worked up new schematics,” Darcy said with no small amount of excitement.

Steve gave the newly befriended duo of Sam and Darcy a dubious look. They had taken less than twenty-four hours to prove to be a dangerous combination, even more so than Bucky and Darcy. While Bucky would do anything Darcy asked, and did do anything she asked, including singing a duet every night at karaoke, eating every vegetable that someone had dared to serve Darcy, and wear a star spangled speedo for science and research. But even Steve’s irrepressible and incorrigible girl had limits on what she would ask Bucky to do.

Sam did not, but Sam had a bump on the side of his head after having asked Bucky if it was okay for him and Darcy to use Bucky in an attempt at making Steve irrationally jealous. Bucky had no problem whatsoever saying no to Sam. Repeatedly and with much glee.

“Magnet, no,” Steve said gently.

Sam nudged Darcy with his elbow and put his forefinger to his nose.

“Wait, I forgot the codes,” Darcy whispered back to Sam, knowing full well that Steve could still hear her. “Was the finger to the nose trying to withhold sex in order to get my way or was it sex him up to the max until he can’t say no to my demands? Either way, I mean, I don’t like that plan. Who came up with it again?”

“Barton says it’s what he does when he needs Laura to agree to something stupid,” Sam shrugged.
“Ew, then no, I’m not doing that,” she turned to Steve and assured him with a loving smile, “Sexing will be normal and will never be held for ransom, baby.”

“Don’t baby him in front of me, Lewis, we had rules,” Sam reminded her as Steve opened his arms to her and brought her to sit on his lap as he continued to eat his breakfast. He attempted to feed her a chunk of mango but she turned up her nose at that and instead plucked off a piece of sticky, syruped waffle off of his plate. Sam wrinkled his nose as Darcy made a production of sucking the syrup off his fingers. “We had an agreement, Lewis!”

“Huh?” Darcy looked up and shifted in Steve’s lap. Her eyes went extra wide and she made a small pleased sound. “Fire in the hole, Sam.”

“TOO LATE!” Sam grumbled, stalking from the room. He glared at Bucky, who was on his way in and said, “They’re about to start devouring each others’ faces. Fire in the hole.”

Bucky gave Sam a wry chuckle before disregarding the man’s advice and walking into the kitchen anyway.

“HEY! I was trying to be nice!” Sam called out after him.

Bucky paid him no mind and sat opposite Steve at the kitchen table, ignoring the fact that Darcy was in Steve’s lap and kissing him avidly. He took their preoccupation to his advantage, stealing Steve’s breakfast plates and coffee. He was three quarters of the way through the waffle before the canoodling couple noticed his presence.

“That’s my waffle,’ Steve pouted.

“You got to kiss your sweet dame, it’s a fair trade,’ Bucky said wisely, a smirk on his lips before he stuffed them with waffle. He watched as Steve thought over whether he complained about his lost breakfast and potentially insulted his sweet dame or not. Bucky nodded proudly when Steve shrugged off the loss of the waffle and cuddled Darcy closer.

“Bucky?” Darcy asked sweetly.

“Yes, little Rainbow widow?” Bucky asked, wondering what crazy thing Steve’s sweet dame was going to ask for this time. He was powerless to say no, but he at least hoped it wouldn’t be modeling
provocative European swimwear. Again.

“Will you let Cooper build you a confetti cannon in your new arm? Just a small one?” Darcy smiled at him winningly. He didn’t say no right away, and he didn’t roll his eyes. He looked up at her with just the hint of a smile playing at the corners of his lips. “Imagine if you will, being victorious after a long fought battle, it calls for a moment of celebration!”

“Magnet,” Steve rolled his eyes at his girlfriend. “She’s not serious, Buck.”

“RUDE!” Darcy pinched the insides of his thighs. “I'm one thousand percent serious.”

“He doesn’t need a confetti cannon in his arm,” Steve shook his head.

“Now hold on a minute here,” Bucky held up a finger. “When you say cannon, can it you know, shoot other things aside from confetti?”


“Like bullets,” Bucky smirked.

“You’re so violent,” Darcy sighed. “Perfect for Nat-Nat, really. No offense to Bruce, but he’s a tiny kitten compared to you. You're a mountain lion. Sexy as hell.”

“You think Bruce is a tiny kitten?” Steve demanded.

“Good to know you skipped over the fact that I called your best pal sexy as hell,” Darcy smirked. She tilted her head thoughtfully very suddenly and said, “Oh, that’s because you know that’s true. Awesome.”

“Who the hell is Bruce?” Bucky demanded.

“Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm,” Darcy wrinkled her nose by the end of the sound and shrugged before turning in Steve’s lap and attacking
his mouth with sudden ferocity.

“That’s not gonna work, little Rainbow widow,” Bucky told her. “I’ve seen this punk naked more than you have, I’m immune, and as far as seeing you naked, it would be a delight. Who is Bruce?”

“Excuse me for the interruption.”

The trio stopped their morning time fun festivities and looked to the new arrival at the door leading out to the patio. King T’Challa gave Steve and Darcy’s inappropriate table behavior a wry smile before turning to Bucky and giving him a respectful nod.

“My friends, we have a problem.”

Chapter End Notes

I know a lot of you wanted Steve to pop Sam in the nose or something, but I really wasn't seeing this as a violent confrontation.

Thanks so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed this.
Most Valuable Players

Chapter Notes

So here we go. On to the next thing in this story. Thanks for sticking with me on this crazy adventure!

Ensemble cast intensifies...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Chapter Twenty-Three: Most Valuable Players

Avenger’s Tower, 2014

“And THIS is why we don’t run off trying to save the day Every. Single. Time! You wind up in a media shit storm and I have to bail you out. You’re all in big trouble, do you understand me? Tony?”


“Do you understand that you can’t go jumping off of skyscrapers in a half finished suit when you are still, technically recovering from open heart surgery?”

“But Pepp, it was Hydra,” Tony explained. “Hundreds of Hydra agents exposed all of a sudden in New York, and Cap’s in a hospital bed in DC, and someone had to go out and---”

“Tony, I understand the need to get the bad guy,” Pepper nodded. “But going forty-eight hours nonstop, in a half finished suit was not the way to go about it. You passed out mid-fight, face on the ground and iron man’d ass in the air... and you could have been hurt.”


Pepper seemed mollified and turned instead to Thor, who was smiling up at her in that beguiling, Asgardian way of his. She shut down the automatic response to ruffle his hair and melt under the
steely blue light in his eyes. Instead, she crossed her arms and gave him a look.

“I was simply assisting my shield brother, Stark,” Thor nodded. “There was great evil afoot and I
had to stop it.”

“Making a pile of Hydra agents and then putting Mjolnir on top of them was not the best idea,”
Pepper told him patiently. “And then starting the revels immediately, and giving Tony Asgardian
meade when he had just woken up from passing out due to exhaustion was also, not your greatest
idea.”

“Understood,” Thor nodded. “Next time, I shall wait for the revels in a more private place, so that
there would be no pictures of Stark, or myself, dancing in victory.”

“Good,” Pepper nodded. She took a deep breath and gave a look to the last, and possibly worst
culprit. Darcy Lewis’ face was beaming at her from the holographic panel. “Darcy? Where are
you? Happy tried to find you in DC and you weren’t at the Stark safehouse.”

“Oh, Clint picked me up and took me somewhere safe, because you know, bad Hydra guys,” Darcy
waved her off.

“Wait just a second there, tiny terror,” Clint edged his way onto the screen and gave Pepper a salute.
“Second Boss, how you doing?”

“Not bad. How’s the first boss?” Pepper smirked slightly.

“Peachy. Loving the new sitter,” Clint slid his eyes to Darcy.

“I’ll bet,” Pepper laughed. “Want to give me the real story?”

“Clint, NO!” Darcy swatted at him. “You’ll be sorry if you do!”

“I found this one on the shores of the Potomac River,” Clint revealed.
“I WILL CHANGE YOUR ENTIRE DAMNED WORLD!” Darcy went to hold a hand over Clint’s mouth.

He easily fended her off and bent over, holding up the iconic shield of Captain America, looking none too worse for the wear.

“She had this, after dragging it out of the river with one of Tony’s bots,” Clint revealed.

“That’s my fault, I did give the bot to her,” Tony piped up, like a kid who was trying to lay on a grenade for a friend.

“Did you also tell her to start using it to play whack-a-mole with the Hydra agents who came after her?” Clint wondered.

“DARCY!” Pepper scolded.

“Like I was going to let them lay a finger on that shield!” Darcy scoffed. “Besides, it’s not like I haven’t been working out lately.”

“Playing fighting games with Tony and Rhodey does not mean you are working out!” Pepper disputed. She shook her head and picked up her cell phone. “You asked for this, Darcy.”

“NO, no, no, don’t call her!” Darcy said, suddenly repentant. “She’s busy!”

“Hey, Nat,” Pepper greeted. “Good work today on Capitol Hill. Yeah. Let Steve know that I know where his shield is. Future Mrs. America got it back for him. Should I send her back to DC to give it to him?”

Pepper frowned as obviously Natasha didn’t think that was a good idea at the moment. Pepper supposed she could understand. Steve had an awful lot on his plate at the moment. It probably wasn’t a great idea to drop Darcy in his lap as well. There would be plenty of other opportunities, and if all else failed, Pepper could always throw another fundraiser.

“Barton, Nat’s going to need that shield back,” Pepper announced after hanging up. “And someone
is going to be in so much trouble soon.”

“TRAITORS!” Darcy called out. She jabbed a finger into Clint’s shoulder. “I’m gonna make you pay so hard for this! Just you wait!”

“And that’s the story of how Nathaniel came to be,” Clint finished with a big smile on his face as he regaled Steve with the story of how Darcy had claimed her revenge by convincing Laura to have a third child. Clint placed Nathaniel in his crib, after carefully taking the boy from Captain America’s poofy chest, so that he could get his mid-morning nap done and over with.

“She---she got my shield back?” Steve asked softly. He shook his head in disbelief but the took a second to think better of it. “No wonder she wanted to get it back again.”

“She likes her symmetry,” Clint chuckled. “Anyway, what did you come in here for?”

“Oh, team meeting on the patio in fifteen. T’Challa came back with something...something big,” Steve announced.

“So...seeing as Darcy convinced my lovely wife that three was the perfect number of children,” Clint said gently. “I was hoping to give you a little...push. I mean, you said the other day that you wanted kids someday...”

“Clint. Darcy and I aren’t going to move up our relationship time table or take a step that we’re not ready for yet so that you can win a bet,” Steve rolled his eyes.

“THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS!” Laura hissed from the doorway. “Tell him it’s thousands and thousands of dollars!”

“No,” Steve insisted. He furrowed his brow. “Three kids is the perfect number, but, you’re---”

“Oh no,” Laura gasped, she walked quickly to Clint and reached for his hand, squeezing hard. “Oh
“You’re not pregnant?” Steve said softly, looking between his two friends. He was in clear distress at the news.

“I’m so, so, so sorry,” Laura whispered.

“She didn’t mean to lie to you, we just wanted to make sure we could help Darcy before you found out,” Clint defended.

Steve nodded, looking down at the floor.

“I just thought it would be nice. Such a wonderful blessing, when everything was looking so bleak,” Steve said softly. “And Nathaniel is getting out of that fun, cuddly baby stage, I’ll miss it.”

And then Steve looked up.

And Laura visibly started to shake.

Because his big blue eyes were filled with disappointment, brow scrunched ever so slightly and his mouth in a soft frown.

“I’m so sorry!” Laura whispered, as Clint was unable to talk when confronted with the look on Steve’s face. “I’m so sorry. We were wrong, four is the magic number, c’mon dummy, let’s go make a baby for Captain America.”

“Laura,” Steve shook his head, forcing a smile on his face. “It’s alright. I understand. Team meeting in fifteen.”

“Alright,” Laura nodded as Steve walked away. She turned to her husband and hugged him. “Oh god, I feel like I just ran over a puppy in front of the kids. Or strangled Elmo in front of Nathaniel.”

“Aww, smarty-pants, it’s okay,” Clint soothed her after he got over his initial terror at having put that
look of disappointment on Steve’s face. “Besides, this might kick up Steve’s timeline. He seems awfully desperate for something to cuddle.”

“So—I can’t try on the suit? Like...even tradsies. You try mine, I try yours.”

“I have no interest in becoming smaller,” T’Challa smiled at Scott.

“What? It’s awesome, though!” Scott insisted. He thought hard for a moment before saying, “But you’re a secret nerd.”

“Scott!” Laura scolded.

“I’m a secret nerd too, it’s totally cool,” Scott insisted. “Wouldn’t you like to know how the suit works?”

“Certainly, this seems like valuable information,” T’Challa nodded. “However, my father commissioned a set of Wakandan scientists to unlock that mystery decades ago after witnessing your mentor, Mr. Pym utilizing the technology. It has its merits, but I have no interest in being smaller.”

“You’ll have to excuse Scott, your highness,” Natasha walked by the aforementioned Scott and went to swat him on the head. Scott ducked, but Natasha had her other hand ready and he still wound up with a swat to the head that was powerful enough for him to go a little dizzy. Natasha smiled before taking a seat next to Bucky, who thankfully didn’t even seem phased by her competent display of violence.

“I just want to look cool,” Scott sighed.

“You do look cool, Scottie,” Luis promised from his laptop screen atop a high bar chair. Lila had spent the better part of her morning drawing a body to place on the chair, so that when Luis called in, it was like he was really there. He gave his friend a thumbs up before turning to T’Challa and saying, “Yo, your highness, Scottie already has a super cool suit. Me, though? I could use some help in the cool suit department, and like, those claws, would totally help me in tearing the wallpaper down in my Auntie’s dining room, cause like, she asked me to help her, and how do you say no to
your Auntie, really. She used to help me go to the bathroom when I was like a young fry, so you
don’t say no, cause seriously, she got the good blackmail.”

“I’ll design you a superhero costume, Luis,” Darcy said cheerfully. “I bet you look good in steel
blue and gunmetal gray.”

“Damn girl, it’s like you’re my soulmate,” Luis sighed.

“Lozado,” Bucky said sternly.

“I’m sorry Sergeant Barnes, I didn’t mean to say that out loud, I understand that Darcy is totally in a
relationship with Captain Steve America and that I shouldn’t keep telling her she’s my soulmate,
even if she totally is. Because Captain Steve America deserves a happy ending, and there’s no way
he’d find a better one than Darcy, cause she’s awesome and like, totally pretty,” Luis blurted out
quickly. The words of his apology were well-practiced. He’d had to say them a lot in the past few
days.

“Stop trying to steal my girl, Luis,” Steve warned as he came into the room with Sam and Wanda in
tow.

“And where were you two?” Clint demanded suspiciously.

“Making out,” Wanda shrugged.

“What?!” Clint yelled.

“Hands over the clothing only,” Wanda shrugged.

“Tiny Dancer! NOT COOL!” Sam edged towards the door as both Steve and Clint puffed out their
chests like overprotective daddy peacocks,. “Tell them the truth before they start punching!”

“We were hanging out in the bungalow with Darlene,” Wanda rolled her eyes as Sam practically
dove for physical cover behind Darcy. “She extends her thank you to you, your highness, for the
hospitality.”
“First vacation she’s had in over a decade,” Sam acknowledged.

“Good to know you’ll use Steve’s dame as a human shield,” Bucky turned in his chair to give Sam a smirk.

“It’s really a good reason to be friends with me,” Darcy shrugged. “I’m tough and protect people. Like a superhero. Who needs a costume.”

“Yes, babygirl, now this is what I was thinking,” Luis began.

Steve cleared his throat authoritatively.

“I totally didn’t mean to call your woman baby girl. That’s not like, a proprietary sort of name, it’s more like...a platonic term of endearment. In the hood.”

“I got called baby girl all the time,” Scott agreed. “In prison.”

“Believe it or not, we have real business to discuss,” Steve reminded them. He turned to T’Challa and gave him a nod.

“We have a problem,” T’Challa revealed. “In the questioning of Zemo, it has been revealed that he did not act alone. There was another who thirsted for needless revenge against the Avengers, and that person is still out there, ready to carry on with Zemo’s work of tearing the Avengers apart.”

“That is like some next level shit,” Luis sighed. “Like breaking up the Beatles and shit.”

T’Challa turned to the holographic panel on the dining room wall that usually displayed artwork. Instead, it showed a picture of a middle aged African American woman, one picture showed a government ID, a barely there smile on her face. The other, was a surveillance picture, of her standing in a hallway at MIT, talking to Tony Stark.

“The name she gave for the credentials is Miriam Sharpe. She lit the fuse,” T’Challa sighed. “Her
misplaced grief for a son taken from her made it easy for her to connect with Zemo. And while his attempts to destroy the Avengers has failed, she is free to continue her work.”

“And according to Zemo, she has plans?” Natasha questioned.

“She has a lot of plans,” T’Challa nodded. “But unfortunately, Mr. Zemo would only passively hint at the destruction she could wreak.”

“We need someone to find out what she has,” Bucky put in. He turned to the high bar stool that held Luis’ face. Then he turned to Natasha and smiled. He realized why the redhead had insisted Luis attend this meeting. “There’s really only one person I can think of that could find out for us.”

“Psst, Scottie. Why’s Sergeant Barnes smiling at me like that?” Luis whispered.

“Well, I think it’s because you’re about to be called up to the big leagues, Luis,” Scott answered. “The really big leagues.”

Avenger’s Facility, Upstate New York

“Do you have any eights?”

“Go fish.”

“Colonel Rhodes. I can tell when you are lying.” Vision reminded Rhodey gently. “Now, if you please, do you have any eights?”

“I still say card games should not be played with Vision, not even Go Fish,” Rhodey sighed, placing the eights down on table for Vision to take.

Tony smirked as Vision happily took the eights and reassembled his pile of cards without the
matched sets. Not for the first time that evening, his eyes slid towards the archaic cellphone that Rogers had sent him. It was sitting on the counter, connected to an equally archaic charger. Not ringing, buzzing or vibrating.

He knew that Steve had told him if he needed him, he only had to call.

Somehow, he didn’t think calling Steve up and saying *Give me Lewis back so we can have fun. Everyone else can come back too, except for Barnes*, would go over very well. But he was one more bored evening away from doing just that.

Rhodey usually got pretty tired fairly early into the evening, so that just left Tony with Vision to try and stimulate his brain enough to want to go to sleep. He could have just climbed inside of a bourbon bottle to finally achieve blissed out unconsciousness, but he was trying not to do that anymore. For important reasons.

“Boys. I see it’s another thrilling night amongst super heroes,” Pepper said in a carefully cheerful tone as she walked into the common area. She surveyed the construction cones set up around the hole in the floor. “I thought I sent contractors to get that fixed.”

“Yeah, you did, and they were awesome,” Rhodey nodded. “But, there are some of us, or really, just one of us, who want to keep the hole in the floor as a reminder of some sorts.”

Pepper nodded and her eyes slid to Vision, who was staring down at his cards unblinkingly.

“What’s the reminder for?” she asked softly.

“To never forget that words have power,” Vision admitted. “And that joy is fleeting and should be held tightly so that it does not escape.”

“Bummer,” Rhodey sighed. He got up from his seat, all in one smooth, powerful motion thanks to the machinery Tony had perfected for his legs. “I’m going to go, got a skype session with Carol.”

“Enjoy buddy,” Tony waggled his eyebrows. He then turned to Vision, who was staring morosely at the hole in the floor. They stayed that way for two whole minutes before Tony cleared his throat.
“I must also leave,” Vision announced. “I simply forgot that Mr. Stark wished to have as much uninterrupted time with you as possible in his continued attempts to rebuild your relationship.”

‘Awesome cover, buddy,’” Tony rolled his eyes as the humanoid simply phased through the floor. Tony nodded before looking up at Pepper, his bottom lip between his teeth and a slight pinkish color over his cheekbones. “Kids these days. They say the darndest things.”

“I think it’s nice that you talk these things out with them,” Pepper admitted, going for the kitchen and heading straight for the teapot.

“Right. Yeah. So how was that thing?” Tony wondered. ‘That uh, business trip?’

“Fruitful,” Pepper smiled. “You added a few more zeroes to the coffers.”

“Awesome. Zeroes are great,” Tony nodded, although he didn’t seem too enthused. “They’re not the most important things, I know. That would be happiness. Friendship. Love. Those are the important things.”

“Show off,” Pepper smirked into a canister of tea bags. “Oh, last bag of lemon zinger. FRIDAY, can you order more, please? It’s Darcy’s favorite.”

“And you think Darcy is coming back, when?” Tony wondered.

“Some day,” Pepper shrugged.

“And you think that...why?” Tony prodded.

“Because, Tony, this is meant to be a home for a very specific, highly skilled group of people,” Pepper said softly. “They’ll be back eventually, and you know me. I like to be prepared in advance.”

“They’re not coming back anytime soon,” Tony shook his head. “And Rogers isn’t going to be
going anywhere without Barnes by his side. You know that as well as I do.”

“And you don’t think that one day, you’ll be able to look aside from—–”

“Don’t please,” Tony interrupted her gently. He gave her soft smile and said, “I’m not that far in therapy yet, I can’t be skipping ahead. I still have to, you know. Deal with the smaller stuff first. My overcompensating need to make amends for the wrong I think I’ve done in the world. Crippling anxiety and panic attacks. Post traumatic stress disorder. Narcissistic tendencies. Let me get through the little steps before I deal with trying to find forgiveness in my heart for my parents’ murderer.”

“Okay, Tony,” Pepper nodded and gave him a smile. “Thanks for inviting me back so soon. I know that bringing Darcy here didn’t…”

“It’s alright,” Tony interrupted again. “The shield belongs to Cap. And it was fitting that Lewis came to retrieve it again. And I understand why you did it.”

“Thanks,” Pepper smiled softly, taking a deep breath before leaning in to Tony’s personal space.

“Boss, I have Nick Fury on a secure line,” FRIDAY interrupted.

“Tell him to take a flying leap off of that floating piece of crap,” Tony ordered.

“Put him through, FRIDAY,” Pepper overrode Tony’s command.

“STARK!” Fury bellowed. “Get your ass to Massachusetts, now.”

“What? No. Gross,” Tony shivered. “I was already in Massachusetts this year. That fills a quota. I don’t want to breath the same air as the Red Sox. Nothing good can come of that.”

“Oh, okay, then. Let me just go and call up my other team of superheroes that could help me out with a megalomaniac, that you personally funded through your September project, who is currently trying to take over the MIT campus with some kind of slime that can control a person’s thoughts. Wait—wait, I did call them, but it’s going to take them at least eight hours to get here because they’re on the other side of the damned planet. Now suit up, get your android, and come and give
some help here. Please.”

Fury obviously hung up and Pepper suppressed a sigh before pulling at Tony’s sleeves. She gave him a big smile and shook her head.

“You may have funded this project, but you also funded the projects that are working on ways to feed the hungry. And cure the sick. This is just one bad apple,” Pepper reassured him, seeing that her words were barely making an indent. Once again, he was falling into that deep pit of guilt.

“FRIDAY, debrief Vision and let Rhodey know where I am,” Tony asked. He gave Pepper a heartbreaking look. “You know what’s bad? Fury isn’t associated with any government or oversight committee. And he’s the one that’s been giving me the heads up on where I’m needed. Hours before Ross even tries to call. Even Rhodey is admitting that a highly decorated general does not always equate to a good person. And I signed over my autonomy to him.”

“There are other ways,” Pepper reminded him. She looked to the phone on the charger, knowing who it connected to. She had one of her own that would lead directly to Natasha. “He’s just a phone call away, Tony.”

“So is pizza,” Tony changed the subject adeptly. “Let me go handle this thing, and when I come back, let’s order pizza, and watch that show you always wanted me to watch.”

“You want to watch Once Upon a Time with me. Really?” Pepper shook her head in amusement.

“You said the key words. With you ,” Tony nodded. “And with you, I’d do anything.”

_________________________________________________________________________

Wakanda

“Captain Rogers!” T’Challa called out. “I am flying to the United States, I’ve received word that there is a dangerous attack happening at MIT.”
“MIT?” Darcy questioned, climbing off of Steve’s body quickly. Their swimming lesson in the pool had quickly devolved into a heavy make out session, so much so that Bucky had walked by and told them that he would be coaching Darcy’s swimming lessons in the future.

“Would you both like to accompany me?” T’Challa asked.

“Yes, just let me---” Darcy went to doggy paddle out of the pool, but Steve reached for her and brought her back against him. “HEY, MIT Steve, that means Tony.”

“A project that was funded by Mr. Stark has gone horribly wrong,” T’Challa said delicately. “He will not be successful in handling it himself. My sources state that mind control is at play here.”

“You’re not going, Magnet,” Steve said softly.

“It seems bad,” Darcy whispered. “It’s Tony, Steve.”

“You still have a scab on your head from your last mission,” Steve reminded her. She seemed unphased by this so he sighed. “I’m turning in one of my cards, Darce.”

“Really?” Darcy furrowed her brow. She had given him an early birthday present. An envelope filled with little cards that were written out as coupons. Get Out of Jail free, One free foot massage, and perhaps, the most valuable of all cards, One Free Override of a Potentially Bad Decision.

Steve walked them to the edge of the pool, placing Darcy on the ground above easily before hopping out himself. He looked to T’Challa and nodded.

“Give me ten minutes, you should go in with Wanda and Clint at least.” Steve told him. “They’re more experienced with that sort of thing and will be good in the fight. You’ll need a flier who can work with Tony, so Sam should come too.”

“I’m in,” Natasha said suddenly, appearing, as usual, from out of nowhere. She gave Steve a stern look, “You stay here, though. Keep an eye on my fella.”

“Alright,” Steve smiled softly.
“And keep an eye on your Magnet,” Natasha smiled knowingly at Darcy, who had the good grace to look offended. “Read the fine print on your cards too. Do me a favor, actually, and occupy her until we take off so that she doesn’t stowaway.”

“Rude!” Darcy called out in abject betrayal.


“Gather your team, we can discuss strategy on the journey,” T’Challa shook his head in amusement as Darcy continued to act like an offended southern belle at Natasha’s true accusation.

“Alright,” Steve smirked. “You’ll just need one thing before you go then.”

Steve didn’t see the team off less than fifteen minutes later. When he had sent Natasha off with that last secret weapon, he’d taken the chance to read Darcy’s card, including the very fine print on the back.

One Free Override of a Potentially Bad Decision.

Unless Darcy really actually knows that her decision isn’t totally bad, just sort of shady.

“Magnet, what am I going to do with you?” Steve smiled.

“Hopefully something entertaining, because I have about ten different ways I can incapacitate you and get on that plane,” Darcy smirked at him.

“Love you, Magnet,” Steve smiled down at her before bending at the knee and throwing her over his shoulder. He gave a salute to Bucky before stalking towards their bedroom. “Fire in the hole.”
Luis. Secret agent.
Luis. Master of spies.
Luis. Super hero.
I'm so excited.
Thanks for reading!
Chapter Twenty-Four: Brains Scrambled, Not Over Easy


Idaho, 2012

Those eyes were not her husband's eyes.

Natasha had warned her that it had been a lot worse. Clint had been absolutely taken over by Loki and the powers of the scepter. He'd done unspeakable things while under its control. Natasha had said that his eyes had been a different color. Cold. Unfeeling. Determined.

Laura sat next to Clint, a small little Lila in her arms as he stared straight ahead, those dark blue eyes she had grown to love so much in the past decade were blank and unseeing. There was so much pain and anguish there, that she didn't know how to even begin to deal with it. She didn't know how she was going to help him recover from this. How did you get a good man to feel better about terrible things that he had done?

"Dummy, get your shit together. I need help," she blurted out, sounding exactly like she had sounded when they had first moved into the farmhouse and she had needed help pulling down awful wallpaper when he had been tinkering around with a tractor that they were never going to use anyway. (And that she could have fixed in less than five minutes).

Clint blinked himself back into the present and stared at his wife in confusion.
"Don't just sit there like a bump on a log," Laura insisted. She handed off the squirming child in her lap and said, "Change this."

"I---what?" Clint whispered.

Natasha had dumped his ass in a bed after the long trip home. Something about being home, about having his wife wrap her arms around him and kiss him and offer him calm and salvation had triggered Clint into going nearly comatose in response. He hadn't been responsive to anything Natasha and Laura had said for the past five hours.

Laura held out the child to him, and there was definitely the distinct aroma of a dirty diaper in the air. She turned the giggly Lila in her arms and waved the diaper right in front of Clint's nose.

"Laura, c'mon!" Clint wrinkled his nose in distaste.

"Hey, don't give the kid a complex!" Laura ordered. "Everyone poops, and nobody poops something that smells like fresh linen. I've been changing diapers for three weeks alone while trying to convince the kid that pooping in the potty is totally normal and fun. Your turn."

Clint swallowed, looking down at the innocent child in Laura's arms. He loved his kids more than anything. When Cooper had been born, Laura and Clint had come to an easy agreement the first moment they held the baby. They loved each other plenty as husband and wife, that was a no-brainer. But it wasn't hard to realize that they loved their kids even more.

He didn't want to touch them though now. He'd spilled so much innocent blood while under the scepter's control. He didn't think he could ever touch his kids again. To taint them with that vile touch.

"DUDE," Laura cut into his self loathing once more. She pressed the diapered butt right to Clint's nose. "Change this or I will make you wear it as a hat."

Clint nodded and took the baby with wary hands, trying not to immediately break down as the wiggly little one squirmed in his hold until she was pressing into Clint's chest.

"Hey baby," Clint sighed, unable to stop himself as the tears slipped from his eyes.

"Dangerous gamble," Natasha whispered to Laura from their vantage point in the hallway.

"I had to do something," Laura sighed. "Besides. He's my dummy. I know what would work. One day you'll know too."

Natasha swallowed. She had already had what Laura had had. The knowledge and ability to provide respite and calm for a tortured and troubled man that she loved. It wasn't going to be repeated. The last time she had tried, he had shot straight through her.

The women were silent for a moment as Clint sniffled and took the baby to the changing table, coming back more and more to himself with every passing moment.

"He's going to drift again," Natasha said softly. "This isn't the kind of thing that goes away all at once."

"Yeah, I know," Laura nodded. "Luckily for me, Lila poops every few hours, so, there's always going to be that thing to pull him back."

MIT Campus, Present Day

"Vision, goddammit, funnel that shit my way," Tony demanded. "Where's your head at? Remember that thing in Rome? Where Cap had the little robot critters all corralled in that tight alley space and we just smashed them? Let's do that."

Vision sighed as he tried to do what Tony wanted, but these weren't exactly tiny robotic creatures. This was little blobs of sturdy blue slime that oozed around with the speed of a squirrel and didn't feel like being corralled anywhere. Tony and Vision had discovered that the mind gem had no effect
on the primordial ooze, but Tony’s blasters worked just fine in disintegrating it. But the speed and
completely random movements of the stuff made blasting it hard.

At the very least, whoever had let the gunk loose hadn't programmed it with malicious intent. The
slime was simply making people dance strangely when it would attach itself to any bare skin. The
quad was full of people with blobs of goo on them and they were waving their hands around in a
dream trance. It might have qualified for the world's strangest rave at that point.

Neither man/android wanted to have it touch them, however. Vision was especially cautious about
getting too close. He didn't want to dance, but he also had the wherewithal to know that whoever
was controlling this might want to do more with his brain than make him dance.

"Get off me!" Tony hissed, flinging his foot as some of the slime started to creep up the Iron Man
suit's leg. "This is not how you ask a lady to dance, you louse!"

"Tony, we need assistance," Vision said flatly.

"You don't think I know that?" Tony demanded hotly. "Ross said he's trying to get the Fantastic
Four up here, but they've been—fucking slime, get off! They're already defecting away from Ross's
supervision. We're on our own, let's just figure it out, I'm a genius and you're a genius created by
me, we can figure this out."

An arrow whizzed right by Tony's head and imbedded itself into a piece of slime that was going for
Tony's mask. The arrow seemed to work handily on the goop, pinning it to a nearby wall and giving
Tony enough time to lift a gauntlet and zap it to ashes.

Half a second later saw a familiar frisbee of patriotism zipping above Tony, ricocheting off of
buildings perfectly as it knocked the fast moving ooze into concrete, seemingly dazing it long enough
for little zaps of electricity to shoot out after them. The widow's bites were competing with Iron
Man's repulsors and Tony knew that Natasha would have an accurate count later and lord it over him
if she got more of the stuff.

"It's about time you got here old man," Tony called out, opening his face mask and turning around
just in time to see Sam fly forward on his wings to go and meet the shield as it bounced back.

Tony furrowed his brow as he watched Sam catch the shield after it had made its final bounce and turn slowly in the air, a really slow, incredibly proud smile etching itself on Sam's face as he nearly posed with the shield as Tony watched. Tony rolled his eyes, knowing that if Lewis had hacked the feeds, she would make a vine of the moment and add a majestic, heroic soundtrack.

"Stop showing off," Clint called out, nailing another bit of slime to a nearby wall, letting Natasha zap it to ashes. "We're on a strict time limit here, in and out before Ross can have his people try to round us up again."

"I look badass," Sam grinned.

"Where's the old timer? Does Darcy have him tuckered out in bed already?" Tony wondered. He watched as Vision gave up on his offensive strategy and flew slowly towards the quad, where little blips of red energy were obviously attempting to get the goo gently off its victims in concert with the Black Panther rounding up other spastic, but non-threatening dancers.

"More like, he's Darcy-sitting," Clint snorted. "Although really, she's probably doing the sitting. You know, lap sitting."

"I don't understand what your wife sees in you, Barton," Tony rolled his eyes, feeling a little bit of calm going through him as some old camaraderie filtered back into his system. After over a month of it just being him and Vision, this felt good.

"I don't either," Clint laughed, running towards a nearby wall and jumping so that he could grab onto another ledge, pulling himself up the building with skill and precision. Once he got to his perch, he lifted his hand and caught the shield that Sam had flung his way. He flexed just a bit and threw a wink to the nearest surveillance camera before flinging the shield away again. "But whatever it is that's got her, I'm glad for it."

---

**Wakanda**
"Hot tamale, mama loves her some biceps," Laura murmured as she surveilled the feed that Darcy had managed to hack into remotely from her phone, presumably amidst a water break during her shenanigans with Steve.

"Really?"

Laura turned around and winked at Bucky. She laughed out loud when she realized the technically older man was flexing his sole arm ever so slightly. Bucky, who had come a long way in interacting with the rest of the crew during Steve's month away with Darcy, waggled his eyebrows at her in a way he hadn't really since before 1945.

"Oh, if you only had two of them," Laura sighed.

"I got a smart lady and her genius kid working on it for me," Bucky promised. He came and sat down next to Laura on the couch. "Your baby is sleeping now. Whatcha watching?"

"OH, hey, no, you're not allowed to watch!" Laura tried to squirrel the state of the art tablet away from Bucky's view, just as Natasha appeared on the surveillance feed, jumping off of Stark's shoulders and stealing a 'kill' from him.

"Damn," Bucky sighed wistfully, watching eagerly as Natasha effortlessly destroyed blobs of goo. He frowned at Laura when she waved her hand in front of her face cautiously. "I'm tryin' to watch my old lady bring home the bacon, do you mind?"

"Oh, hey, that's awesome," Laura smiled at him. "I had no idea what I'd do with you if you went into compliance mode. Well---I have ideas. But I'm a happily married woman."

"I'm sure you got plenty of ideas," Bucky chuckled. "But yeah, it's getting better. I don't want to see her going after gangs of overgrown men, but I think I can handle watching her wreck a little goop. It is a thing of beauty."

"Her ass is a thing of beauty," Laura shrugged, earning a nudge from Bucky. "But what are you doing here? You're on Darcy duty in like, five minutes, my kids can't watch for her all day, they have to do kid things, we're not running a surveillance sweatshop here, Bucky."

"Steve's on Darcy duty," Bucky shook his head.
"Oh, friend," Laura laughed at him. "You're adorable."

"Doll, I'm fairly certain that Steve's got Darcy handled," Bucky insisted. "He's had her in that bedroom for half the day now, last time I passed by I had the delightful pleasure of hearing a lovely feminine moan that told me the little Rainbow Widow was plenty occupied."

Laura squeaked and held up a finger right in front of Bucky's face.

"One. You are not allowed to call me Doll anymore, cause if you do, I'm going to pinch your cheeks, and it might not be the ones on your face."

Laura held up another finger.

"Two. That lovely feminine moan means that STEVE was occupied. Women can multitask, and obviously Darcy did, because she's put this surveillance feed on my tablet."

Laura reached out and pinched the cheek on his face at the look of befuddlement on his face.

"How's a lady like Darcy manage to set that up when she's got Steve with his head under the covers?" Bucky wondered. He shook his head. "Steve must not be that great. I tried to give him pointers back in the day, but he'd yell at me about boundaries and manners. Never mind that ten minutes later, I'd see him jotting down notes."

"Hey...yo...Sergeant Bucky, sir."

Bucky smirked at Laura, and sure enough, the barstool began rolling into the study. Cooper had had a busy morning while on Darcy duty with his sister. Lila had made the body representation for Luis more detailed and impressive. But Cooper?

Cooper had given the bar stool wheels.

Laura suspected that Darcy had also managed to design a quick program that was giving Luis the
ability to control the machine from the other side of the world. She hoped that she hadn't done that while Steve had his head under the covers, as well. Because then Steve really needed to work on his skill set.

"Yeah, Luis?" Bucky wondered.

"Can you give me some of them tips, son? Cause, not that I'm like, shabby at the romancing or anything. I've had zero complaints, trust in that. Like. Zero complaints," Luis assured him. He made a little shrugging motion, and Laura knew, she just knew, that Cooper would be building the bar stool arms and shoulders next. "But still, you never know, I mean, my best friend from second grade, Jackson, he like, moved away and was like a major player in high school, like, all the ladies wanted a piece of him, but then, like all of a sudden, boom, it was like his mojo was just gone. Like zapped out of his body. And he was so lonely he went and joined a really creepy church that makes him wear this weird bow tie. Like, do you really think Jesus cares about bow ties? Cause I don't."

"Luis," Bucky looked right into the screen with an unimpressed expression.

"Sir, yes sir, Sergeant Bucky, sir," Luis nodded with a big goofy smile on his face.

"Did you do that homework I gave you?" Bucky asked patiently.

"Why, yes, yes Sergeant Bucky, sir, I did," Luis' eyes lit up in absolute delight.

"Are you sure?" Bucky questioned.

"Absolutely," Luis nodded. "I did it two hours ago and let me tell you, it wasn't easy, cause I went to the store, right? And this chick from down the block, who is like...kind of as pretty as Darcy, but doesn't have that spark, you know, the spark, you got a lady, so you know what spark I'm talking about and---"

"I don't believe you," Bucky said simply. He brought up his best Winter Soldier glare and looked at Luis very carefully. "Did you complete the assignment?"

"No sir, no, Sergeant Bucky, sir, I didn't," Luis shook his head.
"Go on and try it now," Bucky asked, the murder glare gone and an encouraging smile remaining.

"What was his assignment?" Laura wondered as Luis looked down at the ground and rolled away slowly. The wheeled bar stool turned and he gave a longing look at Bucky, only to be met with a stern visage. He then slowly turned away and left the room.

"I told him that with his upcoming mission, it was important to be able to stay quiet for longer periods of time. Asked him to try to manage it for a full fifteen minutes."

"And he failed," Laura nodded.

"Of course he did," Bucky smiled. "And he should. His mission isn't about being quiet, it's about getting people to talk. And he'll be great at it."

"Awesome," Laura laughed. "Oh, and hey, you're currently failing your mission, so you might want to go and take care of that."

"Magnet."

Darcy very quickly dropped her phone to the bed and made a pretty unconvincing snoring noise. Steve was definitely not buying it. He had actually drifted off into a small nap, only to wake up to a whispered curse and Darcy pounding things into her phone as if someone's life depended on it. She was actually cursing out Vision, if he heard her correctly. Calling him the maroon moron and talking about how JARVIS was superior in all things except actual butt having. Muttering promises about how she was going to jam his infinity gem where the sun didn't shine.

"Magnet, I know you're not sleeping," Steve told her as he shook her a little bit from the embrace of his arms. She snored louder. "Fine, you sleep, sweetheart, I'm going to mission command and seeing what's going on."
"Hmmm, I'm awake, huh? Hi baby!" Darcy gave him a beaming grin. "That was a nice nap. Let's go make out on the beach. It's been at least eighteen hours since I got some sand stuck somewhere uncomfortable."

"What are you doing?" Steve wondered.

"Currently?" Darcy wondered. "Currently my fingers are walking the slopes of Steve's Abs Mountain. Final destination is happy town, population: Steve's boy parts and one happy Darcy."

"Stop being so adorable," Steve ordered. "Or I'm gonna kiss you senseless."

"I can't stop being so adorable, it's a blessing and a curse," Darcy smartly informed him. "And I'd like to see you try to kiss me senseless. I got so much sense it's coming out of my adorable ass."

Steve rolled them in the bed until she was underneath him and did his very best to kiss her senseless. As a couple, the biggest argument that they had had so far had been that Steve liked Darcy to be on top of him during heavy makeout sessions, but Darcy liked Steve to be on top of her during heavy makeout sessions.

As far as arguments went, that one wasn't so bad.

And while Steve liked to have her soft little body straddling his, he definitely wasn't going to complain about the way her hands moved up and down his bare back, or how her thighs parted so that she could try to wrap her legs around him in an attempt to pull him even closer, as if that were possible.

Steve furrowed his brow when he felt one little hand lift off of his skin and he swore he felt the warmth coming from a phone screen.

"Really?" Steve mumbled against her lips.

"I'm not senseless yet," Darcy reminded him.
"What are you doing that's so important you aren't enjoying my kisses?" Steve wondered. "I'm gonna get offended, Magnet."

"I am a bona fide badass multi-tasker!" Darcy promised him. "I was enjoying the hell out of those kisses."

Steve sighed and rolled off of her, going for the shorts he had willingly shed hours ago when he thought he COULD distract his best girl from trying to poke her nose into the action.

"Where are you going?" Darcy full out pouted.

"Down to mission command where I can be a little useful," Steve said softly, weary and put upon sadness saturating his voice.

"I was getting plenty of use from you," Darcy promised earnestly. "I just wanted to check in to make sure that Vision wasn't screwing things up. You know he's bad with written direction. I promise I wasn't insulting your prowess, Steve kisses are the best of all the kisses. I'm just REALLY good at texting with my eyes closed."

Steve heaved a sigh and did something he had not done to Darcy yet in the short time they had been stuck together like glue. His turned to face her, and his head went from being pointed towards the floor, but began lifting very slowly to face her.

"NO!" Darcy whimpered in immediate horror.

Steve continued to slowly lift his head until his eyes were looking directly into hers.

Laura had warned Darcy about it. Natasha had tried to train her to better handle it. Even Tony had joked about it a few times in the past.

"Steve Rogers puppy eyes of sadness and doom!" Darcy whispered. She felt sympathy tears gathering in the corners of her eyes and the back of her throat burning. He looked like the epitome of sadness and disappointment and she had put that look on his face. "Nothing could have prepared me adequately for this moment."
"I'll be downstairs, Magnet," Steve said softly, that disappointed and sad facial expression of his telling a thousand sad stories at once. Like he was sad he hadn't been exciting enough for her in bed to devote her sole attention to him. Like he was disappointed that she needed to keep interfering in the mission. Like he was devastated and hurt and abandoned.

"Not fair!" Darcy's bottom lip started to tremble. She had never seen the sad expression on Steve's face. It was causing a very visceral and honest reaction in her that she just couldn’t stop. Tears began to stream down her face and she opened her mouth and an uncontrollable sob came out. "I---I---I'm so so sso sorry!"

Her wailed hiccups came out and echoed throughout the room.

"Magnet, no, sweetheart," Steve shook his head, the disappointed puppy look disappearing immediately and being replaced with something akin to amused panic. He went for her on the bed and wrapped her up in his arms and she continued to hiccup out sobs. "I was joking, I was just trying to get you to stop texting while we were kissing. Don't cry, Darcy, please, I'm so sorry."

"You---y-you looked so sad!" Darcy managed to get out between hitched breaths.

"Pepper Potts once called it my one true superpower," Steve kissed her forehead. "I didn't mean to make you upset with it."

Just then, the door to Steve and Darcy's suite was kicked in, and Bucky was on the other side, flanked by Darlene and the bar chair bodied Luis.

"What in the hell are you doing to her, punk?" Bucky demanded. "I could hear her wailing all the way down at the bungalow!"

"Steve gave me---gave me the puppy eyes of doom!" Darcy's bottom lip still trembled.

"Oh, baby girl, come and talk to Luis about it," Luis cooed at her as his mechanical apparatus walked into the room, pushing past Bucky easily. "Oh shit, you is naked as hell up there in that bed. Whaaaaaat? Damn, Captain Steve America. You are one hell of a lucky old-timer!"

Chapter End Notes
Thanks so much for reading! More fun stuff ahead (will be updated Sunday, fingers crossed)
Brain for Sale, Barely Used

Chapter Notes

Hi! Happy Sunday!

So I went out to see Ghostbusters yesterday and it was SO GOOD. Everyone should got see it. Thor. THOR! THOOOOOOOR. And also, kick ass ladies. SO KICK ASS!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty Five: Brain for Sale, Barely Used

Las Vegas, Summer 2015

"OW! What was that for?"

Tony rubbed the back of his head after having been unceremoniously smacked on in it. He turned around and glared. Not many people dared to touch Tony. Even at this much more toned down Stark Expo, where most of the people were reputable scientists and employees who knew him, there weren't many people willing to do much more than shake his hand. Only five people would even think about smacking his head in public.

Banner would absolutely smack him. Who was totally not there at the moment. He was...somewhere. Had to be, nothing could kill the dude. But he wasn't there. Tony had done a worldwide scan for gamma radiation in the past two months since Ultron. There wasn't a trace of him on the entirety of the Earth. But he had to be SOMEWHERE. Tony was certain of that.

Natasha would definitely smack him. But she was currently in upstate New York with the rest of the team, aggressively interviewing/interrogating prospective plumbers to finish up the pipes on the New Avenger's facility. It was one of the last remaining positions to be filled in order for them to open the facility up. It was strange that you couldn't find a trustworthy plumber. Mario and Luigi were lies built upon a house of cards.
Pepper would have hit him with a pile of paperwork he had ignored. But Pepper was...not there. And she was aggressively ignoring his multiple text messages at the moment. Most likely due to the fact that she was busy in South Korea, trying to make amends for the damage that had been caused by Ultron. That had been caused by Tony.

Doctor Jane Foster would have no qualms with giving him a none too gentle tap upside the head. But she was currently on stage in front of about five hundred people from the astrophysicist field, doing a very professional version of a raspberry and a taunting 'haha I was right and you were wrong and now you should worship me cause I'm the Queen of Space. Literally, suckers!'

So that left only one person who would dare to hit him.

"Lewis! You're looking particularly lovely today," Tony grinned down at her.

Darcy did NOT look particularly lovely, actually. Darcy looked like she had been run ragged for the last two months. She was decked out in head to toe in Stark Industry swag. From the t-shirt that was overly large and fashioned into a dress, to the belt she had fashioned out of a few of those bandanas they were giving out by the front door. She blew a large piece of hair that had invaded her vision before reaching up and smacking him upside the head.

"A murder bot, really, dude?" Darcy huffed out.

"C'mon kid, it's not like I haven't already heard this from your as yet unmet other half," Tony rolled his eyes. "I did a bad thing. I'm trying to make up for it. Where were you for that anyway? Me and Bruce could have used someone with your skill set to stop us from building the thing in the first place."

"Don't you dare blame me for not being there!" Darcy hit him again. "You are the one that told Jane about the strange readings JARVIS picked up in the Himalayas. THAT is where I've been for the past three months. Thanks a lot for that by the way."

"I can pick up a social cue, Lewis, I realize you aren't really thanking me," Tony wrinkled his nose. "Rude. And also, you should be thanking me. If you had been at home in the tower, you'd have been shiskabobbed. Why are you dressed like that, anyway? Not that I don't appreciate my name across your fantastic tatas, but still, weird place to advertise."

"I might have missed being murder-botted to death in the tower, but my things did not miss it,"
Darcy informed him. She smacked him again and said, "AND, thanks to your murder bot invading the internet, ALL of my luggage was lost when we finally did come home."

"Oh," Tony wrinkled his nose. "Will a shopping spree buy your forgiveness?"

"A shopping spree and..." Darcy prodded.

"A shopping spree aaaaaand," Tony thought about it before holding up a victorious finger. "The finest suite of rooms in the New Avenger's Facility. One that can easily be made more spacious when you finally de-virginize Grandpa."

"A shopping spree and really nice suite at the new Facility that has a mini Stark Coffee bar," Darcy insisted. "And by the way, the Himalayan research means that Jane will be world travelling. AGAIN. So I won't be able to even move into the facility until next year some time."

"First class travel, I promise," Tony smiled at her beguilingly. "No more lost luggage, Lewis."

"AND," Darcy prodded.

"I don't think you want my first born," Tony shrugged. "Pictures and/or video of your future beloved stripping out of the star spangled uniform?"

Darcy flushed and shook her head. She composed herself quickly and arched an eyebrow, "Complete and total FRIDAY access."

Tony scoffed at her.

"I already convinced her to let me do it, she just needs your final override," Darcy smiled at him sweetly.

"LEWIS, stop charming artificial intelligence!" Tony grumbled. "It's witchcraft, is what it is!"
"I can't help you build them like that," Darcy insisted. "TOTAL ACCESS."

"No," Tony said resolutely.

"Okay, then you'll be sorry," Darcy shrugged.

"I don't doubt it."

MIT, Present Day

"Boss, you've got General Ross on line one," FRIDAY announced cheerfully as Tony and Clint worked together to obliterate the last of the slime. "Also, you should know that he has a sizable armed troop heading your way. The orders were capture or kill of known fugitives."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Tony huffed out in annoyance.

"Have I ever kidded you?," FRIDAY asked in an almost blithe manner.

Tony incinerated the last bit of goop attached to the dorm building before flipping up his mask and turned to Clint.

"Time for all good boys and girls to head on home," Tony advised. "Ross is bringing the heat to bring you back in. And it's not friendly. The goop is gone, Vision and I will track down the mastermind on our own."

"Wanda, you about done over there?" Clint asked over his comm.

"Last one," Wanda promised, sounding tired. She had been gently coaxing the slime off of victims for the past half hour, and it had not been easy work. It had been made infinitely harder by the fact that Vision was just standing next to her, staring at her.
Whisps of her energy gently touched against the victim's head, who was still trying to gently dance in front of her. Inch by inch the slime was removed from their temple and finally the blissed out dancing was gone and only confusion on the face of the victim remained.

"Are you alright?" Wanda asked.

"Thank you! That was so weird."

Wanda nodded and moved the slime to the side, waiting patiently for T'Challa to incinerate this one with a clever little baton he had been using, lighting each one up. T'Challa was ushering the victim away though, and Sam flew up behind Wanda and brought in his wings before taking Steve's shield and smashing it at the suspended blob.

It wasn't as effective as lighting it on fire, but with enough blows from the vibranium, the slime was effectively pounded into vapor. Wanda rolled her eyes as Sam clearly was trying to show off.

"Natasha or T'Challa could have handled that, Sam," Wanda said in a bored tone.

"I know that Tiny Dancer, but smashing with the shield is fun and therapeutic," Sam called back.

"I wasn't aware that you needed therapy," Wanda said dryly, her expression coated with sarcasm. "You always seemed so well-adjusted and normal."

"In comparison to World War II Veterans, sure, but every guy has got to get some frustrations out," Sam winked at her, then dodged, just in time before Clint's arrow could clip his ear. "Fuck off, Barton!"

Vision watched the repartee fly between Wanda and Sam avidly. He was reminded of one of the shows that Wanda had tried to introduce him to in the course of a year. She loved the American television shows centering on teenage drama from the turn of the millennia, as they had been the ones to be played in syndication on Sokovia basic cable. The way Wanda and Sam were going back and forth, playful, bantering, mostly sarcastic, but with an underlying fondness that spoke to the time they had spent together in the last weeks since the Sokovia Accords. He was reminded of Wanda's favorite show and how her favorite couple had acted.
"You are romantically involved with one another," Vision blurted.

"SHUT YOUR PURPLE MOUTH!" Sam hissed at him quickly, looking around, seeing that Clint's back was turned to them and wouldn't be lobbing any arrows at Sam's junk at the moment.

"Viz, we're FRIENDS," Wanda clarified. "Sam is the closest friend I have, to be honest."

"But---" Vision struggled to get his thoughts into comprehensible words. Wanda and Sam were building up to some kind of precipice and both seemed blind to it. There was comfort between them, and Vision couldn't help but be slightly happy that Wanda had found such comfort. But the greater part of him was feeling something else. Something he didn't understand.

He wanted that comfort and familiarity with Wanda. He wanted to put a hand on her shoulder and squeeze before giving her a big beaming smile. He wanted to say a sentence quietly, near her ear, and have her giggle madly at whatever he had just said. He wanted to be the one to wrap an arm around her shoulder and drag her to the quinjet in preparation to leave.

But he wasn't that person. Sam was that person, and Vision felt...Envy.

"See you soon, Viz," Wanda gave him an awkward wave before Sam gently tugged at a long lock of her hair, causing her to give the winged man a pleasantly irritated look and the threat of a zap of her red energy as he ran from her on to the plane.

"Ugh. Vision is such a Dawson."

"OH MY GOD, TOTALLY!" Laura clapped her hands together after Darcy's comment. Laura had a moment of realization as she sat on the couch with Bucky seated on the floor in front of her. She was braiding sections of Bucky's hair absently as she avidly watched the surveillance feed that Darcy was now controlling on the big screen of the entertainment room in the royal mansion.
The sound of wheels whirling was loud and quick.

"You guys know the Creek? For reals?" Luis piped up. "Cause you know I know this---"

"LUIS LOZADO."

"Sorry Mrs. Wilson," Luis immediately blurted and they could hear wheels slowly whirring as Luis faced the corner again.

"You are facing the corner for a reason," Darlene reminded him helpfully. "What was that reason?"

"Talking about Darcy's body in a disrespectful way...even though it wasn't meant to be disrespectful. She's like a Botticelli or Titian painting come to life. I totally have nothing but mad crazy love for her body---"

"Luis," Steve warned from his place on the couch next to Laura. Although he didn't disagree with Luis' assessment, Darcy's body was beautiful and he knew that he was a lucky bastard. He realized that he would probably have a lot to talk about with Luis if they were ever face to face. So long as they didn't dwell too much on Darcy's body in particular, of course. The girl in question sat on the floor between his legs next to Bucky. Steve was the one making intricate braids in Darcy's hair.

Darcy and Bucky had a bowl of popcorn between them, and whenever their hands would stray into it together, they would do a complicated thumb war. Darcy's other hand was on her phone, and she was cutting the surveillance feed to make the mission the others were on look like her own personal old school teen drama.

"Sorry Captain Steve America," Luis said miserably.

"Who is Dawson?" Bucky questioned.

"DUUUUUUUUDE," Scott said from his place on the floor on the other side of Bucky, where Darlene was braiding Scott's hair.
"Is my son the Pacey in this reality?" Darlene wondered.

"Yes," Laura grinned big and wide. "And Clint is going to go all protective caveman and that is good for mama."

Steve kissed the top of Darcy's head and asked, "Do you like protective caveman stuff?"

"Only if you're willing to wear a loincloth, but you know I'm not the biggest fan on being told what to do," Darcy smirked. Steve had given up on trying to get her to stop interfering in the mission after she had recovered from her crying jag. And he had been incredibly impressed with her ability to get good footage from the event site. Darcy narrowed her eyes at the screen and took a gasp as Tony, who had his mask up and was speaking with Clint jovially, suddenly had a pit of blue slime drop down from one of the eaves of the quinjet, landing directly on his face and sliding right over to his temple.

"That can't be good," Laura shook her head, then considered it for a moment. "I want to see him dance!"

"He's not going to dance," Steve shook his head, looking down at whatever Darcy was doing with her phone, she was typing fast. Steve's mind was going a mile a minute as he tried to figure out the scenario his teammates had found themselves in on the other side of the room.

The slime was annoying, but not life threatening. Whoever was behind it was funded by Tony, essentially. And they would have known that Tony would have been called to the scene. And most importantly, everything had gone so easily once the team had gotten there. Now, on their way out, one last attack on Tony...

"They're going to control his mind," Bucky whispered as he looked at the screen, clearly distraught as Tony pulled up both hands, repulsors charging as they aimed at Natasha and Clint. He knew what those repulsors were capable of. He quickly shot to his feet and said, "We gotta go and help."

"Sam!" Clint called out, the alarm in his voice was enough to have both Sam and Wanda running back out, just as Natasha knocked Clint back with a dead drop kick, so that both she and Clint were out of range of the repulsor blast.
Sam flung the shield, bouncing it off of Tony's head and having it ricochet perfectly to land at Natasha's feet. She lifted it and did a somersault, landing in front of Clint, and they both sent up a silent thanks to Steve, who had insisted that his teammates practice with the shield at least once a day, because they both knew the most perfect way to make their bodies compact and untouchable behind Steve's primary weapon, even as Tony let blasted them at what Natasha suspected was full strength.

Tony stopped shooting at the shield, cutting his losses for the moment and knowing that the two spies were essentially safe behind the shield. If he could have, he would certainly have made a pithy comment about the old man teaching his turtle tricks to just anyone. But since he was kind of trapped behind a cold haze that had leeched into the base of his neck, he couldn't.

He couldn't say anything. He couldn't control how his hands moved from the shield to the quinjet opening, aiming for a weak and vulnerable spot in Sam's neck. He knew it was weak and vulnerable because three months ago, Rhodey had brought it up, saying that Tony needed to work on a better design for Sam. The mind controlling ooze wasn't only blocking his own ability to make decisions and control his body, it was accessing thoughts and memories at the speed of light, delving in and pulling out just what was needed.

"Boss, please," FRIDAY tried to speak to him through his fog. "Your repulsors are at max, a shot to Wilson would kill him."

Tony knew that.

He did.

And he felt the cold sweat building down his neck as he couldn't do anything but let loose, firing at the one vulnerable spot on the whole team.

"TONY!" Darcy's voice cut in through Friday's just as the blast took off.

Sam's wings expanded and he was ready to lift off in half a second, but he knew that he'd be hit within one quarter of a second. Until a ball of red energy just large enough to encase a small woman stepped in front of him, absorbing the blast with no harm done.

"Stop this, Tony," Wanda shook her head. "Fight it."
"He can't fight it," Steve said through the comms, halfway across the world, working feverishly with Darcy, Laura and Bucky to come up with something. "According to FRIDAY, you're getting very unfriendly company in ten minutes."

Steve conferred quietly with his Wakandan bound team before coming back.

"T'Challa?" Steve asked.

"Get him on board and bring him back with us," T'Challa answered the unspoken question. "We cannot leave him to wreak havoc here."

Tony had by now given up on trying to blast through Wanda's shield, which his captive mind knew was stronger and more secure than it had been even a few months ago. He used the suit's surveillance and saw that the super spy twins had disappeared, and the thing controlling him decided to let loose on T'Challa instead.

In the cold observant part of Tony's mind, he gave Natasha a silent thanks for recruiting T'Challa to their side during his battle with Steve in Berlin. Because as he let pulses of energy hit T'Challa, the King of Wakanda used superior athleticism to quickly dodge. And when one lucky blast did hit him, it slowed him down for a moment, but what would have put any normal human on their back only gave T'Challa pause.

No wonder Natasha had cycled through so much energy in trying to stop T'Challa back in Berlin.

"TONY!" Darcy's voice floated into Tony's comm unit again. "FRIDAY, give me control of the suit."

"Darcy, you know that I can't," the artificial intelligence almost sounded distraught. "He never gave me the final approval, said you still hadn't done what he told you to do."

"No, no, I finished that! I finished that bit seven ways to Sunday and Tony said he'd let me play with the suit if I did," Darcy insisted. "Give me the suit, he said I'd get one full minute with it. FRIDAY, give it to me!"
Tony felt some confusion filter into his brain, and he knew it wasn't his own. It was cold and invasive as something or someone was trying to use the mind control to gain access as to who was talking to Tony's AI at that moment. Tony tried. He did, thinking of anything instead of Darcy. But it was all there, ready and gift wrapped for the enemy. Her association with Thor and Jane, with Tony and Pepper. Her skills, her weaknesses, her allies and enemies, the preferences for pizza toppings.

And then, a little cold blast of victory in Tony's brain.

Her importance to Captain Rogers.

Suddenly, and without any warning, Tony was attacked from all sides.

The shield was tossed by Natasha and glanced off of his head again, before ricocheting with precision upwards where Sam was waiting, grabbing it and using it to deflect Tony's shot at him before zipping back down for his head. Tony managed to deflect the shield to the side, but it didn't stop Wanda and Vision both from blasting him from either side. His movement was impeded from his front and his back as red energy and golden energy encapsulated him.

It stopped very suddenly for a brief moment as T'Challa leapt towards him, and instead of getting scratched to metal bits, he had one small disc placed on his back before T'Challa was out of harm's way.

Tony went to shoot again, when one arrow flew at the disc on his back.

And all of the power in Tony's suit suddenly drained.

Natasha had made a rolling tumble for the shield and threw it up in the air at Sam again. He grabbed it with ease before zooming into position.

"Now Tiny Dancer," Sam huffed before flinging the shield with precision, it was joined with Wanda's energy and connected with Tony's helmet with incredible force, effectively knocking him out.

"We must leave! We'll secure him on the jet," T'Challa called out before going for Tony's unconscious form, he grabbed for his shoulders and Vision helped.
"I cannot go," Vision told Wanda quietly. He looked off in the distance and squinted, seeing the armada of hired guns that Pierce had bearing down on the location in hopes of recapturing the rogue Avengers. "I will attempt to placate Secretary Ross, and perhaps sway him away from your path."

"Good," Wanda nodded, holding her hand to her ear and hearing Steve confirm that Vision should try to buy them as much time as necessary until they could get Tony back to himself again. "Steve says that you need to find out who is controlling this while we get Tony back to normal."

The last thing they needed was for a mind-controlled Tony to fall into Ross's grasp so securely. Wanda knew that Sam's constant conspiracy theory espousing was infecting her, but she couldn't help but wonder if Ross wasn't behind this somehow.

Ross couldn't obtain complete control of Iron Man before, even with the Accords in place. But whoever was controlling him at the moment did have complete, dangerous control.

"Maximoff, you need to neutralize Vision," Bucky's voice cut through the comm.

Just as Natasha walked up to her and said at the same time, "Knock him out. Friendly fire cover plan."

"Great minds think alike," Wanda smirked before turning to Vision with an appropriately apologetic look that was barely masking a hidden smile of satisfaction. "Sorry, Viz."

"You are not," Vision shook his head. "But this might make us even?"

"Maybe," Wanda shrugged before holding up her hands and manipulating her energy with almost all of her strength, creating a powerful shot that had Vision on his ass on the ground by the jet, blinking in and out of corporeality.

Vision watched as the plane took off quickly, traveling even faster than a quinjet. Wakandan innovation was truly breathtaking. He blinked as he felt the closest approximation to pain that he could. It was a mild buzzing sensation, but still, uncomfortable.

"Vision," Secretary Ross was standing above him in what seemed like a blink of an eye. "Where's
Stark?"

"Taken," Vision answered back easily. "By the rogue Avengers."

Chapter End Notes

also, someone amazing on tumblr made a gifset for this story. It's the words that I wrote coming out of Darcy and Steve's mouths, matched up with awesome gifs, and I'm so utterly gobsmacked by it. I did a funny dance when I saw it and teared up a little. Thank you Aoisakai! COOL GIF SET HERE!

Thanks for reading!
Hi! I'm at a summer program with school right now. Spending time in the dorms and whatnot. It's providing a surprising amount of time for writing. Mostly because I don't play Pokemon Go. And everyone else is busy with Pokemon Go. So I'm sitting here and writing fanfiction like a fiend!!!
Apparently it was the runt of the litter and would have to be obliterated. She patted a slimy antler of Manuel and shook her head, "Don't you listen to her Manuel the fluffy, you're a good boy, you are, even if you do smell less than fresh."

"Pepper Potts will not stand for having this thing drip slime all over Stark Tower," Jane insisted.

"As a resident of the Tower, I have a parking space available that I never use!" Darcy sneered at Jane. "I'll make it Manuel the Fluffy's stable. He'll LOVE it."

"Darcy, you saw what those other things were capable of," Jane rolled her eyes. "Stop being ridiculous and obstinate."

"Stop being rude and ugly!" Darcy fired back. She immediately looked apologetic. "You're not ugly, Janie. I'm sorry. That was mean."

"Bitch!" Jane countered.

"I said I was sorry, you gross faced assbutt!" Darcy screeched back at her.

"There is no way you are bringing this thing back to the Tower!" Jane crossed her arms in front of her, giving Darcy the death glare that usually meant business. Darcy still ignored it four out of five times. "Tony would never allow it!"

"Wanna make a bet?" Darcy threw another raw chicken before wiping her hands and pulling out her cellphone. She grinned triumphantly when Tony picked up after only two rings. "Yo. Starkinator."

"Hello Cap's Future Boobs."

"TONY!" an admonishment in the background rang in Darcy's ears.

"Hey, you're gonna love her boobs, man. I mean. Wow," Tony said calmly. "You're a lucky man in the future."
"Stop torturing Captain America," Darcy blushed bright red. "I need to cash in a favor."

"Oh, please tell me it's meeting Captain Stick Up His Ass," Tony begged. "He's heading out for DC in a few hours, you could meet him there and wax his Washington Monument in less than twenty-four hours."

"Can I bring a pet back to the Tower?" Darcy wondered sweetly. "If you say yes, I will no longer be angry with you for 2013."

"For all of 2013?" Tony wondered hopefully.

"All of it," Darcy promised.

"TONY DON'T LISTEN TO HER!" Jane shouted. "Use your brain, man. Why would she give you a whole year of forgiveness? She wants to bring back a bil---"

Darcy jostled with her phone and threw a raw chicken at Jane's head. The astrophysicist showed surprising athleticism when she ducked. Manuel went for a bite of Jane's head and Darcy wagged her finger at him.

"Bad Manuel the Fluffy! Don't eat my astrophysicist!" she scolded.

“I will agree on another condition,” Tony said with manic glee. “I will take the forgiveness for 2013, and you also have to devirginize a national treasure, aka Captain America.”

“STARK!” a shout echoed from the background.

“You're such an asshole,” Darcy rolled her eyes. She looked at Manuel the Fluffy, remembering how his own family had turned on him and tried to kill him. Nothing deserved that.

“I just sent you a picture of his abs if that helps sway you,” Tony whispered.

“God dammit, Stark!” came another indignant shout.
Darcy’s phone chimed and she resisted the urge to drool over the picture.

“Someday,” Darcy whispered. “And I will forgive you for half of 2013.”

"SOLD!” Tony called out gleefully.

"YAY! Okay, I'm going to need a few things. First off, a Chicken farm, because Manuel the Fluffy eats like, five every ten minutes. Also, a floor of Stark Towers to be reinforced with vibranium. And I will of course, need something to make the slime non-toxic," Darcy insisted.

She heard the sirens and then the bolt of lightning and naturally, swore intensely.

"Darcy!" Jane smacked her arm. She pointed to where Manuel the Fluffy had trotted off to a block down, where he was currently being zapped by Thor. "Your new pet tried to eat an ambulance full of people."

"Bad Manuel the Fluffy! Don't do that!"

---

**Wakanda, Present Day**

"You sure this is going to be safe for them?"

Bucky surveyed the little underground room that Darcy and Steve had slid down into at the start of their month long adventure. The kids had enjoyed the slide tremendously, and were begging to be taken back up to try again. Steve, Bucky and Scott had a definitive timeline in order to get the children and civilians as safe as possible.

T'Challa and the others were on their way back to the private island. Tony had remained unconscious for the duration of the flight, but no amount of Wanda's magic or Sam and Clint's downright vicious banging on the suit would get it off of the man.
Bucky knew that there had to be other forces at work here, and Natasha had confirmed it with her coded messages to him. The previously harmless slime was not quite as harmless as they had originally guessed. And it was definitely controlling Tony, even if it was to have him immobile and unconscious.

"Safest place I could think of aside from putting them in a vibranium cave," Steve furrowed his brow as Darcy and Scott worked with their heads together over a tablet. Darcy was still trying to work her way into FRIDAY remotely, but it was to no avail. "Darcy knows how to move to the main island if she has to get them out, and Laura can fly the spare quinjet."

"Alright," Bucky nodded. He went to check his own arsenal of weapons, and sighed a little when he realized that he would be half as effective at containing the threat of a mind-controlled Iron Man with only one arm.

"Uncle Bucky!" Cooper shouted out, rushing towards him and digging into the little bug out bag that Laura always had ready to go for the kids. Even Nathaniel had one, full of diapers, formula, the crunchy little puff treats he liked so much.

Bucky's eyes went to the size of saucers when Cooper pulled out an impressive skeletal build of an arm. The little boy started fiddling with it, bringing out a little soldering pen and making a few last minute alterations.

"Scott, I'm ready!" Cooper announced. He looked up to Bucky then and gave him a small smile, "It's not the real thing. It's just the model of the skeleton so that I could show King T'Challa and ask him for the vibranium to build it and the rest of it."

"Coop, buddy, it's amazing," Bucky breathed out as Scott came over to them and looked down at the bionic arm.

"HOLY SHIT, you should get like a blue ribbon first place science fair thing for that," Scott shook his head in disbelief. "You figured out the problem with the rotator cuff, all by yourself?"

"Yeah, I did what you said!" Cooper said with a gleeful excitement that was identical to his mother's. "Just sat at the bottom of the pool until I almost died, and it came to me."

"Lang!" Bucky scolded.
"Yes, Uncle Sergeant Bucky?" Scott grinned up at him.

"Stop telling the kids to do dangerous things," Bucky advised.

"But it's where all the good ideas come from," Scott insisted. "Nothing gets good ideas going like adrenaline and fear for your life."

"When I get that metal arm on me, I'm slapping you upside your head with it," Bucky warned.

"Seems warranted," Scott shrugged before fiddling with his controls. He shrunk down and Cooper picked him up, placing him on Bucky's shoulder as Laura began pulling duct tape off of the stump quickly.

Bucky watched in fascination as an incredibly small Scott hopped down into the exposed wires that Laura and he had been prepping in their down time for the new arm. Bucky strained his ears and shook his head, as Scott was singing as he worked, something in Japanese and about thanking Mr. Roboto.

Cooper brought the arm up and with Laura's assistance, Bucky began to FEEL little twinges running up the nerves of his left shoulder as Scott began to make the connections between the model arm and Bucky's old circuitry.

All of a sudden, there was a power surge as the last connection was made, and the servos in Bucky's shoulder seemed to boot up with energy that had been missing since Tony had blasted the last arm off. Scott jumped from a small gap and turned big again pretty quickly.

"Jesus, that thing is powerful," Scott shook his head in wonderment. "All those whirring plates up there in your shoulder are seriously the sickest thing, dude. So cool."

"Thanks," Bucky said softly, staring down at the new arm in wonderment as he slowly flexed the fingers. It worked just as well as the old one, seamlessly communicating with his brain and moving as if it were a real appendage.

"I can't wait until we give you the biceps back, cause really. Metal biceps, it's my nerd dream,"
Laura said softly, placing her hand on the metal bone that would have been his bicep.

"Mmmhmm," Darlene added her two cents in from the corner where she was playing with an utterly calm baby Nathaniel.

"Badass skeleton terminator," Darcy put up two thumbs and gave Bucky a big grin.

"I watched that movie two weeks ago with Barton," Bucky told her with a smirk. He felt a breath of relief go through him when he reached the new skeletal metal arm back into his thigh holster and pulled out a gun. It was exactly what he needed.

Bucky dropped to his knees to be eye level with Cooper and gave him a big, thankful smile.

"I can't thank you enough, Coop," Bucky said earnestly.

"It's just the prototype. I'm gonna build you a better one, Uncle Bucky," Cooper promised.

"With a confetti cannon," Darcy whispered.

"With a---some stuff," Cooper tried to hide his smirk.

"Buddy, you can do whatever you want, Confetti, gas cannon, a little flower that squirts water at people," Bucky shook his head. "I trust you."

Steve walked up to the little grouping after having gone over worst case scenarios with Lila, who as always, was ready for anything thanks to her obsessive training with Natasha. He wrapped his arm around Darcy, and looked down at her with a happy little smile.

"I trust you, too, Magnet," he whispered.

"Hmm, seems like a bad idea," Darcy gave him a little wink.
"You keep trying to get access of the suit away from Tony," Steve nodded. It was a good plan, and Steve knew that Darcy could do it. "But please, if we can't keep Tony at bay, you get yourself and Laura and the kids on that plane and take off, okay? Please, Magnet?"

"Oh, that look should be illegal," Darcy sighed at the way Steve was giving her big earnest eyes full of love, devotion and begging. "Okay. I promise. We'll get the heck out of dodge if you can't put Tony in the time out corner. Just...try to be careful, okay?"

Bucky snorted. "Little Rainbow Widow, if I couldn't get him to be careful nearly a century ago, you ain't gonna get him to do it now."

Massachusetts

"Who the hell are you?"

"Oh, hey. I'm here for the purple guy? I'm with Stark Industries, like, crazy right? I am definitely not qualified for this position, like at all. Besides the fact that it's totally not in my field. I mean, clearly I'm destined for great things, but science was never one of those things I...you know, excelled at? Like, except for this one time in first grade, where we made clocks that ran off of potatoes. Potatoes, man! I did that better than anyone else in the class, swear to God. I just, like understood it. Electricity. But that must have been like a one time thing, cause I accidentally shock myself every day when I trim up the pretty..."

"Oh my God, I don't even care anymore," Everett Ross rolled his eyes and walked away.

"That worked, coolio," Luis grinned, walking towards where Vision was sequestered in the back of a van. "Yo, you is burgundy as hell, dog."

"I'm sorry?" Vision furrowed his brow at the newcomer.

"Hey, you know Darcy? Fine as hell chick with like a body that won't quit?" Luis wondered. He wrinkled his nose for a moment and sighed. "I promised Captain Steve America I wouldn't talk about her that way anymore. She's way more than just her fine ass body. She's smart as hell too. She uh, she said I should come and get you out of here. Cause we have some work to do? But we
gotta hurry, cause my buddies Kurt and Dave are waiting, and they don't really like waiting too much. I'm pretty sure if we don't get over there in the next two minutes, we're going to be stuck here. At the very least I’m getting arrested. And I’m not cool with that.”

"What would Miss Lewis have me do with you?" Vision wondered curiously.

"Your accent is posh, like dude, how many girls you get with that voice?" Luis wondered. "You'd think that I could get some chicks with my accent, but most of them aren't impressed. I think it's because everyone they know talks like me. Maybe I should try out England or something, they might think my accent is exotic and then it would be on like Donkey Kong."

"I'm sorry," Vision repeated. "What are we doing?"

"Oh, we're going to help you figure out who is behind that crazy slime taking over people's brains, namely Iron Man," Luis said cheerfully. "This'll be fun, man. C'mon. We have to get to New York cause I start my new mission in like, less than a day now, and I want to be fresh you know? Like for spying."

"I do not know, I'm sorry," Vision shook his head slightly.

"That's alright, homie. No worries. I'll explain on the way."

Quinjet above Wakanda

Arguably, Natasha had the most experience out of all of them in dealing with those that were under mind control. And after watching everyone try to get Tony out of his suit for the last five hours, she was willing to say that without a doubt, this was the strangest case she had run into yet.

'A and she needs to boink her boyfriend out of mind control status every couple of days, so believe me, she knows weird,' Sam had helpfully explained to T’Challa.
Natasha and Clint had conferred silently, and made it known to the rest of the team that they were not supposed to talk openly with an unconscious Tony in their presence. Instead, they had spent the entirety of the flight passing notes and making some plans. Natasha was using her coded communication with Bucky to relay plans to both the island refugees and to Shuri, who would be working on fortifying the main island with the Dora Milaje and W’kabi.

Natasha didn’t have any doubt that Tony would be waking up as soon as they landed in Wakanda.

She had not anticipated him bringing up his gauntlets, ripping through his restraints and blasting four large holes into the sides of the plane just as T’Challa had made his descent. Natasha had been standing with Steve’s shield and she was first to be sucked out of the hole in the plane. Clint was quick to follow.

"Steve, incoming," Sam held his hand to his active comm unit even as he ran to jump out of the hole, going into a precise airdive as he chased after Natasha, who was spread eagle in an attempt to slow her descent. Just like they had always practiced. He grabbed her around her waist and let the wings unfurl, letting out a harsh grunt as the drag pulled against their bodies. "Gotcha, Red."

He saw a flash of red light out of the corner of his eye and knew that Wanda had secured Clint as they both floated as quickly as safety would allow back to the ground. Natasha turned in his arms and looked out for T’Challa, and shook her head in disbelief as the impressive ruler of Wakanda had somehow managed to get his mask on, and then jump on Iron Man’s back, riding him down like a hang glider as the jet spiralled uncontrollably into the water.

Tony barrel rolled in order to try to shake T’Challa, but vibranium claws gave the Black Panther steady purchase before he executed a perfect somersault off of Tony’s back when he was close enough to the ground where Steve and Scott were waiting. Steve held up his hand and sure enough, Natasha had tossed the shield to him from high above.

"Tony," Steve said with no small amount of authority as the Iron Man suit landed in front of the other united heroes. "Tony, please try to fight this, if you can."

"Where’s Lewis?" Tony’s voice came out, but it didn’t sound very much like him. Far too business like. And he would have probably made at least three jokes about how a regular sex regimen looked good on Steve by now had he been normal.

"Not here," Steve answered back, looking at the suit warily.
The mask flipped up, and Tony's face stared back at them, his eyes an ice blue. The same vibrant color that the slime at MIT had been. His expression was blank, lacking all of the usual Tony Stark nuances. He tilted his head to the side and his lips turned into a thin, grim line.

"It's amazing how little prepared Mr. Stark was for this," Tony nodded. "There are no blocks or filters or anything keeping me away from the good stuff. You'd think with his history, he'd be ready for an attack like this. But, he's a Stark, so arrogant until the last."

"No one can prepare for something like this," Wanda said knowingly as she floated to stand beside Steve.

"Where's Lewis?" Tony asked again. He squinted and shook his head in amusement. "She's trying to get access to the suit. Clever girl."

Natasha took three steps back, ready to run and defend if Tony made a move towards the bunker she knew Darcy and the others were in.

"Can't even trace her signal, she's not bad at this," Tony nodded. "Okay, so we'll do this the hard way, then."

The iron man mask flipped down again, and Tony brought up his hands, the sounds of the gauntlets powering up sounded wrong against the crash of the surf on the beach.

The attack was eerily similar to the one back at MIT. Tony focused on the weaker links, in this case, Natasha and Scott. Scott immediately shrunk, the repulsor blast meant for him going to a tree behind him, destroying it immediately.

"Damn dude, turn it down a notch or two, like half of that would fritassee me, seems a waste of power," Scott shook his head as he ran towards Iron Man, sending up grains of sand in his wake.

Tony not only sent a repulsor blast Natasha's way, but also a shoulder rocket came out. Steve stood in front of her, the shield taking the blunt of the explosion. But they couldn't stand there all day and defend themselves from what Tony threw at them.

"Who knew?" Tony laughed as he took a short break from actively trying to destroy his former teammates. "Who knew there was one girl that would just bring you all together like this? I didn't. I
mean, Stark did, but I didn't."

"Who are you?" Steve demanded.

"Don't worry, Captain, we'll get to that. I'm still just amazed. I could have grabbed her from the beginning if I'd known, this would have all been so much easier," Tony made a chuckling sound that wasn't him at all, all the while he tapped away at the screen generated by his arm panel. "In the meantime, I'm going to go and get that girl that's so important to all of you, and when I'm done with her, every single one of you will know who I am."

Steve felt a white hot anger coming over him like a tidal wave, threatening to rob him of his self-control. He managed to make a small nod of his head, and Bucky, who had set up a sniper's nest some distance away let a shot hit Tony's shoulder juncture just when he was about to bring up his arm to shoot again.

"Really? You have the murder machine up in a tree?" Tony chuckled again. He hit another button. "I'm bored with this already."

The sound of multiple repulsors were rapidly approaching, and Steve grimaced as whatever Tony had managed to rebuild of the Iron Legion could be seen rushing towards them through the sky. Three quarters of them split off for the main island while the remaining came to the private island.

"Captain," T'Challa called out, before setting off at a run, eager to defend his people.

"Go, Sam, Natasha," Steve looked up to the tree Bucky had dropped out of and gave him a wary look. He would never ask Clint to leave the island his wife was on, but Bucky and Natasha together could prove disastrous if Bucky couldn't keep control of his mind when faced with Natasha presumably destroying half of the Iron Legion.

The man in question didn't seem concerned though, only eager to assist in any way he could. Bucky simply gave Steve a small salute before taking off to follow Natasha and T'Challa, as Sam flew towards the island of innocent civilians.

"Oh, oh, oh, the girl is good," Tony shook his head. "She almost got through that time. But I worked very hard to get control of this suit, I'm not going to let it go now. Curious though."
Tony let off another few blasts, even as Clint sent an electromagnetic arrow into the juncture at his shoulder, rendering the holographic panel useless for the moment.

"I found her for a second and then, poof gone," Tony admitted.

Steve felt the corner of his mouth go up in a smirk.

"I don't know who you are, but I am very certain of one thing," Steve promised. "Darcy Lewis is a legend. And you are in way over your head if you want to try to contain her."

T'Challa zoomed down the slide and rushed towards the platform that would take him to the island. His confusion at not seeing it there was palpable, until suddenly it was zooming towards him, a little bit bigger than when he had last left it.

"Whooooo!" Darcy called out gleefully as she sat on the platform that Laura and Cooper had managed to extend, her arm looped into a handlebar for security as she continued to work diligently on her phone to gain control of FRIDAY. She looked up to see T'Challa looking down at her in his Black Panther uniform, and she hiccuped a giggle when his head turned slowly and slightly to the right like a real kitten who was curious and slightly confused. She waved the phone at him and smiled, "Howdy, your highness, King T'Challa."

"Little Rainbow Widow, what are you doing?" Bucky demanded as he came down the slide after Natasha.

"Going for a ride, hop on your highness!" Darcy waved her hand as the hydraulic system began to whirl up. T'Challa did as she advised and they both zipped through the underwater tunnel that would take them back to the mainland in less than two minutes.

"I just thought this would be easier," Darcy shouted out over the rushing of air. "If Tony can get a location on my phone when I'm trying to stop the suit, he'll be all confused and stuff."

"Very ingenious," T'Challa promised her. He leapt off the platform before it could even come close to stopping and rushed to a panel on the other side of the room. When he opened it, he revealed an awful lot of gadgetry that would have had Jane drooling. He picked up a slim piece of plastic, looking very much like a battery booster. He rushed back to her and handed it off. "Try this, it has
proven fruitful with non-Wakanda technology in the past."

"what's it do?" Darcy wondered, slapping it on the back of her phone before he could answer.

"It makes things fast," T'Challa's smile could be heard as the hydraulic system prepared itself to go back to the island. "Be most careful, Miss Lewis. And please, when you have obtained control, be sure to ask that the Iron Legion stop destroying my country."

"Can do boss---whoooooo!" Darcy called out as she rushed back to the other side. She looked down at her phone and her eyes widened at how fast the program was going now. "Oh hell, yes. Stark tech can suck it, Wakanda is where it is at."

"Little Rainbow Widow," Bucky smirked down at her as he and Natasha crammed themselves on the platform with Darcy. "You behaving, kid?"

"Never," Darcy grinned up at him. "You gonna be okay with watching my lady Natasha wreck some robots over there?"

"Maybe," Bucky shrugged, his hands wrapping around Natasha, pulling her tight as the platform took off. "If not, she'll be able to give me orders. Rip apart robots. I can do that whether I'm in compliance or not."

"Go Team Mother Russia!" Darcy encouraged.

"Darcy," Bucky said seriously as they came to the other side. "Whoever is controlling Stark wants YOU."

"Gross," Darcy sighed.

"Please keep on staying as safe as possible," Bucky advised.

"You're doing a very good job so far, Darcy," Natasha gave her a little smile before gripping at Bucky's shoulder. "Come along lover, we've got robots to smash."
"Yes, dear," Bucky winked at Darcy as they took off, and Darcy herself was propelled back towards the island.

There was something strangely satisfying about taking the Iron Legion out. Therapeutic, even. Wanda was sure of it. She had thought she had worked through all of her previous contempt for Tony, but obviously she had been mistaken. She currently had half a dozen of them immobilised, ready and waiting for Steve, who flung the shield at them, rendering them headless and having them fall in a pile.

Steve's eyes flicked behind him for just a moment, and took a breath of relaxation when he saw Clint edging towards the entranceway to the underground bunker. The archer was firing at close range with EMP arrows, retrieving them from the carcasses as soon as they stopped sparking.

A loud metallic sound echoed throughout the island and all of a sudden every member of the Iron Legion fell uselessly to the ground.

“NOW SCOTT!” Steve hissed into the comm unit.

"Clever little thing, your girl is, Captain," Tony gave an eerie smile. The blue in his eyes twinkling. He shrugged and said, "Still can't get into here, though."

"Give her time," Steve promised, picking up the shield and turning towards Tony. "Let Tony go. You're not going to get what you came for."

"Today, I won't get what I came for today," Tony corrected him. "But I did get something so much better than that. Information. Information is power, Captain."

"I don't know who you are," Steve said lowly. "I don't know why you're doing what you're doing. But I will promise you, here and now, you will not lay a hand on Darcy Lewis."
"Hmmmm, you're wrong there, but I think that's something you're getting used to," Tony turned and pushed off in the direction of the other island.

"Wanda!" Steve shouted as he went at a dead sprint towards Tony. He felt the energy at his back pushing him forward until he tackled the suit into the beach, the sand nearly exploding up in the air at the force of the impact.

"Give it up, Captain," Tony laughed, even as it became garbled as Steve hammered the shield at the iron man mask, much like he had done in Siberia. "I know where she is now. I know what she's doing."

Steve’s eye flicked towards the vulnerable hole that Bucky’s earlier bullet had made in Tony’s shoulder and could see a miniscule Scott flying out, shouting at the top of his small, tiny voice.

“READY! GO!”

“Magnet,” Steve said simply.

He knew that deep underground, Darcy was avidly working on using the connection that Scott had set up inside of the suit’s circuitry. She may not be able to gain completely control of it, however.

The mask split open and Steve glared down at Tony's face. And very quickly, the entire suit disassembled, falling in pieces around Tony.

"You're never going to touch her," Steve insisted, ready to bring the shield down on Tony's face this time when the man below him choked, and the blue ooze began seeping out of his mouth and nostrils.

"Wanda!" Steve called out, and she was right there, funneling the ooze away from Tony's face, containing it.

"Shit, shit," Tony mumbled, sounding more like himself. "Get the stuff in some kind of container. It knows everything."
"Tony?" Steve looked down at the man with worry on his face.

"We have to find out who did that," Tony said desperately. "They're coming for us, Cap. They want to destroy us."

Chapter End Notes

Lots of fun stuff coming up.

Thanks so much for reading!
Chapter Twenty-Seven: Regrouping Group

Brooklyn, 1929

At the age of twelve, Bucky Barnes hit a growth spurt. Suddenly, he was taller than his mother by three inches, he was still skinny all over as his body rapidly shot upwards, using every bit of food in that endeavor rather than build muscle. Which was fine and dandy for him, he could still sneak into all the cracks and crevices he needed to when he and Stevie were getting chased by the latest bully on the block.

But most importantly, his hands were suddenly too large for everything. He was like an overgrown puppy, with feet and hands far too big for his body. And this was his doom at the job he worked to bring in a little extra money since his ma couldn't clean houses at the moment thanks to the arrival of his third (and hopefully last) little sister, Rebecca.

His job had been easy as pie, really. Compared to a lot of kids around the neighborhood who spent countless hours toiling in factories to bring home pennies, Bucky worked at a fabric mill where his only job was to replace the needles in the machines every once in a while. He was exceptionally good at getting under the machine and into the little places he would need to get in order to fix things. And he'd let his imagination run when he was in those machines, imaging going into a rocket ship and heading out to space, or some kind of robot that would save the city from a monster.

He spent his down time at the factory reading pulp novels that the ladies brought in for him. His favorites were the science fiction ones. The more ridiculous, the better.

His growth spurt had happened nearly overnight, and the foreman said he shouldn't come back, but
he'd given him a referral to his cousin who was gathering strapping young men to work on the skyscrapers in Manhattan.

No way, no how was he going to be climbing beams at the top of the sky. He had a healthy fear of falling to his death, thank you very much.

He just had to convince his foreman to give him another chance. He was sure he'd be able to squeeze in and keep on fixing the machines.

"Hey Buck!"

Well, he probably wouldn't be able to, actually.

Because Steve Rogers gave him a happy wave before hearing the whistle that meant one of the machines needed servicing. He darted to the one in question and disappeared under a big beam, a little slower than what Bucky would have, but still, in a few minutes, the noise had stopped and everything was working alright again.

When Steve reappeared, he was redfaced and sweaty, holding his finger to his mouth as he sucked on a little scratch he'd gotten.

"What the hell are you doing here, punk? Bucky demanded.


"This is my job," Bucky furrowed his brow.

"Your ma said you couldn't do it anymore," Steve disputed. "You got too big."

"Steve, I need this job," Bucky shook his head. "Least until Ma can get up and about again. And I thought you was gonna get a job selling papers!"

"But this pays more," Steve shrugged. "And you guys need that money."
"It's dangerous for a little guy like you," Bucky continued. "Look at ya, bleeding all over the place..."

"Don't get blood on the fabric, Rogers!" the foreman shouted.

"And the air in here is gonna have you dead in a week!" Bucky worried.

Steve coughed for good measure, which only sent Bucky into a bigger panic.

"And whaddya mean you guys need the money?" Bucky demanded. "Your ma said she didn't want you workin' since you were nearly dead anyway most days. She was yapping to my ma sayin' she was gonna move to the TB ward to get extra money so you wouldn't have to work yourself to death."

"Money's not for me, Buck, it's for you," Steve shrugged his thin shoulders. The whistle went off again, and Steve was off at a rush to the other machine that needed servicing.

Bucky stood there dumbfounded before Steve came back, this time wheezing and with another finger in his mouth that he'd scraped up. The dumb punk was going to ruin his artist's hands by the end of the day. And then Bucky'd never hear the end of it from his sisters, who demanded that Steve draw flowers and dresses for them every day of the week and twice on Sundays.

Steve bent over double as he tried to catch his breath.

"Dumb punk," Bucky sighed before grabbing Steve's bleeding hand and wiping it on a bolt of fabric.

"ROGERS! I TOLD YOU NOT TO BLEED ON THE FABRIC! YOU'RE OUTTA HERE!" the foreman screamed. "You too Barnes!"

"Sorry, Buck," Steve sighed once they were back on the street.
"Don't worry about it, look, we'll both go sell the papers, and we can do some sweeping to make up the difference," Bucky promised. "Both of us doing it'll mean double the money."

"Alright," Steve nodded. "What about that other job? The one in Manhattan? The Stark family was gonna build one of those buildings soon, right?"

"I'm not climbing up a hundred stories anytime soon, thanks," Bucky shook his head.

"Dunno, seems like fun," Steve smiled.

Bucky put him in an affectionate headlock as they made their way home. "How're you ever gonna find a girl to put up with you? You ain't got no sense for danger at all."

Steve blushed but rolled his eyes. "No girl'll ever take a second look at me. But if there is one out there for me, she's gonna have to like danger."

"I have no doubt she will."

---

**Wakanda, Present Day**

Tony had vomited everything in his gut onto the sand of the beach within an hour. In the meantime, his former teammates worked on getting the slime, which was avidly trying to get to another human being, contained and inspected.

They'd made it back to the mansion and Wanda was allowing small holes in her forcefield in order to allow Laura and T'Challa to poke at it. Literally, with sticks.

Natasha walked into mansion, with a docile Bucky following her. He was clearly triggered, waiting
for commands from her. Steve looked up in concern.

"I thought you said it went okay?"

"It did," Natasha shrugged. Bucky had watched her essentially play a very violent game of dodge ball with the Iron Legion and one of the severed heads of the Iron Legion, and he had managed to hold on well enough to continue taking them out with sniper fire.

"After," Clint huffed indignantly from the door.

"After," Natasha repeated, her lips curling into a cat-like smirk. Clint walked in with his hands trapped behind his back, seemingly stuck in his bow. "Clint was annoying me so I managed to tie him to his bow on the ride back.

"It was impressive," Clint shrugged.

Steve nodded, then looked down at Tony warily. The man in question had been sitting on the couch with his head in his hands, but had looked up at the sound of Natasha's arrival. Steve was definitely worried about how Tony would react. The last time Darcy had interacted with Tony in New York, he had still been dead set on hating Bucky for what he had unconsciously done.

"What's wrong with him?" Tony demanded.

"When he gets a boner for Natasha, he goes Winter Soldier mode," Sam explained indelicately. He rubbed at his scalp, where his hair was starting to finally come back in. "Don't try to put him that way on purpose, they'll be consequences."

"Ready to comply," Bucky's voice wasn't quite his own. It was missing all of those little cadences and accented vowels that had come back quickly with his memory.

"Come along, lover," Natasha nodded, walking ahead of him and going towards their shared room.

"That's not—he's, he's triggered? Like in Berlin with Zemo?" Tony stood up quickly and looked around at the rest of the island refugees. "How's he get out of it?"
"Natasha will handle it," Steve said as delicately as possible.

"They do the do," Darcy put in helpfully. She made an obscene hand gesture and gave a wink to Tony.

"On what planet is that okay?" Tony demanded, clearly angry as he took a step towards Darcy and Steve. "He's not in control of his own mind, and can't give consent, and they're just going to go and do---"

"Tony," Steve said gently. "Bucky knows that this happens. It's getting better, and it's not lasting so long every time. This is the only way we know how to break this particular trigger, so this is what they do."

"It's not right," Tony huffed out, drawing from his own recent experience. His mind had not been his own. He'd had to watch while he did things. While his memories played in his brain for an unwelcome audience. He looked down at Darcy, who looked as nonplussed as she ever did and Tony winced. She was in danger now and that was his fault.

"Mr. Stark?" Darlene said softly, seeing the beginning of a panic attack starting in the billionaire. She put a gentle hand on his shoulder and said, "Can you help me with something outside?"

Tony nodded and let himself be drug away. Steve sighed and squeezed his hand against Darcy's thigh. He had been unable to take his hands off of her since she had emerged from the underground tunnel.

"He feels guilty," Darcy sighed. "Tony never does well with guilt."

"Yeah," Steve nodded, leaning in and placing a kiss against Darcy's temple.

"I'm not going anywhere, cutie," Darcy promised. "Don't act like someone's going to steal me."

"Someone is trying to steal you," Steve whispered.
"Well then, I think I should come up with a plan, then," Darcy nodded. "I like being very much not stolen."

"Who're you again?" Tony whispered. He flinched a little when Darlene patted his shoulder.

"Darlene Wilson. I'm Sammy's mother," Darlene explained softly.

"Oh. Good job there," Tony nodded. "Sam's a good kid. Pain in the ass and way too sassy for his own good, but a good guy, really."

"Thank you," Darlene smiled genuinely. "I kind of like him, I guess."

Tony was quiet for the next five minutes as Darlene began making exaggerated breathing sounds. \textit{In...Holding....Out...long and slow}. She did it and he found himself copying her, and while his mind went a million miles a minute, in every single direction, he found that the breathing was helping.

Millions of dollars spent on therapy and fancy memory machines and more therapy and Darlene Wilson helping him to breathe was actually working to bring him back.

"He killed my parents," Tony whispered.

"I imagined that in seventy years, he killed a lot of people's parents. And children. Brothers and sisters and best friends," Darlene nodded.

"And you're not scared to be here on this island with him?" Tony wondered.

"I'll admit that it wasn't at the top of my to do list," Darlene admitted. "And when I got here, and I saw the way he interacted with Darcy. And how much he cared. I kind of got it."
"I don't want to get it," Tony revealed. "I want to hold on to this anger with both hands and never let go."

"Do you?" Darlene shook her head.

"No," Tony sighed. "I don't."

"Your mother was a great woman," Darlene said softly. "I went to college thanks to her. A scholarship fund she set up. I imagine that she would want you to find every scrap of happiness that you possibly could, and not hold onto bitterness and pain. It's what every mother wishes for their child."

"Absolutely not."

Darcy laughed. Her laughter was contagious and spread quickly. Scott was first, of course, giggling to himself as he began carefully placing M&M's into his popcorn. Wanda was next, with tiny snorts of laughter that could barely be heard. Then Sam was chuckling. The baby laying against Steve's pec giggled as he settled into dreamland, and soon, even Steve was laughing, eventually. He had the good grace to look guilty about it at least.

Bucky rolled his eyes and looked back at the plans they had been drawing up in regards to this new threat against their merry little band of heroes. They were waiting on word from Luis and Vision, but it was imperative they work on something when there was a very malicious person or persons out there that wanted to rip them all apart at the seams.

It was Darcy's involvement in things that had caused Bucky's vehement denial that had set off the laughter. He didn't laugh though. He held his arms, both metal frame and flesh, at his sides, his hands balled into fists.

"This is such a bad idea," Bucky sighed, looking down at the crude diagrams Darcy had drawn up. "Little Rainbow Widow, are you trying to get yourself killed?"
"I'm trying not to get myself killed, actually," Darcy shrugged. "I'm not really the type to just sit around and wait for someone to try and off me or kidnap me. Besides, I think I used a lot of restraint here---"

"Your first draft had you kidnapping the president's wife," Bucky rolled his eyes.

"That was the FIRST draft," Darcy reminded him helpfully. "You'll see, draft 78 doesn't have that in there."

"What do you have to say about this?" Bucky turned to Steve, who had tried to escape with the baby. Steve tensed and walked to the crib, putting a sleeping Nathaniel in it before turning very slowly to face the room. Bucky watched carefully, ready to run and tackle him should Steve try to escape.

Steve opened his mouth to say something quick, but then shut it. He looked very much like he was stuck between a rock and a hard place and Sam, who had been prodding the blue stuff with his own stick while Wanda made a game of moving the force field, suddenly started paying eager attention. He hated Barnes with the power of a thousand suns, but he did love to see Steve sputter whenever Barnes would give him shit for being an idiot.

And now it would be double shit, because there were TWO of them. Darcy and Steve were both idiots.

"Don't strain yourself, baby," Darcy gave him a sympathetic look and a puckered air kiss from across the room. "I know the plan is crazy."

"Thank God," Steve sighed. He didn't want to offend her. It was reckless and crazy and outlandish. But that just meant it would work. "It's nuts, I know. But, that seems to work, most of the time."

Bucky stepped very close to Steve, nose to nose, and he used his new metal hand to flick at the man's forehead. Just hard enough to sting.

"Ouch," Tony called out with some of his normal irreverent buoyancy. Both super soldiers turned to the doorway he had just entered and he nodded at Barnes before turning a more playful look on Steve. "You really broke up with me for him? I've never been so abusive."
The room was silent, with Sam and Wanda now shifting their eyes back and forth between all parties avidly, wondering who would break first.

"The punk needs a firm hand, or else he'll start jumping from planes with no parachutes," Bucky gave Stark a timid nod, swallowing slowly. His guilt was all his own to bear, but Tony had the very earned right and ability to pile more on if he so choose.

"Who told you that? NAT!" Steve called out anxiously while simultaneously making a run for it to hide behind Darcy.

"WHAT?" Bucky hissed, ever mindful of how hard it was to get the baby back down for a nap once he'd been woken from it.

"This is the best thing," Tony muttered. He looked to Sam and Wanda, who were also watching Steve attempt to hide behind Darcy, fending off Bucky's well placed metal slaps. "Is it like this all the time?"

"Only when Steve accidentally lets something slip," Wanda admitted ruefully.

"Barnes, Darcy once ran around during an alien invasion rescuing puppies and cats and GERBILS," Tony announced very quickly.

Darcy let out a dramatic gasp and pointed her finger at Steve.

"Steve once jumped from a 108 story building!"

Steve looked down at Darcy with a glimpse of his hurt puppy look, but when she winced he wiped it off his face and instead revealed,

"Darcy once tried to adopt a three ton alien beast that had toxic slime antlers!"

"DO NOT BRING MANUEL THE FLUFFY INTO THIS! Steve once let me taser him to test it
"Dude!" Darcy accused.

Steve looked down at her in bewilderment. That had been a bedroom secret. He shook his head and came out with "Darcy's tackled me into every closet in the mansion for ---you know, fire in the hole!"

"Dude!" Sam called out in annoyance. "I keep my clothing in there!"

"Excuse me?"

Everyone stopped looking at Darcy and Steve, who seemed heated in an interesting way as they threw each other under the bus repeatedly. They turned to the doorway to see T'Challa and Shuri standing their with amused expressions on their face.

"Even my closet, Miss Lewis?" T'Challa questioned.

"Twice in your closet," Darcy blurted. "Second time was Steve's bright idea."

"You said it was time for a nap old timer---"

"Regardless," Shuri rolled her eyes in a very familiar look to the rest of the Avengers refugees. They'd seen it often, usually thanks to Scott or Sam. "We have a problem."

"We just had a problem," Sam sighed in annoyance.

"Everett Ross is on his way to Wakanda in an attempt to restructure the Accords with me in them," T'Challa admitted. "You are all going to have to hide. Now."

Chapter End Notes

there's always something going on here.

and this was a Luis free chapter. I will have to make it up to you somehow. (All Luis chapter coming soon!)
Thanks for reading!
The Importance of Being a DJ

Chapter Notes

Hi!

So, non story related, what are your dorm room essentials? I'm going to be leaving for school in two weeks, and my parents have declared that it is time to start shopping. But other than the world's smallest fridge, I have nothing else on my wish list because I have no idea what else I need.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Importance of Being a DJ

Stark Towers, January 2015

"LIKE A BLACK WIDOW BAAAAABAAAAAY!"

JARVIS did not have the software or programming available to be judgemental. Sarcasm, yes, he could do sarcasm. But having been created by Tony Stark, it was a very conscious decision that being judgemental should be left out. The artificial intelligence could survey a situation, and offer a sarcastic, witty response, but that was about it.

If he could like or dislike anything, he had decided that he would like offering the sarcasm and witticisms. Most people were annoyed when he gave those responses. Especially Mr. Stark.

However, the people who were ranked the highest in his databases that ranked preference of personality quite enjoyed his programmed sarcasm.

Two of those people were currently in the Avenger's common room at that moment. Singing along to a pop song that JARVIS would have chosen to be judgemental about if he had the ability to do so. But he could understand why Darcy was singing along at the top of her lungs and dancing around Natasha at the moment. Darcy had just returned from a visit to Asgard where she had visited her pet.
JARVIS had called Darcy immediately to the common room, where Natasha was sharpening various knives. And JARVIS could tell with 93.4 percent certainty that Natasha was in need of cheer. She had returned prematurely from a search she had been running in tandem with Captain Rogers and Mr. Wilson. She had returned and had not displayed any positive facial expression when she had discovered the ingenious little prank that Clint had played on her spare set of knives that she kept underneath the common room coffee table.

When the Black Widow was so despondent that she did not even smirk at a 20% angle at such a clever little trick from one of her favorite people, JARVIS had programmed himself to send out a distress call. Darcy, Pepper and Clint were on the list of acceptable recipients of said call. Tony was to be locked in his lab at all costs.

JARVIS authorized and paid for the food delivery that had arrived in the lobby of Stark Tower, while simultaneously searching for the next appropriate song to play from Darcy's 'We ain't dead yet' playlist.

When he played the Spice Girls next, Darcy whooped with joy and managed to pull Natasha out of her seat. JARVIS tried to write a program quickly that would allow him to be judgemental, because it would have come in quite handily at the moment.

"Ms. Romanoff, a call is coming through for you," he announced instantaneously.

"No business calls!" Darcy insisted. "J, we talked about this."

"Indeed, but your security protocol is being overridden by Captain Rogers," JARVIS told her helpfully.

"How does he outrank me here?" Darcy demanded petulantly. "I mean, aside from being the technical leader of the Avengers and being a Captain in the military and being more awesome than me with super muscles and stuff and stuff. Those are just things, Jarvy. I thought we were buds!"

"I assure you that I enjoy your company more than Captain Rogers."

"Flirty." Darcy gave a little grin to the nearest security camera. The elevators opened and one of the security guards stood there with bags of booze and pizza. "OH! Rations are here. Go ahead and take your dumb Captain call that is apparently more important than me. I'll be right back."
"Nat?" Steve questioned, the video was fuzzy and unclear on the nearest holographic panel. He furrowed his brow at the loud music in the background. "You having a party? Is that why you're home early?"

"I'm not having a party," Natasha sighed. "I left because..."

She paused, which only made Steve look more panicked. She had left because she had found a piece of paper in a safe house that Bucky had most recently been in. It had her name at the top. Her real name. And below it was presumably whatever Bucky could have remembered about her.

The list was not long.

Red headed.

Strong.

Beautiful.

Smart.

Ticklish on the inside of her elbows.

Love.

The last word on that list had been half scribbled before it stopped abruptly. Natasha assumed he had blanked out on it, feeling that fuzzy pain in his head that signaled he was about to go compliant again. The paper was left behind, which only made her worry more that he had left tracks behind.

She prayed there hadn't been a handler there to take advantage.

"There was nothing there," Natasha reported to Steve brusquely.

"Natasha," Steve's image on the screen may have been blurry, but he could see her with crystal clear clarity. She was conflicted and, although Steve had a hard time believing it, hurt in some way. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Natasha nodded. There were not many people on Earth who could read her moods. One
of those people was struggling at the common room door with far too much takeout. Natasha gave
Steve a genuine look of appreciation. "Thank you for asking."

"Do you need me to come back?" Steve asked. He looked behind Natasha on the screen and saw a
glimpse of curly brown hair and two small hands holding bottles of very expensive vodka in the air
as whoever it was danced around energetically.

"Well, that depends," Natasha smirked at him.

JARVIS noted that it was with a 20% angle.

“On what?” Steve asked warily, his own humor resurfacing with Natasha’s.

“If you’re ready to meet someone very close to me that I think you will like quite a lot,” Natasha
arched an eyebrow, her voice a low murmur.

“Uhm,” Steve blinked. He looked down at the latest readouts from JARVIS, showing where Bucky
might pop up next. He was not really in a good place to be meeting people. Important people. Not
yet.

"How do you feel about girls' night? Manis, pedis, dancing, singing along to terrible pop songs and
finishing it off with watching a movie that will probably make you cry like a baby?” Natasha
wondered, offering Steve the easy out.

"Sounds terrible," Steve nodded, although he peered behind Natasha to see that the little, buxom
brunette had her back to the camera and was doing a complicated rolling of her hips that had his
mouth going a little dry.

"Well then, you should stay on his trail," Natasha nodded. "Be safe, Steve."

"Will do, have fun with your---dancing," Steve kept trying to get a better look and Natasha cut off
the call abruptly.
JARVIS quickly reviewed the call footage, and could confirm with 78 percent certainty that Captain Rogers knew who was in the background of the call. He did a thorough analysis of Captain Rogers facial expression and matched it to those on file. He updated the voluminous file on the probability of Captain Rogers and Darcy Lewis becoming romantically involved and sent out a text message of the update in the odds, all the while selecting another song that he felt he should be judgemental about, but could not manage it without the proper programming.

"YES, J!" Darcy clapped as the next song came on. "You are the world's greatest DJ."

**

Present Day, New York City

"BLah blah something something, Cake by the OCEAN!"

Vision watched as his new teammates unabashedly sang along to the terrible pop song he had brought up to play on Luis' spotify program.

"Big purple you are kinda hella good at this dj-ing shit," Dave gave a nod to him as Kurt and Luis continued to sing their hearts out with well practiced car dancing choreography.

"I've had much practice," Vision nodded. "Between Mr. Stark and the other Avengers, there is a variety of musical tastes to cater to. And apparently, one of my main job functions was to provide appropriate soundtracks to their day. Darcy had told my former--"

"Darcy ..." Luis stopped singing and gave a heavy sigh. "She is fine as hell. Dave, did you remember that movie we watched when we were high that one time cause we accidentally ate Finny's brownies that he made special for his auntie with the glaucoma? You know, and the movie tripped us out, cause like, it was cartoons, but in real life, and then we went outside and tried to paint a black hole into Finny's ma's shed so we could go to cartoon land?"

"I remember you getting a concussion from trying to run into the magic portal to toon town, yeah, Luis," Dave rolled his eyes.

"Right, so the fine cartoon with a body like your Uncle Kevin's fancy toe, but like NOT gross?" Luis questioned. Kurt looked away from the wheel for a second with wide eyes.
"Even the funny top of it?" Kurt questioned.

"Homie, nothing funny about it," Luis sighed. He made an irritated face and said, "Dang yo, I totally feel bad. Like I hear Falcon's mama in my head scolding me and I'm seeing that stern ass look in Captain Steve America's face just saying this stuff. So hold up, Darcy's got a fine body, let's get that out of the way. Uncle Kevin's fancy toe but in soft girl form, yo. But for real? She's smart and funny. She's like, my soul mate."

"Darcy Lewis and Captain Rogers have a 97% chance of marrying within the next six months," Vision cut in. "She cannot be your soul mate."

"What now?" Dave furrowed his brow. "You a matchmaker? Like, is that one of your superpowers? Cause dude, the honeys are not wanting a piece of this in the last three weeks, and it's my longest dry spell, for real. Hook a brother up."

"I am not a matchmaker, but my previous incarnation has had the opportunity to survey them closely and compile data---"

"You have been reincarnated? I have too!" Kurt slapped his hands across the steering wheel. "I was Amelia Earhart. The Bermuda Triangle was not kind."

"I was JARVIS, the artificial intelligence created by Tony Stark," Vision explained.

"No shit, you lived in the Matrix?" Dave chuckled.

"I did not live prior to this," Vision shook his head. "Truly, I am not actually alive now. I am a sentient being in an android form."

"Duuuude," Luis shook his head. "You're not alive right now?"

"Not in a way that you are," Vision nodded. "I have no need for sleep, nor food, nor---"
"You do not need food?" Kurt asked in horror.

"I have not since I was, for lack of a better term, born," Vision shook his head.

Kurt suddenly swerved the car into the next lane and went for the first exit at a high speed.

"No, I see what you're doing, Kurt, I agree," Luis nodded. He slapped Vision on the very hard shoulder and shook his head. "You may not need food or sleep or whatever, man, but it's not needing it that makes you human. It's having it and enjoying it that makes you human."

"That's deep as shit," Dave nodded. “Did you have more of Finny’s auntie’s glaucoma brownies?"

"I've been telling you, son, but you don't believe me. I got depths. Darcy would understand."

**

Wakanda

Wanda's eyes widened when Sam slid down the entranceway to the underground room that led to the main island. She had been put there to protect Laura, the children and Darlene, with Clint perched high up in a tree above the entranceway. Bucky was in a similar protective space, above the bungalow where Steve and Darcy and Sam had been stashed.

Natasha, who had no reason to hide from the Joint Task Force boss, as she was not technically a wanted criminal, was out in the open. Scott was shrunken down in the Mansion. And Tony had taken off quickly, hopping to the nearest Stark Industries building in South Africa.

"Why are you here?" Wanda wondered.

"Missed you," Sam shrugged.

"Liar liar pants on fire," Wanda rolled her eyes.
"Hey, I miss you all the time when you're not around. You're the only normal person in my life right now," Sam insisted. "I appreciate you, Tiny Dancer."

"Ahem," Laura coughed. Her warning sign for when Clint had ears in the room. And Lila would sell out Wanda and Sam in a heartbeat if candy was involved.

"Darcy and Steve wouldn't stop canoodling," Sam said truthfully. "It's like they can't keep their hands off of each other."

"There's a reason he calls her Magnet, dude," Laura grinned at him, obviously still loving being so very right about her only successful matchmaking.

Sam mocked Laura behind her back, dodging the balled up dirty diaper that she threw over her shoulder at him.

"Man, moms and their eyes in the back of their head," Sam grumbled.

"Sammy, you're bored and hungry," Darlene guessed. "Go and check the rations with Wanda."

"First chance I'm getting, I'm taking you back to the States," Sam said with a smile on his face. "I don't like to hear the voice of reason all the time."

"Too bad, I like being a vacationing superhero on the run from the law," Darlene chuckled.

“When do you think we’ll be done with this anyway?” Laura wondered.

“Don’t like being underground?” Sam guessed.

“It’s not my favorite place to be, but also, Scott is in the mansion,” Laura reminded him. “He’s not going to stay out of mischief forever, you know."
“I will tell you, your highness, I expected to find a spare rogue Avenger or two around your private mansion,” Everett Ross had a smug smirk on his face as he stared up at both T’Challa and Shuri. “At least the star spangled one that you were working with in London. And…”

He paused and looked down at one of his reports and nodded before holding up a mug shot of Darcy Lewis, circa 2010.

“Marcy Lewis, known conspirator of the Avengers, and who I have warrant for,” Everett announced with almost manic glee.

“Her name is Darcy,” Natasha said calmly as she strode into the room, wearing a bikini and a sarong. “And you could have no reason to issue a warrant for her.”

“On the contrary Miss Romanoff, you’ll find I have a lot of reasons,” Everett insisted. “She and Jane Foster were called to appear before the Accord Council three weeks ago to explain the use of an otherworldly portal that popped up on our radar almost two months ago. They didn’t have permission to use that portal.”

“You can’t know that it was them,” Shuri shook her head.

“I’m sorry, Princess Shuri, as advanced as Wakanda is in technology, I don’t believe that they have mastered the use of the Einstein Rosen bridge,” Everett’s smugness was off the charts at that point. He turned his obnoxious smirk to T’Challa and asked, “Is that where Barnes is? In Asgard with Thor and Dr. Foster and Marcy Lewis?”

“DARCY!”

Scott’s annoyed shout came out more like a small squeak at the feet of the assembled people. Everett looked around in confusion before shaking it off and going back to his regularly scheduled simpering smirking.

“This woman was seen interacting with your security force in London,” Everett pointed to the picture. “I have it on good authority that she has been seen on this island. I’d like to know anything you might know about where she is.”
T’Challa arched an eyebrow at the man in front of him who apparently either did not know who he was dealing with, or had no care as to who he was dealing with. Shuri looked down at her shoes, hiding a smirk as she realized that her brother was gearing up to smack the small American down.

“I will remind you once again, Mr. Ross, that I never signed the Accords, and therefore, I am not beholden to listen to one of your requests,” T’Challa’s voice dropped to its lowest register. “I will also remind you that you are here due to my generosity of spirit and offer my assistance on my own terms to the problems your organization faces in the wake of you declaring some of the world’s greatest defenders as criminal.”

“Now wait just a second---” Everett swatted at the tip of his right ear in annoyance as he felt a pinch there.

“You will not interrupt the King of Wakanda!” T’Challa’s voice boomed.

Shuri angled her head completely towards the floor to hide the giggles that threatened to erupt. It had been a game that she and T’Challa had played as children. They would compete to see who could sound more like their father. She had always won until T’Challa’s voice had deepened when he hit puberty.

Everett swatted at his own ear again, this time a little more violently.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, wrinkled his nose and swatted at his ear again.

“I do not know what Miss Lewis is doing at this moment,” T’Challa said. “I will be sure to tell her that you are searching for her at the first opportunity I have.”

“Be sure to---” Everett felt a pinch and smacked at his own head with real strength, essentially sucker punching himself. He looked around in confusion, he could have sworn he heard something that time.

“I will arrange for your transportation back to your plane,” Shuri had composed herself quickly. Scott was obviously having the time of his life, and it was probably very important to get Everett far away.
Scott went big as soon as Everett cleared the front door and gave T'Challa and Natasha a big thumbs up.

“How cool was that? He fell for the oldest trick in the book!”

“It was amusing,” T'Challa admitted. He looked to Natasha and gave her a respectful nod. “I have use of your services, if you are willing.”

“Your highness, we’ve all told you we would be willing to do anything to repay your kindness to us,” Natasha reminded him.

“I fear that someone that is close to me may be working against me,” T’Challa admitted. “The little obnoxious man said someone had told them they saw Darcy here. Only my closest of advisors know that you are here.”

“I understand,” Natasha nodded. “I will be discrete and work with the Dora Milaje in my investigation.”

“I thank you,” T'Challa said genuinely, truly concerned. This wasn’t the first time since his father’s death that he felt insecure in his choice in advisors.

“Man, I’m gonna go do it again,” Scott shook his head, hands flying across his controls. “That felt too good. I’m going to definitely try to get him to knock himself out this time.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I got a tumblr a little while ago, and I think I feel pretty comfortable posting it up here now. If you're on tumblr, I'm super friendly. If you're not on tumblr, I'm still super friendly and we should be friends.

I hope that you liked this chapter. Thanks for reading!
I've noticed something when Luis is in a chapter. The word count climbs, but the page count stays the same. Because Luis has huge ass paragraphs of dialogue but no action or paragraph breaks.

This is your warning that there is a lot of Luis in this chapter. It's his time to shine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Beginner's Luck

2013, Long Beach, California

"Why are we here again?"

"Do you always have to know everything, Rogers?" Natasha countered. She paged through the sticky, laminated pages of the little hole in the wall restaurant as Steve sat opposite her, looking up at the various pictures and curious art tacked up on the walls.

"I like knowing everything, and you do too," Steve reminded her.

Maria had suggested that Steve needed more lessons in espionage after having nearly stumbling upon and ruining an undercover investigation for one of the numbered agents. His insatiable curiosity and his never ending need to figure things out meant that it was getting harder and harder to pull the wool over his eyes. But in order to have him in the loop, he would have to have a gentler hand. And no one was better equipped in having a gentle hand than Natasha.

"I need information from an informant," Natasha explained. "And I think I want to try the eggs benedict. I'm feeling brave."

"You're going to meet an informant here? With...me sitting here?" Steve furrowed his brow. He
knew Natasha was deadly, dangerous and incredibly competent. It didn't quite make sense that she would have a meeting with one of her top secret informants with Captain America sitting across from her.

He wasn't exactly an individual who could melt into the background. He'd seen at least five people snapping pictures of him with their phone at that point.

"Don't worry. Turn off the part of your brain that has to question everything," Natasha ordered. "Or at least keep that part silent. Silence is a valuable weapon."

*Keep your trap shut, punk, you keep shoving your foot in your mouth. Silence is golden. And gold is valuable.*

Steve looked down at the cup of awful coffee that the waitress had slopped into their cups when they had taken a seat. He'd only known Natasha for about a year at that point, but there were times when she said stuff to him...things that reminded him of Bucky, but obviously translated into Black Widow Speak. It was probably why his friendship with Natasha had formed so quickly and was so much stronger than his friendships with the rest of his team. He liked Barton fine, but he was always heading off to secret missions, and try as he might, Steve could never find out where Clint went for weeks at a time.

Tony and Bruce were currently in Stark Tower in New York City, knee deep in exploratory science. And Thor was no longer on Earth, although Steve knew from the brief time spent with the Asgardian, that they could be great friends. And Steve trusted Fury as much as he trusted the tooth fairy, which was not very much. He had the good grace to know that not trusting Fury meant that Fury was damned good at his job. But he was never going to go and grab a beer with the man.

But Natasha had kept tabs on Steve when he went on his cross country trip. She'd show up in the most random of places. World's largest ball of twine? There was Natasha waiting for him by the side of the road with a smile. Amish country in Ohio? Natasha was already checked into the nearest motel with a bag of cheeseburgers, texting away happily. She'd grab him for quick missions. She'd keep him updated on the rest of the team and the state of the world. She'd keep trying to give him little steps into the world. Text messaging lessons. The importance of not believing everything you read on the internet. How to effectively shut up blowhard talking heads that spouted their mouth off about him on 24 hour news channels.

Natasha was a great friend. But there were times when she reminded him so much of Bucky that it hurt.
She ordered her Eggs Benedict and he ordered the sunrise sampler and a giant cinnamon roll that was as big as a dinner plate. She was texting someone, a smile on her face that Steve had never placed before. It was an excessively fond expression.

"Talking to Clint?" Steve wondered.

"No," Natasha shook her head. "A good friend. Who you would actually like a lot, I think. She's moving to England for a work project and she's amusing me with her stories of how she's saying goodbye to her co-workers."

"Pranks?" Steve's mouth quirked up.

"Yes. She's quite good at them," Natasha nodded. She looked up at Steve appraisingly. "Would you like to meet her? I can arrange something."

"I'm---no," Steve shook his head. "My life is still kind of a mess. Not ready for that kind of thing."

"Someday you will be, and when you are, I'll introduce the two of you," Natasha promised. The cinnamon roll was delivered and Steve had the good grace to allow Natasha to pull off particularly delicious looking pieces, even though she had snorted when he had ordered it.

"When's your informant coming?" Steve wondered.

"He's already here," Natasha shrugged calmly.

Steve looked at her in confusion, and she smiled at him serenely, somehow wordlessly telling him to listen.

"And yo, son, so I heard from my cousin Bernice that there was this weird ass dude the other day at the marina and he was looking for a crew, and I'm like, do I really want to do that? Do I want to go down that road again, cause I got a record and I know that one wrong move is just gonna send me right to the big house. But then I think about the $90,000 in debt that I racked up from Stanford and how no one is hiring, especially for a dude with a degree in Eastern Asian studies. I mean, my neighbor had said to me at the time, Luis what were you thinking? and I was like, I don't know homie, I just really like anime, you know? And it was really easy to learn Chinese for some reason. Then I'm like, alright man, I'll do it. But I'm not gonna like it."
"Luis, nobody cares, just bus the table!" the waitress called out before placing Natasha and Steve's breakfast plates down in front of them.

"But you should care, because this dude was shady, and I did not like dealing with him. Like...creepy and dark, like a Goosebumps episode. One of the really scary ones too," the busboy sighed as he reluctantly cleaned up. "He's staying on a yacht down by the harbor. Who does that? I mean, if you got money for a yacht, you should have money for a hotel room. And who names their boat the Filthy Baron. Sounds shady as all get out. Marissa! If I got arrested, would you bail me out?"

"Hell no, Luis."

"Alright then. Thought what we had was magical. But alright."

Steve turned and gave Natasha an astonished look.

"Some informants are better off staying ignorant of the fact that they are informants," Natasha said in a low tone. "You can get a lot of information from the right kind of people if they're simply left to live their own life in peace. Finish up, Rogers. We have to go down to the harbor and have a look around."

Present Day, New York City

"Go to your assigned drop points, make the pickup. Come back to headquarters. In and out, no one should stop you. You got any questions?"

The man in the police uniform should have known better. He'd been doing this song and dance for the last hour. The lone recruit that had been brought into the organization actually raised his hand as if he were in a classroom full of students, even if it was just the guy in the cop uniform and the new recruit in a back alley.
"Yeah, so, this sounds way too easy, and maybe it's just me, but nothing is ever that easy," Luis shook his head. "Like one time, me and my nieces were trying to make bath bombs, you know, the little fizzy balls you throw in water and it's like your fourth grade science experiment all over again, with the baking soda and vinegar? Except this time, it's like baking soda and like citric acid, but don't freak, like I did when I watched that first tutorial on youtube, cause I'm like, son, I am not letting my baby nieces bathe themselves in acid. Like I don't care what you say Lush sales associate, that just seems wrong, but it turns out like acid isn't always bad, and vinegar is an acid. Which I know I should have known because of the fourth grade science, but science has never been my strong point. I'm more of a fine arts kind of guy."

"Are you for real right now?" the fake cop slapped his forehead. "Sergio said you were legit."

"I am totally legit, I'm great at what I do, son, don't get it twisted," Luis promised. "Sergio knows what's what. Like he and I share a friend who is super cool and good at what she does. So when I needed a little extra cash due to my unfortunate back story, I got the hookup. Anyway, like I was saying, with the bath bombs, like it's summer right, so that means it's super humid and I'm trying to get this bath bomb shit in the mold so it can dry, but it just keeps expanding, and I don't think even super strength or the Hulk could get this mold closed at this point, so instead of cool little bombs, they wound up with blobs. They still worked though, and made the bath all fizzy and colorful and smell good. But the panic at first like I'd just wasted twenty dollars on an arts and craft project that science wanted to derail, it just didn't seem like a good idea."

Dave and Kurt made a walk by on the nearby street, Kurt letting out a loud sneeze.

"Gesundheit," Dave offered.

"Dah, dah," Kurt waved him off.

Luis gave the fake cop a bland smile and shrugged, "I just want to make sure I'm not getting burned son, I mean, I spent some time in the slammer and aside from having a kickass roommate, it wasn't that much fun. Most dudes come out of the pokey with like this cut upper body, but I just came out with a healthy fear of communal toilets. So are you on the up and up here, like, who's got my back?"

The fake cop shook his head in annoyance and began to stalk off, muttering, "Fucking Mariah and her fucking loyalty to fucking Sergio. This is a disaster waiting to fucking happen. Get in the damned car, we're going to straighten this shit out back at headquarters."

Luis bit at his bottom lip to keep from grinning before following the very angry man, throwing a nod
to Vision, who was set up in the van running surveillance on the bugs that Dave and Kurt had just planted on the fake cop's car.

He knew if Natasha was listening in, she'd of gotten the most important bit out of that whole conversation.

Mariah. That seemed pretty important. Like she was the one in charge.

"So, like, there's like a point where the chick with the smirky smile has like an epiphany. Like a light bulb moment, where she's like, shit son, I have been wrong this whole time and I hate being wrong cause no joke, I'm kind of a low key know-it-all, but I've always been right, so it's all good, but this is the first time I'm wrong, and I'm still mad even though I don't have any right to be mad at all. But she reads the letter, probably a dozen times or so, and I get that. One of the things that kind of makes a good person is thoughtfulness and attention to detail, so I totally understand taking a breath, re-reading it, getting less mad but not totally chill yet, then repeating those steps like, a bunch of times so that your madness level is like chill."

"Oh my god, please kill me," fake cop muttered.

"So now she knows the truth, and she has to go back home and live with that truth, and you know, not blow up this guy's spot and tell everyone he's TOTALLY a villain. But she hesitates, you know, because he IS a villain and shouldn't she say something, but if she does, then she'll blow up this other dude's spot and betray a confidence and also like, totally trash his sister's reputation, and reputation is real damned important in this hood, you feel me? So she doesn't say anything, but that totally comes back to bite her in the ass later, cause her youngest sis is like a wild child. Like girls gone wild but in England in the 1800's. And she totally goes off with that dude just like Colin Firth's sis. But this is worse cause it's a bigger scandal right, the kind that can't be hushed up...

"How did this happen? I don't even know," fake cop whispered to himself.

"But I'm totally getting ahead of myself, dog, let me back the Jane Austen train back to what's happening with the two oldest Bennett sisters, alright, so my girl Jane is like, still broken hearted and--"

"STAY HERE!" fake cop barked suddenly, before flying from the room in abject horror. Sergio
definitely owed him big time.

"You're doing good, Lozado."

Luis knew that his friends, his mailman, all of his former teachers throughout his schooling, and any casual acquaintance he had ever met would be hard pressed to believe that he stayed silent in that moment.

That amazing and wonderful moment where the Black Widow, super amazing super spy and superhero, and grade A hottie, and keeper of Sergeant Uncle Bucky's balls had told him in his undetectable earpiece that he was doing a good job.

He was going to be talking about that forever, he just knew. Actually, he made a mental note to start eating more fruits and vegetables and antioxidants. He wanted to live a lot longer so that he could tell more and more people about how Natasha Romanoff thought he was doing a good job at being a super spy.

Because that's sort of what he was at the moment.

He'd annoyed fake cop enough with nonstop chatter that he was sort of just abandoned in a small room in a large industrial building in New Jersey. He had immediately started humming his code song. (U can't touch this). And that was the signal to have Vision start jamming the surveillance cameras on the inside.

The ear piece had been turned on then, and Natasha had been feeding him direction ever since as she and hopefully Darcy, but probably Sergeant Uncle Bucky, were working on getting him to where he needed to go.

They'd told him that he would know what he was looking for when he found it, and he really believes that because that was essentially the story of his whole life. Which was why when he made it to a little room with a lot of computer servers, he did what Natasha told him, jamming a usb drive into the appropriate hole and then hightailing it out of there.
But he stopped midway down another long and gray hallway.

"Keep moving, Lozado," Natasha ordered when he paused in front of a door.

"I heard something," Luis insisted.

"Keep moving, you have five minutes before someone realizes that Darcy is downloading everything they have and sending it to Stark's secure server," Natasha advised.

"Darcy's helping. That's so nice," Luis sighed dreamily.

"Luis," Bucky's voice came over the line. "Do I have to bring Darlene in on this op?"

"No Sergeant Uncle Bucky, sir," Luis huffed out petulantly. "But I did hear something in there. Sounded like crying."

"Luis, this is not a rescue mission, this is recon, get out of there, now," Natasha ordered.

"Just a minute though," Luis shook his head. He tried the doorknob and found that it was locked. But it appeared to be just a normal lock and not a fancy state of the art lock. And really, he had normal locks handled when most kids were learning to ride bicycles, so this wasn't actually a problem. He took out the small comm unit and put it in his pants pocket so that he wouldn't get distracted by Natasha's very insistent shouting at him to stop before he went to work on the lock.

"I WILL TOTALLY KICK YOUR ASS I SWEAR!" the small woman on the other side of the door yelled. She was brandishing what looked like the underwire from her bra in wide, blind swipes. "I'm not going to do what you want me to do, so just go to hell!"

"Yo, calm down, pretty lady," Luis held up his hands. "I'm here to help you."

"Bull shit, that's what the guy said before that, and they wound up having me figure out that stupid blue crap that lojacked Stark's brain. I'm out. You can't make me do anything. I'll have you know,
that I resisted fucking Ultron, so next time you try to trick me into doing something I don't want to do, remember that I will kick every square inch of your ass if you try me. And the Black Widow totally taught me to kick ass. SO GO ON. TRY ME."

Luis's eyes widened as he looked down at the fiesty young woman who was very, very pissed off, and still brandishing her bra wiring as a weapon. He pursed his lips and wondered.

"What's your name? Oh shit, that's a siren, uhm, long story short, you have to come with me now, cause I'm going to definitely be wanted by these dudes and not in a good way. I promise, that I'm like one of the good guys. Avenger approved and everything. Actually, I have a real life Avenger waiting to pick me up in the getaway van, so we should probably head out now, you feel me?"

"What?" the prisoner blinked at him.

"What's your name? And let's go," Luis held out a hand.

"Helen. Helen Cho," she revealed. She shook off her stupor and grabbed Luis' hand. They began to run and Helen didn't look back to where she had been kept prisoner for the last forty-eight hours, kidnapped right out of South Korea with no one the wiser. She didn't know who this chatty person was, but she was going to definitely let him help her escape. "Nice to meet you."

"You know, I don't hear that nearly enough. I like it."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!!
Chapter Notes

Hi! It's Wednesday!

Someone asked how I keep all of these characters and story lines straight. I have a ton of notes and need to know where everyone is in every chapter, even if they're not in the chapter. Everyone. EVERYONE.

I hope that I can take this awesome nerdiness to school with me and apply it to actual studying.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty: Side Work

Sweden, 2015

"I don't like her."

"JANIE!" Darcy admonished loudly. Several scientists who were waiting to be let into the lecture hall prior to the start of the convention looked up from their phones or tablets or scattered notes at the loudest sound they might have heard in a few years.

"HEY! You don't get to use that tone of voice with me on this one! I'm pulling the superhero significant other card!" Jane wrinkled her nose at Darcy. "You don't understand what it's like."

"She coooooooooooould," came a sing songy voice from an unseen source.

"Fuck off Barton," Darcy hissed at the corner of the room where she knew Clint was hiding in a vent.

"Just saying," came the non-corporeal voice. "Give me the word, kid. I'll have him here in a heartbeat."
"What?" Jane looked up, confused.

"Nothing, just our security detail being a jerkwad," Darcy waived her off. "Why don't you like Dr. Helen? She's awesome. I love her."

Jane narrowed her eyes at Darcy and muttered, "You love everyone."

"I don't love everyone," Darcy disputed.

"You told the hotel employee who refreshed the breakfast bar this morning that you loved them," Jane reminded her.

"She brought us fresh bacon, Janie. Of course I love her," Darcy rolled her eyes.

"You told Doctor Sabald that you loved him yesterday," Jane rolled her eyes even harder.

"He said he liked my shoes. There's nothing wrong with loving an eighty-two year old man with good fashion sense," Darcy rolled her eyes twice in a row, only getting slightly dizzy.

"I know a ninety-something year old man who you could love---"

"FUCK OFF BARTON!" Darcy hissed.

Jane smiled smugly at Darcy and said, "You made me send Thor back to Asgard with a message to your bilgesnipe about how much you love hi---"

"How dare you bring up Manuel the Fluffy! You know how much I miss him!" Darcy poked at Jane's shoulder. "Why don't you love Helen? She's part of the five foot four and under crew. We are contractually obligated to love her. Also she made a hole in Clint disappear."

"Feel good as new. If not a little itchy sometimes," Clint announced from the vent.
"Fuck off Barton, be normal for once!" Jane hissed up at him.

"I'm inviting her down here with us," Darcy pulled out her phone and began texting. "It's not cool to let a friend sit alone at one of these things. Besides, that way Clint's focus won't have to be split."

"I'm awesome, I can handle it," Clint promised.

"Doooooooooon't," Jane whined.

"Whhhhhhhhhhy?" Darcy demanded.

"Cause she likes Thor. Like..LIKES him, likes him," Jane huffed out a sigh. "She thinks he's cute."

"I---what? Hold on. If the criteria for being your friend means that we can't think Thor is cute, then I'm sorry, Janie, but you and I can't be friends anymore," Darcy smirked.

"Me neither," Clint offered, still perched in his vent. "Your man's a god. A god of tushies."

"I hate you, Barton, why couldn't we have real security?" Jane demanded.

"I'm on light duty," Clint answered. "'sides, everyone else who could be spared is working on the new facility."

"OH, the new facility!" Darcy held up a finger as a thread of a thought came through. "Natasha wants to know when we'll be needing lodging. So I need to know if you want to do that lecture tour."

"Uhmmmm...." Jane pursed her lips in thought. She'd been going on an awful lot of lecture tours. It was amazing how much she still adored lording it over everyone who had called her a quack. She loved reminding them that she was ACTUALLY right and totally awesome.
"Hi!" Helen chirped brightly as she walked up to them. "So, don't tell anyone I told you this, but once we get into the lecture hall, if we go to stage right, in the little alcove, they're keeping cookies and energy drinks there instead of water and fruit."

"Oh my god, I love you," Darcy clapped her hands together, despite Jane's super exaggerated eye roll. "Are you going to be staying at the New Avenger's Facility, or are you heading back to South Korea?"

"Splitting my time," Helen answered. "I'll be at the facility when it opens then back to South Korea January 2016."

"We're TOTALLY saying yes to that lecture tour," Jane chirped in suddenly.

"Ugh, fine," Darcy sighed. She looked down at her phone and grinned. "Which means we'll be back at the facility in order to see Helen when she's done in South Korea."

"Awesome?" Jane gave one slight fidget.

Helen's phone chirped and she looked down at it and laughed before looking up at the other women. "Hey, do you guys have any recent pictures of Thor?"

"WHAT?" Jane demanded, anger boiling immediately.

"Yeah," Helen nodded absentmindedly. "Or oh, Steve Rogers? That might come in handy."

"Uhm," Darcy said smartly, starting her own fidget.

"Specifically his butt or his biceps," Helen nodded, still looking down at her phone. "I'd prefer the butt, but you know, the biceps are definitely not too shabby. Thor's are better, but Steve's are good too."

"Well, let's—we shouldn't," Darcy wrinkled her nose. She'd never met Steve Rogers. She had no claim on Steve Rogers, except for the fact that every single one of their mutual acquaintances had been trying to play matchmaker with them since the beginning of time. She shouldn't want to pinch
the fleshy part of Helen's arm for her wanting to mack on Captain America's butt and/or biceps.

But she was *totally* going to feed her to Manuel the Fluffy.

"Dude, if you have a shirtless picture of Thor or Steve, I can pay off one of my student loans by the end of the week," Helen continued. "OH, or Barton! He's surprisingly valuable."

Darcy blinked at her. Jane tilted her head to the side curiously. And Clint FLEW from the vent and landed next to Helen.

"What kind of value are we talking? Because I have a healthy need for money at the moment," Clint said. Laura was due in about three weeks now. He had THREE college funds now. "Does it have to be good lighting, or can I whip off the shirt here and now?"

"This lighting should do," Helen nodded. She got her phone ready while Clint quickly whipped his shirt off. She grinned at Darcy and Jane. "Seriously, being associated with the Avengers is awesome. You can make all this extra cash selling their pictures online to crazy fans. Thor and Steve are the most valuable, obviously, but still, can't go wrong with Barton."

"So---you don't like them?" Jane asked. "Is that why you were always asking about Thor this past year?"

"I CAN MAKE MONEY FROM PICTURES OF AVENGERS?" Darcy whispered in excitement. She whipped out her phone and pulled up a picture of Tony with two pieces of licorice hanging out of his mouth like walrus teeth. She put the phone an inch from Helen's face and demanded, "How much can I make from this?"

"Fifty cents, tops?"

Jane’s hand went for her phone, knowing how many shirtless pictures she had of Thor. 3,132. And that was just shirtless pics only. She’d had Tony give her the super deluxe Stark phone memory package. Thor was never shy about his body, and he reveled in the fact that his future bride found him attractive. He had no boundaries, whatsoever. It was pretty spectacular.

"I like them fine, for you know, hero types," Helen revealed. "But I prefer a more normal guy to set
my heart on. You know. Not all---"

She gestured to Clint as he flexed for the camera, making a very constipated duck face.

"That."

New York, Present Day

“I was just coming out of the day spa, you know, I thought I’d treat myself. There’s nothing wrong with treating myself. I make enough money now that my student loans are all paid off thanks to that calendar that Thor, Clint and Tony agreed to. And Steve may have been Mr. July and not really agreed to it, but he wasn’t fussed, because it was me, and I’ve proven myself loyal to the Avengers. I mean, that’s what sucked so bad about this past year and a half, you know? I got mind controlled by a big shiny stick of doom, built a humanoid body and then fought the mind control and stayed conscious long enough to tell Steve what was what. I DESERVED THAT SPA DAY DAMMIT! But nooooooooooo, Helen. Noooooooo, you can’t have four hours of peace and solitude. You get mother fucking kidnapped and mother fucking thrown on a mother fucking plane and all of a sudden you’re being forced to program blue goop that will take over the brain of the man who essentially funds all of your research, experiments and spa days. I mean... I just wanted to get my eyebrows waxed. Is that too much to ask?”

Luis blinked at Helen as she finally stopped talking as they arrived at the pickup spot ahead of time. Helen had been talking at lightning speed ever since they had hit the open air. It was pretty amazing, really. Luis hadn’t been able to get a word in edgewise.

“Say something,” Helen asked, only sounding mildly desperate.

“Your eyebrows are dope,” Luis said quickly, before holding two thumbs up.

“The Avengers aren’t going to be mad at me, are they?” Helen fretted. “It wasn’t my fault. I didn’t want to do it, but they didn’t tell me what I was doing, and by the time I knew what I was doing, I had a gun to my head and it was too late because the goop had integrated into brain tissue. And then they had control and were getting all this information downloaded from Tony’s brain. And DARCY! They had everything on Darcy, even her real bra size. And you know what? I didn’t
even know they did bra sizes in letters higher than E.”

“Awesome,” Luis breathed out.

“I KNOW RIGHT?” Helen nodded. “Her tatas are freaking spectacular.”

“Marry me?” Luis wondered in a whisper.

“What?” Helen furrowed her brow.

“Oh, our ride is here,” Luis announced. The van pulled up and the side door quickly opened. Luis gave a small wave to Vision, who was staring at Helen in wonder.

“Vision?” Helen questioned.

“Mother Helen?” Vision tilted his head to the side.

“Mother what now?” Luis furrowed his brow.

“Vision ate the pizza, he loved it!” Kurt announced happily. “Woah, pretty lady.”

“Damn Luis, she is fine as hell, what is it with you lately?” Dave shook his head in dismay. “You are stealing my game with your Mexican voodoo, man. You suck.”

“I’m sorry, Mother?” Luis asked, looking between Vision and Helen with a look of utter confusion on his features. “Someone please explain stuff to me, cause I’m getting a headache. For real, though.”

“We must go, Natasha says they have already found the device,” Vision insisted, holding his hand out and helping Helen into the van. “She is most displeased with you, Luis. But I believe she will understand when we tell her that you have retrieved Mother Helen.”
“C’mon, man, either she’s your mom or she’s a really high ranking nun, and either way I’m going to be crying in the back of the van,” Luis sighed as he followed Helen into the van. “Can I catch a break, homie?”

Helicarrier

“You work too hard.”

Sharon looked up from her printouts she had been meticulously pouring over for approximately four hours at that point and gave Maria Hill an incredulous look.

“Hi Kettle. I’m the Pot,” Sharon smirked at her. “Remind me again when the last time you were on honest to god Earth was?”

“Five months ago,” Maria shrugged, as if that were no big deal at all. “Remember, because I was in New York, but you were in England, and that was why you wouldn’t go out with me.”

“I don’t go out with you because technically you are my superior officer,” Sharon reminded her helpfully.

“See, and that’s why we really need to find a buffer zone,” Maria nodded. “Someone to play devil’s advocate. In between us. Are you sure Wilson can’t be convinced?”

“He’s occupied,” Sharon made a small snort of laughter. “The Asgardian meade has spoken.”

“You know I had some of that meade once. Just a sip out of Cap’s glass,” Maria smiled in fond remembrance. “Did you try any?”

“Absolutely not,” Sharon insisted. “I like my head space the way it is, thanks. I mean, you should have seen Rogers. He was ridiculous.”
“He was Darcy, I’d imagine,” Maria nodded.

“It was so wrong,” Sharon shook her head. “But Wilson was worse. He got all shy. And girly. And very much like one little Wanda Maximoff.”

“Huh. I can see that working eventually. Maybe,” Maria nodded. “Is there money riding on it yet?”

“Isn’t there always?” Sharon wondered. “I give it three years until he can admit he likes her. Five until he can get a date from her with the disgruntled permission of all of her father figures.”

Maria laughed and looked down at the papers Sharon was analyzing. Money trails. Those were the worst to try and get through. She reached out and let her finger go down a line, brow furrowing as she tried to figure out what Sharon was tracking.

“That’s a lot of money,” Maria murmured, counting the zeroes. Her eyes going a little blurry at the tenth zero in a row.

“Yup,” Sharon pursed her lips. She looked at Maria thoughtfully and asked, “What’d the mead taste like to you?”

“Lemon fresca and then a really bitter ale taste afterwards. Shouldn’t have gone together, but it did,” Maria mumbled, finger still going down the line.

Sharon swallowed and looked down at Maria’s fingers as she continued to look over the work. Very suddenly Maria froze and her mouth dropped open ever so slightly.

“What?” Sharon wondered.

“We have to get on a quinjet. You and I have to visit Pepper,” Maria said with all of her usual gravitas, none of her flirty demeanor remaining.

“What? Did you recognize something?” Sharon looked down at the papers that held all the secrets about where Hydra got its money from.
“Stark Industries account,” Maria said quickly as they both very quickly walked out of Sharon’s assigned office.

“What?” Sharon furrowed her brow. “Maria, that money was essentially in exchange for goods and services provided by the Winter Soldier program from 1989 to 2000. Do you know what you’re saying here?”

“Yeah,” Maria said grimly. “I really do.”

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Wakanda

“Did you just take a picture of me?” Steve mumbled as he blinked himself into wakefulness.

“What? NO. Don’t be ridiculous. You’re imagining things,” Darcy waved off his concern before putting down her phone and jumping back onto the bed and cuddling against him.

“I know it’s you putting those close up pictures of my biceps up for sale,” Steve smirked at her as he allowed her to cuddle against said bicep. “G’morning, Magnet.”

“Good morning, Cutie,” Darcy grinned up at him. “Natasha dropped by while you were completely passed out from the very excellent bedroom workout. She said she has to run an errand.”

“That doesn’t seem suspicious at all,” Steve sighed. “Do you know what’s she’s up to?”

“Something for King T’Challa, I think,” Darcy shrugged. “Bucky would be following at a distance, I’m sure. So she’ll be fine.”

“Natasha is good on her own with or without Bucky,” Steve corrected her. He made a low moaning sound when Darcy began placing kisses on his bare skin, working her way from his bicep to his
chest, then up towards his throat. “I’m just worried that her sense of doing something for T’Challa will have her stepping over the line of helpfulness and into—–”

He fairly twitched in the bed as she kissed at that spot on his jaw that seemed to be hardwired into all of his pleasure centers and he reached for her and pulled her to straddle his body, his hands going for the t-shirt of his that she had thrown on while he was still sleeping.

“She turns into a busybody,” Darcy finished for him, leaning down and kissing against his lips for an extended, blissful moment.

“Yeah,” Steve nodded, helping her to pull off her shirt very quickly. “And Shuri seemed to not want us to interfere before so—–it’s a—–Christ you’re beautiful.”

“Finish your thought, or the shirt goes back on,” Darcy warned.

“It’s a balancing act. We want to be useful to our hosts, but we shouldn’t overstep our bounds,” Steve said quickly. “Natasha’s used to doing whatever she wants. I just hope—–”

Steve’s brain must have fizzled out as his hands had been moving from her hips up her body until he had two perfect handfuls of Darcy.

“I’m sure she’ll be fine,” Darcy promised, before putting Steve out of his misery and ending all conversation.

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“Ms. Romanoff. What are you doing here?”

Natasha turned with a very carefully crafted, small smile on her face on her way into a vault full of vibranium on the mainland.

“I seem to be at a disadvantage,” Natasha kept the smile on her face. “You know my name, but I don’t know yours.”
“Erik Killmonger,” the man said shortly. “But you knew that.”

“Indeed I did,” Natasha continued to smile.

“What are you doing here?” Erik repeated. “You are not to leave the private island. And I don’t think my King has given you permission to be in the vaults.”

“Your king?” Natasha repeated innocuously.

“Tell me why you are here,” Erik would not be baited, and simply glared at the Avenger.

“Oh, I thought that was clear actually,” Natasha blinked at him. “I’m here to steal the vibranium needed to create a new arm.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading!!!
I thought I wasn't going to get this out today to keep on the Sunday/Wednesday schedule, but then I had a moment of inspiration and typing happened.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2002

“You look like a young man who is in need of some guidance.”

Erik Killmonger looked up from his seat in the empty lecture hall. The guest speaker had left at least two hours ago. Tony Stark. Arguably the most successful graduate of MIT, ever. Erik could recognize the fact that Stark had been ridiculously drunk as he stumbled through a speech about having the time of your life and changing the world. It had been full of lies and outlandish exaggerations.

Stark’s words had fed the bitterness inside of Erik. His family had been exiled from Wakanda by King T’Chaka years ago, punished for the weakness of Erik’s father. His mother had died soon after, and Erik had had to fend for himself in a strange land.

He was at MIT on a scholarship, provided by Stark Industries. He had felt compelled to sit and listen to Tony stark drunkenly spout cheap and tired quotes taken off of old greeting cards. It had only angered him more. Stark was a man who had lost his parents and instead of being exiled from his homeland, he had inherited a kingdom of his own.

“There are counselors at the school to provide guidance,” Erik answered in a bored tone he had cultivated well over the years. It had sent many an interested neighbor, classmate or potential friend away.
Erik’s eyes narrowed in alarm at the sound of his given name. The last time he had heard it had been on his mother’s dying breath where she had begged him to find happiness in his life.

“I’m Obidiah Stane,” the man held out a hand. “I personally approved your scholarship.”

“Thank you,” Erik said simply, although it felt more like an unconscious reflex to give appreciation.

“Your essay was moving,” Obidiah promised, leaning against the row of chairs below Erik.

Erik pursed his mouth slightly. His essay had been a joke. It had been made to play on the heartstrings of those who read it. To use what had given him pain in the past and twist it in a way to benefit from it.

“Not the sob story, mind you. We’ve all had our share of parents ruining our lives, even Tony,” Obidiah chuckled to himself. He gave Erik a very discerning look and nodded. “I was more interested in where you came from. I’ve heard that Wakanda is a beautiful place.”

“It is,” Erik answered simply.

“Would you like to go back home, some day N’Jadaka?” Obidiah wondered.

“I do,” Erik answered.

“Then I believe that I will have to introduce you to a few people. People who will help you find a way home eventually.”

Wakanda, Present Day
“You would dare to steal from the man who has sheltered and protected you and yours?” Erik demanded harshly.

“Please, you can drop the act here,” Natasha had a little half smirk gracing her lips. “You and I both know that righteous indignation isn’t what you want to be feeling on T’Challa’s behalf.”

“You are a duplicitous snake,” Erik shook his head in amused exasperation. “His highness might have excused the first betrayal from you in light of finding his father’s true killer, but I can promise you that he will not allow a second betrayal.”

“I’m assuming you know this from personal experience, N’Jadaka?” Natasha asked casually.

The man took a step forward into Natasha’s personal space, and her slightly enhanced hearing caught the sound of a sniper rifle in the distance being readied to shoot. Her head tilted slightly to the right and she took a short blink and after a few prolonged seconds, she heard the rifle shift back into place. She didn’t need protection, and Bucky should have known that. The Winter Soldier would have certainly known that, but there was less and less of the trained assassin living within Bucky’s brain every day.

Someone like Darcy or Sharon or even Jane might have been annoyed by the overly protective gesture. But it made something warm flare in the pit of Natasha’s stomach. She had spent most of her life grossly unprotected. Although it was entirely unnecessary, as she could protect herself, and she had Erik Killmonger ready to spill his traitorous guts, it was still, in its own way, appreciated.

“You know nothing,” Erik spat at her.

“I know Mariah,” Natasha countered, almost sweetly.

Erik remained silent, but a muscle in his jaw twitched.

“In my line of work, it’s a very good idea to be open minded. Standard operating procedure to make sure that you are intimately familiar with both sides of the coin,” Natasha admitted. “Because you know what coins do, right?”
There was some noise coming towards the vaults and Erik stiffened considerably. Natasha realized that he may have been living a duplicitous life, but he was far from being an actual spy. He was definitely in over his head.

“They flip,” Natasha said in an overly exaggerated whisper.

“Well, well, well.” Everett Ross could be heard well before he was seen. From the noisy squeaks of his shoes, to his obnoxious heavy breathing, right down to the high, nasal, accented voice. He came in with Shuri and W’Kabi, who were surprised to see Natasha and Erik in front of the vibranium vaults. “What is going on here, my friends? Ms. Romanoff? You’ve ventured away from Avengers Island?”

“You and your team searched that island from top to bottom, Mr. Ross and you found nothing,” Shuri reminded him helpfully, certainly sounding a little annoyed at that point.

They had hoped to be rid of the small, obnoxious American by now, but he was lingering on for some reason. The tour of Wakanda had been requested months ago, and T’Challa and the rest of his advisors could find no reason to send him away without looking suspicious. He was deemed mostly harmless, if not excessively annoying.

“Well?” Everett questioned, looking at Natasha and Erik as if he were a seventh grade school teacher who had caught two students doing something mildly naughty.

“Ms. Romanoff has been asked to assist in strengthening our security on our precious national resources,” Erik revealed. He gave one curt nod Natasha’s way and said, “We will be speaking soon, Ms. Romanoff.”

“Thank you,” Natasha nodded, watching as the man walked stiffly away.

T’Challa jumped down from where Bucky was still hidden, two stories up and he walked calmly towards the assembled group. W’kabi rolled his eyes. Shuri gave her brother a ridiculing look. Natasha did nothing to acknowledge the impressive feat.

Everett was gobsmacked, though. He had actually made a high pitched squeaking noise when T’Challa had noiselessly landed.

“I thank you, Ms. Romanoff,” T’Challa nodded at her.
“Are you---are you quite sure you’re not a mutant?” Everett stammered.

“That’s insulting,” W’kabi snorted.

Everett floundered and quickly took his hand and swatted at his own backside as something felt like it was pinching him back there. “I--I had no intention of…”

“I can assure you, Mr. Ross, that my brother was born that way, unfortunately,” Shuri arched an eyebrow at a smirking T’Challa. “Total drama queen.”

“Heh,” Everett chuckled, and shifted his weight between his feet back and forth for a full ten seconds. He felt that stinging pinch on his backside again and smacked at it mindlessly. His cheeks were flushed and he felt for one second that he was a teenager again, invited to the cool kids table. He shook it off quickly though and gave Natasha a stern look, “Where’s Captain Rogers?”

“Asking me that question quickly and continuously will not change my answer,” Natasha gave him a look of mild disbelief.

“You never know,” Everett shrugged. He was pretty sure that anyone would crack eventually if he kept it up. He winced and swatted at his butt again. “Sergeant Barnes?”

“I’m completely unaware of where Sergeant Barnes is at this moment,” Natasha promised, keeping her face straight even as Bucky murmured a lovely, accented Meet you back at home sweetheart.

“Alright. I accept that,” Everett nodded. He felt a definite jab, like a needle poking him in the fleshiest part of his rump and he slapped himself so loudly that the noise reverberated across the vault. He recovered quickly though and spat out, “Where’s Bruce Banner?”

Bucky stopped in his tracks and turned around to hear Natasha’s answer.

“I’m pretty sure he’s not on Earth anymore,” Natasha answered glibly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some security measures to go over.”
“So, you like...didn’t give birth to him? Because seriously, I’m not one of those dudes from the hood who looks at someone else’s baby mama and says *nah man, I’m not trying to mess with that*, because seriously, that kind of thing shouldn’t matter at all. What I am confused about is that you’re like, thirty-one, tops—”

“Thirty-four,” Helen cut in.

Dave began choking on his pizza and Vision helpfully pounded him on the back. Kurt was staring at Helen in wonder. Neither he, nor Dave had ever seen anyone successfully cut into a Luis speech.

“Daaaaaaaamn girl, you is fine as hell, I only said thirty-one instead of twenty-five, cause you’re a badass doctor lady, but seriously, kudos, cause you are aging well!” Luis congratulated her. “I mean—”

“I don’t think thirty-four is aged,” Helen disputed, causing Dave to begin choking anew and Kurt to actually hold his chin in his hands as he stared at her. Vision reached out and grabbed the wheel that Kurt was supposed to be steering. “Really, in my field of work, I’m a freaking baby. I’m surrounded by dudes in their sixties and it’s so hard for them to take me seriously when I’m younger than their second wives and their first set of children. I mean, there was one guy who used to bring me lollipops, because he didn’t know how to talk to me, because I reminded him of his granddaughter and he always would give her lollipops, and aside from the fact that I’m not really into sweets unless it’s chocolate, I *suppose* it was thoughtful.”

“So...thirty-four is still too damned young to have given actual birth to an android that looks forty-five, right?” Luis wondered.

“I was not birthed,” Vision clarified. “I came into being from an amalgamation of lightning, artificial intelligence, and flesh melded with vibranium.”

“I was responsible for the flesh melded with vibranium,” Helen waved nonchalantly.
“She is the mother who built my body,” Vision nodded as he let Kurt take back control of the wheel. He went back to Dave and grabbed a slice of pizza, taking an extra large bite and chewing thoughtfully. He swallowed and continued his thought. “Father Thor provided the spark of life that was necessary when Father Stark could not complete the job on his own. Father Bruce was not as involved in my conception, but he was involved in the initial conceptualization, so I still do honor him.”

“That is complicated as hell,” Luis shook his head in disbelief. He looked at Helen, who was picking at the pepperoni on her slice of pizza with a thoughtful look on her face. She was obviously a little embarrassed, but there was pride there too. Luis nodded and said, “But hell yeah, girl, you do you. That’s downright amazing. You made a dude, and you didn’t make him like normal people go about making dudes. That’s awesome. You’re awesome. Also, are you dating anyone?”

“What?” Helen blinked at him.

“Mother Helen does not have time to date,” Vision offered helpfully. “She is on track to win a Nobel prize this year for her work on the portable Regeneration cradle. She has often said that she has missed out on her chance in making the perfect man due to creating me. Her Weird Science moment has passed, apparently.”

“Stop,” Dave hissed at Vision under his breath. “Stop now.”

“Wanda had warned me many times that I overshare,” Vision said by way of an apology to Helen.

“I get that a lot,” Kurt shrugged.

“Me too,” Luis nodded.

“Me too,” Helen admitted. “So where, exactly are we going? I mean...the one thing that I do know, is that I don’t want to be kidnapped again. And you know when I never got kidnapped? When I loved with the fucking Avengers, basically. I mean, yeah, I got shot at and stuff, and brainwashed, but I never actually had a bag put over my face and I definitely wasn’t ever thrown in a smelly van. So let’s go somewhere where that doesn’t happen anymore.”

“We’re waiting to hear from Natasha,” Luis explained. “She’s totally going to be proud of me that I rescued you, but she’s also going to be pissed that I didn’t take her orders. You know. Literally. And really, that’s like, the total story of my life, you feel me, cause like, it’s like when I go and buy a shelf from Ikea, and then put together that shelf, I don’t bother really following the directions,
because they're crap anyways, and just a bunch of Swedish and diagrams, so I kind of just go on my own and figure it out. Spatially, and whatnot.”

“Be cool dude,” Dave muttered under his breath.

“And that’s like how I came up with the sideways bookcase. Works just like a regular bookcase, but it kind of has to be on its side or else it falls totally apart. Which is a really interesting like, talking piece in my apartment. If you ever run out of things to talk about. I never understood talking pieces though, because I never have nothing to talk about, you feel me?”

“Sell it,” Dave encouraged in a nearly inaudible murmur.

“Cause life is just too interesting. I mean, a couple years ago I get put in jail for stealing something that really wasn’t a big deal at all, when you look at the grand scheme of what’s happening in the world nowadays,” Luis nodded, ignoring Dave’s wince. “And really, I got my shit together now, I’m working with the Avengers, I’m close personal friends with World War II veterans, and I think I’m ready to you know, get out there again. Date.”

“What exactly are you trying to say?” Helen furrowed her brow.

“Date me?” Luis asked bluntly.

“There it is,” Dave bit back a chuckle and took another bite of his pizza.

“Uhm. Maybe?” Helen shrugged. “Once we figure out where we’re going and---wait a minute. You said Natasha?”

“Oh yeah, she’s like my new life coach. Or boss. I don’t know. Both?” Luis nodded.

“She’s gonna kick my ass,” Helen grumbled. “Rule number one of being friends with the Black Widow, never get kidnapped.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Luis reassured her. “She’s like, my new best friend. I’ll totally make sure she goes easy on you.”
“You really have no idea who the Black Widow is, do you?”

Asgard

“Hey Heimdall,” Jane chirped cheerfully enough as she wandered towards the Rainbow Bridge that was essentially Heimdall’s domain. “I haven’t been here to see you in a few days.”

“It’s been five of your Midgardian weeks, Doctor Foster,” Heimdall nearly smirked at her.


“I have it on good authority that your thirst for the Prince was quickly extinguished and that you were actually buried in research for the remainder of those weeks,” Heimdall said airily.

“Don’t tell Thor that,” Jane muttered. “Seriously. Zip the lips, Heimdall.”

“Our usual arrangement will suffice,” Heimdall arched a brow her way.

“I’ll make sure to have Darcy bring the chocolate next time she comes to visit her... thing,” Jane shivered.

“I don’t know that she will have the time,” Heimdall admitted. “She’s been quite. Busy.”

“Oh, damn, that’s right. Captain America is her meade mate,” Jane rolled her eyes fondly. “She wouldn’t ignore her baby though. She’ll be here for her bi-yearly visit.”

“We shall see,” Heimdall nodded.
“Got any letters for me?” Jane wondered hopefully.

“Of course,” Heimdall nodded. He cleared his throat and began to recite,

“Dear Doctor Foster, this is Cooper Barton. Auntie DarDar said that if we wanted to get in touch with you, we just needed to talk to Heimdall in the sky. Hi Mr. Heimdall. Auntie Dar Dar says that she’s found herself a steady fella and that while she still thinks you’re super handsome, she’s not going to be doing inappropriate things anymore to your backside. She apologizes in advance for not giving it the respect it deserves? I don’t get it, but oh well. Anyway, Doctor Foster, don’t forget you promised to come back eventually. I need to finish my summer science project, and could really use that floaty magic science ball toy you told me about. I think some of the small scale shifting metal mechanics can help with my project. And also, Lila would like for you to ask Sif for those diagrams on how to flip a man four times her size. Auntie NatNat refused to teach her. All my love, Cooper.”

“What a kid,” Jane grinned. “Seriously, Barton may be shit at flushing a toilet when he’s done with it, but he’s awesome at making kids.”

“Indeed,” Heimdall nodded. He’d gotten other private ‘letters’ from Cooper Barton. He was a clever little boy.

“I’ll have to go and try to convince Thor about letting me take that toy back,” Jane sighed.

“Perhaps wait two nights, after the feast for the Grateful Harvest,” Heimdall gave her a small, secret smile.

“Ohhh, good idea,” Jane grinned. “Any other letters?”

“Just one,” Heimdall nodded, clearing his throat again, clearly loving the performance aspect of delivering Jane’s letters. “Dearest Janie,

It’s Darcy.

And Steve.

We miss you a lot, Janie-babe. Lots and lots of stuff has happened since you booked it out of
Midgard to ride that Asgardian beefcake train.

Magnet, honestly…

Whatever, this is how I talk with my bffandever, cutie. You should get used to it. Here, to desensitize you, this is how I’m going to describe our activities to Janie once she’s back. Steven Grant Rogers is a gift to all womankind, but actually, just a gift to me. The things that his hips could do finally makes me understand the meaning of Shakira’s amazing classical work *Hips Don’t Lie*, because his hips don’t lie, and they can have me drooling in less than ninety seconds when he really wants---

Sweetheart, shhh…

Heimdall, let it be noted, that Steve is silently chuckling and looking as proud as the puffiest peacock right now. FYI, Stevie, Asgardians view sexual prowess to be in the same category as being a warrior. Aaaaaand now he’s blushing and TOTALLY proud of himself. Seriously adorable.

Magnet, maybe you should get to the point of the letter.

*Oh, fine. Number one. Janie, please visit Manuel the Fluffy and tell him that I will be to visit him as soon as I can, and he will get to meet Steve, and he is going to love him."

“Not bloody likely!” Jane scoffed.

Heimdall shrugged, clearing agreeing with her. Manuel the Fluffy was a point of contention in Asgard. They wanted to make Darcy, the fierce hearthkeeper that Thor had claimed as his own kin, as happy as possible. But the runt of a bilgesnipe litter was certainly not anyone’s first choice of a pet. Except for Darcy, of course. Heimdall took a breath and continued onwards.

“Also, remember that thing that Hogun said that Frigga used to cure that time he nearly had his head severed? Yeah. I need that.

Dr. Foster…
Call her Janie, cutie.

Jane...

Good enough.

Jane, we need your help. Wanda has made no progress with Bucky’s programming, and while we have people working on finding the triggers, Darcy seems to think you and Thor might have a different kind of answer.

The stone broach thingie, remember, Janie?

Whatever you can bring back, or any information would be truly helpful. Thank you so much, Jane.

Thanks, Janie, we love you, come home soon, make sure you tell Manuel the Fluffy that I love him so so so so much! Also, can you ask Volstaag about that axe crossbow thing, cause I think I need one.”

“Hm. Stone broach,” Jane nodded. “How likely is it that Odin will let me take that?”

“I am unsure that asking him would be wise,” Heimdall admitted.

“Hmmmm,” Jane nodded again. Heimdall seemed to be saying something to her with a single arch of his eyebrow. She was definitely thankful for Darcy’s introductory course into Natasha-speak. She understood that quirk of an eyebrow. “Okay. I’m going to go and get an elk to throw into Manuel the Fluffy’s pit. That should count as saying hi, I’m sure.”

Chapter End Notes

JAAAAAAAAAAAAANIE! I’ve missed you so much. And also, I really like the idea that Darcy communicates to Jane when she’s on Asgard through Heimdall. I like to think that Heimdall greatly enjoys reciting the 'letters', he's a secret drama nerd.

I hope that you enjoyed this. Thanks very much for reading!
These are the Days of Scott's Life

Chapter Notes

This chapter was probably one of the quickest chapters I've ever typed up. It was a lot of fun to do!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty-Two: These are the Days of Scott’s Life

August 2015, New Avenger's Facility

"Okay, we'll be back really soon. Please make sure that Wanda has enough things to do to keep her occupied. She's in a little bit of a calmer space since Tony built the murder bot, but still, she's...you know. Just take her to the farm if she gets too pouty and despondent. OH, and have Maria make the office supply dude order colored thumbtacks. Like, bright and fun colored thumbtacks. Because he's giving me a hard time about it, and I don't want to pull rank, but I totally will."

"Darcy, are you sure that you want to go to Asgard?" Natasha asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Of course I do, I want to accompany its future Queen and get all the free stuff that comes with that. Last time I was there, they gave me this salve that I swear to Frigga, is orgasmic. I gave the rest of the bit I had to Helen and she's gonna try to recreate it and then we're going to sell it as Thor's Magical Thunder Lubricant...guaranteed to light you up every time..."

"You just seem distracted," Natasha had the hint of a smirk on her lips.

"Don't you start!" Darcy wrinkled her nose at her super spysassin friend.
"I'm just observing that you usually don't ramble so much. You're sounding like Helen at this point," Natasha shrugged. "You know, Steve and Sam are due back to base in less than eighteen hours. It might be nice to finally introduce the two of you."

"Mmphh," Darcy's mouth made a funny side to side motion on her face. "Speaking of Captain Rogers, please make sure he gets that packet I put together on those Accords that the UN is starting to make noise about. Loud noise."

"You could stick around, help us set up a little more. Make sure Steve approves the brightly colored paper clip purchase form," Natasha suggested.

"I'm sure that when Captain Rogers wants to meet me, he will no doubt go to any of the dozens of people trying to set us up and ask them," Darcy snapped back.

"Darcy," Natasha said in a soothing, placating tone, a little concerned to see that Darcy was genuinely a little annoyed.

"Here comes, Janie. Okay, I'm going to go and get my free stuff, we'll be back in three weeks in Manhattan, and then it's touring time," Darcy waved her off. "And tell Lila I'll bring back loads of pictures of Manuel the Fluffy playing with that toy she got him."

"What up, Big Red?" Jane said distractedly as she tried to organize her little carry-on bag stuffed to the gills with Midgardian sweet treats that Thor liked. Darcy had it taken care of, of course, but still Jane liked to bring a little something extra. Mainly, push pops. In addition to the candy, she had a half dozen pair of hopefully clean underwear and several paper tablets covered in illegible scrawl that she wanted to go over with the royal astronomers.

"Okay, love you, bye," Darcy smacked a kiss on Natasha's cheek and smirked when Jane tried to do the same, but ended up kissing Natasha's ear instead. "Ready to Roll, Heim-doll!"

Natasha watched as the bifrost lit up and soon Jane and Darcy were gone and in their place, when the light receded was a single, fluttering piece of parchment. She reached for it before it hit the burning bits of lawn the bifrost had left and picked it up with a little knot in her stomach.

*The doctor is safe in Sakaar.*
Natasha took a deep breath and nodded as she made her way back into the facility, intent on making sure a certain overzealous supply orderer became well aware of the Darcy protocols in place. Whatever she wanted, she was given, essentially. And that didn't come from her, Pepper or Tony. That came directly from Steve, and the man had never even met her face to face.

Steve had been in Rome with Sam, making a quick tour to see if they could find Bucky in an old haunting spot Natasha had dug up. Apparently he had been there, according to Heimdall, but had evaded Steve and Sam once again. She was fairly certain it would take something big to actually get James back, but she was at a loss as to what that thing could be.

She stretched her neck slightly, eager to put the fear of Captain America's disappointment into someone, to at least work some of her own well earned tension off.

Present day, Wakanda

"Tony is heading back to the facility to beef up security and welcome back Helen and---those guys."

"They have a name. You know. As a collective group," Scott shrugged at Natasha, as she clearly didn't want to say the name out loud. He gave her a little bright eyed smirk and let his shoulders do a slow shimmy back and forth. "C'mon. You can say it, big bad scary Russian assassin lady. Say it. C'mon. Say it. They're the Three…." 

"No." Natasha rolled her eyes.

"Say it," Scott cajoled, only to receive a gentle slap to the back of the head as Bucky came out onto the patio with a pitcher full of Scott's favorite Sangria. "Ohh, fruity tea alcohol water. Yes, please."
"Sharon checked in," Natasha continued as she was saved from using ridiculous crew names as Scott began to pour a tiny glass of sangria that he set aside, before taking a large straw and putting it right into the pitcher for a slurp. "She and Maria are touching down in Silicon Valley. They have some suspicions about your American handler."

"Good," Bucky nodded. He gave her a wrinkle of his nose and said, "So, tell me about Bruce Banner, Natalia."

"He is a brilliant doctor who occasionally turns green and ragey," Natasha murmured as she went over reports.

Scott looked up from his slurping with obvious delight. One of his favorite parts about living on the island was the daily dose of fun relationship drama. Some times it came from Clint and Laura. Very little of it came from Sam and Wanda, and it was mostly unintentional, super slow burning friends to lovers stuff from them. Most of the time it came from Darcy and Steve, whether they had intended it or not. The very committed couple had lovely moments of subtext that Scott liked to watch. Darcy was insecure sometimes, and it was always fun to watch Steve work her out of any lulls she had fallen into. And Steve was Captain Steve America, so there were plenty of times when it seemed like everything was crashing in on his head, and Darcy would toss him a nice life preserver.

He never understood Dave and Kurt's great love of soap operas, where people were always breaking up and cheating on each other. Scott much preferred the little, not relationship-ending dramas he was currently surrounded in. It was so much more fun than at regular cable shows.

But by far, the most interesting couple to watch was definitely Uncle Bucky and Uncle Bucky's Natalia. So complex. So over the threshold of Scott's actual emotional maturity level. But yet so fun for him to watch nonetheless.

"You don't want to talk about the fact that we're very, very close to finding the next set of trigger words that could have you becoming a compliant weapon of mass murder?" Natasha asked, almost cheerfully.

"You're avoiding answering," Bucky said shrewdly. "Don't think I don't know you tricked me into compliant mode when I asked you before by doing that thing to Steve that I like seeing you do so much."

"Darcy asked me to do that to prove a point," Natasha waved him off.
"Doll, I'm not gonna get jealous," Bucky promised her. "I tried to kill you at least three or four times in the last forty-five years. You had every right to go out and have some fun times."

"Bruce was a mistake," Natasha said evenly. "I don't know what I was thinking."

Scott thought for sure that he was wearing the suit, because the two of them were talking to each other like he wasn't even there. He didn't mind though. The voices were less booming and distorted when he wasn't shrunken down.

"Didja love him?" Bucky wondered, only a little sullenly.

"No, James," Natasha said softly, her hand going out and running down the length of his face. "I have only ever loved you, and you know that."

Bucky couldn't help the way his lips moved upwards into a tiny, pleased smirk. He hummed in contentment when Natasha leaned in and slanted her lips over his for a long extended moment. A metal skeleton hand ran a line up the slope of her arm before going behind her back and waving at Scott to go away.

"Nuh uh. Summer's are reruns. Gotta get my watching in now," Scott mumbled, not feeling creepy in the least at watching this lovely vulnerable moment.

Bucky's metal skeleton hand gave him the finger.

Scott shrugged it off and continued watching.

"Incoming minors, take the excessive PDA to a private room, you lovebirds," Laura irritably announced as she stomped onto the patio.

Scott shifted his attention from the rapidly departing Bucky and Natasha to Laura. He gave her a little wave before diving back into his pitcher of sangria.

"Lang, I know you know better than to have not saved some for me, you little bastard," Laura grumbled, only slightly mollified when Scott slid her small cup towards her.
"MOMMY! Daddy says I'm not allowed to go with Teela and learn how to defend my King T'Challa!" Lila whined as she stomped onto the patio.

"Your father is a turd-bucket. Of course you can go with our protectors and saviors and gracious hosts and do whatever they want you to do," Laura insisted. She threw back the entire contents of the little glass Scott had given her. "So long as they don't send you to the vibranium mines."

"Don't be silly, Mommy, Wakanda doesn't mine with humans, they have robots to do that," Lila scoffed.

Lila ran off and Scott waited patiently, taking absent sips from his pitcher of sangria. He knew that Laura's petulant silence had an expiration date. This wasn't his first rodeo around one pissed off half of the Barton parents. Laura held out her cup with a scowl and he begrudgingly gave her half a cup more before wrapping his arms defensively around the pitcher.

"What is it with you superhero types? Honestly?" Laura demanded hotly.


"I really think he's forgetting who rescued his ass this last time. I AM THE SUPERHERO NOW, DAMMIT," Laura huffed out, throwing the pitiful amount of sangria that Scott has spared her down her throat.

"You're pretty badass," Scott nodded. "And as far as superpowers go, you and Clint are pretty much even."

"Exactly. See, he has a wicked bow and arrow, sure, if we get transported back to paleolithic times, he's the dude I want with me," Laura nodded. "But I can take a look at the room and my genius brain will figure out a way to knock you out without doing hardly any work. I ROCK."

"No arguments, dude," Scott reminded her helpfully.
"So how dare he, huh? How dare he work with Fury on trying to get us a new farm somewhere isolated and quiet and boring?" Laura demanded. "How dare he think that I'd be totally cool with leaving this family when it's just starting to solidify and be Mama Barton on another farm?"

"Shiiiiiiiiit," Scott made a disgusted face. "Seriously, what is he thinking, dude?"

"I KNOW," Laura ran her hand through her hair in frustration. "He'd still be stuck in an underwater prison if it weren't for me."

"Yeah, I'm glad you weren't Mama Barton on the farm then," Scott nodded.

"And I don't have any problem with Fury, really I don't. He makes the hard decisions. He keeps the hard secrets. But leave the man out of it," Laura sighed. "Give Fury an inch and he will gladly take a mile, all the while spouting about how it's for the greater good. Your greater good. I mean, he's working on getting an enclave back in Canada for all the so-called civilians. Including your ex-wife and kid!"

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?" Scott stood up suddenly, sloshing the pitcher of sangria ever so slightly. He took the straw and carefully pulled up the drops that had landed on the table. "That is so not happening. I mean. So not happening, dude. No way. That's, beyond the realm of possibilities of happening. I don't even know that Fury dude. Not cool."

"Babe," Clint sighed as he came onto the patio, Cooper trailing behind him with a sullen face.

"Fuck face," Laura leveled a glare at him.

"Babe, the kid," Clint gestured to Cooper with his head.

"Please, I'm not the swear jar kid," Cooper grumbled. "And you ARE being...not cool, so it's not like she's lying."

"COOP!" Clint chastised.

"I'm not leaving Wakanda!" Cooper grumbled. "Unless you're going to let me visit Aunt Doctor"
"Coop, we live here now, sure, but we might not always be welcome here," Clint said gently. "It's important to have backup plans. There might come a time when King T'Challa can't have us here anymore, and we have to have another place to go then."

"That's a big fat stinking lie!" Cooper disputed. "King T'Challa is the KING, he doesn't want us to go away, so we shouldn't have to go away!"

"Stop being a fuck bucket, Clint!" Laura added quickly. "You and I both know there is a huge difference between a back up plan and going to Fury and giving him control over another big plan of *Hide the Bartons* ."

"And the Maggie and the Cassie and the fucking Paxton, dude!" Scott chimed in. "Have you no chill, Barton? No chill?"

"This is fucking ridiculous," Barton huffed out, outright glaring at Scott. He turned a softer, pleading look to Laura, but found no forgiveness or understanding there and sighed before turning and heading back into the house, going to the only member of his family who wasn't currently pissed at him. The baby.

"Mom, I don't **want** to go live on another farm," Cooper whined. "The science here is better. Please don't let Daddy move us again."

"Who is moving?" Darlene demanded as she and Wanda came from their daily walk on the beach together. "I have five more days before I have to go home, so it's not me. Maybe. I'm still thinking about retiring early."

"Mrs. Wilson, Dad wants to move us back to boring North America!" Cooper announced in distress.

"And my not at all pleasant baby mama," Scott was almost as equally as distressed as Cooper.

"Sam told you about saying that, Tic Tac," Wanda rolled her eyes.
"You need an intermediary?" Darlene looked at Laura knowingly. It wouldn't have been the first time she had played a marriage counselor to the Bartons during her short stay in Wakanda.

"Can it be pillow fight therapy?" Laura wondered with sudden excitement. "Cause I want to whack him."

"Sure," Darlene smiled at her knowingly. "Let's go."

"Can I whack him?" Scott wondered.

"No. Finish your sangria, Scott," Darlene advised. "And your daily drama viewing."

"Daily drama?" Wanda furrowed her brow as Darlene led Cooper and Laura back into the house.

"Shh, next episode is starting," Scott advised her. He got a devilish little look on his face before he sidled up next to her and placed an arm around her shoulders. "So, how old are you again?"

"Too young for old farts like you, Tic Tac."

Wanda and Scott turned to face Sam as he walked onto the patio. Wanda looked at him in confusion as Sam glared as hard as he could at Scott.

More specifically Scott's hand which was curled around Wanda's bicep.

"Sometimes viewer participation is the only way to get things moving," Scott muttered with a shrug.

"I got kicked out of my conference call with Sharon and Fury, thank God," Sam announced. "The Bartons are doing some weird foreplay thing with pillows in front of my mom."

He walked over to Scott and physically, and none too gently, pried the man's fingers and hand off of Wanda. Then he glared at Scott for good measure. Then he took Wanda's hand and started walking
"You got your suit on underneath?" Sam asked.

Wanda moved her t-shirt and pulled on her bikini top strap. Sam swallowed slowly and nodded.

"I found this awesome little glade with a waterfall and pool yesterday. You'll like it," Sam promised.

"Ohhhh, can I come too?" Scott asked, already knowing the answer to the question as he picked up his pitcher again and took a big sip.

"I'm not levitating you back home when you pass out," Wanda warned him.

"Yeah, stay here, Tic Tac," Sam glared at him once more for good measure.

Scott shrugged it off and smiled as they walked away.

"Good episode today. Kurt will like that progress," Scott shrugged. He furrowed his brow and wrinkled his nose as he looked around at the lovely and green surroundings around the patio. "Where's my Darcy and Steve show?"

He sighed and took his pitcher, intent on finding the show so that he could get a complete day's viewing in.

His tablet buzzed on the table and he quickly slid the screen open to see Luis' face.

"Yoooooooooooo," Luis grinned at him. "Look who the new super spy is on the block, friend!"

"Hey, Luis!" Scott said cheerfully. "I can't go and get Luis robot today. It's in the den, and that's where the Bartons are doing pillow therapy today."
"Oh shit, son, I do not want to be involved in that," Luis shook his head. "Although Dave will get a kick out of it. He likes hearing about how those crazy Bartons keep things spicy. Like, one of those sitcoms his nana watches, but instead of it being unrealistic, both parties are like, equally hot."

"HEY!" Helen called out, elbowing Luis so that she could take up half the screen with her face. "Hey guy I don't know. Where's Jane? I need to ask her a question. 'Cause I don't know how I've escaped the wrath of Natasha after a kidnapping, but I'm not going to complain about it, because Jane once got kidnapped for two whole hours by AIM, and they totally didn't know that she was actually Jane Foster. They thought she was Darcy. So they were trying to get passwords out of her, and Jane was like, yo dude, I totally don't know, that's my assistant's job and she changes the passwords every day. Three days ago it was HYDRA SUCKS DONKEY BALLS, and today it could be AIM IS A RUBBER BABY BUMBPER BITCH. Who knows? But seriously, Dr. Jane Foster, I need her for reasons. Because when she got kidnapped, she survived the wrath of Natasha. And I TOTALLY need to survive the wrath of Natasha, because...duh."


"Didn't I tell you, sweetness?" Luis smiled at Helen. "Dr. Foster, aka Darcy's best friend, aka world renowned astrophysicist, aka People's most beautiful genius of 2014, aka---"

"The girl who can't operate a microwave except to use it as a pizza holder," Helen waved him off. "Please. I love Jane, but she's a normal human being, not a goddess. Well. Not a goddess yet. Because I think once Thor finally asks her to marry him, which I think is in his five year plan, then she'll eat an immortal apple and become a goddess, which seriously, kind of seems like it sucks a little. Like, it'll be the book. All my friends are dead. So depressing."

"I agree," Scott nodded, knowing that neither Luis or the female on the screen with Luis would acknowledge him.

"Anyway, Dr. Jane is on Asgard, because of the meade," Luis nodded. "I told you about that, didn't I?"

"Yeah, I want to have some of that. I wonder what it would make me act like?" Helen smiled. "Like, all serious and quiet and boring?"

"Doubt it!" Scott laughed.
"Did you say something bro?" Luis wondered. "I get a little lost in Helen's eyes. She's the bomb---"

"OH, do you guys want to go and look for Darcy and Steve with me? I didn't get my episode of them today, and I get cranky when I don't watch all my shows," Scott nodded.

"Cool, let's do this," Luis nodded.

"Are we going to interrupt anything shady?" Helen wondered as Scott walked with them around the house. "Cause I saw the compatibility charts that JARVIS published a few years back, and I figure those kids are gonna be banging like screen doors in a hurricane. OH! The birth control is holding right? Because she and I take the same stuff, and I just want to know for reasons."

"Uhm, no buns in the oven that I know about, but then again, I didn't know Cassie was coming along until she was like, there," Scott shrugged.

"That reminds me of my next door neighbor's daughter, Elisa, she was on that show, right, the one where you didn't know you were pregnant until you were like, pushing the baby out---"

"That's a lie, come on, Luis, as a medical doctor, I can say with damned near certainty that---"

"No, for real though, cause she had a little padding to begin with and she just thought she was---"

"Woah," Scott breathed out as he finally found Darcy and Steve. He turned the tablet to see what he was looking at.

Darcy and Steve were on the private balcony of their room, kissing, which was not an unusual occurrence.

What was an unusual occurrence was the modest, but sparkly diamond ring that Darcy had on her left ring finger. And the fact that Steve was on one knee, happy tears streaming down his smiling face, and Darcy was bent at the waist with her arms wrapped around his shoulders as she kissed the living daylights out of him.

"Shit, I missed it, and I can’t rewind it," Scott fretted in a whisper. “Season finale! Season finale cliffhanger!”
SEASON FINALE CLIFFHANGER! Sorry Scott, but it's not the season finale yet. I think I'm probably going to have to keep on writing this monster until like, Chapter 50!

Also, I will do my best to update on Sunday, but it will be a busy day for me. So I'm not promising.

Thanks for reading!!
Chapter Notes

Did you guys think I would actually let you hanging, regarding Steve's proposal? NEVER!

I hope you enjoy this. Let's go back for that rewind that Scott does not have the power to do...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Three: The Best Four Hours of Steve Rogers' Life (so far)

February 2014, Arlington Virginia

"Are you sure we're allowed to be doing this?"

Peggy Carter took a deep breath of fresh air into her lungs, turning her head as quickly as her old bones would allow it so that she could aim a truly unimpressed look Steve's way. To his credit he gave her a knowing smirk before rolling his eyes, picking her up and out of the backseat of the sedan he had conveniently borrowed from the SHIELD fleet of unmarked cars and gently placed her into the wheelchair.

"Don't get old if you can manage it, Steven," Peggy sighed as she settled old bones into the surprisingly comfortable wheel chair. "I can hardly recommend it."

"I had a gray hair yesterday," Steve shrugged. "So, all that spouting off Howard did about the serum slowing down my aging to molasses was a big fat exaggeration, which you know. Howard. That makes some sense."

"Indeed it does," Peggy chuckled as Steve began pushing her wheelchair along the smooth pathway
leading to the cemetery. "He and I had our fair share of adventures while you took your ice nap."

"I bet you got into all sorts of trouble. The reports that I got to read were very redacted, I'm sure," Steve nodded in amusement.

"Steven, you wound me," Peggy taunted. "Up seven more rows and over two, and we'll be there."

Steven nodded, feeling a little out of sorts all of a sudden as he and Peggy made their way to a grave that Steve had not had the courage to visit yet. He'd made the tour of the country, going to all the gravesites of his long lost comrades, meeting children and grandchildren and in Morita's case, one very new great-great granddaughter. They were bittersweet visits. It was inspiring to see that these great men who had risked everything to fight alongside of him had gone home to live happy and fulfilling lives.

But they'd had happy and fulfilling lives. Something Steve had not had, and something Bucky hadn't had either.

"There he is, well, the headstone at least," Peggy sighed.


*Beloved son and brother.*

Steve felt the air leave his lungs as he stopped in front of the head stone. He stepped to the side of Peggy's chair and his legs crumpled beneath him until he was sitting next to her chair, right in front of the empty grave.

"Colonel Phillips looked for him after all was said and done," Peggy said softly. "Sent a half a dozen groups over the course of a month and a half after Hydra's fall to try and find his remains."

"Yeah," Steve whispered, wiping uselessly at the tears that had begun to fall.

"There had been a blizzard shortly after, unseasonal weather," Peggy acknowledged. "There was no hope of recovering him."
"It's probably more peaceful where he is than being in this cemetery," Steve shrugged helplessly.

"He always did complain an awful lot about being crammed in with the other soldiers," Peggy had the ghost of a smile on her lips. "It is, of course, the main reason why I bribed Sally from the provisions department to always make sure his lodgings were as close as possible to Dum-Dum's and Morita's. Just to get a rise out of him."

"You sneak," Steve let out a watery chuckle. "He complained so much about always smelling Dum-Dum five minutes before he entered a room."

"It was the little things in wartime to give me joy," Peggy answered back smartly.

They fell into silence again, and Steve sighed, taking out a single piece of paper, folded up neatly and placing it on the headstone. He'd spent months writing out his thoughts. His thanks. His regrets. He had so many things to say to Bucky still. They could have had a lifetime of being at each other's side and it wouldn't have been enough. Sometimes he found himself at the end of a mission, or a particularly harrowing day in the 21st century, and he'd mutter things out loud, complaining about his day. He looked to Peggy and gave her a wry smirk.

"Sometimes I think I'm going crazy. I talk to him, you know?" Steve admitted.

"Steven, I talked to you for quite a bit of time after you were gone," Peggy admitted. "Right up until the point you were standing in front of me again. The nurses thought I was mad, too, when I would complain to you about the rain bothering my knee that---"

"You had banged up when I tackled you to the ground back in Brooklyn," Steve rolled his eyes. It hadn't been the first time she had complained about it.

"You find your comfort where you can," Peggy said firmly. "Soak it in. Revel in it. Because you don't know when you'll be taken from it. You can't know when it could end. So while it's here, reach out with both hands, grip on tight and never, ever let go."

"Wise words from an escapee from the nursing home," Steve gave her a look. He knew what was coming next. He'd been visiting Peggy three times a week whenever missions hadn't gotten in the way. She always rounded the conversational wagon back to this point whenever she kept her faculties about her.
"You signed me out, Steven, I haven't escaped fully yet," Peggy assured him.

"I signed you out to take you for a walk around the facility, not to drive thirty miles to visit all of our dead friends," Steve sassed back pleasantly.

"I've missed that smart mouth an awful lot," Peggy said wistfully. "The only one who could handle you properly back then was Barnes. You should really find another who has those same special abilities. Perhaps one you might want to actually kiss this time, because I doubt you wanted to kiss Barnes back then."

"Peg," Steve huffed out with a blush tinging the tips of his ears.

"Little Nicky Fury told me about a lovely girl who he won't allow me to meet," Peggy said in a cheerful, conversational tone. "Brunette, because I know how much you like those, despite any blondes that you may have been caught kissing."

"If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times, Peggy---"

"Yes, yes, she ATTACKED you and OVERPOWERED you. All six feet and two inches of you. Just completely overwhelmed those serum enhanced muscles," Peggy picked at him. "Steven. I know that you'll always hold a special place in your heart for me."

"You're my best girl, Peggy," Steve said softly, an indulgent little smile playing on his lips.

"Yes, and that's all well and good, but you need to go out and live your life," she advised gently. "And if your best girl is saying she has a smart and sassy little looker that just so happens to be in your circle of friends and acquaintances, perhaps you should listen to her."

"I doubt Fury told you to set me up with a blind date," Steve laughed at the thought.

"No, Anthony may have mentioned something on our last skype session," Peggy admitted.

"Soon, okay? I just, I'm still dealing with some bouts of depression," Steve admitted softly. Peggy didn’t have to say a name when she was describing the smart and sassy looker that she wanted to set
him up with. He knew who Darcy Lewis was. "I'm still having some nightmares. I'm a mess, Peggy. And no sweet woman deserves to have to deal with that. Let me just---work some stuff out, alright?"

"Alright," Peggy conceded. "But, I want to see you happy before I pass, Steven."

"Peg, don't talk about that," Steve physically cringed at the idea. She was the last person alive who understood. He didn't want to give that up yet.

"Alright, alright, I'll live forever," Peggy promised him. "Let's go and get some ice cream."

"You're not meant to have sugar," Steve reminded her helpfully.

"I'm also not meant to be thirty miles from the nursing home, but here we are, Steven," Peggy sassed back. "Now take me for ice cream, or I'm going to make sure you get arrested for stealing a national icon away from her caretakers."

Four hours prior, Wakanda

Steve slowly drifted to wakefulness with a once foreign, but now delightfully familiar feeling. 

Contentedness.

He honestly could say that it was probably one of the most underrated feelings in the world. He'd experienced a lot of feelings throughout his long life, decades on ice or not. Fear. Anger. Hunger. Sadness. Excitement. Love. Loneliness.

But he had never consciously known a time when he could have been content. It was a warmth in the pit of his stomach that greeted him hand in hand with wakefulness. A feeling of soft skin against his fingertips that pulled him away from the happiest dreams he'd ever had into something even better than the happy dreams.
He had tried to explain it to Bucky a few days ago. Because at first he thought it was downright unnatural to feel the way he did. He was a man who was used to fighting day in and day out for just some semblance of peace. He put the needs of others before his own well being for so long, that when suddenly a soft life full of friends and family and love came to greet him, he honestly thought something might be off.

'I used to get stuck in a good dream of red hair and your smart ass mouth in cryo every once in awhile, it still felt wrong though. False. And pal, this life you have now, I'm living it side by side with you and I can tell you, we aren't going to wake up in a bad place again.'

Bucky had been right. Things may go awry, there would always be someone in the world trying to get to them all. They'd sent Tony off back to the States with the full knowledge that someone would probably try and come for Darcy eventually. He'd learned that Helen Cho had been taken hostage recently, and he knew that if Darcy wasn't solid beneath his fingertips he would have to worry about that too.

But Steve was no longer the man who put off meeting a girl his friends had thought would be just perfect for him. He'd spent years knowing that Natasha was right. That if she said that she had a friend named Darcy Lewis, and she thought that she and Steve would hit it off, then that Natasha was definitely right. She was always right, really. He'd put it off for so many reasons. A young, bright, vibrant girl didn't need an old man that was frozen out of his own time. Then it became a beautiful, smart young woman didn't need her life put in constant danger. And then of course, it morphed into all of the above, plus the fact that a busy, resourceful, brilliant woman probably didn't have time for a man who was never in the same time zone for one whole day.

He'd been a fool, of course.

Darcy would be safe. He would move heaven and earth to be sure of it. And so would their friends and family.

He'd wasted so much time being lonely and sad that to wake up every day to the happy content feeling was beyond his wildest dreams.

He squeezed fingers along the hip of the woman responsible for all of that contentedness and he let out a sleepy moan as he slowly stretched against her. She was half sitting up in bed, and the gentle light from her tablet greeted his bleary eyes first thing. He heard a rustle of paper and blinked lazily.
"What're you working on, Magnet?" he wondered.

"Some stuff for Odin," Darcy bit at her lip as she looked at the old parchment.

"Odin? Why?" his curiosity waned a little when his eyes focused and he saw her bottom lip get caught between her teeth. He gave a little sigh before placing his lips on the side of her neck, working his way up to get at that pouty bottom lip himself.

"We came upon an agreement so that he would provide room and board for Manuel the Fluffy," Darcy explained, despite Steve's lips working at her jaw. She smirked when one of his hands left her hip and took hold of her tablet, taking it out of her hands and laying it to the side.

"What's he got you doing?" Steve wondered, before slotting his lips against hers, effectively stopping her from answering any questions.

She pushed the tablet further away and gently moved some of the very old parchment full of words to the bedside table, before taking her leg and pushing it against him, forcing him onto his back. She quickly put a leg over him and sat across his abdomen, unsurprised when he sat up just enough to put his mouth against her clavicle before moving further down.

"Frigga wrote a lot. She kept extensive diaries. He wanted someone neutral, outside of Asgard to catalogue them. Extensively," Darcy explained, then let out a heavenly sigh as a swirl of Steve's tongue sent shivers running down her spine.

"Strange," Steve stopped his mouth's honest work. "She was his wife, he should know about most of that stuff."

"People can keep a few secrets from their significant others," Darcy winked at him. She shimmied down his body until he groaned when she slid against his arousal. "Besides, Odin is shady as hell. Frigga was smart to keep her secrets from him secret."

"And you're going to keep her secrets secret?" Steve asked knowingly.

"Hmmmm," Darcy shrugged, pointing up to the ceiling. She trusted Heimdall completely, but he was sworn under an oath to protect the All Father. She didn't know if that included withheld information, but she wasn't going to take any chances.
"Remind me never to--- oh god,\" Steve's eyes rolled back into his head as Darcy let out a blissful sigh as she sank down on him. "Never get on your bad side."

"Impossible, cutie. Absolutely impossible."

---

**Three Hours Ago**

\“You'd be so nice, you'd be paradise to come home to and love.\”

Steve sighed as Darcy finished her little, soft lullaby to baby Nathaniel, who was comfortably drooling against Steve's chest for his morning nap. He smiled at Darcy before she gently took the baby from his hold and put him into the crib that Scott and Clint had spent nine hours putting together the week prior. Scott had somehow managed to staple gun Clint to one of the legs of the crib. When Laura investigated hours later, there was no staple gun to be found.

Those things tended to happen around Scott, though.

“I love it when you sing,” Steve grinned at her as they slowly made their way out of the nursery.

“True love right there, cause I've heard you sing, Lewis,” Sam was waiting on the other side of the hallway, casually leaning against a doorway. “Is the hell beast down for the count?”

“He’s a precious little baby, Sam,” Steve reminded him. “And Darcy has the voice of an angel.”

“You’re head over heels in luuuuuuurve with Darcy. Of course you hear her with rose tinted ear muffs. And for you, Nathaniel’s a precious little baby,” Sam nodded. “To me, and Scott, and Clint, he’s a precious little baby hell beast.”
Darcy shrugged, knowing it was true, both the fact about her perfectly average singing voice and Nathaniel’s true nature. Steve had never really gotten into Nathaniel’s naughty side. The Barton kids all took after certain adults in their lives. Cooper was his mother’s son, totally. Lila was definitely Natasha’s child in everything but actual blood and genetics. And Nathaniel was all Clint. And probably a little bit of Steve at this point too.

At not quite a year old, Nathaniel was well known for terrorizing Scott, either in the suit or not. Sam swore that the baby waited until Sam was nearby or actually holding him before any pooping happened. And he got this little evil grin on his face before he let the stinkiness happen. He was a climber, even though he didn’t quite walk yet, and Bucky or Steve had had to reach up and grab him from very high shelves already.

The baby knew one word. And it was *NOPE*, and he spent all of his waking hours shouting it at people’s faces. And also interjecting it at inopportune times.

Just the other day, they had all thought the baby was sleeping against Steve’s chest when Sam was making his case for being able to take a short trip to Monte Carlo for ‘research’.

“I’m totally capable of handling myself in an adult situation, Steve. And Mom.”

“NOPE!” the baby had called out before going back to sleeping peacefully against Steve’s chest.

“Sharon sent a message,” Sam revealed. “A package has been delivered, want me to head over to Shuri’s office and retrieve it?”

Steve gave Sam a smirk before opening his mouth.

“*Nope* :;

“C’mon, Cap, that’s not nice,” Sam sighed. “I promise I’m not going to leer at Shuri. Again.”

“But her administrative assistant is still on the table, right?” Darcy said under her breath, which was useless, because Steve could still hear it. And of course, he knew that Sam was keen to get any Wakandan friendly relations started.
“We had a deal, Lewis,” Sam narrowed his eyes playfully at her.

“You insulted my singing talent,” Darcy shrugged. She grinned up at him and said, “That violates section 3, item F of our agreement, thereby enacting the retribution clause. Remember?”

Sam rolled his eyes but gave Darcy a little smile. He always appreciated a little bit of sass.

Steve grinned down at Darcy. He loved when she talked contracts. But Sam was right. Steve loved when Darcy did anything.

“Want to grab second breakfast then?” Sam wondered. “Or is time for a nap for the old timer?”

“The old timer just had a nap,” Darcy shot finger guns at Sam with a wink. “A very, very good, fulfilling nap.”

“Gross,” Sam nodded at her. “C’mon. Wanda is making blitnzes with the leftover fruit Sergeant Skeleton arm chopped up for Scott’s two gallon serving of sangria.”

Steve grinned as the trio walked away from the nursery towards the kitchen where Wanda and Scott were excitedly discussing the greatness of 1990’s cartoon movies. It made Steve happy to see a smile on Wanda’s face, and if it got a little brighter at the addition of Sam, who seemingly completely forgot about his quest to get to know Shuri’s administrative assistant better, well then, he’d take it.

Two hours earlier

“You’re dropping your left shoulder an inch too low. Stop that. Again.”

Darcy huffed out her breath in annoyance and sniffled. She then took a deep breath before slowly bringing her body back up to standing upright, her eyes big and soft and just a little weepy. Her full bottom lip jutted out and wibbled ever so slightly. It didn’t appear to be working very well so she let a small whimper squeak out.
“Little Rainbow Widow,” Bucky said softly. He shook his head and said with more gentleness than he had ever used on any of the other Widows he had trained, “Again, please.”

“But...but,” Darcy resembled one of those little cartoon woodland creatures in the awful movies that Scott and Wanda liked to watch every so often. “I’m tired.”

“That’s bull, and you and I both know it,” Bucky smiled.

“Steve woke me up early---”

Steve made a little gasping sound from his place next to Lila in the shade where they were waiting for Darcy to be done with her daily Bucky approved training. He looked to Bucky to defend himself but found that his best friend was definitely not buying whatever Darcy was selling.

“Steven Grant Rogers has never woken up before seven AM unless lives were at stake,” Bucky shook his head in disappointment at Darcy.

“And then he tuckered me out because of---” Darcy side eyed Lila. “Earmuffs, kid.”

Lila rolled her eyes and put her hands over her ears.

“Because of his condition, you know,” Darcy shrugged, fighting against the wicked twisting that her lips wanted to do. “The sex addict nymphomaniac thing.”

Bucky laughed out loud at her faux seriousness and turned to Steve, who was mid eye roll at Darcy’s antics.

“You and I both know that the BOTH of you have the same condition,” Bucky chuckled.

“Hey, I don’t need it all the time!” Darcy countered.

“Prove it,” Bucky shrugged.
“Buck!” Steve called out anxiously. He knew Darcy well enough to know that she’d consider putting an end to old timer naps just to prove Bucky wrong. Steve definitely didn’t want that. He really loved when Darcy put him down for his old-timer naps. He was not willing to see if Darcy needed them more than the need to prove Bucky wrong.

“Darcy,” Natasha called out as she walked around the outdoor training area that Bucky had set up for the ‘civilians’ on the island. Laura was very good at the training. Darlene enjoyed it well enough, but she and Bucky usually wound up chatting with their feet in the water down by the beach rather than working through physical exercises. Cooper did the bare minimum to get by. Lila was obsessive and usually wound up tiring Bucky out. And then of course there was Darcy.

Natasha had tried to warn Bucky that the girl was untrainable. She had worked for years to get Darcy where she was currently at. At first Darcy had jumped at the chance to learn the wicked ways of the Widow. But once she’d learned the basics she had shrugged and called it a day. Natasha had bribed. She’d bartered. She’d used trickery and downright lies. What she found worked best was actually creating little situations for the girl that seemed life threatening, but were usually just some low level SHIELD agent in disguise. Natasha had set up countless fake muggings, fake kidnappings and fake carjackings just to put Darcy through her paces.

It had worked.

“Barter system,” Natasha called out in Farsi. “If you don’t want to do something, find another road out.”

“Heh heh,” Darcy let out a dark chuckle that had Bucky rolling his eyes.

“Hey, where are you goin’?” Bucky demanded as Natasha walked away.

“I have an errand to run,” Natasha waved him off.

“I still want to talk to you about—dammit,” Bucky sighed as Natasha quickly and elegantly bolted.

“Ohoh, trouble in Russian paradise?” Darcy asked with a big grin on her face.
“Don’t try and change the subject, Little Rainbow Widow,” Bucky advised her. “Come on, let’s go again.”

“How about a compromise?” Darcy wondered. “If I can get you on your back, we’ll say that my training is complete.”

Bucky couldn’t help the explosive bark of laughter that came from his lips. He shook his head and sighed happily.

“Alright, kid, deal. Let’s see what you got,” he drawled out, sounding very much like the Brooklyn brawler he was.

“Okay,” Darcy nodded. She held up a finger while she ‘prepared’, which involved stretching her neck, shoving her hands into her bra to reposition her boobs and then turning away from him and sauntering towards Steve with a lovely little smile on her face. “Cutie?”

“Yeah, Magnet?” Steve wondered, confused by this inefficient plan of attack.

“Remember when you said you loved me so much you couldn’t imagine not doing something for me?” Darcy wondered.

“Of course, Darcy,” Steve smiled at her.

Bucky groaned audibly.

“Can you put Bucky on his back for me?” she wondered hopefully. “I’d do it, but I have to go pick something up real quick. Something important.”

“Magnet,” Steve chastised, although half heartedly.

“I mean, I could do it, if you really wanted me to,” Darcy nodded. “But I really do have to go and get something important really quick.”
“Stevie, c’mon,” Bucky shook his head. “If you do this for her, I will never let you live it down!”

“So you’re admitting that I could get you on your back?” Steve wondered.

“You son of a bitch,” Bucky wrinkled his nose at him. He then looked to Darcy, who was steadily walking backwards away from the training area. “Sneaky little minx.”

“You love me,” Darcy winked at him.

“Had you been in the Red Room, I would have had you killed!” Bucky called out cheerfully. “Either that or fallen in love with you!”

“Buck!” Steve grumbled.

“Use it, Cutie. Think about him romancing poor little Russian me, and use that anger,” Darcy called out helpfully before rapidly rushing away.

Bucky couldn’t help a grin as Steve went on the attack quickly and ferociously. Lila’s eyes widened, her hands still clamped tightly on her ears as the two super soldiers started to spar in earnest. She was getting a lot of good information from watching the men playfully swipe at each other. But she felt a little silly.

“HEY!” she shouted loudly. “CAN I TAKE MY HANDS OFF MY EARS NOW?”

One Hour Earlier

“Hey,” Clint grunted as he wandered into the study that Steve and Bucky were currently icing down bruises and chatting with lazy grins on their faces.

“Dammit, Barton,” Steve sighed.
“Huh?” Bucky furrowed his brow.

“It’s his I fucked up face,” Steve shook his head. “What now?”

“May have mentioned something to Fury about wanting a backup plan in case Wakanda becomes unfriendly for us,” Clint admitted quickly, knowing that Steve wouldn’t appreciate a song and dance about what he’d done. “He’s gone a little overboard.”

“No shit,” Steve said dryly. “You’re talking about the man who started developing handheld weapons of mass destruction after Thor landed. And built three helicarriers to fight day to day crime…”

“Dammit, Steve, I know that,” Clint sighed.

“Then why not ask me about your concerns? T’Challa would never turn us away,” Steve shook his head. “Never go to Fury first. Not with your life decisions. He’ll try to take them over and then go crazy on them.”

“I was worried. You can’t understand, Steve,” Clint insisted with some real passion in his words. “You don’t have kids. You can’t know what it’s like to have their future safety and comfort hanging on the whim of someone who you were fighting a few months ago. You can’t know what I’m feeling.”

Steve paused and opened his mouth to speak before shutting it very quickly.

“Oh shit, oh shit, you can’t know that right?” Clint whispered. “It’s too soon for kids, you gotta hold out on knocking up Darce, you can’t fuck up the bet for me, dude.”

“Steve?” Bucky questioned, looking at Steve’s reaction curiously.

“No, we’re not expecting,” Steve said delicately. “We have a plan.”

“Jesus, thank fuck,” Clint blew out a breath. “Care to tell me when that part is planned, exactly? I
mean, there’s a lot of zeroes in the pot, Cap.”

“I don’t have kids. But I have Darcy. I have Bucky and Wanda and Sam and everyone here,” Steve said firmly. “I trust T’Challa with everything. He’s a man of his word. A man of honor and conviction.”

“He’s a man with a country to lead, and if that country wants us gone, then we’re gonna have to get gone,” Clint insisted.

“In the end, you’re going to have to do what you feel is best for your family,” Steve said diplomatically. “But Clint, you and Laura and the kids, you’re my family. Mine and Darcy’s. If we ever wore out our welcome here, I would protect you, and find a new place.”

“Yeah,” Clint nodded, easily accepting Steve’s promise. His eyes bugged out of his head very suddenly. “SHIT. I left my phone in the room. Fury’s been texting it nonstop.”

“So?” Bucky furrowed his brow, but then a moment of realization stole over his face. “Laura’s in the room.”

“Better go put out that fire, quick,” Steve advised.

Clint didn’t waste time, running from the room. Bucky shook his head in mild amusement before getting up off the couch.

“I gotta get Scott his sangria. And try to track down a redhead that I want answers from,” Bucky squared his shoulders.

“Answers about what?” Steve wondered.

“Bruce Banner,” Bucky’s mouth twisted a little into a frown.

“OH,” Steve’s eyes widened. “Look, I didn’t know when I encouraged Bruce…none of us knew she kept what you and her had top secret.”
“You encouraged him?” Bucky pouted at Steve.

“I wanted Natasha to be happy. And—she was always razzing me about dating. About Darcy and getting up to speed on modern women, I was just—you know,” Steve shrugged.

“Being a fucking troll?” Bucky smirked at him. “No worries, Stevie. I mean, I had tried to kill her a bunch of times.”

“A bunch of times?”

“So, it’s not like she owed me anything,” Bucky continued. “I just—I want to make sure I’m not stepping on any toes here. Laura said that Banner is a pill when he’s mad.”


“Yeah, but—”

“She loves you,” Steve interrupted insistently. It felt like seventy plus years later the roles had been reversed. Steve was trying to inspire confidence and reassurance about a woman for Bucky, instead of the other way around. Steve felt that lovely surge of contentment hit him. He would never need Bucky’s services in that way again. He was absolutely confident and sure of Darcy’s love for him. And it was his steadfast opinion that Bucky should feel the same way about Natasha. “For decades, Buck. She’s loved you and will keep on doing that come hell or high water, because she’s Natasha Romanoff and she will do whatever the hell she wants. And she wants to love you and keep you safe.”

“Yeah, alright,” Bucky waved him off. “I’m gonna go and get Scott’s sangria. And your dame came back to the house fifteen minutes ago. Think she’s upstairs in your room. Go and tell her she won and I won’t force her to train. But try and let her know that I just want her safe. From everything. Including me.”

Steve nodded and got up, clapping Bucky on the shoulder before they parted ways. Bucky always knew where and what Darcy was doing. Ever since she and Steve had come back from the island, Bucky was more than vigilant. He may not have had to reassure Steve about Darcy’s devotion to him, but he could still protect them both in other ways.
Steve went quickly towards the room he shared with Darcy, wondering what errand she had had to run. She was on the balcony and he joined her, smiling at the new flowers and vines clinging to the wrought iron railing. The little starburst flowers were bright red and blinding white and deep navy blue.

“That’s new,” he said softly.

“Shuri thought it was funny,” Darcy shrugged.

“So, what were you doing?” Steve wasted no time.

“Natasha and I made a run to the mainland to pick up something that Pepper sent me,” Darcy shrugged again, a little nervousness in her stance, tension in those shrugging shoulders.

“Mysterious,” Steve rolled his eyes. “What’re you up to Magnet?”

“Okay, alright,” Darcy nodded. “We have a timeline.”

Steve’s mouth opened in the closest thing to slack jawed that he had. If Clint and Bucky hadn’t just been talking to him about this, his mind wouldn’t have jumped to the thought of Darcy with a rounded tummy, and the idea of them holding a small bundle of pink between them, or the idea of a small little voice calling out for Mommy and Dada. His heart hammered and he looked down at her in wonderment.

“I love parts of the timeline,” Darcy admitted. “But there are some that I think could be bumped up. Maybe.”

Steve was dreaming up what he was going to paint on the walls of the nursery. The skyline of New York City along with a host of nursery rhyme characters dancing along, definitely. Names began running through his head. He knew that Darcy preferred traditional names, but he really liked the modern, fun names that were out there. They would compromise, definitely. Because it wouldn’t matter if they named the little one Paper Bag, because she would be so loved and so cherished and so beautiful.

“Magnet, are you pregnant?” he blurted.
“Not that I know of?” Darcy gave him a curious look. A slow smile bloomed on her face when she
saw his utter disappointment. “Steve, Cutie, do you want to move that part of the timeline up?”

“Yes,” Steve answered bluntly. “But we should think on it, a little. Because it’s just something I
realized I want, and there are other problems to worry about right now, and we’re in a pretty scary
space, safety wise. Especially you.”

“Hey, I can get James Buchanan Barnes flat on his back, I’m sitting kind of pretty right now,” Darcy
giggled. “But yeah, we’ll work it out. Because...well, that might be something I want moved up a
little too.”

“Alright,” Steve gave her a dreamy smile, reaching out for her with outstretched arms.

“Hold on, first things first,” Darcy held out a little box and put it in his hand.

“What’s this?” Steve looked down at it. He opened the box and his eyes widened. “Magnet...where
did you get this?”

“Pepper got it for me. It was in a safe deposit box,” Darcy revealed. “Has been since Howard came
back to the States in 1946.”

“My mother’s ring,” Steve looked down at the small little chip of a diamond set on a shiny silver
band. He hoped that it wouldn’t have to be resized. He wanted to be able to slip it right on away.
This was ahead of their plan by ten months. And he couldn’t be happier for it.

He quickly got down on one knee and Darcy grinned down at him with tears in her eyes. She had
thought he would think about it. That he’d want to mull it over. But he was diving right in and it
made her heart stammer out an uneven, but happy rhythm. He pulled her left hand and placed a kiss
to her palm before keeping a tight hold on it, looking up at her with joy all over his face.

“Magnet. I shoulda listened to Natasha years ago. And then I shoulda listened to Clint. And Fury.
And Pepper. And Tony. I should have been brave and just met you back then, and talked to you.
And looked at you and fallen in love with you and I’m the world’s biggest idiot for stalling and
waiting so damned long.”
“Selling it, Rogers, you're really selling it right now,” Darcy grinned down at him, sparkling little tears of happiness collecting on her eyelashes.

“I’m done being an idiot though,” Steve promised her. “I coulda had years with you alerady, Darcy Lewis, my Magnet. And I want decades and centuries and forever with you now. Please, would you do me the honor of letting me be your husband? Would you spend the rest of your life, hand in hand with me?”

“Of course, Steve,” Darcy nodded, the grin on her face brighter than the sun as he slipped the ring on her finger. She bent at the waist and put her hands on either side of his face before kissing him soundly. She pulled away from him slightly and sighed happily. “Mr. Rogers.”

“Mrs. Lewis-Rogers,” Steve answered back, anticipating her little thrilled squeak as she went for another kiss, the pair of them completely unaware that Scott, and his tablet full of Luis and Helen had witnessed the moment. They were far too caught up with each other, and far too intent on celebrating their engagement to care. Steve got up off his knee and hoisted Darcy up very quickly and over his shoulder. “Come along future wife, it’s time for this old-timer to take a nap.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter didn't want to end. It's so long. I hope that everyone enjoyed it. Steve did. It was his perfect four hours really. Darcy time. Baby Nathaniel time. Sammy time. Watching Natasha be awesome. Wrasslin' with Bucky. Just all of his favorites in there. And then, you know. hitting the fast forward button on the things that both he and Darcy might want.

Thanks so much for reading!
Chapter Notes

Sorry to have missed posting on Wednesday. I'm at school now and was exhausted after moving in.

I hope that you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Four: All Good Things in Good Time

2004, SHIELD Headquarters, Triskellion

Laura Quill had known her fair share of annoying days.

But today really took the cake.

"What problem could you possibly have with her?"

Peggy Carter's small whisper could still be heard. There was heat and fire and brimstone and a sort of exasperation there that only came after over eight years of living. A normal person would have cowed at it, surely.

"Rogue birds are not something I go out and try to find," Nicholas Fury answered back.

"You are never going to survive in my place, Nicky," Peggy sighed.

"Director Carter, at this point, I'll never be taking your place, because you absolutely refuse to leave," Fury answered her back. "I'm perfectly capable of handling the day to day hiring of scientists on my own."
"Uhm? I never applied?" Laura called out helpfully. "Usually, people get hired when they apply. I was invited down here for a free spa weekend, actually, and then you know, Men in Black and stuff."

And that had been the truth. She had thought she was coming down for a work retreat. Three days of spa treatments, champagne and mediocre buffet food. She had been really looking forward to it actually. But it had not been for a work retreat. She hadn't worked for AIM for too long now, but she already knew that AIM was a lot of things, but apparently it wasn't into the amenities.

She was being head hunted.

By a super shady, super secret organization.

Apparently run by her Great Uncle Frank's best friend's wife?

And some super shady dude in a way too much leather to be considered a corporate professional.

"They're not gonna listen to you," an unseen observer piped up.

Laura got up and spun in a circle, then reversed the spin and began walking very quickly towards an air vent in the far right corner of the room. She plopped down to sit on the ground, reached into her very functional, but still quite pretty knock off Coach purse and pulled out something that looked like a screw driver, but definitely was not a screw driver.

"Hey--hey now, wait, what are you doing?" the guy in the vents piped up.

"Keeping you from getting out here, dummy," Laura shrugged putting away what must have been a highly potent, definitely modified miniature soldering iron. She dug in her purse again and held up something that looked like an inhaler. "I have a friend who put knock out gas in this, want to see if it works? She's KIND OF the smartest person I know, so I'm going to guess that it's gonna work pretty well, actually."

"No thanks?" Clint wondered hopefully.
"You really are dumb," Laura held it up.

"Quill! What the hell are you doing over there?" Fury barked.

"It's Barton, Nicky, you should know that by now," Peggy rolled her eyes, but the gesture was tinged with fondness, not annoyance. The ability of certain agents to surprise Fury was almost endearing to Peggy. She had not been fooled by Barton once. And she'd only managed to let the wily little Natasha slip out of her grasp once before. "Miss Quill, allow me to introduce you to the cheeky little monkey in the vents. You'll be working with him over the course of the next three days."

"In chimney sweeping?" Laura asked in disbelief. "I have a doctorate in mechanical engineering, not ventilation maintenance."

"HEY! I was supposed to get to train the recruits, I wanna train the recruits!" Clint called out anxiously. "Your niece is starting today, Pegs, and she's a hot tamale."

"Don't make me shoot you, Barton," Peggy warned.

"You're disgusting," Laura wrinkled her nose at him.

"Eh, once you get to know me, the biceps tend to make the disgusting a little less potent," Clint wagged his eyebrows at her in the dark of the ventilation shaft.

"Gross," Laura wrinkled her nose before pressing down on the inhaler, effectively knocking Clint out.

"I like her," Natasha said from the chair next to Peggy's desk, where she had appeared out of thin air. Peggy had spent the last four years avidly trying to break the ex Russian assassin of that. She had not succeeded. "We should keep her."
Present day, Wakanda

Scott had put the tablet on the Luis Bot that cooper had magically attached arms to. The arms were not as cool as Bucky's new arm, but it was really cool anyway. Now the trio were just waiting patiently for Darcy to come help him program a simple app to let Luis move the arms around. Scott perked up in excitement when he heard footsteps, and was visibly disappointed when it was just a seemingly made up Clint and Laura.


"No offense," Scott sighed.

"We're waiting for Darcy. Darcy and Steve, and not for any reason that we can say at all---" Helen began.

"No, totally just because I totally love Captain Steve America. Like, totally," Luis nodded.

"And I miss Darcy. I mean, it's been months since I've seen her, and I as much as I hate the fact that I was kidnapped, this means I'm in the kidnapped club, and Darcy isn't in that club," Helen continued. "And I kind of want to rub her face in it a little. Because she rubbed my face in the whole I got to go to Asgard club, and I have a giant alien beast puppy as my pet."

"No, I totally feel you, sweetness. It's not like you want to be rude about rubbing something in someone's face," Luis nodded thoughtfully. "I mean it's more like, you know, I had this friend in seventh grade once, and he was like, yo, look at my cool ass wallet, it's totally on a chain and I have it like, anchored to my jeans and it makes a cool jingle when I walk. And I didn't have that kind of a wallet. One, because I was flat broke."

"I was flat broke once. In medical school. I had to eat tic-tacs and stolen saltine crackers from the salad bar at the hospital cafeteria where I was shadowing," Helen easily interrupted. "And then I kind of realized that they were having me do a lot of mundane things in patient's rooms and you know, people knock hospital food, but let me tell you something, buddy, nothing beats cups of jello that patients sort of forgot about. And I would have been like, absolutely dead without it."

"Oh dear lord. They've multiplied," Laura whispered to Clint. "There are two of them."
Steps echoed in the hallway again and Scott looked up hopefully. When Sam and Wanda came in, he rolled his eyes and sullenly wrinkled his nose.

"Love you too, Tic tac," Sam sneered at him. "Where's Darcy? We gotta do our dinner planning."

"She's busy!" Helen chirped. "Not that I saw anything. Or you know, know anything. Because I don't. I mean, I know loads of things, just not anything about Darcy or why she's busy or what she's doing, because Scott totally left the room before I could see her do anything, which is a shame really, because not that I'm into him looks wise, but still, for science, it seems like something you'd want to watch."

"Old timer nap?" Sam looked to Wanda thoughtfully.

She blinked a few times before nodding and closing up the wall again. She gasped a little and shivered.

"Hey now, Tiny Dancer, you shouldn't be doing that," Sam reminded her.

"They're done with that, it was---different," Wanda took deep even breaths to keep her reaction in check. She sighed and mumbled, "So much happiness."

"Uhm, so yeah, uh," Scott blew out a breath that had his lips making an obnoxious raspberry sound. He didn't want to spill the beans. He, Luis and Helen had come to the very quick decision that just because they had knowledge about Steve and Darcy's engagement, they shouldn't go spreading it around. It would be up to Steve and Darcy to do that, and take the joy and love and celebration for it too. Scott mused for one moment about just how good a friend he was. To Captain America of all people. He errantly wondered if he'd be a groomsman, or just an usher. He was cool with either so long as he was some kind of part of the wedding party. Except officiant. He didn't want to have that kind of power. What if he married Steve and someone else by accident? That'd be a disaster.

He heard Luis and Helen doing their weird mind meld rapid fire talking and he shook himself out of his reverie. Scott pointed to Clint and Laura. "You guys are made up and happy again. Tell us about---you know. Anything."

"She hit me with a pillow, and things got better," Clint shrugged.
"He admitted he was wrong and things got better," Laura corrected. "After I hit him with a lot of pillows."

"Cool," Scott nodded.

"How did you know?" Wanda asked thoughtfully, looking at Laura with no small amount of curiosity.

"Know what?" Laura shrugged.

"That you wanted to marry Clint," Wanda smiled. "What's that feel like?"

"Uhm, taking a pregnancy test a month after meeting him and realizing, holy crap, I'm having a moron's baby," Laura admitted easily.

"I grew on her," Clint rolled his eyes, a smirk on his face.

"OH HEY! It's STEVE ROGERS AND DARCY LEWIS!" Helen said loudly, pointing out the pair who were walking into the kitchen, hand in hand. She wrinkled her nose in annoyance when she saw that Darcy's left ring finger didn't have the sparkly little ring on it. "Hey! Where did the---"

"Party go?" Luis put his hand over Helen's mouth. "Fall out Boy. Great band. I'm like, so happy they got back together and put out more music, because the world needs that kind of rock and roll that everyone can just kind of like, crank out of the speakers sometime, right?"

"I'm going to go track down Bucky Barnes. Natasha had an errand to run on the main island, so he's probably free. I should apologize to him for the ass whooping that I made him endure. And also do his dumb training thing," Darcy announced. She smiled up at Steve, "Take my dinner shift with Sammy?"

"Sure thing, Magnet," Steve nodded, bending down and giving her a lovely little chaste kiss.

"Caveman food!" Sam fist pumped. "Shuri brought us over some kind of wild elk type animal meat. Let's go get a fire started, yeah?"
Steve nodded and Clint and Laura followed, leaving Scott in the kitchen alone with Helen and Luis bot.

"What just happened?" Scott wondered.

"Maybe they want to keep it to themselves for now?" Luis wondered. "I mean---everyone seems hyper invested in their relationship. Like, I haven't known Captain Steve America for very long, but even I ship it, dude. Cause like, Darcy Lewis is pretty damned amazing."

"Her hips are like sin poured into human flesh," Helen sighed.

"Seriously, sweetness, just marry me," Luis begged.

"You know what I think it is?" Scott stood quickly, shaking his head back and forth. "It's the bet! I mean, I didn't put any money down, but I totally should have, because I kind of thought they would get married right away. And then have babies. Loads of perfect babies. But I bet one of their closer friends has money down, and they're waiting so that the person wins."

"That seems like something Darcy would do," Helen nodded. "But Steve is pretty much on the up and up, cheating at Monopoly aside. "I don't think he'd---"

Klaxons cut Helen off, and she and Luis turned wide eyes towards each other.

New York

"Not a drill, kids," Rhodey called out, holding his body up, pushing the assisted legs apart so that the War Machine suit could zoom towards him from the locker room. "End the conference call."

"See you Scottie!" Luis called out cheerfully. He looked at Helen as Vision zipped by, Dave and Kurt following at a much slower pace. "So---what's going down?"
"We are under attack," Friday announced helpfully. "All civilians must follow the blinking red light strips located on the left side of the hallway to the nearest fallout shelter."

"I'm not a civilian," Luis disputed. "I'm like...an agent now, or something."

"Dude, we're civilians, let's go," Helen advised.

"I totally do missions and take orders from the Black Widow though---sweetness? Come on? Fine. We'll go to the basement."

California

"You know where we should go?"

Sharon looked up from her work with a blink. Maria was toying with the end of Sharon's hair as she leaned over the chair behind her and watched her work. They were in a Stark Industries building, going through old records, and Maria was obviously bored with the desk work.

"Hollywood. I bet we could find all kinds of handsome, not too bright, but not too dumb, good time boys to take a couple of girls out for a night on the town."

"You're ridiculous," Sharon smirked. "But that does sound fun."

Sharon knew that if Maria and her were to go out on their own as a duo, they'd either wind up making out in a closet somewhere or obsessively checking the perimeters for security checks. Maria's logic was sound, as it always was. They did need a third to join them. But neither of them could exactly go on okCupid to search out a polyamorous third. Not because they weren't on Okcupid, but because they kind of needed someone who had a certain security clearance.

"Oh, got it," Sharon reached out and clicked a few computer keys. "Shit."
"I don't like the sound of that," Maria sighed tiredly.

"Obediah Stane," Sharon shook her head.

"Was an asshole?" Maria finished hopefully.

"Was Hydra," Sharon bit at her bottom lip. "He was funneling money to Hydra. Stealing from the Stark’s and it all went to Hydra."

"So the Stark's money funded their murderers?" Maria had a clear look of disgust on her face. "That guy was definitely an asshole. So was Obidiah involved in Barnes' American programming."

"I think so," Sharon nodded, pointing out a line on the Stark ledgers. "That transfer eventually made it's way to Hydra. It's three quarters of a billion dollars. Right about the time that Natasha thinks the Winter Soldier came to the States."

"So maybe the triggers died with Stane," Maria hopefully put out. She sniffed the air. Something sweet. Something sweeter than air should be from an air conditioning unit. "Hands up, we're out of here."

Both women went immediately for the door, annoyed but not surprised to see that it was locked. Sharon pulled out her phone and tried her panic button for Friday. No use. She then dialed up Steve on the island. Nothing.

The smell was getting cloying now. They had to get out of there. Fast.

---

**Wakanda**

"See, Little Rainbow Widow. That wasn't so bad," Bucky grinned down at her as they made their way back through the lush forest back towards the mansion.
"Your face isn't so bad," Darcy wrinkled her nose at him.

"Lila wasn't complaining about training," Bucky shook his head at Darcy in disapproval.

"Lila is literally made up of sugar, spice and everything NATASHA," Darcy argued, wiping sweat off of her brow.

"You smell something funny?" Bucky wondered.

"Sammy said something about elk while I was leaving," Darcy admitted. "And Steve was going to help him, and you know how well done Steve likes his meat."

"It's because back in the day undercooked meat could kill him dead," Bucky shrugged. "Still, he didn't need to burn it."

They trudged out in view of the back patio of the mansion, Lila above them in the trees, barely rustling the leaves more than the gentle wind. Bucky put his hand on Darcy's shoulder and they all stopped. Darcy and Lila couldn't see what Bucky was seeing exactly. His eye sight was super serum enhanced, where Lila was an ordinary human and Darcy still wore her heavy rimmed glasses even to sleep in most days. But they did see a fair amount of green smoke coming off of the grill.

And body like shapes slumped over at the table.

And on the ground.

One of them had made it as far as the fence, before slumping against it.

A very large, Steve shape, as he if had almost gotten away before even his serum enhanced metabolism had succumbed to whatever had the rest of their friends and family passed out.

"Run, little Rainbow Widow. Take Lila and hide," Bucky advised in a whisper.
German was never a beautiful language to Bucky's ears. It had probably stemmed from being a youth between the World War's. There were a slew of German immigrants in Brooklyn at the time, and Bucky could honestly say that while he was never a bigot, the sound of German being spoken still gave him a bit of irritation. And then of course hearing German for a good portion of his early life as the Winter Soldier had never ingratiated him to the language.

But ten harsh words in German.

*Stand straight and pledge your fealty to your benevolent creators.*

One simple phrase said with a specific accent and cadence had jerked Bucky away, a heavy metal chain yolk depriving him of air, quickly taking over his senses with a dull, wet blanket. He looked to Darcy with the flick of his eyes and pushed against her shoulder, as if he could get her far enough away in time before everything went black and Bucky Barnes was suddenly in the background.

The harsh sounding German spilled from Bucky's lips now, sounding so wrong. The words were misshapen and not accented properly. Darcy knew a little German, having always picked up languages easily. But she didn't need to translate the words this time.

She knew what they were. She had seen that cold look come over previously beautiful blue eyes before.

"Ready to Comply."

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry?
Chapter 35: The Three Master-Steps of the Widow

Iowa, 2009


“Hi Lila-baby, yes, Aunt Natty is hurt,” Natasha said softly as the two and a half year old baby girl crawled up on the bed that Clint had placed her on an hour or so ago.

It was Lila’s nap time. Natasha knew this. But she also knew that her favorite girl couldn’t be bothered with things like sleeping and cribs and staying where she was supposed to stay. Chubby hands pushed at Natasha’s shirt, that was actually one of Clint’s plaid shirts. Lila sucked in a little breath and made a small noise of sympathy as her hands gently lay against the bandage on Natasha’s torso.


Natasha gave her a sad little smile. The little girl curled her body against Natasha’s, wrapping little arms around one of Natasha’s arms. Natasha managed to move her other arm, her hand gently smoothing back the waves of brown hair off of Lila’s forehead.

“I was distracted,” Natasha admitted. She had been shot through by the Winter Soldier. But it hadn’t been the sight of him that had distracted her. It had been the flood of memories that had been blocked, painfully and forcibly by the Red Room. They’d wiped the Winter Soldier from her memory.
They’d taken James from her years ago.

But she remembered now.

“Distacted,” Lila nodded in agreement.

“I saw someone who I thought was long gone, left behind forever,” Natasha huffed out a sigh.

“Like emmm an emmm’s,” Lila agreed, taking a slow, shallow breath. She might not be a fan of naps, but her little body might still have needed it. She fought against sleep valiantly though. She loved her time with her Aunt Natasha.

“Yes, like when Cooper ate all of your M&M’s and we had our revenge,” Natasha nodded. “But we went out and bought more M&M’s.”

“So many, many, many,” Lila nodded.

“And when we got the M&M’s, we protected them from Cooper and your dad,” Natasha smiled.

“Daddy ate emm an emmmmms?” Lila looked up at Natasha with horror. Horror that quickly turned into a little angry furrowed brow. “We revenge!”

“Sure, we will,” Natasha nodded. “Well, Aunty Natty’s favorite thing isn’t M&M’s.”

“No candy?” Lila wrinkled her nose at the idea.

“No,” Natasha couldn’t help a smile. Although she suddenly remembered a time, years in the past, waking up to a newly returned James, opening up a small box of incredibly delicate hand made chocolates right in her face and giving her a little smirk before popping one right into her mouth.

“No toys?” Lila wondered.

“No, no toys,” Natasha nearly grinned.
Doll. He’d called her doll.

In a world full of violence and blood and treachery, he had been the brightest and most tender thing in her entire world. And they’d been taken from each other. She’d left him behind in obviously terrible clutches. He had shot right through her.

She was going to find him. Somehow. She was going to get him out of there.

“Sleepy,” Lila whispered.

“Sleep, little one,” Natasha insisted. Lila made a little noise of protest and Natasha nodded. “What are the three steps of the Widow?”

“Know your shore undies,” Lila murmured.

“Know your surroundings,” Natasha nodded. “No matter where you are, always know everything around you…”

Present day, Wakanda

“What is happening?” Shuri asked in a panic, as the very unfamiliar sound of gunfire echoed throughout the consulate. It had all started less than ten minutes ago, and T’Challa had left Natasha with Shuri while he went to investigate what was happening.

Natasha didn’t need to investigate.

“Where is Killmonger?” Natasha asked Shuri.

“I don’t know,” Shuri shook her head. The young woman was confused and shell shocked. She
couldn’t quite comprehend at the moment that the frustrations of her people were leading to unchecked gunfire in the streets. “You don’t think that he’s behind this do you?”

“He has been sewing the seeds of discontent among your people for weeks now,” Natasha said calmly. “He’s using the presence of the Avengers here to fuel the fire of Wakandan Nationalists who disagreed with your father about opening up borders.”

“But—that’s...I need to do some work,” Shuri mumbled, going for her desk. All of her fear and worry were gone in the blink of an eye and she looked very much like a woman with a job to do. “There are funds that need to be frozen. Erik has access to a portion of the Wakandan Science and Research Facility…”

“Do what you need to do,” Natasha nodded. She looked off into the distance and saw a large plume of green smoke coming from the private island where Bucky and the rest of Natasha’s friends and family were staying. “Shuri. What did you give them earlier today?”

“What?” Shuri looked up to see what Natasha was looking at. She shook her head rapidly. “Go, go now, the elk was gifted to Erik by a neighboring tribe. He is obviously trying to do you and yours harm—-”

Natasha didn’t catch much else, as she had opened the balcony to Shuri’s office and jumped down. She’d made the pass many times before since they had been on the island, even if Shuri and T’Challa had not known. The Dora Milaje had know, of course. But Natasha couldn’t be offended that her equals knew what she was doing. And they had respected her enough to understand why she needed to do it.

Step One: Always Know Your Surroundings

California

Sharon started holding her breath immediately, even as her head went a little fuzzy around the edges and went back to the books she had been reading. She didn’t need to communicate with Maria at that point, who went for her own suit jacket and began tearing it into strips and stuffing it in the ventilation slats. Sharon pulled out her phone and began taking multiple pictures and sending them off to the one contact that would hopefully always be in place for this kind of thing. FRIDAY.
She copied Pepper Potts, because if she and Maria didn’t make it out of there (which even in her head, seemed highly unlikely), Pepper needed to know exactly what was going on. Stark Industries had been involved in some pretty terrible stuff before Pepper came along and sobered Tony up a little. Obadiah Stane had been a very busy man, and was still quite busy even in death.

Sharon looked down at her phone curiously as two text messages came in quickly. One, from an unknown number which she knew would be Natasha.

Go underground. Find who is linked to the lost Wakandan.

And the second was from a contact she had been conversing with quite regularly since her time on the island with the rest of the Avengers refugees. Princess Lila Badass.

Mr Hyde alert. German. Calling all reinforcements, heading West.

Sharon’s eyes bugged out a little.

This was organized. This was more than just her and Maria looking into old fiances of Stark Industries. She realized very quickly that the only reason she was finding this information now was not a result of diligence and hard work. It was because someone out there wanted her here to find it.

And that same person was in Wakanda, triggering Bucky into compliance mode. With the German trigger that Sharon had thought was the least of their worries when the American trigger was still out there.

She quickly texted Lila back, a short Stay where you are, that she seriously doubted the girl would listen to. Sharon snapped her fingers at Maria, holding up the phone for her to see. Maria set her jaw in a hard line and took two steps towards the door, intent on doing her very best to get them the hell out of there.

It wasn’t necessary though, because the doorknob began to melt. Something on the outside was exuding enough heat to cause the silver metal of the door knob to turn into molten liquid. Sharon finally took a deep breath, the sweet air a relief to her lungs, but dangerous for her mind. She blinked and Pepper Potts was a hazy figure standing in front of them. Her fiery eyes and volcanic hand blurry in Sharon’s impaired vision.
“Thanks for the assist,” Maria put an arm around Sharon and drug her out of the room.

“Figured the texts coming through rapid fire was a clue that something had gone awry,” Pepper smiled at them both as she walked quickly down the hall. “Happy is in the car waiting for us.”

“Thanks,” Sharon whispered.

“No problem. You know, rule number two,” Pepper smiled. “Never leave a comrade in arms.”

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*New York*

“Why are we in the ground again?” Kurt asked, definitely a little more panicked than he had been before. “Is bad luck to be in the ground. You know this Dave.”

“Yeah, yeah, bad luck to be underground,” Dave nodded. He glared at Luis. “I think it’s just bad luck to be friends with superheroes, really. I mean, my life wasn’t full of explosions and underground bunkers before we started running with this crew, man.”

“It’ll be okay guys, just chillax, I mean, we got comfy couches, we got over five hundred channels,” Luis waved his hand around. “We got all the MRE’s we can eat, yo. I saw some beefy mac earlier, and I know that Kurt likes the beefy mac.”

“I enjoy the little glove man,” Kurt shrugged when Dave threw him an offended look. “The helpful hamburger glove is beloved in my country.”

“Gross,” Dave shook his head.

“But anyway, it’s not so bad. Sure there are explosions and stuff going down and it looks like all of
our superpowered people are out there handling it, and you know---if the building goes down, we’re kind of going to be buried under a couple thousand tons of rubble, but really, I mean---hold up, why do people put bomb shelters in the basement?” Luis shook his head. “Like, I cannot have a million tons of rubble on me, that’s not how I roll dude. Helen----sweetness, what are you doing?”

“I know she has them in here, just one second----”

Helen was on top of the spartan counters next to the pitiful excuse for a kitchenette in the fallout shelter. She was half buried in a cabinet, throwing down packs and packs and packs of MRE’s onto the ground.

“Steve is crazy about preparing for the worst. And Natasha too. Actually all of them. All of my damned friends pretend that the zombie apocalypse is right around the corner, and they stock up on gross sludge in foil packets that will heat themselves and water towers full of drinking water under-fucking-ground, and burlap sacks we can use to clothe our young if we’re ever stuck down here for so long we have to repopulate the Earth, but you know who ACTUALLY knows what they’re doing?”

Helen popped out of the cabinet and then wrestled a medium sized, very durable container out of the cabinet. She made a sound of excitement and glee before hopping down off the counter and hauling the box over to the boys. She fumbled with the number pad on the lock a few times, mumbling to herself non-stop about birthdays and important days and Steve Rogers’ shoulder to waist ratio before finally she got the numbers right.

“HA! She was such a goner even back then. 07041918!” Helen cackled. “She might have been trying to play it cool back in the day, never openly staring at Mr. July when the calendar came out, but she knew that was her favorite of all the calendar models. Mr. Fourth of July himself. And now, she’s probably gonna marry him, but I hope she can wait until my date, because yeah, the Superhero Calendar made me a ton of cash, but I could always use a little extra boost, especially after I’ve hit the outlets---”

“What’s that?” Dave muttered, taking a big sniff.

“Reese’s peanut butter cups,” Helen grinned wickedly. She opened the box fully and turned it to the Three Wombats. “Because Darcy Lewis is my motherfucking savior and if I swung that way, I’d have put eight rings on it already.”

“Sweeeeeeet,” Luis grinned happily. “We have so much in common.”
“There are Alenka chocolate here,” Kurt gasped, reaching out for one.

“Careful there tiger, those are stocked for someone else,” Helen warned him. “And you don’t want to make step number three go into effect.”

“What’s step number three?” Dave wondered around a mouthful of old fashioned salt water taffy that had been in a fancy sealed bag that had kept it as fresh as if he had just gotten it in a shop at Coney Island.

“Step Number Three: Protect what is yours,” Helen recited. “Not such a bad bunch of steps really. Easy to remember. Solid way to live your life when you think about it. Funny it should have come from a deadly Russian Assassin. Not that I have anything against deadly Russian Assassins. Cause all the ones I’ve met so far have been good people. OH! Do you think I’ll get to meet Bucky Barnes? I mean, the people that had me were pretty interested in getting their hands on him, not that I saw any of their plans. But I overheard just a blip. Bring ihn heim. I mean, whoever thought German would come in handy when I picked it up instead of french in high school. But it totally helped me not only wow that cute dude who was the janitor at my med school, but it also let me hear what they were saying back in evil headquarters.”

“Hey---uh, Friday?” Dave wondered aloud. He knew and appreciated the fact that the artificial intelligence system was probably pretty busy with protecting them and whatnot, but he thought this might be important. “Can you get a message through to Captain America, maybe?”

__________________________________________________________

Wakanda

Step Number One: Know Your Surroundings. No matter where you are, know everything around you.

Lila breathed as quietly as she possible could through parted lips. Slow in and slow out. She watched as the Wakanda man said the words to Bucky. She watched Darcy froze up in worry and fear. And she watched when the Wakandan man said something terse to Bucky---

No not Bucky. That man down on the ground with his hand wrapped around her Auntie Dar-Dar’s
throat was not her Uncle Bucky. That was someone that her Aunt Natasha had told her was a danger. She was to run.

Darcy lost consciousness quickly and crumpled to the dirt beneath her as the Winter Soldier dropped her.

“Bring the woman with,” the Wakandan man ordered. “Others have deemed her important now.”

Lila knew that her Aunt Natasha was going to be so very upset with her now. Because she didn’t run.

*Step Number Two: Never Leave a Comrade in Arms.*

If Lila ran and hid now, she’d be leaving two of her comrades behind. And that was absolutely unacceptable to the little girl. Uncle Steve would surely be devastated to lose both Uncle Bucky and Auntie Dar-Dar in one fell swoop.

She watched as the Winter Soldier picked up Darcy like she was a sack of flour, heaving her over his shoulder. Lila began to move immediately, jumping for the closest tree branch, backtracking the movements she had taken while following Bucky and Darcy closely after their training was complete. She hopped down after two trees and ran flat out as fast as she could to the little manhole cover that led to the underground tunnel off of the private island.

Lila slid gracefully down the chute and got to the modified platform. She had time. She knew it. She knew how incredibly fast her little legs were, and she doubted that Uncle Bucky could run as fast as her with Darcy over his shoulder. And she didn’t know anything about that Wakandan man, but she doubted he could catch her either.

She took the ninety-seconds it took for the platform to rush through the underwater tunnel to the Wakandan mainland to compose two text messages. One to her outside Wakandan contact. Natasha had drilled it into Lila that if anything ever went wrong on the island, or the farm, or wherever their little family had ended up at, it was important to have one outside contact to let know what was happening.

Sharon Carter was another of Lila’s personal heroes, so she quickly sent the message. She then texted her mother. Because Natasha may have trained the girl in the ways of the Widow, but she had also encouraged the dependence Lila had on her parents. It was something denied to Natasha, after
all. And Lila did not think it was weak or wrong to text a very simple,


She was on the other side of the tunnel in no time and jumped off quickly, watching as the platform zoomed back to bring the people she was retroactively following. She walked into the plane hangar and surveyed the four airplanes carefully.

Two of them were quinjets, and she knew that the Wakandan man wouldn’t be taking that. She walked very carefully to one of the other jets, one she knew belonged to King T’Challa. Her fingertip brushed where Cooper had told her the engines were kept in the high-tech Wakandan planes and felt that it was cold. She quickly brought her little backpack off of her shoulders and dug inside for what Cooper had given her for her birthday that year. She placed the little black box over top of the engine covering and waved it back and forth a few times before feeling something inside of the black box pull at the insides of the engines.

Even if the bad guy brought Bucky and Darcy to that plane, it wouldn’t be taking off anytime soon.

She nodded before stepping back and putting the box back in her backpack. The little girl rushed to the remaining plane and clambered on board. She and Natasha had thoroughly investigated all the planes weeks ago, when waiting for Darcy and Steve to come back. She knew exactly where to hide. She knew that Shuri had even put a little survival pack in there for her, full of water, and first aid if anyone had ever needed it, and even a few Wakandan sugary treats.

Lila got into her little hidey hole and secured herself. She went for her phone again and activated the tracker before turning the phone over into the stealth mode that Mr. Stark had built in on them before handing them all out last Christmas like a goateed Santa Claus.

Ten minutes passed, and Lila found herself getting only a little bored when she heard the heavy and clunky footsteps. She wondered who it could have been. The Wakandan man had a light tread, even managing to surprise her in the forest behind the Royal mansion. And her Uncle Bucky walked like a silent and deadly panther most days. No one could hear him when he walked in the mansion. Lila’s mother had threatened to collar him with a bell many, many times.

But it wasn’t Bucky walking. Lila realized.
It was the Winter Soldier. And he stomped with no grace, standing on the plane with an unconscious Darcy still over his shoulder, looking at the Wakandan man for further orders.

“Restrain her over on the cot. We’re going on a little trip with our new piece of leverage. I find nothing remarkable in the girl, but apparently Ms. Dillard thinks the girl will come in handy versus the heroes.”

The Winter Soldier nodded his acceptance before putting Darcy down in the cot. He stared down at her for far too long, feeling confusion at the sight of the young woman with marks on her neck. She shouldn’t have those marks on her neck. She’d had a different mark on her neck a few days ago. He had teased Steve about it plenty---

“Soldier, tie the girl down!” the order came in harsh German. The words were accented and didn’t have the cadence and flow of the previously used trigger words. But the Winter Soldier complied nonetheless, tying Darcy down.

Lila bit at her bottom lip as the plane went into the air. She knew that somewhere deep down, Uncle Bucky was there. She just had to get to him. Aunt Natasha did something private with him to get him back, but that wasn’t going to work this time. Uncle Sam had joked that Uncle Steve had to pull a helicopter on top of Uncle Bucky to get him back last time.

So to get Uncle Bucky back, she’d just have to figure out how to hit him really hard. Like as hard as Uncle Steve could hit him. Or maybe even more, since Uncle Steve hit him with a helicopter last time.

And if she could get Uncle Bucky back, he could stop the bad guys with her, and they could bring Auntie Dar-Dar back home to Uncle Steve, who was going to wake up and be super duper worried.

Aunt Natasha had always told her that it was important to be independent, but sometimes the best weapon a Widow could have was a good teammate.

If Lila could get Uncle Bucky back, then he could help her with Step Three.

*Step Three: Protect What is Yours.*

Lila would definitely try her hardest and do her best. And not to be a braggy brat or anything, but
her best, she knew, was pretty darned good.

Chapter End Notes

Lila Barton, superWidow.

I love these kids. Cooper Barton, space nerd and all around genius, Lila Barton, superspy. (Nathaniel Barton, future little shit and human disaster).

Thanks so much for reading!
Darcy’s phone buzzed a specific pattern, which was never a good sign. She politely excused herself from the meeting that she was attending for Stark Industries Science, in lieu of Jane, who had hopped onto a big rainbow bridge into the cosmos with her hunky Adonis boyfriend. Darcy was better at the meetings anyway. She could haggle like no other when it came to getting Jane, and Stark Industries, the clearance and political leeway that was needed to have truly collaborative science with all the nations of the world. It was how she had brought Doctor Helen Cho into the Stark Industries fold, and the woman was going to come up with some truly impressive ways of keeping not only the Avengers, but the entire population of the Earth well and hole free.

She pulled out her phone and JARVIS had sent her a text message.

*Find cover, Miss Lewis. You are about to be the target of an attack. SHIELD has fallen.*

Darcy immediately called the one person who could know what was going on, but Natasha’s phone was mysteriously disconnected. So she dialed the second person.

“Darcy?” Pepper answered.

Tony was shouting in the background.
“She’s on the list. Fucking shit, she’s on the list and in missile range, tell her to take cover somewhere basementy!”

“Darcy, listen to me, SHIELD has fallen,” Pepper said quickly. “Natasha sent Tony what SHIELD is trying to do...they’re going to exterminate a couple hundred thousand people in the next five minutes. You’re on the list.”

“That ain’t cool,” Darcy said, her voice soft and sounding a little afraid. “Natasha?”

“She’s working on it,” Pepper promised.

“But what about Ste--Captain Rogers?” Darcy wondered. “He’s got to be doing something to stop it, he’s stationed with SHIELD headquarters right now, isn’t he? I mean, Tony tried to get me to go to DC to go on a blind date with him two weeks ago, so he’s there right? The news said he was there and that he was wanted for Fury’s death, but let’s be real here, Fury can't die ever. And Nat texted me and said it was fine like, six hours ago...”

“He’s doing what he can, Darcy,” Pepper promised. “SHIELD was infiltrated by Hydra.”

“Shit,” Darcy breathed out, looking around at her surroundings. She was in a lobby with floor to ceiling glass windows. No way would she be safe there. “What kind of people are on this list?”

“Influential types, people who could be a problem for Hydra,” Pepper revealed. “Natasha thinks it’s full of movers and shakers and independent thinkers.”

“So kind of like that room of people I just left all exposed and stuff?” Darcy demanded.

“Darcy…” Pepper warned.

“Talk to you later, Pepp, gotta go evacuate a fucking building,” Darcy warned before hanging up and rushing back to the room full of independent thinkers. She burst back into the room and shouted out, “OLD FASHIONED TORNADO DRILL! WEEEEooohhhhhhhhhhhWEEEEEEEEEEooohhhhhhhhhhhWEEEEEEEEEEoooo000oooh.
Everyone to the second level basement, NOW! OUT, C’mon Beaker look alive, up and out of your chair, your numbers will be waiting later, take the back service stairs, duck your head around windows. You WILL be graded on this people. MOVE IT MOVE IT MOVE IT!”
There was some confusion, but most of the regular attendees of the meetings knew better than to argue against the whims of Jane Foster and Tony Stark’s little manager. There had been an incident with a flamethrower once and then of course there had been the bilgesnipe. Scatterbrained scientists they may be, but they had a good sense of self preservation.

They were huddled in doorways of the second level basement in no time flat and Darcy was staring down at her phone, which had zero service so far underground. She looked at the head of the committee and pointed a finger.

"Stay here or I will make you test out the new portal sticks," Darcy promised. The head of the committee nodded and Darcy reluctantly climbed the steps, out of breath at the first flight. By the second flight she was bent in half, her hands on her knees as she tried to take in more breath.

"Seriously, kid, how have you survived two alien invasions so far?"

"Fuck off, Barton," Darcy wheezed. "I'll have you know, that alien invasions involve less climbing of stairs and more just sort of---dodging."

"Come along, little Lewis," Barton held out a hand to her. "Nat sent me for you. You and I are about to go underground. The world isn't exactly friendly for either of us right now."

"I don't want to get shot at by Big Brother in the sky," Darcy shook her head.

"Cap handled it, it---it's over," Clint said tightly. "But in doing so, our files were released out into the internet."

"Our files? For SHIELD?" Darcy blinked. "Oh shit. The real file or the one that Tony made as a joke?"

"Both," Clint grimaced.

"The one that Tony made as a joke constantly digitally refreshes with a SHE'S KNOCKED UP WITH STEVE ROGERS' SUPER SPAWN."
"Yeah, I know, so it's kind of important we get out of here. I have some place safe for us while
Tony works on pulling out the important files from the world wide web."

"No one uses that term anymore, Barton," Darcy gave him a soft smile before they both started up
the last half flight of stairs at a steady pace. "So, everyone else is okay? Natasha...Maria...uhm,
Captain Rogers?"

There was a half second of silence before Clint answered with a clipped, "Everyone is fine."

"Uhm. No, Natasha said that when you think before you talk that means you're telling lies," Darcy
stopped halfway up the steps. "Who is hurt? Oh god, is everyone alive?"

"I don't know, kid," Clint admitted, grabbing for Darcy's hand and yanking her up the rest of the
steps. "Natasha's fine. Fury is fine too, believe it or not. Hill, Carter, some dude with wings that
Steve adopted seems fine too."

"Clint," Darcy whispered as they made it to daylight. She shivered. The usually bustling streets near
the convention center were eerily silent. Everyone was probably inside glued to the television.
"Steve?"

"He fell into the Potomac, Darce," Clint whispered, eyes downcast, his face full of anxiety and
worry. "Fury is flying a chopper up and down the banks and Tony flew out of New York to help
find him."

"I---what?" Darcy whispered, feeling her throat go dry and her eyes water.

Steve Rogers was invincible. He was everything good in the world. She'd never met the guy, but
she knew what a strong, decent man he was. She'd been told about him often enough in the past two
years, it almost felt like she already knew him. And if what she thought was right, she'd already felt
what it was like to be Steve when she'd had the Asgardian meade earlier that year.

And it was kind of unspoken that they were sort of...destined for one another.

"I'm going down there," she said simply.
Clint sighed and looked up to the sky, silently asking God what he had done to deserve these stubborn women in his life. He went to make a quick grab for the girl before she could commandeer a mode of transportation and make good on her promise. But Natasha was nothing if not thorough in her religious training of her favorite women in her life, and Darcy evaded the weak grab and managed to get a hand on Clint's wrist, spinning him and pushing his face into the concrete of the wall.

"Not the wrist, it's my money maker!"

"We're going to help!" Darcy insisted.

"They know you know how to use the portals and that you can talk to Heimdall. They know you know how to assemble an Iron Man suit and could probably build an arc reactor if you needed to. They know, Darcy, how important you are, and we have like, a two hour window to get you out before the chaos dies down and someone tries to grab you," Clint insisted.

"I'm going to help," Darcy insisted, her voice wavering and scratchy with anxious tears. "Until we find him!"

"Okay, okay, fine, we'll go to help. I promise kid. We'll go," Clint nodded against the cement. Darcy let go of her Widow-like grip on him and he took a deep breath before turning around and jabbing a needle in Darcy's bicep.

"You motherf---iccker," Darcy slurred before dropping where she stood into unconsciousness. Clint grabbed her and hauled her over his shoulder.

"The things I do for you girls," Clint rolled his eyes. "C'mon kid. Time to go meet my old lady."

---

Wakanda, Present Day

"Uncle Steve?" Cooper said loudly, pushing against the man's shoulders.
When the cooking meat that was supposed to be their dinner started smelling just a little off to Steve's enhanced senses, he'd grabbed the baby and Cooper, rushed them into the house and told them to run to room Shuri had shown them all their first moments on the island. A panic room. Then Steve ran back out and began rushing towards the fence, intent on getting to Darcy, Bucky and Lila. He had been the closest to the grill then when the meat had glowed green and had an initial blast of potent smoke.

Steve had taken the brunt of the tranquilizers and even his serum enhancements had a hard time burning through them. Cooper’s mother, who was the one furthest from the tranquilizers was only started to make raspy moaning noises as she slowly resurfaced into consciousness. Cooper had placed Nathaniel on his mother’s lap and the little baby boy was behaving just as he did when he tried to wake up his mother on any lazy Saturday. He was pulling at her cheeks eagerly, pinching and pushing.

When Cooper had gone to his dad first, and saw the man was trying to pull himself out of it, his eyes crinkling as the tried to open, he knew that you could recover from the gas. Cooper gripped both of his hands on one of Steve’s shoulders and shook with all his might.

“Please, Uncle Steve, please wake up, Lila didn’t come back! She was with Uncle Buck and Auntie Dar-Dar and nobody came back!” Cooper was close to sobbing as he shook Steve violently. “Please wake up!”

Cooper knew that his Uncle Steve was very special and that it took a lot to take him down. For instance, once Cooper and Lila had made him chicken for his birthday last year, but they didn’t quite cook it the right way. Aunt Natasha had said something about cross-contamination, and at the time Cooper couldn’t be bothered to worry about salmonella getting onto the salad he had carefully cut up. Cooper liked mechanics and the stars and physics and string theory. He didn’t have the patience for biology.

So when everyone but Aunt Natasha and Uncle Steve had wound up seriously sick. Like firing out of both ends sick, Cooper kind of figured out that the serum did more than make them super strong. The twelve year old knew then, that this was serious. If the dirty salad that his father had said made him poop out his intestines so that they were inside out hadn’t taken Uncle Steve down, but the gas had? It was bad news. And Cooper wasn’t like Lila. He wasn’t as tough as his baby sister. He wasn’t ashamed of it. Aunt Natasha had always told him that boys could cry and girls could be Avengers, and he truly believed that.

Besides, Lila would kick anyone’s butt that tried to mess with him.
“Cooper?” Natasha’s voice echoed from the house.

Cooper turned and the relief pouring through him was palpable as he finally let go with the tears. His face crumpled and a choking sound tore out of his lips. He paused in shaking Steve for a moment, but kept his hands fisted in Steve’s t-shirt. Natasha was in front of him in a heartbeat, kneeling so that she could look up into his eyes.

“Coop, honey, are you alright?” Natasha asked first.

“Yes...Uncle Steve put me and Nathaniel in the house and we went to the panic room, and we were in there for a half hour, and based on the wind speed and the highest density that a gas that could float could have, I thought it would take twenty minutes to disperse the correct way. So we waited thirty before we—we came out, and Uncle Steve should be awake but he’s not!” Cooper cried out anxiously.

“He’ll be okay,” Natasha promised. She glanced from the grill to where Steve was and figured that he spent a little bit of time trying to wave the gas away from the rest of the team before giving up and trying to get off the patio. He definitely took the brunt of it.

“Nat?” Clint called out. “The kids?”

“Lila didn’t come back!” Cooper whimpered. “She was with Uncle Bucky and Auntie Dar-Dar, and what if they’re passed out and hit their heads?”

“Dada,” Nathaniel started to fret a little at hearing his brother’s distress.

Laura’s phone chimed and she managed to open her eyes.

“I’m up. I’m up, Clint turn off the alarm before I brain you,” she mumbled.

“Mama!” Nathaniel chirped.

“Hey baby,” Laura hugged her son while her hand went for her phone. Her shaking hand went to her mouth and she felt anxiety and worry spike through her. She knew her little girl thought she was
a Black Widow and could save the world, but she was ten. Laura looked to Clint with tear filled eyes and croaked out, “Lila is following Darcy...and the Winter Soldier. She said a bad Wakandan did it.”

"Son of a bitch,” Clint hissed out.

Natasha took in a slow and deep breath through her parted lips. It wasn’t her then that had pushed him into compliance. It was one of the triggers. She slowly unclenched Cooper’s fingers from Steve’s jacket before actively shaking him herself, pulling him out of his slouched position.

“STEVE,” she hissed out. “Steve wake up! Darcy and Lila are gone. James is under someone else’s control, wake up!”

“Wasgoin on?” Sam mumbled. He flew into a sitting position quickly and looked to his right, blinking in some relief to see Wanda carefully and delicately slumped on the table. He placed a gentle hand on the side of her head and pushed the hair out of her face with the other. “Tiny Dancer, you alright? You okay?”

“Hmmmm,” she whimpered in her sleep and her hands glowed with red energy.

“Bring her out of that gentle, Wilson!” Clint ordered. There were many days after Pietro’s death and the horror of the battle with Ultron that Wanda had woken screaming with uncontrollable blasts of her energy lashing out to anything nearby.

“Yeah, yeah,” Sam nodded. He fingers now gently drew little lines up and down her jaw and he put himself as close as possible, his lips against her ear. “Tiny Dancer, you’re okay, we’re okay, just open those big baby blues for me, girl. You’re alright, you’re safe with me. I promise.”

“Sam?” she mumbled, and the energy dissipated harmlessly. She winced though and she felt tears spring to her eyes as soon as she opened them and saw Sam’s concerned dark brown gaze looking down at her. “She’s not here...Lila and Darcy... Bucky, Bucky is gone.”

“What?” Sam blinked.

“Bucky is gone. His...his everything, I can’t feel it,” Wanda whispered, looking for Steve anxiously.
“We weren’t attacked alone,” Scott mumbled, looking down at the tablet that Luis and Helen had been on. “New York…”

“California,” Natasha nodded. “And Wakanda. This was an all out assault all around..”

“Darcy—” Steve mumbled.


“Lila and Darcy,” Steve blinked. “With Bucky?”

“No,” Natasha shook her head, her voice wavering with the wretchedness she was feeling in her heart at that moment.

“No,” Steve’s face crumpled, knowing her meaning even with his foggy mind. He made a small hurt sound before taking a deep breath and pulling himself to his feet with Natasha’s assistance. His niece and his girl were out there somewhere, in the hands of the murder machine that ransomed his best friend’s body.

The entire situation was like a deadly punch to Steve’s gut. And when he found the person responsible for it, he would not rest until they paid for what they had done.

But he had to find them first.

His faculties came back to him quickly and once he had eyes on everyone else and knew they were safe, he began to quickly walk back into the house.

“Uhm?” Scott blinked, helping Darlene to stand as she slowly recovered from the effects of the gas. “What’s happening?”

They quickly followed him, Natasha the closest on his heels as he stormed through the house towards the King’s study. Every eye was on him as he easily reached up to the top of the book case
and pulled down the bottle of Asgardian meade. It was very nearly all of the way full, probably only missing a tiny bit more than Sam and Wanda’s shots at that point. Without a moment of hesitation or thought, Steve brought the bottle to his lips.

“Holy shit, dude,” Sam breathed out.

“What’s happening?” Darlene asked.

Natasha blinked and felt a small smile trying to pull at her lips. She may rule the day with subterfuge and plots, but Steve was the original man with a plan. She shook her head and whispered in explanation, “The meade, it’s Asgardian and it brings you closer to your soulmate, physically—”

“Steve, let Natasha have some of that,” Clint nearly shouted.

“It won’t work. He’s not my soul mate right now,” Natasha whispered. “Believe me, I tried it already after the fall of SHIELD.”

Steve drained the entire bottle, every last drop. He took a deep breath as he turned and put the bottle back on the shelf. He blinked and felt it hit him all at once. His Magnet. Smart and sassy and loving and kind. The last time he had felt like her it had been a joyful experience because he had been joyful to run off the island with her.

But now she was missing, and he felt it.

He was so angry. And Darcy was dangerous when angry.

He turned to face the people he would proudly call his family and nodded, “Okay, people, this isn’t a fucking drill. This is the real, honest to Frigga, deal here. They took my pretty little Magnet away, and I am going to fuck their day up seven ways till Sunday until they give me back my Lila and my Bucky and my Magnet. Let’s go kick some motherfucking bad dude ass!”

Sam couldn’t help but smirk at his mother’s confusion at Steve’s words and Darcy-esque. He shrugged and explained, “Oh, and it makes the act like them too.”

Chapter End Notes
I told you the meade would be back. Or I told someone once upon a time.
My Name is Steven Grant Rogers, You Took My Peoples, Prepare to Get a Patriotic Frisbee Smashed in Your Face

Chapter Notes

So much dialogue. Too much. (Note to self, thank you self for never having Darcyfied Steve, Darcy, Helen AND Luis in the same chapter).

A few people asked about the nature of the meade. The drinker gets the attributes of their soulmate/heartmatch/hubbahubbalove. You have to drink the meade to feel the effects, so Darcy wouldn't feel it at all, and it would probably be a disaster if Steve-ified Darcy was on that plane with the Winter Soldier.

I hope you enjoy this very dialogue rich chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Seven: My Name is Steven Grant Rogers, You Took My Peoples, Prepare to Get a Patriotic Frisbee Smashed in Your Face

2014, Sweden

"Dude. You used to be so much stealthier. You losing your mojo with your death?"

Nick Fury walked out of the shadows of the little cobblestone alleyway. He glared at Darcy from behind his sunglasses, knowing that even if she could see the glare it would have little to no effect on her usual giddy, irreverent manner. It had been two years, and Fury still wasn't used to having someone who was technically a civilian have absolutely zero fear or trepidation when he was around.

It would be refreshing, really, if he weren't so damned peeved with her careless and idiotic actions.

"What're you doing in Sweden? They're Hydra free, I checked before me and Janie came," Darcy promised. When her question was met with silence and more glaring, she held up a handful of
shopping bags, filled to the brim with sweets and goodies. "Janie and I are spending Thanksgiving in Asgard. It's technically not a holiday in Asgard, but they have something similar about harvests and mating rituals. I'm stocking up on the bribe items I need to make sure that I'm still held in high esteem up there."

Fury remained silent and continued to glare as Darcy grinned up at him nonplussed. She checked her phone casually and shrugged. She still had about two hours before she was expected back at the portal. Heimdall was letting Jane drive this one. And while Heimdall could blip anyone out of anywhere if he wanted, Jane was forced to stick to set rotations and the latitude and longitude of it all.

That didn't stop the soon to be Nobel Prize winning scientist from working on a way to portal wherever the hell she wanted, whenever the hell she wanted.

Darcy thought Heimdall should really be looking out for his job security at that point. She told him that frequently in her spoken letters to him. He didn't seem concerned.

Jane wouldn't fit in his armor, after all. And her sword skills were seriously lacking.

Darcy wasn't about to give Fury the satisfaction of asking him why he was standing in front of her in Sweden, glaring full force. So she put her phone back in her purse before pulling out lip balm and applying it carefully. She then reached in and her eyes lit up at the still unwrapped kinder egg she had insisted on buying bulk for Volstagg's kids. She opened it up and began chatting amiably, "You know, I'll never understand American laws. I mean, you can buy a gun at Wal-mart, but god fucking forbid you should be able to buy a toy in a chocolate shell. Seems ridiculous to me. I think that's probably why I got into the political science major in the first place. To figure out what kind of jackassery went into the United States political machine that should keep me from eating a kinder egg a day."

Darcy finished her treat and opened the little toy with gleeful anticipation. Pepper had worked out a licensing deal for the Avengers, all proceeds going to rebuild the stuff they smashed and sick kids. It was the smartest thing, and Darcy loved nothing more than spending as much money as she could on Thor themed merchandise. She squealed in excitement when it was a tiny plastic doll made in Captain America's likeness. She danced him around in the air a little before planting a kiss on the tiny plastic head.

*That* little action loosened Fury's tongue.
"Rogers is in Denmark, we can arrange for you to be kissing the real thing in no time."

"What? Oh, no, I'm not kissing him because—well, whatever," Darcy waved him off. "Hogun likes them. He's bribed all of Volstagg's kids to give him the superhero ones, and this was the one he's missing. And this little piece of patriotic plastic means that Hogun HAS to keep walking Manuel the Fluffy."

"I hesitate to ask how a below average sized Asgardian walks a slimy dog that weighs several tons."

"It's more of a Hogun runs in a field situation and tries to avoid getting slobbered or chomped on. It's the little things that'll keep him young, I'm doing him a favor, really," Darcy nodded. She kissed the toy Captain America again before popping him into the safety of her bra. She shrugged up at Fury and wondered, "Is this about the thing I did?"

Fury shook his head in amusement. The thing she did. Like she had forgotten to turn off the porch light after coming in for a late night and he was her nagging mother.

"I never wanted a tattoo, Lewis," Fury sighed. He pulled down his hoodie and sure enough, the ink on his clavicle was clearly otherworldly, glowing a little green. It was just an edge of what was actually on his body. His chest now had a very detailed and amazing tattoo of Captain Hector Barbossa's face, the expression wasn't even a flattering one, it roughly looked like Captain Hector Barbossa was amazingly disgusted. It was beautifully shaded and glowed green, and Fury couldn't understand how she had done it.

One minute he had been walking down a quiet corridor in Dubai, and the next he had woken up on the streets of England, his chest smarting with pain.

"It'll fade, once the mojo's done it's job," Darcy shrugged.

"I won't ask HOW you did it," Fury shook his head and said at the same time as Darcy

"A magician never reveals her badass secrets."

Fury gave her one quirk of his lips. "But why, Lewis? It had to take a lot of manpower and called
"In favors to get this done. You do realize we live in a post fall of Shield world, and Hydra could have nabbed you or me for these shenanigans. Why?"

"You were rude to Natasha," Darcy answered easily. She usually gave Fury the truth when he asked with enough respect and desperation. She saw him about to dispute it and she shook her head and held up a slightly chocolatey right index finger. "Nuh uh dude. You faked your death, you put her through the ringer, all because of your dumbass spy games. No one messes with my people like that. Not even my other sort-of people. You know?"

"So you gave me a permanent marker to embarrass me?" Fury asked in disbelief. He didn't understand all the things that Lewis did, but he did know her style. Just embarrassing him and putting one up on him was not usually on her agenda.

"The ink will fade," Darcy promised. "It disappears into the skin and then the magic takes hold. From Muspelheim."

“How are you getting things from Muspelheim?” Fury asked warily.

“Some work I’m doing for Odin,” Darcy shrugged.

"What does it do, Lewis?" Fury demanded.

"If you ever die, for real? Like, get welcomed to the big dining halls in Valhalla, then there's a marble that I've given to someone for safekeeping that will go opaque. You know, so she can know for sure this time and not get her heart torn into pieces for absolutely nothing."

Fury took a deep breath.

"You're not so bad, Lewis."

"Duh."
**Present Day, Helicarrier, New York**

Captain America, the Black Widow and Hawkeye appeared in a bright column of light that definitely had caused quite a lot of damage in the top layer of the helicarrier that kept things airtight on the floating ship. When the light receded, the wind began whipping around uncontrollably in his quarters, and although Fury was a paper free kind of administrator, he still had books and the wind cause the pages in them to begin fluttering wildly.

He'd just gotten a report from Hill that she, Sharon and Pepper were on their way back to the upstate Avenger's Facility in New York after narrowly avoiding being taken by an unseen enemy.

"Can I help you?" Fury shouted in annoyance, putting his hand down on the cover of his bedside table book, *Anne of Green Gables*. It soothed him and put an overly active mind to rest on bad days. The pages stopped flapping obnoxiously. His voice was barely heard over the sound of roaring wind.

In approximately forty-five seconds, a crew had burst into his room, and he was kind of impressed with their response time. They'd shaved about ten seconds off in the last six months. They patched the hole quickly before leaving with promises of making more permanent changes at their next landing. Fury glared at Steve, Clint and Natasha, only to have it melt off of his face at the sight of the three of them.

He remembered the sight of the three of them back during the Chitauri Invasion. The surveillance of Captain America marching through the quinjet bay, flanked by the spies. The three most vulnerable members of the Avengers team when you thought about it. They didn't have metal armor or a mystical, alien hammer or the ability to turn into a giant green rage monster. But Fury wouldn't have traded his three mostly normal humans for anyone else. But the state of them now inspired less pride and joy and more worry and anger.

Clint had red-rimmed eyes and looked to be strung tighter than he had been after the Invasion of New York. His mouth was set in a firm line, unmoving and determined. He looked to Natasha and felt some sort of paternal worry set off in him at the state of her. A normal person would have looked at her and only been able to glimpse a quiet woman, deep in thought. Fury knew her better and he knew that she was in some sort of state of desperation. He'd only seen her look like that once before, and it had been on his deathbed before the Fall of SHIELD.

Finally there was Steve.
He stood looking down at Fury, one arm wielding the shield and the other propped on his hip. He was looking at Fury with a sort of impishness that reminded Fury of the only other person in the world who dared to look at him that way. The only thing missing was Steve eating a chocolate candy egg as he watched him.

"I'm going to guess that I have a hole in my security, because I was unaware that there was a three pronged attack going on out there until Hill called me," Fury sighed. "You really had to put a rainbow bridge hole in my quarters?"

"Dude, duh," Steve rolled his eyes. "You used to be smarter than this, Patches."

Natasha moved to the flat panel screen that Fury used to communicate with others and brought up a call to Hill. Clint didn't give them the opportunity to exchange pleasantries before he stepped into view and nodded at them.

"Winter Soldier is in play, he's got Darcy and my kid, along with someone from Wakanda who is not scared to piss off his King."

"I think it's Erik Killmonger," Natasha nodded. "Shuri is going to give us a full report as soon as she can. T'Challa can't help right now because it wasn't a three pronged attack, it was a four pronged attack, at least as far as we know. There's civil disobedience in the streets of Wakanda for the first time ever. T'Challa has his own problems to deal with right now."

"It couldn't have been the American trigger," Maria shook her head as Sharon checked her phone.

"I've got a block on me," Sharon furrowed her brow. "No messages are coming in or out."

"Alright people, I don't mean to get all up in your business here, but I'm about to get all up in your business here," Steve announced in such a blithe manner that Fury actually shivered. "I just drank a straight up gallon of Asgardian magic meade because some mother fucker out there decided to make my Bucky steal my Darcy and my Lila."

"Holy shit," Maria whispered. Pepper's head came into view of the screen and while worry twisted her mouth into a frown, her eyes were sparkling at what she saw on the screen.
"We asked the big dude in the sky to take us closer to you three, and here's where he dropped us, and I know I'm like super strong and kickass, but I don't want to argue with the big dude in the sky, so what do we have, let's spitball some ideas people, because we all know the meade is going to try to twist and bend the spaghetti strings of fate in order to get me my Magnet back, so we should all---you know, be in the same sections of the library, if not on the same page of the book before shit starts to go down."

"Uhm, Obadiah Stane?" Sharon offered.

"Was a heinous bag full of dicks?" Steve offered.

"Big time financer and mover and shaker in Hydra apparently, he was responsible for bringing the Winter Soldier to the States," Sharon answered.

"Dude's dead. Dead people can't trigger scruffy but cute super soldiers into adorable weapons of mass destruction," Steve disputed.

Pepper stiffened on screen and shook her head. Natasha narrowed her eyes and asked, "What?"

"He has a son."

"What?" Fury demanded.

"He has a son," Pepper repeated. "Zeke. Tony---after what happened, Tony sort of gave him asylum. Sins of the father, you know. We set him up close by in New York while he finished up his doctorate. He's been quiet ever since, not really sociable since you know, Obadiah was still his father, but he never seemed to believe the ideology."

"You don't have to believe Hydra's ideology in order to do some pretty fucking dickish things," Steve wrinkled up his nose adorably.

"Did you get Luis' report?" Natasha asked Maria.
Maria rolled her eyes and held up her tablet, "I'm currently on page forty-three. Of eight hundred and thirteen pages."

Natasha's hands were already flying and the screen split to reveal a second call.

"Oh heeeeeeey, boss lady," Luis smiled on the screen. "How's things? We're just sort of chillin here, we totally didn't get into the stash of emergency candy and we totally didn't eat all of the red starbursts that Darcy stashed away for you in case of a zombie apocalypse. Not a great plan, by the way, because unless you had a steady hand on the candy supply, you could have a riot on your hands, and man I don't watch the Walking dead, but I do read the recaps and comments sections on articles, and I know you don't want something valuable that people can you know, feed each other to zombies over."

"I had so much sugar I can see the sounds!" Kurt called out off screen.

"Tony and Vision are still fighting bad guys," Helen reported, poking her head in to be seen next to Luis. "It's totally boring, and sugaring up Kurt seemed like a really good idea at the time. And you know, I really stand by that idea. Because Dave has a family history of type II diabetes, and Luis doesn't need sugar cause he's sweet enough already."

"Luis, sweetie, baby?" Steve asked.

"Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhmmmm," Luis put his hand on his chin as he stared at Steve. Cajoling, sweet, lovely smiling Steve. Luis gave a smile to Helen quickly and nodding, "Are all my dreams coming true? Is this the dream? But where's Darcy and Sergeant Uncle Bucky? Cause they're in it too. Nobody pinch me. They'll be here soon, that's how the dream works."

"Darcy and Bucky and Lila got taken," Clint said in a pained tone.

"Shit son," Luis whispered, all business immediately.

"Luis, what is the absolute most important thing, aside from your sweetness, cause hello, she completes you, man. Like I totally see a spring wedding, because this was a match made in heaven," Steve pointed a finger gun at Helen and gave her a wink. "But after that, what's the most important thing you got from that facility. One word. Go."
"Mariah," Luis said quickly. "The boss is Mariah?"

Sharon was already on her tablet, pulling up accounts and ledgers. Natasha split the screen into thirds and began pulling up her own information.

"Good to know you just keep that kind of shit on my personal database," Fury pressed his lips into an unimpressed line.

"Safer than houses here," Natasha shrugged.

"We're looking for a link between Stane and Mariah because bitter, angry people who feel like they've been wronged tend to group together. Like semi-anonymous trolls on youtube comment sections," Steve advised. "The warehouse where Helen was kept. The people belonged to Mariah, where'd the money come from? And oh...the meade liked that, cause I just got a semi."

"Steve," Clint shook his head slightly. He was worried sick and he fought to keep from smiling at Steve's very Darcy like antics.

"I can't help the way the meade works, Barton! SUCK IT!" Steve grumbled petulantly. "It wants me to be near my Magnet and it's fucking rewarding me when I get a little closer. It made me feel closer to her just now, warm and happy and...you know, happy, dude. Cut me a break."

"Rewarding us all, really," Helen shrugged, her fingers itching for a way to get this on camera. Old habits died hard.

"You got a match on the money for the warehouse," Sharon revealed. "Same lines that the money for Hydra came through. At least they're predictable there."

"Dear Heimdall," Steve began in earnest, eyes blinking upwards to the hole in the roof. "Please take me to wherever Zeke Stane is, because I'm kind of betting that's where we find our people. And it'd be totally kick ass if I could be there to greet them when they get off the plane, you know, with that douchelord all in traction and stuff cause of my muscles. Love you big guy, Steve."

"THEY JUST FIXED THAT HOLE!" Fury grumbled, even as the rainbow bridge exploded and undid all the work the repair crew had done. Natasha rushed back to Steve's right side as Clint took
his place at the left, his hands secure on his bow with an arrow ready to fly. Fury nodded at Natasha, "We'll be down as soon as we can. Try to make sure the Darcy version of Captain America doesn't rip the guy to shreds. We all know who has the restraint between the two of them, and it is never Darcy."

"Not promising anything," Natasha shrugged before they all disappeared.

"That was so beautiful..." Luis began and he and Helen began to chatter even as the crew came back in to fix the hole in the ceiling.

"Bring everyone," Hill suggested when the hole was patched again. "If the Winter Soldier is triggered, we're in for a fight."

"Even me? Helen, sweetness, c'mon, let's go, we have to go rescue the girls and Sergeant Uncle Bucky!"

The appearance of a rainbow bridge portal in front of his modest little SUV in front of his non-descript and affordable townhouse was unexpected. Usually when Zeke Stane had visitors via portation or other other worldly means, it was a little less flashy and a little more terrifying. There was nothing like shaving in the morning and looking up into the mirror and seeing a giant, angry purple face.

This was very different. His keys fell out of his hands in surprise before he could unlock his car properly and suddenly he had an arrow in his face, the fists of the Black Widow a hair's breadth away from rendering him unconscious and useless, but perhaps most importantly he had the meaty paw of Captain America wrapped around his throat, squeezing ever so slightly.

"Hey dude. We can do this the easy way, or the super easy way. You can tell me where my people are and then I can smash this shiny and patriotic vibranium shield against your head, or you can make me smash my shiny and patriotic vibranium shield against your head in order to get the information out of you," Steve offered. He gave him a big grin that was not at all comforting or amusing, but was in fact, pretty terrifying. "Just so we're clear here, you're getting bashed with the shiny and patriotic shield either way. But helping me out gets you to the blissful relief of unconsciousness faster and not helping me gets you an arrow in your dick and a Widow's fist in your jugular."
"Knew Howard exaggerated about you," Zeke Stane rasped out as his face turned red with the sudden lack of oxygen.

"That doesn't sound like where my people are," Steve shook his head at him as if he were a toddler who had gotten into the candy jar right before dinner. "Barton?"

"My pleasure, Cap," Barton nodded.

"Put me down and I'll take you to where they're going to land," Zeke said quickly.

"That sounds like a trap," Steve nodded. He shrugged nonchalantly and gave that downright unnatural grin that Darcy usually wielded when she was angry and livid and ready to deal out some pain. "Cool. Let's do this, asshole."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading!
Chapter Notes

Short little Wednesday chapter for you!

And be warned, there's a running gag/bit in here that gives me great joy and had me snort giggling with amusement.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Lost in Translation

Idaho, 2011

"Seriously? I was gone for three hours."

Clint might have answered his wife's incredulous statement if he had the faculty of using his voice at the moment. But he was currently gagged. And bound. And hanging upside down. And his face was very prettily made up.

"I don't understand how you are entrusted with millions of dollars in spy equipment and planes and arrows and the safety of our nation, you adorable dummy," Laura sighed as she stood in front of Clint. His current prone position had him upside down, his head level with hers if she bent slightly.

He attempted to give her a wink and a charming smile. But Lila had done his undercover makeup. And Lila Barton had a heavy hand with the makeup. The fake eyelashes that Natasha had left behind in her room at her last visit caused his eyelid to glue shut messily and his mouth was, of course, gagged.

"Three hours," Laura repeated.

Clint nodded slightly, his one barely open eye twinkling at her.
"I left you for three hours, and I'm betting, if I check the nanny cam that I totally set up before I left to see if I can get a little extra cash from America's Funniest Home Videos, I will see you ENCOURAGING our children to debilitate you," Laura crossed her arms over her chest. Her mouth was pursed in that way she did when she secretly wanted to smile but knew better than to let it happen.

"Mofifmmphh mosiinfommph," Clint shrugged upside down.

"You're proud of them, aren't you?" Laura rolled her eyes.

Clint nodded and Laura wrinkled her nose at him before reaching out and ripping the duct tape that held the gag in place. Clint hissed out in pain and moved his mouth back and forth to get feeling back in his lips.

"The whole idea of letting Fury wipe me off the face of the map and moving to West Twaddlefuck Street in Corn Town, Idaho was to keep us safe," Laura reminded him helpfully. "There's no need to make my babies into super spies."

"Says the girl who teaches our son about how to dismantle bombs and warheads," Clint countered knowingly. He held up his hands to his wife and gave her a wiggle of his eyebrows. "Boy knows more about particle physics than Tony Stark at this point."

"He knew more about particle physics than Tony Stark by the time most kids were learning their ABC's!" Laura said proudly. Then shrugged. "Okay, so we both have some issues here."

"Not issues, smarty-pants," Clint shook his head as she unbound his hands. "You never know what's going to come our way, really. AIM still would love to get their hands on you, and between me and Natasha, there's always enemies out there that would love to find my kids. Better to be safe..."

"Better to be safe than stupid," Laura finished for him. At this point it would be their family mantra. She'd have it printed on t-shirts at the next Quill Family Reunion. She rolled her eyes and took a step back.

"Wait wait wait," Clint shook his head quickly but it was too late.
Laura felt the ground leave her as the rope gripped on her ankles and tightened very quickly. Some clever levers and pulleys had her hoisted up quickly and soon she was dangling upside down next to Clint, her arms flailing to the ground as she made a strangled yelping noise.

"Hey smarty-pants," Clint grinned at her as she was now face to face with him again, but this time, the same orientation as him.

"Motherfucking fuckballs," Laura wrinkled her rapidly reddening nose as all the blood rushed to her head. "What were we thinking when we had these little bastards?"

"Hey now, I married you in plenty of time. Eight months before the oldest non-bastard was born," Clint disputed. "The House of Barton is bastard free."

"Idiot," Laura smirked. "How do we get down?"

"Gimme a kiss and I'll have us down in a jiffy," Clint prodded.

"Gross," Laura muttered before craning her neck so that her lips landed messily against Clint's.

"Really?" Natasha's unimpressed tone eventually cut through the kiss that had rapidly gotten a little more heated as the blood rush to the head affected both of their senses. She reached out with a blade and cut Clint down first, smirking when he smacked his head on the wood floors. "C'mon Barton. Fury says you're going to be heading out to New Mexico to watch some astrophysicist in the desert."

"I hate deserts."

---

Present Day, Plane over the Atlantic
Lila's phone had stopped working approximately half an hour into the flight. She knew it had been coming. Any idiot would know to scramble cellular service when taking a hostage. It had been absolutely silent out there and Lila was getting a little bored.

She'd planned her plan already, and went over it a couple hundred times in her head, as she would normally do thanks to all the drilling from her Aunt Natasha over the years. But that had left a lot of down time where she couldn't really nap, and definitely couldn't go and grab a snack. The only thing she could do was go over the plan again, every move and every contingency she could think of.

And she spent a fair bit of time considering how long her Auntie Dar Dar had been unconscious. It had been a concerning amount of time.

The bad guy wasn't saying much at all. He made one communication about an hour into their flight.

"En route, four hours. Tell Killmonger it is done and my debt to him is paid."

The Winter Soldier, because Lila was grown up to know and admit that her Uncle Bucky wasn't in there at the moment. Or he was, but he was trapped behind the deadly and compliant weaponized man who had spent decades in the hands of very, very bad people.

She didn't want to hurt Uncle Bucky.

But Uncle Bucky had always told her that she should never hesitate in debilitating the Winter Soldier in any way that she could before running as fast and as far as she possibly could. And he had taught all of the so-called civilians on the island the best way each could do it. Not that Lila had needed much teaching, and she had a few other tricks up her sleeve—or in this case in her bag, if she needed them.

"Wake her, she should not be unconscious for so long."

The order from the Wakandan man jolted Lila out of her continued repeating of her plans in her head. She heard the heavy footsteps of the Winter Soldier come close to her hiding place and saw Uncle Bucky's practical, but still pretty stylish sneakers through the small gap of the panel she was behind. So Darcy was right above her, which was good to know and Lila worked through her plans some more.
"She's unresponsive," came the gruff voice of the Winter Soldier. It was jarring to hear, as Lila had become quite used to the strange, almost lazy accent of her Uncle Bucky. It was gone and that seemed to make Lila want to cry a little, but she held it at bay.

There'd be plenty of time to cry later when her Daddy came to get her.

"Her vitals?"

"Unable to accurately report," the Soldier replied. The sound of the metal exoskeleton arm brushing against Darcy's skin was small, but noticeable. "The arm doesn't have sensory capability."

"Damn it to hell," the Wakandan man muttered before his steps were heard as well approaching where Darcy was laying out. "Watch the controls. Killmonger was clear, the girl had to be alive and if you strangled her to death there will be hell to pay."

The implied threat didn't seem to phase the Winter Soldier and he went towards the cockpit while the Wakandan man checked over Darcy.

"There's a pulse---"

His shout of pain was loud and the crash of a body against metal was clear. Lila's eyes widened in a panic. She hadn't thought to factor in her Auntie Dar Dar's assistance when thinking of ways to incapacitate Uncle Bucky and their kidnapper. It wasn't that she didn't know that Darcy was capable. Even if everyone else but Natasha and Thor called Darcy lazy, Lila knew differently.

Auntie Dar Dar was just very smart. And sneaky.

"Soldier!" the Wakandan man tried to shout out, but the sound was garbled.

There were six loud banging sounds, like a thick piece of plastic against someone's head echoing throughout the plane, and suddenly the loud clunking sound of a man's body hitting the ground. Lila reached for her weapons and was ready to go and assist when Darcy began shouting out harsh commands in another language, it sounded like German. Lila wasn't the best with languages, certainly not as good as her Auntie Dar Dar, but she'd been working on it and she reached in her bag and pulled out the translation book that her mother had gifted her two years ago.
"STAND DOWN PANCAKE!" Darcy said with real authority. It was either Pancake or Soldier, Lila couldn't really tell.

"You are not the correct nugget, tiny bossy nugget," came the Soldier's reply.

Lila wrinkled her nose. Who called someone a nugget? A nugget of what? Poo? Maybe it was nugget poo. Maybe he had said some sort of slang for child. No. Handler. That has to be it. Maybe. Lila couldn't be sure.

"I'm everyone's nugget," Darcy disputed. "I nugget all of the melons and the pancakes."

Lila shook her head. Not melons. Assets?

"Violence against the new nugget is not allowed. You will be bow-tied," the Soldier said calmly.

"Come the fuck on, Bucky!" Darcy said in English, and Lila made a mental note to get her later for the swear jar when they were all safely back home in Wakanda. Darcy stamped her feet slightly in annoyance and began in German again. "You are not to bow-tie me. You can't bow-tie me. I am your nugget, and I forbid you to bow-tie me."

Bow-tie might have been better translated as kill. Lila preferred if it would mean bow-tie instead.

"You are not the nugget."

"I'm the nugget if I say I'm the nugget. Shut your Pancake Mouth! I will have Natasha smother you with her thighs and then not take you out for marathon bike racing!"

Lila's eyes widened, because her mother had crossed out what the original word meant in the book and wrote in marathon bike racing instead. She figured it was probably too mature for her eyes.

"You are too loud and obnoxious to be the nugget. I want for you to be still."
"NO!" Darcy squealed in English as she began moving around the jet to evade Bucky. "BUCKY NO! Steve wouldn't want you too---oww! MOTHER FUCKING FUCKER LET ME GO!"

Lila made a mental check mark for additional swears and winced as she heard the scuffle out in the jet. She should go out and do something, but her arrival now would just throw Darcy off, and she would lose any tactical advantage she had. The little girl peeked through the slats to see what was going on and Bucky had had Darcy's arm in an uncomfortable hold but she'd managed to run up the close, small partition of the plane with her feet until she could use her leverage to swing her body in a semi-circle, tucking her available limbs in tight before kicking out with both feet into Bucky's chest.

She fell to the ground and he staggered backwards a few inches.

"Ugh, how does Steve DO that all the time?" Darcy grumbled.

"You are an awful nugget," the Soldier shook his head in confusion. "If you were a real nugget you would have subdued me by now with cupcakes."

Lila pursed her lips at the book. Her mother had crossed out the word torture with cupcakes. Go figure.

"I'm not going to cupcake you, Pancake," Darcy promised. "We're gonna go home and we're going to fix you."

"The real nugget told me to watch the controls," the Soldier warned.

Because Darcy had inched her way towards them and pulled herself to her feet, her hands hovering over the dials.

"I'm the real nugget. I nugget the crap out of everyone!" Darcy hotly disputed. "HANDS OFF!"

"Do not alter the flight tickle path," the Soldier warned as Darcy reached out and pressed down on a series of buttons with her chest.

"Pancake, stand down," Darcy ordered again. She squealed out in pain and hissed, "Dammit, Bucky,
your freaky strong skeleton hand HURTS! Nat is gonna have your balls, compliance or no! This is my cookie baking hand!"

Now was probably the time to act. Lila nodded and took one deep breath. Aunt Darcy had managed to kick off of the pilot's chair and ease up on the Soldier's hold on her, and at her angle the only weapon she had available was her mouth. Lila doubted screaming at him would do much good, so instead, Darcy did what Lila would have done, what Natasha had trained into the both of them. She bit down on anything available, which happened to be his right pectoral muscle.

The Soldier laughed at that.

"Tiny nugget kitten."

"Big eatable pancake!"

The timing was perfect here, Lila nodded and was about to bust through her little cupboard when her phone lit up suddenly with a text message.

_Mr. Stark and Mommy stole one of the US government satellites and repositioned it to get through on the special frequency to our phones. Liles, I hope you get this..._

The message was from Cooper.

_Be careful, Daddy and Uncle Steve and Aunt Natasha are on their way._

Lila took a deep, even breath. She was incredibly happy to know that. She knew her Daddy would rescue her. And she knew Uncle Steve would rescue Auntie Dar Dar. And she knew Aunt Natasha would rescue them all.

_Mommy says to stay safe and hide and don't try to fight Uncle Bucky._

Lila heard Darcy grunting with pain outside as she went toe to toe with her own brand of fighting with an almost amused Winter Soldier. It mostly involved a lot of twisting her body weight as quickly as possible and getting herself into positions where she could jab or bite at sensitive
positions. Every once in a while she’d knee him in his boy parts, and that seemed to work for a little while before the Soldier tried to grab for her again.

*But if you have to fight. Here's what you need to do...*

Lila's eyes light up as a picture downloaded slowly.

"I'm going to kick the pancake outta you!" Darcy grunted, her knee connecting with the soldier's boy parts again.

Lila dug into her bag again, intent on finding something to add to the plan she had carefully built during the entire flight. Because this would make it so much easier.

"PANCAKE!"

The Wakandan man shouted out, giving the Winter Soldier pause in his cat and mouse games with the feisty little mouse that reminded him in some small ways of something else. The way she moved around seemed familiar, it wasn't as polished or fluid as what he remembered, but the basics were definitely there.

The entire plane jerked as Darcy took that one moment of Bucky's confusion to change the flight plan. She began working on the communication units then, hoping to open something up, and she wished she had spent less time naked in beds and closets and beach bungalows and one time a literal waterfall oasis and more time learning about Wakandan tech, because it was advanced and impressive, but so much so that it dwarfed all the tech she had previously worked with.

The gunshot was the loudest thing Lila had ever heard, and she stopped what she was doing and saw that the Wakandan man had fired the gun and Darcy was now slumped over the controls and whimpering. Her right hand gripped her shoulder even as she kept trying to hit buttons with her nose.

"Tie her down, she will not fool me again."

Chapter End Notes
When I had plotted this beast out so long ago, I thought by the time I got here, it would be miserable and angsty and awful to write. And yet here we are...

I hope you enjoyed reading that! Thanks for reading!
Luxemborg, 1944

"Look at him! Look at his ears! I swear if they got any redder you'd be able to see them from the sun!" Dum Dum cackled with wheezing laughter as he slapped his knees. His preoccupation with the laughing allowed Morita to grab the binoculars and peer through them.

"I wish we can snap a picture of him and put it in the dictionary next to uncomfortable, because that—that is really uncomfortable," Morita smirked and shook his head before handing the binoculars off to Barnes. "Was he always like that, Sarge?"

"Always awful with dames, but I think this is only the fifth of sixth time in his entire life where one has wanted him so bad," Bucky shrugged. He bit back a laugh as the overzealous princess began to let her hands wander as Steve stood next to her at parade rest. "And I really don't think he's ever dealt with a gal quite like that."

"Well, there's Lorraine," Gabe waggled his eyebrows. "The gals who gossip around my desk in the armory say she really tried to tempt the good Captain and Carter caught him getting his lips sucked off his face. Said he looked as if someone had given him a bad head injury."

"S'that when Agent Iron Crumpets shot the poor bastard?" Dum Dum wondered.

"And he's still sweet on Carter? After she shot at him?" Dernier asked in French, and the Jones
"He's an odd sort of duck," Bucky admitted. "Likes a tough gal."

"Who doesn't?" Morita scoffed.

"What dame ain't tough, though?" Jones wondered. "They bleed more than us, and I saw my sister give birth to twins. Every dame in the world is tougher than us."

"We should send your sister after Hitler then, we'd have half of this battle won," Dum-Dum cracked as he finally got the binoculars back. "Oh, hell, we can't tell Pegg about this now. The princess has got some wandering hands."

“Holy cow, the dame is like an octopus,” Bucky chuckled as the princess managed to sneak a hand around to pinch Steve’s bottom despite all of his best efforts to keep her hands to herself.

“How old is she again?” Falsworth’s eyes widened as Steve jumped again when the princess got a handful of his rear end.

“Seventy-three,” Jones chuckled.

"Getting a transmission," Morita announced. "Phillips says get Rogers the hell out of there before his virtue is spoiled and Peg comes in with guns ablazin'."

"I'll get him," Bucky rolled his eyes. "Always pulling that guy's ass out of the fire."

“Or in this case, his ass out of the hands of an elderly princess,” Dum Dum grinned.

“If he hadn’t of rushed in there head first, so keen on getting those damned coordinates, he wouldn’t be in this mess,” Bucky sighed, putting his sniper rifle carefully away as he loaded up on easily hidden weapons and buttoned up the civilian overcoat. “Didn’t matter when he was a little scraper or big ton of bricks, he always manages to jump into the dumbest shit in the name of truth---”
“Justice,” Falsworth put in with overt dramaticism.

“The American Way,” Dum Dum saluted. It was a wasted joke. Steve always rolled his eyes when the crew of Howling Commandos referred to him as Superman.

“Cover me, boys,” Bucky advised before strutting out of their cover.

"Bring back some of those little bon bons in there!" Morita called out. He scowled as Jones smacked at his shoulder. "What, it's been two years since I had real good sugar."

"Go on in and grab the Princess, she's about to give poor Rogers plenty of sugar!"

Present Day, New York

Steve had only just managed to get Zeke Stane turned around with a forearm to the man's jugular when he heard the familiar sound of the Iron Man suit approaching at a ridiculously high speed. Steve couldn't help it, quite literally, as it was Darcy's immediate reaction to pout at the violent fun being cut short. Now he'd have to share the violence with Tony, which he normally didn't mind, but this man had put so much that he cared for at risk, and Steve really did want to deal out all of the violence.

But he'd share, because Tony deserved to get a little in on the man who he had sheltered after Obediah Stane's betrayal ten years ago. He'd given Zeke a safe place when most would have cut ties, and Zeke had used that safe place to plot attacks and then actually try and take control of Tony's mind. Steve, especially a meade enhanced Steve, really liked and looked forward to violence, but in this case he'd be willing to share.

"Your ass is so grass, dude," Steve shook his head with an almost gleeful smirk on his face looking so out of place beneath the Captain America cowl. "I'm gonna charge admission. 10 bucks to get a square kick to your awful ass. I'll be a billionaire in no time."
Tony landed as Zeke calmly and serenely stared up at Steve. Iron Man threw a mangled hunk of metallic robot in front of where Steve had Zeke pinned against the SUV. Tony's mask flipped up and he gave Zeke an annoyed look.

"You're shit at building bots."

"They kept you busy enough," Zeke sneered back. He let out a desperate sound of pain as Steve's elbow dug into his jugular.

"Woops, slipsies," Steve smiled serenely.

"Oh shit, do I have meade Steve with me right now? Darcy in a cap costume?" Tony asked in sudden interest, his sullen attitude melting away quickly.

"Uhhggg, Darcy in a Cap costume...it's inappropriate to get aroused right now, isn't it?" Steve wondered. He shrugged. "You know she's been in a costume before, and not for the fun night-time activities we play, although she does make me wear the suit and cowl sometimes, just to get it off of me in interesting ways."

"Cap, boundaries," Clint warned, pleasantly enough. He was obviously still worried about his daughter, but having the culprit at hand was making it a little bit better. Actually, having an arrow pointed at the asshole that had done all this made him feel a little bit better.

"Don't give him boundaries, I want all the Darcy-esque Steve," Tony shook his head. He looked at Steve and demanded, "Did you ever bone that cute blonde waitress?"

"Naaaah," Steve shrugged. "She was a sweetheart, but she was way more interested in the guy in a suit that rescued her from aliens instead of Steve Rogers, sort of kinky and hella complicated dude in normal clothes."

"Damn," Tony shook his head. "So was Darcy your first since defrosting?"

"There was a dental hygienist about a year after waking up. She had a really wicked bedside manner," Steve tossed back. "And then of course, I'll always treasure the time we spent together."
"Uhhhhhhhh," Tony furrowed his brow.

"Remember? I can't believe you don't remember man, I feel betrayed. And USED," Steve smirked around the mock hurt expression.

"Do you mean that time we cuddled on the couch by accident last summer?" Tony asked thoughtfully.

"Anthony, I can't believe you would refer to our beautiful experience together so glibly. I'm so disappointed I might cry. Or do violence. No, wait, it's do violence," Steve nodded. "You want to take first crack at him?"

"Well he took your beloved. And your Darcy too," Tony cracked.

"Duuuuude, I expect better from you, Tony," Steve gave him a look straight off of Darcy's face. "I get paltry jokes about my supposed love affair with Bucky? I could get better from Nathaniel."

"Hey, how about you let me hit him while the two of you go and cuddle some more?" Natasha suggested. "Because we're wasting time with this."

"Just trying to lighten the mood," Tony shrugged.

"Everything is a joke to you, Stark," Zeke spat out bitterly, the rasp in his voice evident from where Steve had over-enthusiastically jammed his arm into the man's throat. "Your whole life is a joke."

"I think I've cleaned up okay," Tony disputed calmly enough. The look on his face turned dark and angry. "And as far as lives go, I'd rather have this one than the one where I wasted ten years of my life to get some ill-fated revenge."

"You're wrong on both accounts," Zeke smiled. "It was so much longer than ten years. When you come from a long line of the finest Germany has to offer you---"

"Say Hail Hydra and I'm gonna see what the shiny metal shield does to your balls, man," Steve
warned.

"Generations of my family gave everything to Hydra. And now, we will finally dispatch our most bothersome enemy," Zeke promised. "I'll finish what the Red Skull couldn't---"

Zeke screamed out in pain as Clint let an arrow land in the fleshy part of the monologuing villain's thigh. Steve let the man go, and sure enough the arrow had gone straight through, securing Zeke to the car behind him. Steve wisely stood to the side and Clint grabbed an arrow out of his quiver and held it to Zeke's throat.

"You're gonna tell us where the plane is, and you're gonna tell us now."

Zeke looked up into the sky, but he wasn't looking at a plane.

He was looking at a portal.

“Fuck me sideways,” Steve mumbled, looking up at it with wide blue eyes. He’d seen that sort of energy before. Right before the Red Skull disintegrated.

"Time's up," Zeke grinned as alien troops began moving through the portal, not as large in scale as the Chitauri invasion, but the aliens coming down were nasty looking, and smarter by the looks of it. Instead of random destruction, they had a set path.

Straight to the heroes currently holding Zeke hostage.

"Shiiiiiiiiiiit."

Tony and Steve said at the same time in exactly the same inflection.

"Jinx."

"Stop saying what I'm saying."
"Funky spanky sparkle butt."

Natasha rolled her eyes and stood ready to defend herself, even as she searched beyond the portal, seeing something else in the clouds heading towards them. It was fast. Faster than a quinjet. And shaped exactly like a Wakandan plane.

“Put her over there and tie her down this time,” the real handler ordered.

The Soldier looked down at the tiny kitten handler, who had pretended to order him around and watched as she continued to press buttons on the control panel, even as she held a hand to her shoulder. She was even using her nose, and it looked like she was gracelessly mashing buttons, but the flight control suddenly went dark, the screen a blank clear space instead of the radar and flight path that had illuminated the hollow screen on the plane’s front window.

“What did you do?” the real handler screamed.

“Button mashing champion since 1994!” Darcy whispered, standing up to her full, unimpressive height. Her hand was trying to staunch the flow of blood on her shoulder and her skin was even paler than before, looking well and truly ready to pass out once more. “Also...fuck you.”

The Soldier’s eyes briefly moved to his metal skeleton hand. If he had his original arm, he would have been able to get a read on her vitals. She was fading fast due to her reckless actions and attempts to usurp the original handler. Something was nagging at the base of the Soldier’s skull, though. He didn’t want this feisty little pretend handler to meet an end yet.

She was important to a few people. He knew that. The new handler wouldn’t risk having such an uncontrollable liability flying so high in the air if she wasn’t important. There was something more, and it felt like a tingling sensation in his brain. It felt better not to think about it too long.

“Fix it!” the real handler demanded as the plane began to descend. Quicker than what could be deemed as safe.

“Soldier!” the bark was quick. It was a funny thing the more the Soldier thought about it. He remembered new handlers. They were always quick to learn how to give cruel orders, not matter how kind they may have been their whole life. “Torture it out of her.”

“Open ended,” Darcy huffed out as the Soldier went to reach for her and she flinched away. “I view tickling as torture, FYI. Also, talking about baseball, cause I love Steve, sure, but fuck baseball and fuck him wanting to talk about baseball with me. That’s what he has Bucky and Sam for.”

The plane was going to crash, and the chances of surviving it were very low. The Soldier knew this. He looked at the little kitten handler and wondered if she would survive the full spectrum of torture and pain that he could dish out. He made a small decision. He would give pain, but he would not kill. He once again felt annoyance that his arm was incomplete, as it would be easier to keep her alive.

He reached out for her again and ignored her flinch as he pulled her into to stand her flush against him, her back to his front. One metal finger went to the bullet hole and pressed, causing her to screech out in pain-filled expletives. The new handler was at the controls, desperately trying to get them back up and running.

“When I can bash your head against something, you are gonna pay so dearly for this,” Darcy promised.

The Soldier didn’t understand why the small girl didn’t crumple immediately. She was fighting back, and he internally predicted that she would pass out from blood loss before he could torture anything out of her.

Stubborn little thing.


The promise was gasped out between him putting varying amounts of pressure on her gunshot wound. He decided quickly that she wouldn’t break easy, so he lifted her off of her feet with an arm around her midsection and made to turn away and put her back down on the cot she had originally been on before disabling the new handler. He’d have to get her wound covered before he could
adequately torture her.

When the Soldier turned, it was straight into a large metal pipe that was swinging at his face so suddenly that he didn’t have a chance to drop the little kitten handler (who was lethargically, but stubbornly trying to kick his shins). The pipe connected with the side of his skull and he dropped the girl in his arms to the ground, the sound of something snapping, likely bone as her feet hit the ground was loud and the Soldier felt a wave of panic go through him that was new and entirely frightening.

He blinked, trying to get his focus back as he looked to the new attacker on the plane.

An even smaller girl darted out of his eyeline, causing him to turn on his feet to follow her and keep her in his sights. She was impossibly young, and Buck---no, that wasn’t right. He was the soldier.

He blinked very rapidly as the pain swam through his synapses. The hit to the head had felt impossibly strong, and the Soldier didn’t understand how someone so small had done it. He blinked again and almost smiled.

Lila had always consulted Cooper about the physics of the attack, getting the most force out of every swing using good old fashioned science.

“Lila! What are you doing here?” Darcy demanded.

“SOLDIER!” the new handler yelled as the plane’s screens slowly started to flicker to life again.

“Rescuing you guys,” Lila answered from behind the Soldier, who spun to try and attack her.

The little girl was impossibly fast, and she moved like a Widow.

The Soldier knew how those little Russian beauties moved.

“HEY!” Darcy called out, getting the Soldier’s attention again.

She’d had a taser on her. Small and potent, Stevie had smiled when Laura had given it to her. Small and potent just like his Magnet.
The Soldier felt his jaw clenching as the electricity shot through him and two seconds later another blow to the other side of his head landed, knocking him back into the pilot’s chair. Another blast of electricity had him dazed, but not quite out. He was the Winter Soldier, it took more than that to put him down.

“Lila, what are you doing?” the little kitten handler called out anxiously, even as her voice got closer. She was limping towards the cockpit.

“Cooper told me to do this,” Lila muttered, and she was very close to the Soldier. He could reach out and grab her---

A little hand darted out, and a palm was forcibly struck against his chin, pushing his face up. The girl’s other hand reached for the metal arm, and the Soldier would have laughed, because it wasn’t possible that she could do damage to it, even in its current skeleton state. She might have gotten a few lucky hits in, but there was no way that she could---

A hand pressed against a joint. A hidden button that the Soldier didn’t know about. Failsafes.

Bucky had insisted on failsafes. He wasn’t an idiot, and wanted to make sure that everyone was safe. Cooper and Bucky were the only ones that knew.


She tapped out Morse code for SOS. Just once. Just very quickly.

And the skeleton arm fell to pieces, leaving a metal stump and one exposed metal joint behind.

The quick, tiny girl fell back immediately before the Soldier could grab for her, not that he wanted to at that point. He’d done nothing but underestimate the best small Widow he’d ever come across, and he wouldn’t do it again.
“Soldier!” the new handler called out. Darcy had made it to the cockpit, and had managed to pull up enough strength to bum rush him, using some of the moves that had allowed her to survive her own encounter with the Winter Soldier. She scratched and kicked and punched with her good arm, before finally head butting the new handler, causing him to fall backwards and smash his head against the control panel.

Well that was just too bad for the new handler. The Soldier was kind of busy at the moment.

“GIVE ME BACK MY UNCLE BUCKY!” the little girl screamed before smacking the Soldier to the temple again.

“Lila! Hold on to something, we’re going down, and it’s going to be a little bumpy,” Darcy called out.

“NO!” she insisted, smacking Bucky against the head for the seventh time.

His eyes went unfocused and he blinked.

“Lila, do as she says...I’m---I’ll be okay,” Bucky muttered. He hissed out as his head clouded again. “Wait, one more smack. A big one, kid.”

Lila nodded and prepped. Her form was impeccable, and the way she swung did allow for the maximum amount of force her ten-year-old muscles would allow. The pipe connected with his temple one more time and Bucky felt a little darkness instead of the terrifying cloudy curtain this time. This wasn’t the same level as crashing the helicopter, but it was effective, and every ten seconds he’d blink his eyes open and still feel like himself.

He blinked and Lila was strapped in very quickly.

He blinked again and Darcy had finally brought the controls back up again fully, working with Shuri on the communications, who was helping her do a very rough emergency landing.

One more blink had them landing. And rough wasn’t enough to describe it. Lila didn’t scream, but her small whimpers for *I want my Daddy* were terrifying to him, and he couldn’t remember how the kid had gotten there, but he could only silently pray that he hadn’t hurt her while he’d been in compliance.
Bucky winced as he began moving towards the cockpit, as Darcy began to slump, unsecured and in danger of doing real damage to her head once more as the plane hit a long concrete strip of road, going sideways, tearing up the street. He managed to get to her as she fell from the seat, wrapping his arm around her and bringing her to the ground, covering her body with his, trying to absorb some of the impact.

And then as they finally stopped against the side of a brick building, a piece of the plan smacked against Bucky’s head once more, truly finishing the good work that Lila had started, and Bucky, now well and truly Bucky, was completely knocked unconscious.

“Fucking meade. Fucking shit. Fucking fuckballs,” Steve hissed out as he watched the plane make the worst landing ever (and Steve had landed a plane in an iceberg, he knew about bad landings), just as the first alien attacker touched the ground. He looked to Tony and said, “My Magnet is on that plane.”

“What’s so important about a magnet?” Tony made a very confused face before flipping down his visor and letting some missiles fly towards the alien attackers.

Clint took off running for the plane immediately, and he was covered by Natasha, who followed a little slower in order to ensure his safety as she pulled out the guns that were getting the job done, but just not efficiently. She had to put three bullets through each alien in order to get them to stay down.

“This should be good...save the world again, or go and rescue your little woman from the Winter Soldier,” Zeke smirked at Steve. “Decisions, Captain.”

“Fuck you and the horse you rode in on,” Steve grumbled before bringing the shield to the man’s head, knocking him out effectively. He let him crash to the ground in a heap. Steve knew he was in a pickle, he didn't need some overgrown, Hydra, Daddy's boy telling him that.

But he also knew that he had a way out.

“Heimdall?” Steve called up to the skies as loudly as he could.
“What are you doing?” Tony demanded, even as he continued to go on the offensive. Clint and Natasha had made it to the Wakandan jet and were working at getting inside. “A little help here, Cap!”

Steve smirked at him. They were about to get a lot of help.

“Heimdall! Send down Manuel the Fluffy!”

Chapter End Notes

Do I want to order pizza? (The answer is yes, I always want to order pizza). But should I order pizza? I have a shiny pizza gift card. I could order pizza.

Anyway. I hope you liked this. And I hope you're as excited about Manuel the Fluffy as I am. (I'm really excited!)

Thanks for reading!
The Ballad of Manuel the Fluffy

Chapter Notes

Oh boy. Are you guys ready?

I'm not.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Forty: The Ballad of Manuel the Fluffy

Mississippi, February 2014

The sounds coming from the alleyway were definitely, most probably, absolutely above her pay grade. She was there to keep Jane alive, to scout out the latest talent for Pepper's amazing collection of scientists under the Stark Industries umbrella, and also to eat amazing shrimp. Shrimp that came in giant buckets. She may or may not have booked Jane at a local community college a little below Jane’s new, shiny stature because she knew that there was an amazing shrimp shack that would give her loads of delicious shrimp and butter.

BY THE BUCKET.

She’d already recruited some brilliant, but shy little statistician who lived in a shack by the Gulf. And she’d managed to keep (a slightly livid) Jane alive. But that was more in thanks to Thor than anyone else, who showed up after a call to assemble to whisk Jane away for a romantic walk on the beach. And then maybe take her on a romantic and incredibly loud stay in a hotel room for the weekend. Darcy was cool with that. She liked being on her own from time to time, and she really wanted to do shrimp buckets for breakfast, lunch and dinner. And she wanted to do it without Jane's judgey eyes narrowed at her gluttonous face full of shrimp.

But even when the world was good and right, there was always something. The sounds of otherworldly pain coming from the alleyway were certainly something. Darcy thought about calling Stark, but he and the rest of the Avengers were at the Tower, recouping after the last attempt on the world. A lame attempt at that. Someone who used to be a douchebag on a reality show tried to start a rebellion across all fifty states. Captain America had shut him down with one interview, so the call
to assemble was mostly to deal with the out of control, violent and badly put together robots the man had built to rule the country.

Still, they didn't need to come down to the South in order to help unless she absolutely needed it. Heimdall and JARVIS had her back, and if she needed help, help would certainly be brought to her.

The roar that literally was powerful enough to blow a trash can lid out of the alleyway was full of pain and indignation. Darcy couldn't wait anymore. She got her super modified taser out and was ready to blast some alien butt as she jumped around the corner to see what was going on.

They were big.

They were slimy.

They had antlers.

"Mother. Fucking. Bilgesnipes," Darcy whispered. "I thought those wacky Asgardians had been making it up!"

For in the alley there were three gigantic, otherworldly beasts, and they were currently gleefully and viciously attacking something smaller than them on the ground below. Smaller than them didn't actually mean that the thing that was roaring with pain and spiteful indignation was small. He was about as big as a small car. But the other three were as big as BIG cars. And they were currently kicking the smaller one's butt.

"HEY UNHOLY SLIME FUCKERS!" Darcy yelled out, regretting it only a little when the three vicious beasts turned her way. "Uh oh."

She remembered Sif telling her something about bilgesnipes the last time she had been in Asgard. And then she remembered a much more awesome Odin (Jane had described him as a hateful old crotch urchin, but Darcy had found him creepy and slightly charming, which was a weird combination, but better than being a crotch urchin, for sure), arguing amiably with Sif.

Darcy had thought he was a little flirty with Sif, but she wasn't going to judge the Allfather. Sif was a hottie with a body and a lovely attitude towards life. If Odin wanted to marry young the second time around, Darcy wasn't going to pass judgement.
She was, after all, infected with a teeny-tiny crush on someone who was over seventy-years older than her, sight unseen. She didn't like to judge where other people placed their affections.

But what had come of Sif and Odin’s heated discussion, was that Thor managed to survive against bilgesnipes and other bad big things by not only being the God of Thunder, but also being light on his feet. Darcy turned her head slightly and nodded at the sight of Big Amos coming down the street at exactly 3:15 pm. She’d only been in town for three days, but she already knew (thanks to her shrimp addiction), that Big Amos practically raced to the restaurant at 3:15 pm every day. She had had to dive out of the way the day before.

And Big Amos drove an eighteen wheeler.

She waited until the last possible moment before doing a jumping sort of roll that she had been happy to learn from Natasha. Usually she made the transformers noise when doing it, this time though, old school karate sound effects felt better. Two of the bilgesnipes went flying over her head and straight into the street, getting mowed down in a big, giant splat by the eighteen wheel truck that didn't even bother to brake. Big Amos might have loved shrimp more than Darcy. Perhaps.

The third nasty bilgesnipe managed to stop in time and was at the mouth of the large alleyway, snarling and dripping slime from his antlers. Darcy backed up until the wounded bilgesnipe was right behind her, and then discharged her taser. It was more for show, as it did no more than tickle the very angry, lone bilgesnipe.

But it did alert JARVIS that she needed help, and it would tell the nearest Avenger to get to her. And the nearest was her darling lightning brother Thor.

She just had to last long enough till then.

Five minutes of the most ridiculous running and acrobatics (that Natasha would have been proud to see)( later, Darcy was completely winded, and dripping with sweat. The little bilgesnipe she had rescued was following her happily, although he was limping slightly. Until finally Darcy heard the roll of thunder and put her hand on the wounded little guy's horn and pushed him back into the corner of an alley while Thor made his descent.

"Bash, Mew-Mew, bash!" Darcy managed to quietly cheer while she caught her breath. She felt a wave of stinky breath ruffle her hair and she looked back at the little bilgesnipe and saw that it was worried Mew-mew was going to be bashing Darcy and him next. "Oh don't worry fluffy little one,
Thor won't bash us with Mew-Mew. That sexy ass hammer wouldn't let him, I promise. I made her a BED! So you know, she kind of loves me."

The bilgesnipe let out a happy little barking sound and licked at the sleeve of Darcy's coat delicately.

"Oh, you love me too!" Darcy squealed. "You need a name, cause you're my baby now, and no one else is going to ever hurt you, ever. You are----"

Darcy thought it over and then grinned zealously. "You are Manuel, after my favorite shrimp bucket server. You are Manuel the Fluffy. You hungry boy?"

"Lady Darcy..." Thor interrupted with worry as Darcy pet at the side of the bilgesnipe's snout, right next to his very deadly teeth.

"Thanks, Thor!" Darcy waved him off. "I'm going to go use my emergency Stark card to buy an entire store's worth of chickens. You can go back to Janie now. Manuel the Fluffy and I will be fine."

---

_Present Day, New York_

The rainbow bridge lit up instantaneously. Heimdall did not mess around when it came to Darcy Lewis' safety, apparently.

Clint cursed and he and Natasha both simultaneously worked harder at prying the busted door to the Wakandian jet open.

"What's a Manuel the Fluffy?" Hill demanded over the suddenly live comm units.

"How do YOU not know that one of the people under your umbrella of people adopted a fucking
"bilgesnipe?" Tony demanded obnoxiously.

"Send medical," Natasha ordered.

"Medical is totally on the way, pretty lady, with a dope ass ride that one of your underlings gave us at the facility, Kurt is going like a thousand miles an hour and it is so awesome. So never fear! Damn yo, that's like, a catch phrase I never thought I'd be using, cause you know, growing up, you kind of wanted people to fear you, and then when I hit college and went into art history, you most definitely wanted people to fear you cause those bitches weren't shi----"

The sound of a deafening roar echoed through the street and over the comm units.

"What the hell was that? Luis...LUIS...what in the hell are you getting me into right now?" Dave demanded in a panic.

"uhmmmmmmm..."

Steve smiled up at the beast who trotted out of the rainbow bridge portal. Two more people came down before the light show stopped, but Steve was only looking up at Darcy's beloved bilgesnipe.

"Hey buddy, I'm Steve," Steve grinned up at him.

Manuel the Fluffy fairly leapt twelve feet in the air and barked excitedly before bounding to stand in front of Steve.

"How in the Odin's left tit did he do that?" Fandral demanded of Hogun irritably. "The slimy, furry bastard might've broken my elbow in half in trying to get him to go where we wanted him."

"Can't help he doesn't like the scent of Asgardian ManCandy very much," Steve smirked at Fandral before smiling and waving enthusiastically at Hogun. He then put his hand out to Manuel the Fluffy's snout and said, "Boy, she was totally not shitting me about the amount of slime, you got, big guy."
"The meade," Hogun said simply. He nodded, knowing that the beast that Darcy Lewis loved so much was now safe and in relatively good hands with the man that apparently, Darcy Lewis either loved so much or WOULD love so much.

The beasts had a way of scenting a person. Steve currently was borrowing Darcy’s personality. And Manuel the Fluffy could definitely sense that.

Hogun pulled out a sword and turned, rushing forward ten feet to destroy aliens, happily. Anything was better than Manuel the Fluffy wrangling.

"Wait, what---hold on just a moment here," Fandral shook his head. "The meade."

He pointed at Steve, who shrugged at him as he continued to pet at the slimy antlers that were pointed down in reverence to Steve.

"Catch up ye olde Golden Stark!"

"Darcy, I told you to stop calling me that!" Fandral automatically scolded playfully, then shook his head in disbelief. "You are Darcy's heart match."

"Bingo, bongo, boingo," Steve nodded. "And I had about twenty-five servings of meade running through me, and the threads of fate want me to get to my girl, so if you could stop staring at me like I'm a pretty piece of meat and go out and kick some alien ass, that would be SOOOOOO awesome."

"You are quite attractive like this, nothing at all like what the Allfather says about you," Fandral admitted with a shrug before running off to join the fight.

Steve looked up at Manuel, who seemed to know who he was thanks to the meade. And while normal Steve might not have been so comfortable with a pet bilgesnipe, now the size of an SUV, a meade enhanced Steve automatically loved the fluffy thing.

"Manuel the Fluffy," Steve said seriously. "Our Darcy is on that plane, and I need to get her out and make sure she's okay. But these aliens are being assholes, and we need to make sure that they get smashed and smashed good. There needs to be all of the damned smashing. Can you do that for me, pretty boy?"
Manuel the Fluffy barked in a positive response.

"Alright, let's go," Steve jumped up just as Manuel the Fluffy brought his head down, and suddenly Captain America was riding bareback on a bilgesnipe towards the fray. He cut down five aliens on the way, but eventually, Manuel the Fluffy had made it to the crashed jet, and Steve tossed the shield at the door, splintering the thing in half. Pure vibranium would win against vibranium coating every time.

Clint and Natasha simultaneously kicked at the shield, rendering the door useless and broken completely.

"DADDY!" Lila called out, sobbing. "Uncle Bucky and Auntie Dar Dar are stuck under there and I only heard Uncle Bucky grunting a little maybe five minutes ago, and I haven't heard Auntie Dar-Dar at all, and I'm so scared!"

"Hey baby girl, it's alright, it's alright," Clint promised, rushing towards where Lila was overwrought and sobbing and strapped into the seat safely.

He felt a huge weight being lifted off of his shoulders as Natasha and Steve went to work at freeing Darcy and Bucky, who were trapped underneath some broken rigging from the plane. He put his hand to the comm in his ear and requested quietly,

"Tell the Mama Bird she's fine. Better than fine."

"I'm not calling her Mama Bird," Maria disputed jovially enough. "Message delivered though."

Manuel the Fluffy let out a mournful bark from outside the plane, clearly worried about his darling owner.

"Manuel the Fluffy, go and destroy any aliens that get close, please," Steve asked sweetly. "You can't fit in here, and we have to be careful getting this stuff off of them."

"Prisoner transport needed, straight back to Wakanda," Natasha cuffed the man who had had the
audacity to try and take these people from her.

"There's aliens?" Lila wondered, sniffling as her emotions came back under control. She was perking up a little at the idea. "Can I guard the door?"

"The hell you can guard the door, you're grounded!" Clint insisted, before picking her up out of the chair and cradling her to him. His voice was choked as he promised her, "You're grounded until the end of time. No more lessons. No more training exercises. No more gun practice. Grounded forever."

"Daddy, m'fine!" Lila insisted, squirming in his hold. "I got Uncle Bucky back by hitting him a lot in the head."

"Jesus Christ, Nat, what have you been teaching my kid?" Clint demanded. His tiny little girl had managed to beat the Winter Soldier in the head enough to get Bucky Barnes back. It was amazing and absolutely terrifying.

"How to be fucking awesome," Steve answered, straining as he pulled up a heavy beam. "C'mon and help, Barton, let Lila guard the door."

"Fine, fine," Clint rolled his eyes, smacking a kiss on Lila's head and handing her a crossbow. "Door only, hotshot. And you're still grounded."

"Can I ride the bilgesnipe?"

"No."

Clint answered at the same time Steve smiled indulgently and shrugged, "Sure, later."

"On three," Natasha ordered, crouched low and ready to pull Darcy and Bucky to relative safety. Clint and Steve lifted the heaviest piece together and Bucky slowly rolled off of Darcy, looking dazed, bloodied and confused.
It only took a second to realize that most of the blood on him was not his own.

"Fuck, fuck, fucking fuck, shit. God dammit," Steve hissed before taking the entire beam's weight from Clint and tossing it to the side, hoping to hit the man who had taken them in the first place, but missing just barely. He fell to his knees and looked down at Darcy in complete, stock still terror.

She was a mess, blood soaking her whole shirt through and Steve had no way of knowing where the wound had started. She was so pale that Steve felt like vomiting and he reached out with shaking hands in an effort to assess her injuries.

"Lozado, status report," Natasha demanded over her comm as she helped Bucky into a sitting position. She looked at the stump of his arm and winced a bit. His balance was off once again and he nearly fell to the left completely before straightening himself and taking in a shuddering breath. Bucky was stock still and silent, watching Steve with so much fear and trepidation and guilt that it should be illegal.

"Give us ten more minutes," Dave answered quickly, knowing that time was of the essence here and Luis shouldn’t be allowed free reign to monologue.

"Make it less," Natasha ordered. "And I'll go on your next job with you."

"Kurt, oh my god, I think I just peed a little, go faster," Dave begged.

"Don't move her, she may have a head injury," Clint advised before going to the door, intent on clearing a safe path for medical to come through. He patted his daughter on the head, who had been happily firing crossbow bolts at anything within striking distance, much to Manuel the Fluffy’s delight. Clint stepped smiled down at the little girl before taking out his bow and shooting. "Bet I can get more than you."

“That’s not fair,” Lila rolled her eyes. “I don’t want to kick your booty because I got a headstart.”

“Darcy, cutie? Baby, can you open your eyes for me?” Steve asked in a small, worried voice, edged with tears. “Did she hit her head?”

"She didn’t hit her head," Bucky whispered. "She was talking to me when we crashed. It's---it's blood loss that's got her---"
His words tapered off as his eyes overflowed with tears. The words got caught in his throat and he forced them out.

"I'm so sorry."

"Buckaroo, it's ---" Steve wrinkled his nose in discomfort. It wasn’t alright. If Steve had his wits about him, he’d be able to say it though, but he still had the meade shooting through him, “It’s not alright, nothing about this is fucking alright, but how were we to know that this could happen? It’s a fucking shit show, dude, but right now, I promise you, that you and I are going to be okay. Cause you’re Bucky, and I know you would have never hurt her if you could help it.”

“Is Lila okay?” Bucky looked towards the door of the plane in worry, only slightly mollified to see that she was happily shooting at aliens.

It could have been so much worse.

He’d been an idiot to allow it to happen. Living some sort of daydream fairy tale story on that island with his Natalia and Steve and the little Rainbow Widow and fucking Wilson. He’d been a ticking time bomb the entire time and now Darcy was paying the price.

“Little help here, I can see the rocket they gave to the Wombats, and its path is blocked,” Clint announced.

Bucky struggled to his feet and took a few deep breaths as he watched Steve fret over Darcy. He met Natasha’s eyes and almost fell back over at the unmitigated love he saw there. For him. And this is what he’d done to ruin it all. He held out a hand and she nodded, reaching and pulling out a gun, passing it over.

“What are you doing?” Steve demanded, looking up at Bucky with no small amount of worry.

“Making sure that the little Rainbow Widow can get medical attention,” Bucky said quietly, turning away from Steve.

“Go, I’ll stay here with her,” Natasha murmured to Steve. She swallowed a sudden dryness in her
throat when Steve bent over and placed gentle lips against Darcy’s.

Steve could feel some of the meade leak out as he got to his feet and retrieved the shield, following Bucky’s surprisingly fast pace. Manuel the Fluffy was steering clear of the man who had quickly run out of bullets and had instead picked up an alien spear and began viciously tearing into the attackers.

The van with Helen on it began crashing right into any alien in its path and in less than five minutes it was pulling up to the plane. Bucky kept going though, even when Steve stopped to usher Helen and the mini-cradle into the plane. Bucky kept going even when Vision had arrived and the aliens finally started to thin out. Bucky refused to stop dealing out violence and pain to the accomplices of the people who had put this chaos into motion.

“Buck,” Steve reached out a hand and stopped Bucky from chasing after the now retreating aliens.

“I’m so sorry,” Bucky whispered.

“She’s stable,” Clint yelled from the entryway to the crashed plane. “Helen says she needs blood...badly. Like she will die, badly.”

“The healers are expecting her. We have the medicine to heal her,” Fandral announced as he walked up to the two super soldiers. “We only need to ask Heimdall to open the bi-frost.”

The aliens were going back into their portal, and Steve noticed that Zeke was now gone.

“Stark, you got eyes on Stane?” Steve asked.

“Shit,” Tony hissed and he flew quickly towards the portal.

“Don’t get near it!” Steve warned. “It could rip you apart.”

“Let’s call this a win, people,” Hill cut in. “No invasion, we have our people back. We can find Stane another time.”
“Heimdall?” Steve looked to the sky as the alien portal closed. The fighting had driven every ounce of the meade from his system, and now it was in the ether until he and Darcy reunited completely and truly. He knew he couldn’t go. Leaving Earth would mean leaving it unprotected, and at this point, that wasn’t an option. He walked to Manuel the Fluffy, who sniffed at him curiously. “Thank you, Manuel, you did a good job. But now you have to go home with Darcy and make sure she’s well, okay? Watch after my girl?”

“I idiot,” Fandral grimaced, knowing that now he had to deal with slime removal from the medical facilities of Asgard.

The rainbow bridge opened and Steve walked to the plane, taking the top of the stretcher that Kurt and Dave had brought in. He tried to give Bucky a small smile when his friend solemnly picked up the bottom handles of the stretcher and they carefully walked her out.

Another soft kiss to her forehead and Steve nodded up at the sky. She would be safe in Asgard. Thor was there. Odin. They would make her well and she’d be home in no time. Steve stole a glance at Bucky, his face absolutely desolate as he watched Darcy disappear with the bilgesnipe and Asgardians.

“It’s gonna be alright, Buck,” Steve said earnestly.

“No, no it’s not,” Bucky shook his head. He nodded slightly, his face turning resolute. “But it will be. Let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

I've been dreading this so much. But it has to happen.
I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to respond to all the comments last time. I got a little busy there during the last half of the week. But I'm here now, and I'm going to do my best to go back and talk at you all!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Forty-One: Infamous Relations

Asgard, in the month of March and the year of Midgard’s 2014

"Surely, you must be joking," Sif whispered to Thor as they walked quickly towards the bi-frost. "It is one thing to bring Lady Jane here when she needs medical care, but without your mother here to ease the way, the Allfather will not have---"

"I have obtained permission from my father, have no worry," Thor waved her off. He grinned to himself and blue eyes twinkled merrily. "And do not call me Shirley."

Sif gave him a puzzled look as they watched Heimdall work the completely rebuilt Bi-Frost. Heimdall had caught Thor’s Midgardian joke, and managed to roll golden eyes in a full circle before going back to work.

“I don’t understand,” Sif said with practiced annoyance. Thor had been rife with all of these little jokes lately. They were all from Midgard and they were all very annoying.

“It is a joke,” Thor patiently continued to smile.

“From Midgard,” he and Sif said at the same time.

“So you’ve heard it,” Thor nodded.
“I can understand getting permission for the Lady Jane to visit, but what did you do to get your father to agree to allow Lady Darcy here?” Sif twisted her mouth in thought. She liked Lady Darcy very well, the girl was a hearthkeeper, and Sif had the highest amount of respect a person could have for hearthkeepers.

“Lady Darcy will not be staying long, just for the next few days,” Thor explained. He shrugged mysteriously, “And my father is not so averse to all Midgardian creatures. He has heard of the tales of the Lady Darcy, and certainly this last bit with her---- pet, has spiked curiosity in the Allfather. And---well, to borrow a colloquialism from Darcy herself, a magician does not reveal all of his secrets.”

“Curious,” Sif pursed her mouth in other direction. “Oh, look, here they are. Jane looks quite well.”

“She is not interested in the multi-amorous ways of Asgardian warriors, Sif,” Thor reminded her for what felt like the thousandth time since the incident with the Dark Elves.

“If she ever changes her mind,” Sif shrugged.

“You have your own heart match, and you know it,” Thor couldn’t help the grin on his face as Jane and Darcy greeted Heimdall excitedly. Jane taking her time to question Heimdall about certain Asgardian physical phenomena she must have asked him to monitor since her last visit. And Darcy was plying the gatekeeper with gifts of food and small tokens full of Midgardian sentiment, including a small doll made in Thor’s likeness.

“My heart match is...is dead,” Sif said softly, looking away into the sunset.

“Is he?” Thor murmured. “Not for the first time.”

“THOR!” Darcy shouted with joy. She was waving around another of the little toys made in his likeness. “I brought you the new dolls! A whole set of Avengers, so you know, when storytime happens up here, you can show everyone the little replicas.”

Darcy held up a Thor doll in one hand and pulled the Captain America doll out of her back pocket. She danced them around excitedly before making them mutter things about Righteousness and Honor and Boneless Chicken Wings (of which she knew both Captain America and Thor were fans. Thor had told her about that time they’d gotten kicked out of that restaurant together for utilizing the
All You Can Eat deal a little too well).

“Sif! Hi!” Jane waved. “I have so many questions, first off, do I have a laboratory or space to put some stuff in? And you know, get a few readings down?”

“I shall show you, my Lady,” Sif nodded.

Thor had the good grace to not look offended when Jane began to follow Sif immediately. His lady love had the good grace to stop in her tracks in the doorway, put all of her bags and paperwork down and rush back to Thor, who was standing with Darcy, playing with his doll. Jane threw herself at him and he was a good sport about hoisting her up and kissing her properly while Darcy made retching and gagging sounds aside of them.

“Yes, they tend to be very...affectionate.”

Darcy turned and there in all his fancy eye patch glory stood the All Father of the Nine Realms. He was staring down at Darcy curiously, his eyes moving towards the doll she held in her hands. His nose wrinkled a little at the familiar sight of red, white and blue that Darcy had cuddled against her bosom.

“Yoooooo,” Darcy said slowly, as if she had rethought saying it mid-syllable and instead of stopping, just continued to drag out the word uncomfortably. She finished it with a shrug and said, “Thanks for giving Manuel the Fluffy asylum. And thanks for letting me come visit him. And also, thanks for you know, signing that iron clad agreement that said you were not allowed to call Jane or I anything resembling farm animals.”

“You are welcome,” Odin blinked down at the girl curiously.

“Cool beans, dude,” Darcy nodded.

Odin looked over Darcy’s shoulder at Thor, who had a knowing sort of look of understanding in his eyes as he surveyed this first meeting. Jane was looking worried too, but she needn’t be. The true Odin might have found the Midgardian girl beneath him. He might have put up a fuss about both Jane and Darcy being there. But this Odin, well, he respected Jane as much as he could respect anyone, she would make a fine wife for his brother someday. And Darcy.
He had other interests there, as Thor well knew.

“I must speak with the Norns,” Odin announced suddenly before stomping away with more grace than a one eyed person ought to have.

“He should hook Fury up with those badass eyepatches,” Darcy nodded down at her Captain America doll. “I bet if they met, they’d just glare at each other.”

---

**Asgard, Present Day**

Snippets came back to her as she drifted in the healing fog. The snippets were awesome, like digital surround sound, high definition amazing quality DVD rips, but they were still only snippets.

*I’m sorry*. Bucky sounding heartbroken and pained. The rough cut of his voice sending shivers of sympathy through her.

*I love you*. The words barely whispered against her skin as Steve’s soft lips placed a kiss on her forehead.

The beautiful colors of the rainbow bridge, rushing all around her as Hogan said a soft prayer in a foreign tongue and Fandral cursed at the slime that had fallen on his head from Manuel the Fluffy’s antlers.

*What has happened to her?!* That sounded like Odin, sort of. It was blended with an unfamiliar voice, as if two voices were trying to split from one set of words.

*You will be fine, Unn.* That wasn’t Odin’s voice, or Thor’s. But it felt familiar to her. And the cold touch on her forehead felt very nice.

The sound of Thor and Jane arriving, loud and anxious questions from Jane, soft murmurs from Thor as he spoke with whoever had called her Unn.
Not her time yet. And This is how it was meant to be, were soft words from Thor and Darcy could feel Jane’s hand clutching her own as someone brought in a remedy to replace the massive amount of blood she had lost quickly. Also she would need something to heal the shattered wrist and multiple bruises and contusions all over her body, as doing battle, even evasive battle with the Winter Soldier had not been a walk in the park.

Most importantly, they all had agreed, was that they needed to do something about that pesky, unseen head injury that had gone unnoticed on the battlefield but had been noticed by the Asgardian healers and was far more troublesome than the blood or the broken bones or the rapidly blooming bruises. Her brain had swelled considerably since the plane crash and it would continue to do so until it would be too much and she would certainly die.

My Jane, you must give consent. Thor was a sweetheart to the very end. Thoughtful and charming and lovely. And smart as a whip too, because when Odin began to object, Darcy heard a gentle and well-timed clearing of Thor’s throat.

Darcy made an unconscious, swollen brain decision as she heard Jane choke out her consent amidst tears. She would make everyone in the room, the healers, Jane, Thor, even Odin himself swear that they could never tell Steve or Bucky or anyone else how bad it was and how close it had gotten for her. She knew that it would have only taken a few more minutes and she would have been welcomed by Frigga into Valhalla. No one could ever know, especially not Bucky.

Something was being gently placed on her tongue, and it melted like sweet candy even though her mouth had been dry. It tasted of sweet apples and reminded her of the time during the summer when she and Steve had stopped by at a fair after dealing with some awful flamingos and they had each gotten a messy candy apple, and then had traded so many sticky, sweet kisses afterwards. She remembered how warm she had felt then, even though the night was cool, because it was Steve and she had felt so cherished and cared for and adored in those little moments.

She held on to those feelings that Steve gave her. That all consuming, warm, official heart match love that had been so long in the getting there, but would be with her forever. She needed the good, because as soon as the taste of the sweetness evaporated, she tasted pain.

She will be fine, my Jane. She will be fine.

Thor again, so calm, even though he didn’t quite believe his words himself. He was a sturdy emotional rock for Jane to rail against as Darcy’s body began to shake on the bed.
I will go to her. Odin again. Thor tried to dissuade him but it was wonderful and amazing Jane who spoke up in a hushed whisper in the private room with just the four of them.

I don't care who you are right now, Odin, Loki, my mother's trashman, you do whatever you need to do to make sure she is okay, do you understand me?

Darcy realized then that Thor and Jane were doing some interesting work on Asgard, and not just knocking boots. Because they had a few things figured out, apparently.

And then she just felt pain.

“Hello, Unn, do not be frightened.”

Darcy blinked her eyes open and stared at the man who had said the words.

“No offense, dude, but usually, when someone says that before I can even crack my eyes open, there’s probably a 1,500 percent chance that I should be frightened,” Darcy insisted. She blinked and shrugged. “Okay, no pain here.”

“I’ve taken you from it, while your body does the work it needs to do.”

“Cool beans,” Darcy nodded. She gave the man a once over. Tall. Thin. Pale. The shiny raven hair really could use a few spritzes of dry shampoo. He was smiling at her in a way that made her think he was proud of her and also mildly amused by her. “So, you’re Loki.”

“Indeed, I am,” Loki nodded. “Clever little girl.”

“Where’s the real Odin?” Darcy wondered. “I’m thinking the real Odin probably wouldn’t have been so nice to me these past couple of years.”
“You are probably correct,” Loki answered. “And as for the Allfather, he was deep in sleep, but disappeared one day. I fear for him, this is the first sleep he has woken from that my mother has not been present to help him adjust. He must have wandered, to where, I do not know, but I am looking for him, as is Heimdall.”

Darcy nodded, not really caring at that point. Jane had told her that Loki had mostly redeemed himself. Thor still loved his brother, no matter how much shit he got into. And Darcy herself had a healthy appreciation for the God of Mischief, seeing as how she liked her own brand of mischief quite a lot. And in all his time as Odin, Loki had only been kind to her. Encouraging and indulgent and nearly adoring---

“What am I to you?” Darcy wondered.

“You, dear Unn, are my descendant,” Loki smiled at her, cutting right to the chase. “Thor suspected as much when he first met you. You have the spirit of Hel in your veins, from so long ago. There are others on Midgard of course, but I am not so benevolent that I do not play favorites.”

“So----you’re like, my great-great-great-great-great-great-great----etcetera Grandfather?” Darcy furrowed her brow.

(Of a sorts. It does not work exactly like your Midgardian childbearing. It is more that a long time ago, my daughter had a thought, and fostered it in a worthy Midgardian, and you have descended from that Midgardian,” Loki explained.

“Cooooooool,” Darcy nodded. “Explains a lot. Like---all of seventh grade and what I got up to then.”

“Indeed, I saw the reports of your unleashing of the lobsters from local tiny prisons into your school’s newly salinated pool. Very clever and industrious of you,” Loki smiled proudly.

“Am I gonna be okay?” Darcy wondered quietly.

“You are going to be very well,” Loki promised. “We have given you a remedy to heal what has been hurt.”

“And---” Darcy prompted.
“And?”

“And, usually Asgardian healing techniques don’t involve pain,” Darcy shrugged. “I shot a bolt through my foot once when messing around with Fandral’s weapons. The healers fixed me and it didn’t hurt. It tickled.”

“You’re changing,” Loki revealed. “A morsel to alter you so that you are well again, brought back from the brink of death.”

“And?” Darcy whispered.

“It is the smallest amount we can give you,” Loki promised. “The apple, little Unn, you know too well.”

“Jane’s apple?” Darcy blinked.

“Only a small bit,” Loki nodded.

“Will I live forever now?” Darcy wondered desperately, completely terrified out of her mind.

“No, little one, it is more like---ah, the awful and cunning redhead that you adore so completely. Her aging is slowed. Her healing is slightly accelerated.”

“Holy shitballs,” Darcy breathed out.

“I should say you would be happy when all is said and done,” Loki shrugged. “This will mean more time with your Captain, who I still do not entirely approve of, no matter what the Norns have told me of strong heart matches and destiny.”

“Well, too bad, Mister, cause I’m going to marry that man!” Darcy laughed. Her expression went serious for a moment, “Technically, you’re my only living relative. Shit, did he have to ask your permission to marry me?”
“Would it have mattered?” Loki asked knowingly. “The Captain America does whatever he wants, however and whenever he wants.”

“This is going to make for some really interesting family dinners,” Darcy sighed. “Is he okay? Is---is Bucky okay?”

Loki frowned. It was all the answer that Darcy needed.

“Okay, how long does this process take then, when can I be done, because I have a plan, and I want to make sure that I get back in enough time to make sure they haven’t completely fucked me over,” Darcy nodded in agreement with herself.

"There are greater forces at work here, little one," Loki warned her. "There is one out there who is making a play for all the power in the universe. I was taken by him before, and it was to m own detriment---"

"The infinity thing-a-majigs?" Darcy shrugged. "Yeah, I figured that out myself."

"Then---then you found out where my mother was keeping her piece of---" Loki shook his head in amazement. "The most powerful creatures in all of creation have searched for it and have yet to find it."

"Powerful creatures are very often stupid," Darcy hypothesized. "No offense, spirit ancestor, but you've done some stupid things in search of power."

"Indeed I have," Loki agreed. "You will not be safe. Even if you can hold it."

"I'll be able to," Darcy nodded confidently. She paused and took a second to shrug. "Or I'll die trying, maybe. But I can guarantee you that I will be safe."

“The apple does not make you more than what you are, and it doesn’t offer immortality. If Thanos wants to crush your skull, there is little that accelerated healing will do,” Loki revealed. “Fear not, little Darcy, I have faith in your abilities for mischief, you are by far my favorite Heldottir, which is why you should take heed for once in your life.”
“So—you and Sif, huh?” Darcy abruptly changed subject. She grinned at the way she made the God of Mischief splutter suddenly. “I like Sif. She inspires me. What do you think she would do if some ridiculous man told her that she should take heed? Which, by the way, is such a silly saying. How do you physically take heed? Like, is there some Ye Olde English language link that I’m missing here?”

“You are ideally suited to your stubborn and ridiculously adorned heart’s match,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“I know, it’s awesome,” Darcy nodded in agreement. “This is a safe space to speak, right?”

“It is your own mind,” Loki smirked. “Which means it might be relatively secure.”

“You do know what you and Thor need to do, right?” Darcy whispered. “If Thanos is as bad as I think he is—”

“Worse.”

“And he’s after infinity stones, this is kind of an all hands on deck situation,” Darcy nodded. “Which means Midgard needs its super soldiers, and super spies, and super geniuses to protect it. And Asgard needs, well, it needs its everyone. Including the real Odin and the real Prince Loki.”

“It will be nice to not be a hideous old man any longer,” Loki admitted.

“All the better for courting warrior ladies,” Darcy waggled her eyebrows at him. “So when can I go?”

“It will hurt, little one,” Loki warned.

“It’ll hurt more if those two Brooklyn boys do something stupid while I’m gone,” Darcy shrugged.

“Time will pass however it should want. You will wake when you’re supposed to, but when you
“Thanks Gramps,” Darcy grinned at him.

Loki gave her a properly scandalized look. “Please. Don’t.”

Chapter End Notes

BIG REVEAL!

(By the way Unn is Old Norse for 'beloved one' according to google. I liked it!)

Thanks for reading!
Chapter Notes

Hi!

I apologize for the delay in updating it. I lost the joy in writing it for a little way, but am trying to find it again. It doesn't help that this chapter and the next are absolutely ZERO fun to write.

I would ask you to enjoy this chapter normally, but I don't know if that's quite possible.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 42: Bucky’s Choice

The Red Room, 1978

"He is--- distraught."

Natalia looked up at that. She'd been lost in a haze of her own since stepping foot into the facility after one harrowing month out in the wild. She'd hoped he would be there to greet her, to congratulate her, to let that out of place warm smile pull at his lips as he looked at her with so much fondness that it didn't seem quite right.

The cook, the lovely, mostly silent, older man who took to sneaking Natalia extra little scraps of precious protein and who would carefully spoon feed the Winter Soldier after a particularly harrowing bit of programming or testing had greeted Natalia instead at the door to the facility. She'd come back earlier than even the handlers could anticipate, having come out on top of the other girls in the cold, unforgiving wilderness.

Detterich, as the cook preferred to be called, had been with the Winter Soldier longer than anyone else. Rumor had it amongst the girls that Natalia had recently dispatched was that he'd been traveling with the Winter Soldier since 1945. He never spoke. Not really. He understood little of Russian, and never bothered to speak his mother tongue of German.

Detterich helped Natalia off with the coats she had accumulated during her month away, dutifully not allowing his gaze to linger on the blood stains on each layer of clothing. Once down to one layer of
dirty, tattered clothing, she was handed a hot mug of cider, something to give energy, but not heavy enough to have the girl's stomach rejecting it immediately. He administered the first sip, slow and gradual, and nodded at her. His face was absolutely full of concern, more so than Natalia could ever remember it being. He let the bloodied clothing on the ground and instead walked ahead as Natalia continued to sip at her cider.

The cook led the way down the hallway, down two flights of stairs to a room Natalia was familiar with. It was the room used for the Winter Soldier to recover in. She'd been brought there a few times, used as a sort of incentive for the Soldier to obey what the handlers wanted. If James complied, he would be rewarded with time with his favorite girl.

If he did not comply, there was pain for Natalia.

Pain for the Soldier did not work so well. He seemed to have the ability to feel it frozen out of his veins. But pain for the person that he held dearest in the world? That had certainly proven effective, and he'd do what they wanted at the first strike against Natalia, even when she had learned not to cry out.

The Russians had learned something the Germans had not had the chance or the inclination to investigate. Love was infinitely more useful than pain. Even the threat of having his own life taken did not compel the Soldier to do as they asked so much as the threat on Natalia's life. They looked forward to the day that Natalia had been enhanced enough to be so useful. The pair of them would be unstoppable, and so easily controlled thanks to their devotion to one another.

The soldier was sitting on the cot, the very one that she had often held his hand, or stroked tears away from his cheeks, or even let her hand run through brown locks that were getting gradually longer with every passing moment he was no longer frozen. Detterich left Natalia at the door, walking away to both give privacy and to potentially run interference.

She stepped in and the Soldier looked up---not the Soldier. Natalia knew better than that by now. Those haunted, pale blue eyes, red around the edges thanks to tears that could never be burnt from him were looking up at her, and he wasn't the weapon. He was James.

He felt too much. He loved too easily. He soaked up guilt like a sponge. And he'd probably been wrecked with guilt the entire month she'd been away.

It had been James' interest in her as a recruit that had her in the handlers' viewpoint. It had been James drilling her in the proper way to disarm a man that had her better at it than any other Red Room student, ever. It had been James that had put her in the line of fire.
He had tried to dissuade the handlers from sending her out into the wild for the final test. He'd promised compliance. He'd promised to train another girl better.

But the lure of Natalia was too great. Two of them, equally deadly and equally malleable thanks to their overwhelming fondness of the others. They would be the two greatest weapons that Mother Russia would ever wield.

To his credit, James didn't wallow in his guilt. He stood from his cot and walked to the door, not showing any surprise that Natalia had managed to kill every single one of her former classmates in order to survive. He'd known she would be able to do it. He'd made her a monster by association, after all. He checked her over for injury, silent as a church mouse, his metal hand steady even if his right hand had a slight tremble as it made a pass over a wind chapped cheek.

Natalia went to open her mouth, to convey to him that she was alright. That it hadn't been as bad as he thought it would be. That most of the girls succumbed to the cold. She was willing to give him all the lies in order to ease the guilt he felt. Before she could say anything, his lips were pressed to hers as she stepped into the frame of his body, allowing his arms to wrap around her and hold her close as tears slipped out of the corners of her eyes.

They were both monsters now.

Present day, Wakanda

Natasha walked into Shuri’s office, and the Wakandan princess jumped from her place behind a holo screen, shutting it down immediately. Shuri was not gifted in the art of the poker face, a fact that most of the Wakandan refugees had taken advantage of at one point or another during their frequent game nights.

"He is...he's distraught," Shuri said softly. She managed a shrug and a heavy sigh.

Shuri slid a tablet towards Natasha, an apologetic look in her eye, but her expression was resolute. James Barnes had come to Wakanda for asylum after being wrongly accused of so many things. And Shuri may never have taken life as seriously as her older brother, but she did hold one thing in higher regard than T'Challa held anything.
Those who seek asylum will be given it and will be given whatever they need to be whole and well again.

Wakanda had spent so many years behind closed borders, that once her honored, departed father T'Chaka had opened the doors to the rest of the world, Shuri was absolutely floored at the tender age of eleven by the state of the world. She had grown up with luxuries, to be sure, that most Wakandans didn't revel in. But every citizen of Wakanda had the ability to pursue a happy life without worrying about their safety or well being. Upon seeing the outside world, Shuri realized just how well her country had had it.

And she had grimly determined that she would always strive to give a piece of Wakanda's safety and prosperity to those that had not been treated so fairly by their own kind.

James Barnes certainly fell into that category. He'd come to her quietly less than twenty-four hours after they had arrived in Wakanda, and together they had worked on the contingency plan. Shuri never felt that such precautions were necessary, but it had given James a piece of mind to know that should the worst ever happen, everyone on the island nation would be safe from the Winter Soldier.

The Black Widow had been kept in the dark. She would have clearly not been happy with James' plan. Natasha was staring down at the surveillance of the mechanics doing test runs of the new cryofreeze unit, and Shuri had the good sense to stay silent and not offer empty and meaningless reassurances as the spy watched the empty cryofreeze unit be engulfed with the rapid fill cold air that the scientists had developed.

Shuri wanted to tell her that it wouldn't hurt James. James had no concern over his own pain, he'd offered to go to Siberia and obtain one of the old units that the monsters had used to freeze him time and time again, but Shuri would not hear of it. The effects of the super charged air would be instantaneous, and James would feel no pain. Most importantly was the thawing process, which the mechanics were testing now as Natasha swallowed, her eyes never leaving the tablet.

James would be warmed just as fast as he was frozen, the light bright and blinding and emitting bursts of enveloping warmth. Shuri had seen the information on the thawing process that James had provided. As a biologist, she had at once marveled at how James' body had done such a thing, and as a human, she had wept. The pain of the thaw must have been so inordinately immense that she doubted he could properly function as a human afterwards. The deep freeze of his muscles subsequently thawing would have been painful enough to induce madness.

If such a thing had to be done, and it did have to be done, as James had dictated as much, of his own
free will, then Shuri was determined to make it right.

She swiped at the tablet, and it showed Cooper's arm schematics, along with the approval for the vibranium that the little boy had requested of the King. Another swipe showed scans of Bucky's brain and Shuri sighed.

This was where her beloved science would fail her. There seemed to be a magic of sorts holding the trigger words into James' head, even though Shuri did not believe in magic of any sort. Natasha however, seemed to finally brighten ever so slightly as she swiped towards the list of triggers and potential leads that James had provided.

This was something Natasha could do for the man that she found herself loving so very much. She had failed him in her youth, having her own memories muddled with, leaving him behind to an icy, painful slumber until a new millennium dawned. But hunting down long dead ghosts who had used words to control the Winter Soldier, that Natasha felt sure she could do while James slept, peaceful and at ease.

She forwarded the list to herself before giving Shuri a grateful and genuine smile. Natasha immediately turned, intent on heading down to where she knew Bucky likely was, just outside of the hallway where the new cryo freeze unit would be. He probably knew she was coming long moments before she ever came into view.

She could hide from anyone but him.

The look he gave her as he sat there with his stump of an arm wrapped expertly by the Wakandan medics was probably everything that she would need to know.

He was devastated. They had received one message from Heimdall in the last twelve hours, and it had simply been that Darcy was alive. There was no additional detail, no progress report, no total injury report. Just that Darcy Lewis lived. And if she hadn't of lived, Natasha was sure that Bucky would not be sitting there so placidly, clean and well cared for.

No one did self recrimination like James Barnes. Not even Steve Rogers. While Steve's mother had been a bad Catholic, Mrs. Barnes was the epitome of a good Catholic at the time. Her boy learned guilt at the hands of a master.

Bucky looked resolute at the moment. This was the only way to keep everyone safe, of that he was
entirely certain. Natasha knew there was no hope in swaying his opinion, and at this point, she wouldn't want to sway his opinion.

The one thing she wanted for her beloved James was a life free of such pain. She wanted the man whose company she had enjoyed for too little throughout their long lives. He could be carefree and joyful with his buoyant, youthful smile. Even in the coldest of Russian winters, in their own dire circumstances decades ago, James would always surprise her with a moment of joyful clarity, where he'd been so exuberant, energetic and lovely, that Natasha thought he must have been pulling her leg. She loved those moments though. She wanted that for him always.

And while he had had small bursts of that energy on the island, it never stayed for long.

She wanted for him to have peace of mind. He deserved as much.

And this would give it to him. He would peacefully sleep, and it would seem like no time at all to him, when he woke again, he’d be whole for the first time in over seventy years. And she would be there with him, and they would finally get to live a life the correct way. Hand in hand, together.

Bucky gave her a small, apologetic smile, those beautiful blue eyes glittering with unshed tears as he took a deep, even breath. In response, Natasha gave him what she could. Not words that promised she would do everything in her power to make this right again. That could go unsaid, as he was certain she would with that terrifying efficiency that he loved so much about her. Not a smile that would have been entirely artifice, because inside, Natasha was devastated. She had all of her happiness within her grasp these past few weeks, family and friends and James, and now she was going to say goodnight to him.

She leaned forward and gave him a soft, whisper of a kiss, feeling the stubble of his beard scratch at her cheeks. James nodded ever so slightly when the too short contact of their lips ended, and let his forehead rest against hers, breathing her in.

He wouldn't say it out loud, because no one ever knew when Sam had ears to the ground, and Bucky would be damned if Sam had ammunition against him for teasing, but he would take the soft feeling of her, the warmth she provided, the pleasant cinnamon smell of her and he'd let it be the last thought he had before the icy cold sleep took over.

He would dream of her until he could be with her again.
They stayed that way for at least five minutes, taking what strength they could from each other, giving what affection they could. While Natasha knew she wouldn't let him linger in cryofreeze for long, she didn't know how well she could get the job done with the current state of the world. But she would get the job done, that was for certain. But it wouldn't hurt to have one last gentle touch. One last breath to hold onto until they met again.

Natasha nodded before kissing him one last time, this time lingering a little longer, giving him something to look forward to. She pulled away with that small, wicked smile that promised better things lay ahead before standing up and walking away without looking back.

That had been easier than he had expected, but Bucky knew that if Natasha was good at anything, it was rolling with the punches. The next person to drop in would probably not be so easy. He was not looking forward to defending his decisions and choices to Steve. He loved his brother in all that mattered, but Steve always thought that the best way of doing something was Steve's way of doing it.

But that had been a single Steve back in the 40's. That had not been a Steve who had proposed marriage to one of the sweetest and most loveable dames to have ever existed. Because yes, Bucky knew that Steve had proposed. He'd seen the ring hanging from a chain around her neck while they had been trapped in that crashed jet. Against all odds, two people were made for each other, born over seventy years apart, found each other anyway, and realized that life would be so much better together. And Bucky had almost ruined that---almost killed his best friend's fiancee.

His mind had wandered when he'd seen the ring. He'd been thinking on it for hours now. He knew Steve and Darcy's relationship timetable. He'd been consulted by both of them and given his enthusiastic approval. He was looking forward to winning every bet. But one step had been moved up a few months. And Bucky had come to only one conclusion. Steve would have immediately proposed to the girl if they'd hit another milestone early. Bucky had been torturing himself with half-believing that Darcy was pregnant and that there was no way she would still be pregnant after going toe to toe with his murderous and violent other self and then the subsequent plane crash.

He didn’t know what he would do if his suspicions turned out to be true.

Not to mention what he'd done to little Lila Barton. An innocent girl, ten years old, playing at being a superspy had gotten thrown into a dangerous situation. He sighed when he heard the tell-tale drag of Clint's left foot. An old injury caused him to lag with that food just a little, but Bucky could always hear it, as could Natasha, of course. Bucky had even taught Lila to listen for it, and the little girl always managed to amaze her brother with knowing when their dad was approaching.

Clint stood in front of him, his arms crossed over his chest, and Lila standing beside him, looking
beside herself with her own kind of guilt. Clint nudged the little girl, and Bucky, who had been expecting to get a dressing down by the understandably upset father, instead got a little folded piece of paper shoved under his nose by Lila's shaking hands.

He reached for the paper and winced when he felt a hot tear hit his right hand, dropped straight from the little girl's eyes. He curiously opened the paper and shook his head in disbelief. It was folded in half and when he opened it, there was a lovely little colored pencil sketch, hastily done, but pretty nonetheless, of the view of Wakanda's sunrise, with two figures, although hazy in detail, they were clearly Bucky and Lila as they did their morning stretches before training.

_Sorry I followed you and got hurt cause I'm too big for my britches. It's not your fault and I love you Uncle Bucky and please don't go frozen again._

Lila broke down in plaintive sobs, her voice choking on her apology and Bucky stood, wrapping his right arm around her as Clint took a step back, giving him a respectful nod. Bucky and Clint had talked mind control before, plenty of times during the time that Darcy and Steve had gone on their worldly travels. Clint, above everyone but Natasha, would understand what Bucky was doing. The guilt of causing pain to people who were good and were important was immense, and Clint understood the need to go under.

He'd tried to explain it to his daughter, but just like with most things, the stubborn little girl wouldn't listen.

One of the mechanics opened the door to Bucky's new bedroom, and gave a soft smile and a nod. Bucky kissed the top of Lila's head and gave a respectful nod to Clint once more. The father nodded back and took a hold of Lila as she cried and raged and begged, picking her up and carrying her off quickly. He had brought her there to apologize for her foolishness, but the punishment of seeing Bucky go into cryofreeze was just too steep for her crimes.

Clint did understand. He had seen what kind of shape his own daughter had been in, and Darcy. He could understand the need for Bucky to do what he was clearly doing. And Clint inherently knew that this wasn't just about Darcy being Steve's girlfriend. Bucky cared for Darcy too, and to see what had happened to his friend, whether it was truly Bucky's fault or not, it had been jarring. Clint understood.

He was at the elevator with a crying Lila snotting into his neck messily when the doors slid easily open and Steve was there, looking a little beat up from their fight of twelve hours ago. But he seemed to be in a fine enough place. Word of Darcy's survival had floated down hours ago, and Steve seemed to be at ease with it, instead of anxious and fretting as Clint was sure to have been about Laura.
There was some sort of an understanding there for Steve. He knew she was in safe hands with Thor and Jane, who loved Darcy as a real sister. They would do what was necessary to bring her back whole and unscathed. There wasn't a better place for her, really.

Steve looked at Lila in concern and Clint could only shrug.

"He's—he's," Clint winced as Lila wailed louder. He gave Steve an apologetic look. His daughter was clearly overwrought and needed a small meal, some pain meds and another four hour long nap.

Steve waved them off, giving Lila's hair a soft, sympathetic stroke that only had her crying louder. He squared his shoulders and went further down the hall, to where Natasha had directed him ten minutes ago.

He couldn't help but think this had something to do with Bucky. Bucky who had been stock still and silent throughout their entire flight back to Wakanda. Bucky who had gone missing five hours after landing. Steve had thought he had been with Natasha, getting his emotions in check, but he'd just seen Natasha, who'd told him she would be going out on missions and that she'd get in touch if she needed assistance.

Steve didn't ask her what missions she had that he didn't know about. She had a look in her eyes that Steve didn't think he'd ever seen before. It had been open and raw and vicious, but there was a determination in it. Steve did the only thing he could think of. He pulled the redhead into a tight hug, taking note that she shivered once and let one tear fall, before pulling away and heading towards the King's private jet hangar.

So Steve's hackles had been up regarding what Bucky was doing. He wanted to spend a good few hours reassuring his best friend that everything would turn out alright in the end. Darcy would be okay. Of course she would be okay. The universe had finally given Steve all the happiness he could stand, with his brother, his closest friends and his best girl. No one was taking it away from him now.

He'd had a meeting with T'Challa a few hours ago. Once they had more concrete news from Asgard regarding Darcy, then Cap and his team would be moving again. The political climate in Wakanda was on tenuous ground, and Steve knew that their presence in the country was doing T'Challa no favors. Steve had another place lined up, England had been more than willing to host them in safety and secrecy.
He had wanted to find Bucky to start going over security logistics for the move. But after his encounter with Natasha, he knew he had so much more to talk about.

He walked into the cryo freeze unit and he could feel his stomach turn unpleasantly as Bucky sat on a cot, dressed casually in what usually passed for his pajamas lately on the island, getting the stump of his arm scanned once more by a team that would be working with Cooper and Laura to build the new arm out of vibranium. Steve's eyes went to the holoscreens along the walls and sighed at the images of Bucky's brain, showing the darkened places where the worst injuries were.

Steve stepped forward and Bucky looked up, giving him a small, sad smile.

"Hey punk."

Chapter End Notes

This was an exercise in restraint for me. You'll notice that there was very, very little dialogue. We should be back to normal dialogue heavy chapters in the next update, which I hope will not take nearly a month!

Thanks for your continued support and patience! And of course, thanks for reading!
Chapter Forty-Three: Prelude to a Nap

France, 1943

“I can’t understand it. The same things go into the guy that go into us, but somehow he manages to turn it into some kind of gas that could wipe out every last Nazi on the face of the Earth. It's a skill, sure, but pal, I'm gonna wind up killing him before we can use it for good.”

Steve looked up from the fire with a smirk on his face. He was more than used to Bucky's continual complaining about Dum-Dum Dugan's bodily functions. Truth be told, Dum-Dum was the worst offender out of all of the Howling Commandos. And he was especially prolific while sleeping, somehow letting all the trapped gas out of his body as soon as he hit a deep sleep. It wasn't so bad when they were back in London, where they each had a small, private room underneath headquarters, but when they had missions, they were limited to two tents.

And Bucky always managed to draw the short straw and get lumped in with Dum-Dum the smelly and Morita and his wandering sleepy hands. Most days he woke up from a tenuous two hours of sleep in a cloud of stink, with a small man clinging to his back like a koala bear. He'd give anything to just be able to sleep out under the stars. Hell, he'd even take the supernatural stink of Jones’ feet.

Steve got his own tent, being Captain and all. It wasn't anything to write home about though, that was for sure. Had Steve still been five feet and four inches tall and a hundred pounds soaking wet, then maybe he would’ve fit in the little pup tent he set up every night that they were out in the wild. But Steve was definitely not small any longer. Steve was gigantic. It had been over six months since his rescue, and Bucky still wasn't used to seeing his best friend as a behemoth of a man.

He definitely missed his shoulder rest, that used to be the top of Steve’s head. But all in all, it wasn't
so bad. Steve was healthy now, and finally strong enough to back up that mouth that would never stop running sass.

Bucky sat with Steve by the dying embers of the fire, silent as the man went over maps of enemy territory with a thorough eye. That, Bucky was glad to see, had not changed. Steve always was good at the strategizing. Even when they were tiny tots running around Brooklyn streets, pretending to defeat the invading cowboys in imaginary wild west games.

"You should be getting more sleep," Bucky said sternly, so accustomed to years and years of looking out for Steve's health and well being. It would be a hard habit to break, that was for sure.

"Don't need so much more now, I told you that a million times," Steve said off handedly, sounding like he was still a tiny guy waving off Bucky's concerns about an extra sweater. "Speak for yourself, anyhow. You've been getting a couple hours a night tops."

"I'm fine," Bucky said shortly.

He didn't want to say that he didn't need so much sleep anymore either. That would mean telling Steve what he was pretty sure had happened to him. After getting picked out of that cell amongst all of the other prisoners, he'd been carted off to a creepy little doctor, who had taken one look at him, smiled in a vile, disgusting sort of covetous way before nodding slowly.

After that, it was hard to remember what happened.

He did remember needles pushing something blue into his veins. And then he remembered a lot of pain. Steve had said his own serum had been blue, a beautiful, other worldly kind of color. Bucky doesn't remember his being worthy of such praise.

And it hadn't made him bigger like it had done for Steve. So it couldn't have been just like the Erskine thing. But Bucky felt different. First it had just hurt, like it was burning him on the inside and making things over new. Then he'd noticed how quick he'd recovered when Steve initially saved him. He'd been given so many drugs to keep him strapped to that table, but ten minutes after they were no longer being pumped into his body, he was fine.

Bucky looked down at his hands. He'd accidentally nicked himself with a blade that one of the Howlies had haphazardly lay by the fire. Nicked was too soft of a word. He'd damn near sliced the end of his pinkie finger off thirty-six hours ago, and here it was, looking like it had been no more
than a paper cut.

He didn't want to wind up like the Red Skull. He spent most of his days now halfway sick with worry that he'd wind up a monster. So he tried to focus on the good. And all the good he had now was Steve and the rest of the Howlies. So he'd do his damndest in making sure they were safe on every damned mission.

"You know what I miss?" Steve said quietly as he began folding up his maps.

"Being small enough to fit in a pup tent?" Bucky offered smartly.

"Jerk," Steve rolled his eyes, but a smile started to stretch at his lips.

"Punk," Bucky answered back quickly. "What do you miss?"

"Mrs. McCann and how she used to fret over us," Steve revealed.

"Stevie, she used to slip me rubbers to escape the clap and you pamphlets about nursing homes to escape euthanasia!" Bucky laughed.

"Yeah, and she made those cookies, with the cinnamon and the pecans," Steve nodded. "Those were good."

"I miss that red head that let my hands wander all over every square inch of her ass on the beach," Bucky sighed.

"Dot, her name was Dot," Steve rolled his eyes.

"You sure? I thought her name was Sugarlips," Bucky teased, causing Steve to snort with laughter. Bucky sighed again and said, "I miss those sandwiches we used to get from the corner grocer on payday. Half a pound of meat and cheese between two slices of bread with all the mustard you could manage."
Steve and Bucky's stomachs growled together in unison. Steve's metabolism was much more potent that it had been, and he needed a lot more food to get by. Bucky wasn't so bad as that, but he could tell that he needed more food too. Usually it just made him worry more. Tonight though, Steve went towards the ration bag and pulled something out, splitting it in two and sharing it like it had been one of those payday sandwiches full of pastrami.

"We'll get back home someday," Steve said wistfully. "Back to pastrami, and pecan and cinnamon cookies and your redhead with a great rear end."

"I wanted to bite it, really, it was just so---" Bucky's eyes rolled into the back of his head a little as he blinked them closed and bit his bottom lip.

Steve held up the unappetizing ration and clinked it against Bucky's. "To home. To getting back to good."

"To getting back to good."

Present Day, Wakanda

"Please Buck, you can't."

Bucky grimaced a bit as Steve stood there in the doorway to his new, comfortable and humane cage. He really hoped his best friend didn't make this harder than it had to be. Bucky had been hoping for anger, for some small piece of bitterness that it had been his fault that Steve's girl was so hurt she had to beamed off of the planet. Anger and blame were somethings that Bucky could deal with very well.

He never really knew how to deal with Steve's earnest brand of concern. He'd spent two decades being worried about Steve's wellbeing, it always put him off the tracks a bit to have Steve be the one worried about him.

"You should be angry," Bucky said thoughtfully. "It'd be easier if you'd be angry."
"Why would I be angry?" Steve furrowed his brow.

"You're not stupid, Steve, so don't play at it," Bucky looked down at the space where his left arm used to be. He looked around and noticed that all the techs and scientists who had been preparing the chamber for him had found somewhere else to be, giving he and Steve complete privacy for the moment. Bucky refused to look up at Steve, knowing what would be there by the sound of his voice. Worry and pity. But what's more was a sort of longing. Steve and Bucky were the last little pieces of their old home, their old lives, their old century.

And that'd be well enough, but they were monumental pieces of each other's lives. They were brothers in every sense of the word but blood. Bucky hated making Steve sad. He'd hated it when they were eight and Bucky had inadvertently taken the last sweet that Sarah Rogers had in her little glass bowl and Steve had been so sad to see it go. And he hated it now, when his screwed up life had managed to take away Steve's girl when he'd only just really found her.

"I'm angry about a lot of things, Buck," Steve said honestly. "I'm angry that you fell from that train, that I didn't know you'd already been enhanced—I would have looked. I would have stopped everything and I would have looked. I'm angry that those bastards tried to rip every piece of you away from your bones and replace it with cold blooded murder instead."

Steve paused and walked further into the room, taking a careful look at the cryo unit. He didn't know much about the science of it all, but just from a layman's viewpoint, it looked a hell of a lot better than the units he'd seen firsthand in Siberia. He'd have to thank Shuri for her compassion. But first, just one more shot to stop the unstoppable from happening. Steve knew there was nothing he could do to pull Bucky out of this plan now. But that didn't mean he wouldn't try.

"I'm angry about Hydra and Shield and the stupid fucking Accords. I'm angry that there's something bigger waiting on the horizon, pushing pieces around a board bigger than anything I can imagine, just waiting---" Steve shook his head. "But I'm not angry at you. This wasn't you."

"Even you're going to get sick of saying that after a while," Bucky promised. "So, you know, let's stop having reasons for you to say it. I'm a time bomb, Stevie. I'm just---next time, it'll, it could be so much worse."

"It's plenty bad already," Steve acknowledged. "Buck, I'm worried outta my skull here. Darcy's up in fucking outer space and I can't even be there with her to see how she's mending or if I can---just hold her hand. I hate it, I do. But I've already seen the surveillance footage..."

"There's footage?" Bucky cringed noticeably. Apparently, there was always footage.
"You fought it, every step of the way, I could see that," Steve said softly.

"Steve, was Darcy...was she expecting?" Bucky whispered, very suddenly, so desperate for a change in subject that he was willing to bring up his biggest fear. Steve was looking at him in confusion. Bucky winced again and admitted, "I saw the ring. I know you proposed."

"No," Steve said resolutely.

"Don't tell fibs, if it was early days, then it's---"

"NO," Steve shook his head violently. He sat down next to Bucky and turned to face him, his expression honest and open. "She wasn't, we're not, that's not going to happen for a little while."

"That's what you said about asking her to be your missus," Bucky reminded him. "If anyone deserved a happy accident, it'd be the pair of you."

"Not until, not until everything is settled," Steve put delicately. "Till we have a home. Till we can all be comfortable. Not until I have my best man, keeping me from pulling out my hair worrying about cribs and diaper pins and teething."

"It might be a while," Bucky admitted.

"Natasha left ten minutes ago, it won't be as long as you think," Steve managed a smile. "She's awful determined, Buck. You sure you want to waste the energy it'd take to freeze you solid again?"

"The peace of mind will be worth it," Bucky insisted. "Please Steve, for me, just, let me have this choice."

Steve swallowed back the argument on the tip of the tongue. He was reminded of Peggy's words when Bucky had first fallen from the train. He wanted to keep arguing. He wanted to not have to say goodbye to his brother again. He didn't know when Darcy would be back. He didn't want Bucky gone too. He'd grown accustomed to the heady feeling of happiness that having both of them in his life had given him. He didn't know what he would do without them both. There was Sam, of course, but it would be unfair to place such a heavy burden on the man. And the rest of the team
didn’t deserve to have Steve leaning so hard on them either.

He wanted to be selfish for a moment, but knew that Bucky deserved peace of mind. He deserved comfort. He deserved to wake up and not have to worry about having his choice taken away from him out of the blue. Steve knew that Bucky deserved all of this and so much more.

"Remember those awful rations we used to eat after everyone went to sleep?" Steve said softly.

"They were sawdust mixed with honey to form bricks," Bucky smiled in remembrance. "Coulda used them as ammo if we ever ran out of bullets."

"I miss 'em some days," Steve admitted.

"Yeah? I miss the new socks the old ladies next door to headquarters always knitted for us," Bucky admitted. "Softest and warmest things in the world."

"I miss the way Phillips used to spit when he was talking real angry," Steve laughed. "And we made a game outta not getting spit on."

"Never forget that I won every round either," Bucky said seriously.

"You miss Dum-Dum's gas?" Steve prompted.

"Nope," Bucky smiled.

The remained silent for a few moments, and the techs started to come back into the room quietly, doing last minute system checks. They didn't have much time left. Steve reached out and pulled Bucky into a bone crushing hug.

"Tell my little Rainbow Widow that I'm sorry," Bucky whispered.

"I'll try, but she's gonna be so mad, that she might strangle me before I can get it out," Steve muttered back. Darcy would probably not approve of Bucky going back into a deep freeze. He got up from
Bucky's bench and put his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunching just a little like they used to when they were teenagers, like he was trying to make himself smaller. He shrugged and said softly, "She's going to be okay, Buck. She's going to be just fine, you'll see. She's a tough little thing."

"Yeah, she is, pal," Bucky nodded, knowing that he was agreeing more for Steve's sake than on really believing she was alright. If she wasn't alright, Bucky prayed that Steve would just let him sleep right on up until the end of the world.

Steve nodded and looked down at Bucky again before taking another walk around the sterile and nearly beautiful space, looking for some flaw maybe to stop the whole thing from happening. He sighed, stuffed his hands in his pocket and walked back towards his friend, who was staring off into the distance a little as he got his bearings about him. Steve gave Bucky a small nod and asked,

"You sure about this?"

Bucky took a little breath and looked up at Steve earnestly.

“I can’t trust my own mind,” his lips turned into a rueful little smile. “So until they figure out how to get this stuff outta my head, I think going back under is the best thing.”

Steve didn’t want to agree. He wanted to keep Bucky with him. But he gave a small nod anyway. For Bucky’s comfort and for that alone, he gave a small nod.

“For everybody,” Bucky said.

“We’re ready Mr. Barnes,” Shuri was the one to come in and give him a gentle smile.

It was quick. Bucky was safely secured in the cryo unit, and Shuri advised him to close his eyes and be ready to sleep. Steve watched, waited for the slightest hint of hesitation on Bucky’s behalf. But his friend was resolute, determined to remove himself like a problem that needed to be worked on. Eventually, Shuri put a hand on his shoulder, and Steve stopped watching Bucky sleep, slowly walking out into the hallway, unsure of what to do just then. He had to get the team ready to move, but Bucky was stuck in Wakanda, Natasha was out in the wild again and Darcy--his little magnet was so far away he didn’t know what to do with himself. He stared at the beauty of the Wakanda island out of the window, not really knowing how much time passed. It felt like he was sleeping too, frozen to everything around him.
He heard T’challa walking towards him, and he knew the King was making sure he could hear. T’challa was part of an elite three, with Bucky and Natasha, who could actually sneak up on Steve. He had told T’Challa they would be leaving the island no less than an hour ago, in order to remove some of the heat the King was feeling with a suspicious segment of rebellious people in his nation. And now, he was leaving the world’s most wanted man here in cryo freeze.

“Thank you for this,” Steve said sincerely as T’Challa stood next to him by the window.

T’Challa looked at Steve with concern. The Captain had lost a lot in the last twelve hours. And he’d been thrust back into unknown danger once more, ready to go out in the world and try to save it once again.

“Your friend and my father...they were both victims,” T’Challa intoned. “If I can help one of them find peace…”

Steve swallowed and his voice was low and gravelly as he said, “You know if they found out he’s here, they’ll come for him.”

T’Challa turned to face the window again, staring out into the mists of his kingdom, what his father had protected and the ancestors before him had built. He had reluctantly agreed that the rest of the Avenger refugees should leave until he could find all the usurpers inciting riots in his streets. He felt a small piece of failure settle in his heart, and T’Challa was not a man used to failure. Barnes was one thing he could protect for Steve and the others.

“Let them try.”

The men remained in stoic silence for a full thirty seconds before the lights of the Bi-Frost began beaming down from the atmosphere right onto the landscape of Wakanda in front of him. Steve nearly jumped out of his skin as the light receded and there stood Darcy, dressed head to toe in armor reminiscent of a female Asgardian warrior. She blinked and looked around, catching his eye from the one hundred yards distance and grinning like mad as she ran towards the building.

“Your lady has changed,” T’Challa said softly. He pointed to Darcy and caught the gleam off of an orange stone around her neck. “She carries power, now.”

“She’s always been plenty powerful,” Steve couldn’t help but smile, seeing Darcy running towards the building, health, strong and whole had put his heart to rest for a moment.
The Bi-Frost glowed again, and just as Darcy got far away enough, Natasha was standing there, looking confused and stunned.

“Oh shit,” Steve whispered.

“Is something the matter, Captain?” T’Challa wondered.

“She’s got something, whatever’s around her neck,” Steve whispered. He squinted and saw that she had moved the engagement ring to her left hand, the orange stone now residing around her neck. “She has some kind of remedy for Bucky, and now he’s frozen his damned self and she’s going to be so pissed.”

Chapter End Notes

Steve couldn't have stalled Bucky for ten more minutes???

Sorry for the scene regurgitation above, it was the only transition I could work in there. I had to watch the mid-credits scene a bunch of times, and then cry. Because of Bucky reasons.

Thanks for reading!
Okay. Here we go. I am now free from any and all canon. This should be fun, right?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Forty-Four: A Dangerous Trip into the Matrix

Quinjet, hastily landed next to the Potomac River, 2014

Clint woke up feeling as if he had been hit by a few Mack Trucks. Roughly seven of them, if he had to take a guess. He took a few hazy blinks and in the distance, the fiery wreckage of the helicarriers and the Triskellion came into blurry focus.

“Whassat?” he mumbled, his throat raw and scratchy and his mouth feeling like he had eaten about thirty cotton balls. He tried to move, and found that not only was he sluggish from whatever had knocked him out, but he was also bound to the pilot’s seat.

He had picked up Darcy in Philadelphia after the fall of SHIELD. She’d fought him, wanting to go to this very place to help out Steve Rogers, even though she’d never actually met the man. Clint had dosed her with a sedative, and she’d gone down like a sack of rocks. He’d put her down on the medical cot in the quinjet before getting the hell out of dodge, because while Steve and company had managed to get those helicarriers down, Darcy and he were still sitting ducks for now exposed and desperate Hydra members.

He had just tried to get them out of rang, preferably to Idaho where they could lie low. He was sure Laura and the kids would love Darcy. They’d heard enough stories about her.

He’d just set the autopilot when he felt the bite of a needle. And then sweet, sweet black sleep.

“ Fucking Lewis,” Clint grumbled.
Luckily, she wasn’t so great at tying knots as his kids were. He was out of his bonds in less than fifteen seconds. But now he’d have to go out and look for her. He loaded up on weapons, knowing that he’d probably need them. By Natasha’s estimates, over half of SHIELD was actually Hydra. They were probably trolling the river for Steve too.

“If I were a small, irritating brat of a woman, with no regard for my personal safety and an absolutely senselessly stupid amount of bravery, where would I be?” Clint wondered as he deboarded the quinjet. His sight had much recovered since he woke up, and he made a tight circle, looking far into the distance all around the Potomac.

He wouldn’t put it past her to go into the water.

When he thought about it hard enough, it might be a peachy little story for Darcy and Steve to tell the grandkids someday.

*Your amazing Great-Uncle Barton thought we’d be swell together, and your grammy took it upon herself to knock poor old fantastic Great-Uncle Barton out and rush headfirst into a spy war, then dragged me outta the Potomac and gave me mouth to mouth with extra tongue.*

Barton rolled his eyes at the imagined voice of elderly Steve Rogers in his head. One of those future Roger kids better have the name Clint somewhere in their future signatures. He’d settle for Clinton.

“No today, Nazi douchebags! Prepare for your balls to be busted!”

Clint didn’t even need the hearing aids turned up to hear her. For such a tiny thing, Darcy Lewis sure had a mouth on her. He took off running for her, and sure enough, on the banks of the Potomac, looking a little like a drowned rat, Darcy Lewis stood, Captain America’s shiny vibranium shield in her hands, having just used it to probably brain a Hydra agent laying at her feet.

Clint got an arrow notched, ready to assist with the three other agents that were advancing on Darcy, keen to get their hands on the shield first, and maybe worry about a living, breathing hostage after. He took out two in rapid succession, but didn’t dare shoot an arrow at the third, who Darcy was bashing in the balls with the shield. She was winning handily, so Clint wasn’t too fussed, and instead appreciated one of the strong women in his life doing what she did best.

“You about done there, Mrs. America?” he called out sarcastically.
“Shoot,” Darcy wrinkled her nose at having gotten caught. She stamped on the instep of the Hydra Agent who had foolishly underestimated her then brought the shield up to man’s chin, knocking him on his back and into blissful unconsciousness.

“What were you hoping for here, Darce?” Clint wondered, using the tone he used on Cooper when he had snuck out with his telescope to try and look for Thor in the middle of the night.

“To be done with this and back on the quinjet before you woke up?” Darcy grinned.

“How’d you manage to shake off six hours worth of sedative?” Clint wondered as she kicked at an unconscious Hydra agent before marching up the riverbank to stand in front of him.

“Dude, you’ve got to meet Betty Ross someday. She designed my awesome, foolproof birth control, AND she shot me and Janie up with experimental antidotes to about three hundred different kinds of tranquilizers. Jane and I can’t be kidnapped dude. Do you realize how quickly they’d move to torture once they had about two minutes worth of our sass?”

“Fair enough,” Clint nodded. “You know I have to tell Nat about this, right?”

“Barton, no!” Darcy looked horrified. She then looked down at the shield and wondered how hard she’d have to hit Clint in order to get him knocked out too. Probably really hard. Barton had a wicked hard head.

“Barton, yes . You are in so much trouble. I hope your future boyfriend’s shield was worth it,” Clint reached out and ruffled Darcy’s wet hair. “C’mon. We’ll call Hill for cleanup while we go and find you clean clothes.”

“You guys don’t keep clean clothes on quinjets. Just Banner pants and emergency blankets. And please don’t make me try to put on Banner pants. They’re not gonna button, dude,” Darcy whined as they walked back towards the quinjet.

“Not on the quinjet,” Barton smirked. “We’re going to Idaho, kid.”
"Magnet, are you alright? Let me look at you," Steve said breathlessly as he met Darcy at the doorway to the science building. She was a sight to be seen, looking windswept and breathless in leather and metal, looking like she was ready to do some kind of battle. The skirt made up of a lot of leather pieces flared nicely around his favorite set of hips, and the armor seemed to be specially made for her, seeing as it actually fit her properly. She was a vision.

And she looked healthy and whole and no worse for the wear of what she had been through less than twenty-four hours earlier. His hand reached out to touch where the bullet had lodged and just before his touch landed against her skin, the orange stone began to glow.

"No, no touching, not yet, wait!" Darcy took a giant step back, but it was too late.

The light encapsulated the both of them. T'Challa had the good sense to step back, but Natasha, who had easily caught up with Darcy and was now right behind her, took a step forward, unsure of what was happening between Steve, Darcy and that mysterious stone glowing around Darcy's neck, but absolutely willing to assist.

She reached out to pull them away from each other, fearing what the bright light was doing as Darcy let out a small battle cry that was muffled by the sudden vibration coming off of the stone. The closer Natasha got, the brighter the light became until it engulfed the trio in its haze.

Natasha blinked and felt her feet on uneven ground. She hated being on uneven ground. What was worse, she felt uneasy, unguarded and absolutely ill prepared for whatever might come next. She was having problems remembering what came prior to her standing on uneven ground, in a dusty stone pit, reminiscent of a gladiator arena. There were orange, malformed rocks all around her, obscuring her vision. She had said her farewell to James and had immediately set out to get things to be right for the man who had just put himself under cryofreeze one last time.

She'd been ready to get on the quinjet when the Bifrost erupted with light all around her, and when she had landed on solid ground once more, she was staring at Darcy's back as the girl sprinted towards the Exploratory Sciences building that Bucky would be calling his home until his triggers could be erased.
"Fucking hell, Jesus you Avengers should keep your hands to yourself!" Darcy yelled suddenly and Natasha turned in a full circle, looking around for the young woman. Darcy grunted out in exertion, something that very rarely ever happened. It made Natasha panic a little.

"Calm down!" Darcy yelled.

Heavy footsteps fell, and Natasha was relieved to know that all of her faculties weren't stolen from her. That was the sound of Rogers' careless, heavy tread, she'd heard it so many times when they were about to rush into danger. He turned a corner, his face full of desperation.

"I can't find her!" he growled out, running past Natasha and grabbing the woman's forearm, dragging her along at full speed.

"CALM THE EVER LOVING FUCK DOWN!" Darcy yelled once more, her voice everywhere, but there was no physical sign of her anywhere as Natasha and Steve ran around the sandy pit full of rocks.

"Christ, it couldn't have been one of the kids that touched me? Or Lang at least? Someone without such a meaty, well done soul?" Darcy lamented. "Had to be two of the people I definitely didn't want to have to defend here."

"Magnet, where are you?" Steve demanded, coming to a stop in a circle of hoodoo shaped spires of rock. He immediately began climbing one of them, in order to get a better view. He looked around and Natasha felt her pulse leap a little at the sudden terror on his face as he obviously spotted Darcy.

The Black Widow immediately began climbing the nearest spire of rock, pulling herself up and looking in the direction that Steve was gaping at in horror. Darcy, his magnet, was about a hundred yards away from them, running and jumping between the spires with agility that she would normally not be graced with.

"What the hell is that?" Natasha breathed. Chasing after Darcy was a large black storm cloud that had taken the shape of a two story high, vaguely humanoid thing. Amongst the swirls of smoke that made up its body were the twinkling of glittering lights, all the colors of the rainbow. Natasha was reminded of the Bifrost, but the Bifrost was a beautiful thing, pure light and energy. This was light trapped in a monster, and it gave her an uneasy feeling deep in the pit of her gut as Darcy ran from the beast.
"It’s the stone!" Darcy called out, nearly missing a footfall on her next jump, causing Steve to go into immediate action, running in her direction, intent on heading off the monster giving his fiancee chase.

"Darcy," Natasha whispered. "Did you find an infinity stone?"

"Maybe?" Darcy squeaked, sounding like she was apologizing. She saw Steve out of the corner of her eye and shook her head, "Stay away, you perfect idiot!"

To his credit, Steve stopped in his tracks at Darcy's order, although it looked like he wanted to argue the matter a little. The sentient black smoke monster turned, and eyes that were made up of a million shimmering multifaceted and multi-colored lights grew at the sight of Steve Rogers standing in front of him.

"Mistake, mistake, mistake," Darcy winced. "HEY, SMOKEY AND THE ASSHOLE. LOOK AT ME! I'M IN CHARGE OF YOU NOW!"

Natasha cursed in Russian.

She didn’t know much about the infinity gems. But she was the only human on Earth who knew as much as she did. Not even Jane Foster had access to the transcripts that Natasha had access to. SHIELD agents driven mad by Loki’s scepter, and Clint's own troubles with it had led her to beg Thor to allow her research in order to better prepare. She knew that there were six of them. She knew that Thanos wanted all of them, but so far three of them were just out of his reach. And she knew that while they had the allurement of power, they were so much more dangerous than what they were worth.

And Darcy had somehow gotten her hands on one in order to help Bucky. She swallowed as the stone gleamed orange and Natasha went back to the old and weathered children's story book that Thor had given her after the fall of Shield. It had been deemed unreliable for the researchers that were working in Asgard, but Thor had wisely decided that truth lay in legends and fairytales. Natasha had agreed at the time.

Orange meant the soul stone.

And the soul stone was probably the most dangerous of all the Infinity Stones. First and foremost, it
was a sentient thing. The children's book had translated roughly into "Dastardly soul eater". Secondly, it ATE souls, hence "dastardly soul eater". And Natasha was making an educated guess here, but apparently, the meatier the soul, the more it would want to eat it.

"Look at me Smokey! I'm your boss!" Darcy screeched as the beast started to advance slowly on Steve two swirling plumes shaped into arm-like appendages extended towards him.

Natasha winced as she realized what Darcy had been complaining about. The children's book had warned that the dastardly soul eater wouldn't want the clean and pure souls of newborn babes, or the good and innocent. It warned children to be good and live good lives, because what the soul eater wanted most of all was damaged souls, ones that had seen hard times and survived.

Of all the people on the island to catch the stone's attention, Natasha and Steve would be the worst, as they had lived for far longer and with far more pain and suffering than another soul. The only soul it would want more than Natasha and Steve's was...

"Holy cow. What in the hell is that?"

Natasha turned in alarm to see Bucky struggling upwards onto one of the spires one armed.

"How did you get in here?" she demanded.

"M'dreaming...Shuri said they might be nice dreams, but I shoulda known better," Bucky winced. He saw the monster approaching a frozen Steve, and even further away he saw Darcy running towards the thing, looking ready to fight. "Jesus, little Rainbow Widow, what're you doing?"

"No, stay back," Natasha warned, jumping spires to get to Bucky faster. If she and Steve had been pulled in through touch, she wondered how Bucky was here as well.

"You guys put me off my game, I was ready to march in and mind-meld with Bucky, I was prepared to fight there," Darcy winced as she ran, seemingly answering unspoken questions. "I had it under control, but you can't keep your hands to yourself, can you?" 

"Last time I saw you, you were near death, you don't think I wanted to hold you a little to make sure you were real?" Steve whispered, taking a very long step back to the closest spire.
"Hold me or make out with me?" Darcy snorted.

"Is now really the time for verbal foreplay?" Natasha whispered, approaching Bucky and blocking his path.

"Natalia, move, they need my help," Bucky begged. "It's my dream, I can go help somehow."

"This is not a dream," Natasha warned.

"Bull," Bucky shook his head and made a quick move to get past her.

Natasha had no time to explain, and rather than call attention to the fact that she was speaking to possibly one of the most appetizing souls on the planet, she simply tackled him, and both of them tumbled at least fifteen feet towards the pit below. Bucky managed to twist them in midair so that he was on the bottom, taking the brunt of the impact.

"Not a dream, then," Bucky wheezed as all the air was knocked from his lungs. His eyes were wide as he looked upwards.

"It wants to eat your soul," Natasha whispered.

"Why they hell would it want to do that?" Bucky asked with morbid perplexion.

"You have an interesting sort of soul, James," Natasha gave a slight shrug as she rolled off of him. "It's not so interested in the clean and shiny."

"It's why Frigga was so good with it," Darcy said, her voice everywhere and nowhere once again for Natasha and Bucky at least. "Clean and shiny."

Darcy grunted with exertion once more and Bucky wrinkled his nose and struggled to get up again, taking in slow and deep breaths and he tried to shake off being tackled to the ground. She wasn't trained for this kind of thing. He'd focused on teaching her how to get out of a jam, and Natasha had
done pretty much the same. He'd not taught her how to take out an otherworldly monster from the
great beyond, with no weapons and only dressed up like a lady viking from one of those blue novels
his mother used to read.

"Fucking hell," Steve whispered.

"You owe Lila, like, ten dollars, cutie. You know you're not supposed to swear unless it's during
bedroom and bedroom related activities," Darcy quipped.

"What's going on?" Bucky demanded, going to climb the nearest spire once again. He didn't hear
her coming, but he felt Natasha tackle into his side, bringing him down to the ground.

"Uh....she's winning?" Steve offered.

"You helping, you big lug?" Bucky demanded hotly.

"Can't," Steve reasoned, feeling utterly powerless as he watched Darcy work. She'd managed to
grab the shadow monster by the right leg and was currently digging in her heels, pulling it back from
advancing on Steve. "Not so clean and shiny."

"Bullshit," Bucky disputed. "You're Steven Fucking Rogers."

"Yeah, and it doesn't matter what public opinion is about me, I've lived a long time, seen a lot of bad
times, taken a lot of souls of my own," Steve reasoned. He realized it wouldn't matter if he'd taken
the bad souls. The beast that Darcy was currently trying to wrangle like an overgrown, naughty
toddler didn't care. He only cared about how many souls were on Steve's tally sheet.

Steve had quite a few, but Natasha winced when she realized she had so many more, and Bucky had
the most of all of them. What had Darcy been thinking trying to use such a thing on the Winter
Soldier?

"I was THINKING that some bad shit is about to go down, and I want him with us, not frozen in a
fucking tube!" Darcy yelled, and it became very clear that, yes, in this space and with that stone
around her neck, Darcy could read what was on their minds. "I was THINKING that I didn't want
my friend putting himself in the same damned state that his torturers had kept forcing him in and out
of for so damned long. I was THINKING that of all the men in the world that deserved a second
chance, it was James, motherfucking, Buchanan Barnes!

Steve watched as Darcy yanked on the beast's leg with every syllable of Bucky's full name, motherfucking included, and finally managed to get the physical manifestation of the soul stone off of it's balance. It was a beautiful thing to watch. He imagined that to him, Natasha or Bucky, the thing might have weighed a few tons, but to Darcy it looked to be a large sack of flour as she twirled in a circle, the leather flaps of her Asgardian warrior's skirt billowing out around her as she shot putted the beast at least fifty yards away in the opposite direction of Steve.

"I love you, Steve, I do," Darcy smiled at him, big and gap toothed and beautiful. She straightened the glasses on her face and nodded at him with sudden severity. "But if you don't get out of sight with the other soul happy meals, while I get this thing under control, I'm holding out on sex. You know, for as long as humanly possible."

"Ten hours, if she's lucky," Bucky muttered.

Steve smiled, jumped three rock spires to land on hers, gave her a long, searching kiss before easily taking a step back and jumping down to the ground. The bastard landed on his feet, too, and Bucky rolled his eyes at him.

"She'd never last ten whole hours," Steve said confidently as Darcy let out a small whoop of victory. He recognized it as the one she usually used when she managed to get her clothes on after a shower before Steve could convince her to stay undressed. So it must have been going a little well up there.

"You'd never last ten whole hours and she'd have jerked you off out of sympathy forty-five minutes into the ban," Bucky teased, wincing again when he heard the roar of the beast that would have loved to have eaten his soul precious moments ago. It sounded like it was losing to Bucky's little Rainbow Widow.

"I really missed you these last ten minutes, pal," Steve deadpanned, his eyes rolling a little.

"Can I volunteer to have my soul eaten rather than spend this time with the two of you being useless?" Natasha wondered dryly, her eyes never leaving the sky, hoping to see a hint of Darcy, safe and well and whole. It seemed kind of silent up there for the moment, and she wondered what the manifestation of a tamed, soul eating infinity stone looked like.

"How quickly we forget silent moments of love and affection," Bucky shook his head ruefully.
"You know, I really have to say," Darcy sighed, and the dusty red landscape they had been on slowly began to swirl away, like someone had put their finger on a swipe of wet ink and smudged. Slowly all the red began to fade away and only deep, midnight blue remained as far as the eye could see. "The three of you could have a comedy hour together. I'd totally watch that."

She stood in front of them, looking rosy cheeked and just a little winded, like she had actually participated in the physical activities Bucky was always trying to get her to do. The stone around her neck glowed brightly, and Natasha swore she could see the beast trapped within, ready to do some damage and eat some souls.

“So, I was hoping to just do this with Bucky, but now I have an audience, which is really awkward, because it’s kind of awful to do something this weird and difficult and strange the first time with an audience. But I’m not gonna have the energy to break this and go back in again, so it’s going to have to be this way,” Darcy rambled, looking a little wired, like she had indulged in far too many coffees from the Wakandan Royal Palace’s excellent coffee maker.

“What exactly are we doing?” Bucky asked warily.

“Spit shining your soul,” Darcy put bluntly. “Taking out the bad, and leaving the good. It’s only been done once before, and that was like ten thousand years ago, but I think we can do this. You ready?”

“For what?” Bucky whispered as Darcy took a step towards him.

“Buckster, I honestly---I have no earthly idea. But let’s get this thing started, okay?”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is about to get a little weird, I think.

Thanks for reading!
A Very Special Episode of Someday, Maybe

Chapter Notes

I don't know how to properly prepare you for this chapter.

Someone said something last chapter about Twilight Zone. SO yes, this is kind of like the twilight zone.

Bucky and Darcy need a safe place to do some important work. And this is what Darcy and her limited power over the soul stone has created.

There are several song links throughout the chapter, leading you to a youtube video, if you want to hear what I was listening to.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Forty-Five: A Very Special Episode of Someday, Maybe

Black Screen.

Announcer (that sounds like Darcy)

Portions of "Someday, Maybe" are taped in front of a live studio audience. This program is brought to you by Hydra, the KGB and nefarious power plays around the world. Additional sponsors are strife, douchebags and Ivory Soap, washing away your tears since 1879!

(Vanity shot of masked Hydra agent gesturing stiffly to a bar of Ivory Soap)

Announcer and Title card reads

Previously on Someday, Maybe...

(Soft ambient piano music fades in)

Title card fades out to reveal a montage of previous scenes from Bucky Barnes life, included are meeting Steve Rogers at a young age, showing him coming to Steve's rescue at least five times in rapid succession, each flashback showing them a little older. Other key flashbacks include Bucky opening his draft letter, going through basic, looking at a giant, terrible Hydra machine before being
taken prisoner.

Howling Commandos quick montage: Morita doing finger guns, Dernier winking, Jones rolling his eyes, Dum-Dum passing gas.

(piano music should segway into Star-Spangled Man with a Plan)

Clips of Steve appearing, this time as Captain America, rescuing Bucky. Peggy Carter is seen smacking both Steve and Bucky upside the head multiple times in quick succession.

(Screen goes black, Music becomes ominous).

Very short images of Bucky's last fight on the train are separated with black screens.

When he falls, the shot should be of Steve's face, concerned and becoming smaller.

(No music, black screen, the sound of a slow heartbeat begins soft and rises in volume)

Various scenes of violence, pain and torture are shown on screen for a few seconds: The arm being attached, the first wipe, the first time the Winter Soldier is taken out of cryofreeze, beatings, torture, and a few key assassinations completed by the Winter Soldier.

(heartbeat sound becomes more rapid with each scene until it is so rapid that it flatlines. Black screen.)

A brilliant blast of light comes through, and Natalia Romanova's face is seen in soft light, staring up at the Winter Soldier with curiosity as he reaches a metal hand to lift her up off the floor.

(Soft music returns here, piano version of 'Bucky & Natalia's' theme)

This montage should include Red Room training, but also scenes of tenderness. Bucky smiling at Natasha, watching her fondly as she excels at her training, Natasha's hand tracing the weathered scars emanating from his shoulder, beauty and gentleness peeking out of the darkness of the Red
Room.

(Screen goes black and ominously slow heartbeat returns)

The flashbacks are quicker now, less than a second, showing a bleak life of violence and cold and blackness until finally, a slow motion shot of Natasha being shot by Bucky, and then Bucky staring as Steve falls from the helicarrier.

(Fade to Black. Cue Theme Song and Title card)

SOMEDAY, MAYBE

Upbeat, acoustic guitar pop song begins playing, with the show and cast credits on screen. Scenes of Bucky Barnes, with two complete human arms, walking through a park, as various members of his life walk and interact around him.

THEME SONG

Someday, maybe, when we're old and gray, we can be in love once more.

The Bartons and all their kids flying a kite, with Laura and Cooper trying to improve the kite with various robotics and machinery, while Lila is using her father, who is holding the baby, as a perch to climb avidly up the reinforced kite string.

THEME SONG

Till Then I won't give my love away, baby I'm forever yours.
Scott, T'Challa and Shuri wave at them from their place at a picnic, with Scott dressed as a giant ant.

**THEME SONG**

No need to complicate it, that smile is worth the wait, yeah I'm forever only yours

Sam and Wanda rollerblade by Bucky, Sam rollerblading badly, but still managing to mess up Bucky's hair along the way.

Tony is standing in the pathway, glowering up at Bucky, looking out of place with all the adorable, friendly scenes Bucky has walked past. Bucky continues walking, giving Tony a respectful nod and being careful to walk around the man.

Bucky reaches a fancy fountain, where Steve is leaning against a stone pillar, and Natasha is sitting on the lip of the fountain. Both of them are smiling at him, looking happy and joyful. He sits down between them, and gives a small smile directly in the camera as Natasha loops her arm in his and Steve pats his left shoulder.

**THEME SONG**

Someday, Maybe, Someday Maybe, Someday maybe I'll be yours.

FADE IN:

INT: BARELY LIT BEDROOM
Bucky sits up in bed with a gasp, the bedsheets falling around his waist, revealing a bare torso.

(Audience cheers loudly and quickly turns to wolf-whistle at the appearance).

BUCKY
(desperate and confused)
What's going on?!

(A hand reaches up from the bed, the body covered completely. The hand grips Bucky's shoulder and yanks him back towards the bed)

NATASHA
(voice muffled)
I told you not to wake me before sunrise, James. You better make it worth my while...

(Audience "Oooooooohhhh").

NATASHA
(Exaggerated)
I'm waiting!

BUCKY
(Confused and faltering)
What's... what the hell is this?

Natasha sits up in bed, the sheets magically covering up anything that might be censored, even though the same sheet only comes to just below Bucky's belly button. She reaches out and gives him a kiss (Held for audience reaction).
NATASHA

(Smiling softly)

This is your life, James. You remember that?

(LOUD knock on the door)

NATASHA

Come in!

(Door opens to reveal STEVE ROGERS in super tight workout gear)

(Audience cheers. Wait several beats for extended cheering)

STEVE

(Cheerfully)

Hey Bucky! Ready to start in on another good day?

NATASHA

Rogers, how long have you been awake?

STEVE

(shrugging)

An hour?

NATASHA

And how many marathons have you run?
STEVE

Two?

(pause)

Haven’t been able to sleep right. I guess I AM feeling a little tired...

(Audience laughs)

STEVE

It was a pretty big fight with Tony, after all.

NATASHA

You’ve had worse. I mean...Hitler?

STEVE

Yeah, but that was seventy years ago!

(Audience laughs)

STEVE

So, how’s about we go out and get sweaty, Buck?

NATASHA

Actually, James and I were going to get a little sweaty ourselves.
Bucky slowly gets out of the bed, staring at his left arm in wonder. He shakes his head in disbelief and looks around at the brightly lit room. He brings his left hand up to run through his hair and sighs.

BUCKY

Where's Darcy?

STEVE

What's a Darcy?

ANNOUNCER

And now, a word from our sponsors!

EXT. SHOT OF A PARK

RUMLOW

I'm a douchebag.

INT. SHOT OF A KITCHEN

ALEXANDER PIERCE

I'm a douchebag.

EXT. SHOT OF OUTERSPACE
RED SKULL and THANOS

(together)

We're douchebags...in space.

INT. SHOT OF GREEN BINARY CODE OVER A BLACK BACKGROUND

ZOLA

I'm a douchebag on the internet.

INT. SHOT OF OVAL OFFICE

THADDEUS ROSS

I'm being a douchebag right now.

(gestures to President)

And he has no idea.

ANNOUNCER

(over footage of all of the confirmed douchebags, being douchebags)

You or someone you love, may know a douchebag. They're everywhere. Infiltrating our safe and happy places, trying to be bigger douchebags and take away everything that makes you happy.

EXT. SHOT OF A PARK.

NATASHA rushes into frame and cleanly knocks Rumlow out with a hard punch to his weathered face.
ANNOUNCER

(over footage of NATASHA beating RUMLOW up)

But you don't have to take douchebags lying down.

Instead, have you tried to punch them in the face?

NATASHA

Or punch them in the genitals.

INT. SHOT OF A KITCHEN

BUCKY BARNES punches PIERCE in the throat.

BUCKY

Or in the throat.

EXT. SHOT OF OUTER SPACE

THOR swings the hammer at THANOS'.

PETER QUILL winks at the camera obnoxiously before blasting RED SKULL in the ass with a space pistol.

THOR and PETER

(together)
Or in the ASS.

INT. SHOT OF A KITCHEN

BUCKY

Wait---who was that? The guy with the spacey kind of laser pistol?

INT. SHOT OF GREEN BINARY CODE

A binary representation of SAM WILSON appears on the screen.

SAM

Kick those douchebags in their metaphorical asses.

INT. SHOT OF A KITCHEN

BUCKY

(rolling his eyes)

Really? Wilson didn't do shit to take down Zola. And who was that guy? Little Rainbow Widow? Where are you?

INT. SHOT OF OVAL OFFICE
STEVE ROGERS appears next to THADDEUS ROSS

STEVE

Punch the douchebag right out of them.

(STEVE begins punching and doesn't stop)

INT. SHOT OF A KITCHEN

BUCKY

Doesn't seem to be working right there, punk. Need a

(looking down at his flesh hand, smiling softly)

Hand?

INT. SHOT OF OVAL OFFICE

STEVE

I could punch the douchebag out of douchebags all day.

ANNOUNCER

(over continued punching of THADDEUS ROSS. NATASHA, THOR, SAM, PETER QUILL join in.)
We can't stop douchebags from occurring. But we can stop them from doing the douchebaggery they are currently involved in.

BUCKY walks into the frame, staring at PETER QUILL

**BUCKY**

Seriously, Little Rainbow Widow, who is this guy?

**STEVE**

I forget the kid's name, but apparently he's important later.

**PETER QUILL**

Starlord, dude. Seriously, has no one heard of me?

**ANNOUNCER**

Ask your friends and family if punching douchebags is right for you. Then go out, and find a way to punch a douchebag.

(quicker and softer)

Side effects of punching douchebags might include: Euphoria, Adrenaline highs, sore knuckles, increased strength in biceps, increased delivery of fruit bouquets and other sundry thank you gifts, also, being super duper happy that you punched that douchebag because he TOTALLY deserved it.
BUCKY is sitting on the couch with his head in his hands. CLINT BARTON walks in from door number 3

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE.)

CLINT shoots finger guns at the audience, generally hams it up.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUDS MORE).

CLINT brings up his right, bare arm and flexes.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUDS LOUDER).

LAURA BARTON enters behind Clint and smacks him upside the head as he continues to try to garner more raucous applause.

She looks to Bucky concerned.

**LAURA**

Hey hottie with a body. What's wrong?

**BUCKY**

Don't know. Weird stuff keeps happening.
LAURA

You live in a big loft in Brooklyn with a dozen other various people who you are not related to by blood in any way. None of us have real jobs, but we wear designer labels and have furniture that costs more than what ninety-eight percent of the nation makes in year. Also we're all kind of ridiculously good looking.

(elbows Clint in the gut)

This bozo notwithstanding.

(audience laughter)

CLINT

Yeah, I'm astronomically good looking.

(Audience laughter)

CLINT

But seriously...

(pauses. winks again at audience)

I'm so good looking.

LAURA

(rolling her eyes obnoxiously)
Seriously Buckster. What's the weird here?

BUCKY

(looks around in confusion)

Where's the other wall? What are those people? What's going on? This is like one of those shows Darcy made me watch, with the kids with the funny hair and pastel clothes and ridiculous hijinks...

LAURA

Saved by the bell?

CLINT

Facts of Life?

LAURA

Showing your age there, dummy.

CLINT

You didn't have a problem with my age, during our morning marital relations half an hour ago.

(AUDIENCE REACTION)
LAURA

Seriously though, I don't get what's weird. And what's a Darcy?

BUCKY

The little lady who announced the strangely satisfying advertisement earlier where we got to beat up assholes.

CLINT

(horrified)

You guys beat up assholes?

(pause for a beat)

Without me?

LAURA

(sotto voice, aside to CLINT)

I think something's wrong with Bucky.

CLINT

Dude, hearing aid. You're supposed to be the smart one.
LAURA begins to use sign language with her husband.

SUBTITLES:

He's disassociating again.

BUCKY
(looking at the bottom of the screen)
I can read that!

SUBTITLES for CLINT's signs:

He gonna need another intervention.

Door number Five opens and SAM WILSON appears.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE).

BUCKY

Oh hell, not you.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

SAM

(shrugs and strolls into the room, sitting next to Bucky with a smirk on his face)
I hear you need another intervention. You know, cause of your old man condition.

BUCKY

(Sighs)

Sure, why the hell not? Can't be any worse than what's going on right now.

INT. BRIGHT NIGHT CLUB.

On the stage is a full band, and standing in front of the microphone, crooning "Cupid's Got a Shotgun" as a duet are CLINT and LAURA.

BUCKY is sitting in the front row, a look of horror on his face as CLINT mostly just does ridiculous choreography.

BUCKY

I was so wrong, this is so much worse.

ANNOUNCER

And now, a word from our sponsors

EXT. SHOT OF WASHINGTON DC
BUCKY is in Winter Soldier regalia, his mask in place, guns in hand. NATASHA and STEVE are standing apart from him, looking bloodied and beat up.

ANNOUNCER

Pesky blood stains and splatters on your clothing, skin and hands got you down?

(OFFSCREEN)

MYSTERY VOICE

(not shown due to copyright issues)

Do what I do! WEAR RED!

BUCKY looks down at his hands, one flesh and one metal, covered in blood.

BUCKY

Jesus...

NATASHA

(holding her hand to her shoulder wound)

James, it's fine
STEVE

(holding his hand to a wound to his gut)

We're okay now, don't worry. It's okay, pal.

INT. SHOT OF LAUNDRY ROOM

CLINT stands there covered in scrapes and scratches, completely shirtless.

CLINT

I'm a busy man, what with international espionage happening every other day and alien invasions happening on the other days. So I don't have time to go out shopping for new clothes every day I come home blood stained.

LAURA

(offscreen)

It's usually his own blood.

CLINT

Cram it, smarty pants. I'm doing a commercial here.

ANNOUNCER

You seem like you're ready for Blood Be Gone! The sister product of goo be gone. Just apply directly to the stains, throw it in the washer and you're good to go.

(TIME LAPSE)
Clint pulls out a clean purple tee from the washer.

**CLINT**

WOW, it really works! I wonder if this will work on kid stains too?

**EXT. SHOT OF WASHINGTON DC**

Natasha and Steve are now healed, the blood gone from their clothes.

**STEVE**

(smiling)

See, good as new.

BUCKY shakes his head and looks down at his blood covered hands.

**NATASHA**

(stepping forward with a bright orange spray bottle)

This is going to sting a little, lover. I'm sorry.

**BUCKY**

Wait---What?

NATASHA sprays at his hands and Bucky lets out a loud, tortured scream
INT. BRIGHT NIGHT CLUB

STEVE is on stage, looking shy and uncertain, but doggedly singing a very soft, simple version of "God Only Knows" from the Beach Boys.

STEVE

(singing)

If you should ever leave me, though life would still go on, believe me.

BUCKY and NATASHA are seated at a table, their friends surrounding them at other tables. A brunette WAITRESS comes to their table and reaches for BUCKY’s drink, which is mostly empty, but shows the remnants of something bright and orange.

WAITRESS

(bending to look at Bucky)

Refill, sugar?

BUCKY

Darcy?

WAITRESS

I don't know if we serve that, I'll have to check.

STEVE
(Singing directly to BUCKY and the WAITRESS)

The world could show nothing to me, so what good would living do me?

BUCKY

(desperate)

Darcy, please, what's happening? It—why did the last advertisement hurt so much?

WAITRESS

(Whispering)

I'm sorry, I don't really know what I'm doing here. I just---we needed to figure out a way to do this that wasn't you know, me reaching inside of you with an orange glowy hand and scrambling you back together again.

BUCKY

But the television show?

WAITRESS

It's something we did together a few times. You seemed to like them, I thought it would be a good sort of—neutral ground to do our work.

BUCKY

We also played your video games...you couldn'ta picked that?
WAITRESS

Did you really want us to play the super violent crap we play together?

BUCKY

Mario kart?

WAITRESS

I didn't want to do live action Mario Kart, dude. No offense, but you're ruthless.

STEVE

(still singing)

God only knows what I'd do without you.

BUCKY

(shaking his head)

Who knew he was such a crooner?

WAITRESS

We listened to this a few days into our adventure together. He said it was his song for me. He sang
this to me once when he thought I was sleeping. It's one of the sweetest things anyone has ever done for me. Thought it might be calming for the both of us. Take our minds off of the pain.

**BUCKY**

(confused)

Little Rainbow Widow...is this hurting you too?

**STEVE**

(ending the song)

God only knows what'd I'd be without you.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUDS)

NATASHA links her arm through Bucky's and gives him a warm smile. She gestures with her chin to his filled drink

**NATASHA**

Bottoms up, lover.

**BUCKY**

(looking around)

Where'd the waitress go?

**STEVE**
(walking towards the table)

The looker with the beautiful smile? She went to go get me a root beer. D’you think she’s single?

TONY STARK walks on stage, dressed in an outfit like HOWARD STARK’s outfit from the World expo. He rolls his eyes and wrinkles his nose at BUCKY.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUDS)

TONY

(giving a cocky wave to the audience)

Fresh out of the slammer, please enjoy the dramatic stylings of The Three Wombats and some other guy...

SCOTT

(offstage)

HEY! C’MON, NOT COOL!

(AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

TONY

Ladies and gents, you're in for a real treat. Please enjoy this excerpt from Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing, with way longer and wordier monologues, twice the sexual tension, and as Shakespeare, you know, intended it, an all male cast.

BUCKY
(whispered)
Oh god, no.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

ANNOUNCER

And now a word from our sponsors...

(Black screen)

MALE ANNOUNCER

(deep voice)

Coming soon to own on DVD...seventy-five years worth of pain and blood filled memories...countless kills and forced, murderous servitude...

(pause for a dramatic beat)

(Upbeat big band music plays)

MALE ANNOUNCER

(clearly SAM WILSON's voice)

And seven decades worth of RIDICULOUS hair choices!
SAM/ANNOUNCER

You think you've seen it all, but I promise you, you have seen NOTHING. I mean, look at this.

(Surveillance footage of Bucky with a slight mullet)

SAM/ANNOUNCER

(cont.)

And take a look at little Miss Perfect Natasha. The Black Widow. With a perm. You can't make
this stuff up people.

(Grainy picture of the NATASHA with a tightly spiraled perm).

DARLENE WILSON

Sammy, what in the world are you doing?

SAM

Mama, why are you here? When are you going home?

DARLENE WILSON

I'll go home when I'm good and ready to go home, don't mind about that, now you stop picking on
poor Bucky and Natasha, or else I'll be showing your second grade school picture the next opportunity I get.

**SAM/ANNOUNCER**

Mama, no!

(sighs)

Here have some damned memories...

BUCKY can be heard screaming in the distance, muffled.

---

**INT. BRIGHT NIGHT CLUB**

The BARTON children are on stage, singing a "True Colors".

**BUCKY**

(Softly, to Natasha)

This isn't so bad. Better than watching Luis chase Kurt down for a scene ending kiss.

**NATASHA**

I clearly need to work with Kurt on evasion techniques

(AUDIENCE LAUGHS)
STEVE

(reaching for Bucky's empty glass)

Where's the waitress?

WANDA, sitting at the table next to them with Sam puts her head in her hands.

WANDA

Stop making the waitress come over, you're just going to be thinking about despoiling her on one of these tables. I can't take it any longer.

STEVE

(in a dreamy daze)

Now I am thinking of that. Wanda, why would you do that?

(AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

THOR walks up behind STEVE and slaps him upside the back of his head.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUDS)

STEVE

(annoyed)
What was that for?

THOR

You think of despoiling my precious sister in a public place?

NATASHA

What are you doing here?

THOR

(Shrugging, looks at the camera and makes a subtle kissing face to the audience)

Ratings?

(AUDIENCE CHEERS)

JANE FOSTER appears from behind THOR.

JANE

Where's my Darce?

NATASHA

What's a Darce? Where'd you leave it last?
JANE

(pointing at Steve)

With this big goofball.

STEVE

(looking dismayed)

I didn't do it. I swear.

BUCKY

(putting a hand on Steve's shoulder)

It's okay, pal. Let's order Thor and Jane a drink. That might set their minds at ease.

NATASHA

Where's that damned waitress?

SAM

Steve scared her off with all the excessive old man drooling over her little yellow uniform.

The lights of the night club go dark, and the sound of gunfire erupts.

BUCKY
(yelling)

Darcy!?

An explosion rocks the night club, and the sound of the children screaming is the clearest sound.

BUCKY

(desperate and pained)

Darcy please! Please stop!

FADE TO BLACK.

TITLE CARD READS

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

A lot of the songs in this chapter were completely different for a long time, and then I unironically listed to the new Michael Buble CD with my mother last Friday when she came to visit me. I loved it and rewrote some bits in this chapter to accommodate it.

I'm sorry ahead of time if you found this chapter a little too jarring to read. I totally understand. It's not a perfect script format either, it's just from how I remember scripts looking from my time in plays. This was meant to be "a very special" episode of this story. I hope some of you enjoyed it!

Thanks for reading!
Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for the awesome comments on last chapter. I was really very nervous about it, so I'm glad it totally didn't anger anyone.

But....back to normal now!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 46: Back to Our Regularly Scheduled Programming

Kansas, 1994

"Carry on my wayward son, they'll be peace when you are done...lay your weary head to rest...don't you cry no mooooooooore."

The music kicked in and the young man sitting on top of the little temporary shack that was part of the traveling circus' menagerie of dilapidated and barely held together temporary buildings tested the plywood and fabric the tents were made of by going into a very enthusiastic air performance of...all the instruments.

It said something that he was mostly on key with the tinny sounding song playing through the wireless radio he had next to him on top of the canvas roof.

"I thought that you were legally deaf, Mr. Barton."

Clint Barton's epic air guitar solo came to a screeching halt as he blinked curiously down at the new arrival. She was probably somewhere between the age of fifty and seventy, if he had to guess. He was always terrible at guessing people's ages. One of the reasons why he went into the aerial work instead of the conning games set up on the perimeter was because of his shit guess work.
He could read a person from over a hundred yards away, tell you what they ate for dinner last night, and what orientation they put their toilet paper roll facing up or down. But to hell if he could tell whether the stone cold silver fox lady standing in front of him was past the age of retirement or not. She was a lady though, proper English accent and everything to match her thin red lips, perfectly set, perfectly gray hair, and dressed immaculately in something that resembled olive drab in cut, but was actually crisp black in color.

"Ma'am," Clint gave a tip of his imaginary hat. "M'afraid if you were looking to spectacle at the strange disturbance from yesterday, it's long since cleared out."

The pretty older lady gave him a knowing half smile and nodded.

"I realize that," she admitted. She had ordered the clean up crew after all. SHIELD had been busy at work trying to figure out the woman who could apparently literally wreck a great amount of people with only the sound of her voice.

These anomalies kept popping up. Seemingly random individuals exhibiting superhuman capabilities. Highly specific capabilities, but still, dangerous to the general public.

"You seem to be untroubled with what you have seen," the senior citizen grade A hottie smiled up at him, her brown eyes twinkling merrily.

"Well, ma'am, I've been in the circus since I could walk, practically, and then there was the thing with my brother. I expect you'd be aware of the particulars there," Clint nodded, knowing that the woman in front of him wasn't only a candidate for Mrs. Older Universe, but was actually a member of the spooks that had taken Barney away. He grinned down at her in a casual sort of way. "I've seen a lot of things, is what I'm trying to say."

"Indeed you have," she chuckled.

Clint fell a little in love with her on the spot at the sound of that genuine laughter. He shook his head and sighed, jumping down from the top of the tent.

"So here's the deal, pretty lady," Clint admitted. "I'm kind of outta a job now. And I'm not sure if y'all are hiring or if there's a job I might even be halfway qualified for, but it seems to me that I've had my life upended a handful of times, and three of those times, you and your fun group of people wearing really boring clothes, present company excluded, have shown up. So I'm thinking we could
save a lot of time by just having me work for you and being here when the crazy goes down."

"I can't bring you to your brother," she said resolutely.

"Wasn't asking for all that, just want a job, is all," Clint insisted calmly.

"Aside from climbing to rooftops and hanging from a trapeze and, of course, successfully tricking a man who can turn wood into liquid into the sewers, what are your skills?"

And Clint nearly full out grinned, because she was flirting with him. Definitely downright flirting. He was going to enjoy working for the lady, no doubt.

"You didn't mention the air guitar," Clint pretended to chastise her.

"Oh, please forgive me, the air guitaring was absolutely superb," she mocked him with elegance.

Clint was a goner. Sure, she was wearing a wedding ring, and he was barely nineteen, but Clint knew that he'd forever love this lady.

"I'm pretty handy with weapons, my favorite is a bow and arrow," Clint admitted.

"Don't do this to me, Peggy. Don't think of it," a disembodied voice muttered from a nearby van.

"Nick, come out and meet your newest recruit," the grinning Peggy shouted. She held out a hand to Clint and squeezed his hand as hard as she could, which was very hard indeed. "Clint, it's very nice to meet you. I'm Peggy Carter."

"No shit," Clint breathed. "The real Peggy Carter?"

"In the flesh," Peggy promised.
"Marry me?" Clint offered hopefully.

"Sorry, darling, but I am, in fact, already married," Peggy admitted. "Now, are you ready to do some hard work? We're having a problem in the Ukraine and could use a set of good eyes. We can treat this as a trial run of sorts."

"Ma'am, it'll be my absolute pleasure."

Present day, Wakanda

"What in the hell is this shit?" Clint hissed, shading his eyes from the bright orange glow emanating from the Wakandan science facility he had just hauled Lila out of.

Lila turned herself in his arms and gasped at the sight of the building. It looked like it was engulfed in fire. She wanted to get to it, suddenly. Wanted to run into it and see if it was as warm as it looked. She tried to get down out of her father's hold, but he was having none of it this time.

"No way, kiddo," Clint winced as she kicked at him a bit, right in the gut.

The orange glow of the building did not hold the same enticement to him as it seemed to have for Lila. He felt nothing good could come of him going near that mess. He squinted and against the light, he saw a half a dozen people running, one of them outpacing the rest. In less than half a minute, T'Challa was standing in front of them, not even winded.

"Do you know what Darcy has brought?" T'Challa demanded.

"That was Darcy?" Clint blinked, a little stunned. He grimaced as Lila began squirming in his arms with even more determination to get down and figure out what was happening. He nearly tossed her in the air as he managed to get her turned around just so that he could stare at her with warning.
"Liles, we JUST talked about this. You are NOT a superhero...yet. You are absolutely not running into that building."
"None of us are," Shuri said, walking up towards the trio, a little more winded than T'Challa had been. "The readings my top engineer are getting are---unreadable. I have no idea what is happening."

"Fascinating," T'Challa blinked, looking at the haze of the glow curiously. He seemed to react as Lila and took an unconscious step back towards the building.

"Easy there, Your Highness," Clint threw a more subdued Lila over his shoulder and reached out a hand to T'Challa's arm. He winced once more when the able fighter managed to flick Clint's hand away, with just enough pain to annoy the archer.

"I will handle him if he gets out of hand," Shuri promised.

"You fight very dirty, sister," T'Challa wrinkled his nose at his sibling.

"All fighting is fair," Clint interjected. "No such thing as dirty."

"DADDY! Auntie Dar Dar is in there, what if she needs help?!" Lila kept squirming.

"Not only, Darcy," Shuri admitted. "Captain Rogers and Agent Romanoff were also encapsulated by the---by the mist."

Obviously it was hard to describe what had actually encapsulated Steve and Natasha. Mist would have to do.

Clint sighed. He realized now why Peggy's hair had gone white so early and why Nick didn't have a hair left on his head. Being at ground zero, in charge of people like Clint suddenly knew he was, well, he could feel his hair going white with every passing second. His phone began ringing and he knew it was either his wife or even Nick himself, demanding to know what the hell was going on.

A pulse of energy shot up from the building into the sky, the sound of it a big booming shot in the night.
Clint wrinkled his nose, "That can't be good."

---

Asgard

Heimdall let loose an unholy kind of noise, guttural and full of sharp edged pain. He fell to his knees at the gateway, his eyes glowing brighter and more orange than ever before. Thor and Loki, in the actual clothes and guise of himself, rushed into the bridge room, their eyes going wide as Heimdall was writhing in pain. Jane eventually caught up to them and she grimaced at the sight of the gatekeeper, walking towards him quickly in an effort to assist.

"What is happening?" Thor demanded. It had been less than an hour ago when he had ushered a recovered and eager Darcy to the portal, given her a bear hug and received a kiss on his cheek before she had left. And now, the gatekeeper was writhing in pain and discomfort.

"Are we being attacked?" Loki wondered.

"No, it's---it's something Darcy is doing," Jane explained as she knelt next to an ailing Heimdall. "Her research said that Frigga had found a tether for the stone, but she didn't say it was---it was a person."

"What stone, my Jane?" Thor demanded, holding up his hand at the ready, waiting for Mjolnir to join him in case they were going to face an attack. With Heimdall ailing, they wouldn't know until the attacker was upon them.

"What is the little Darcy doing to him?" Loki winced as Heimdall roared with pain.

"The stone, you idiot, aren't you paying attention?" Jane snapped at him. "You set Darcy out to do all that research on your mother's stuff, and you had no idea what your mother was actually hiding?"

"I only looked for something to find my father," Loki shook his head. "Any other knowledge would have been a welcome addition."
"What STONE, my Jane?" Thor repeated. He'd been involved in his own tedious research ever since the birth of Vision. Usually when someone used the word *stone* in such a capacity, it meant a very specific kind of stone. And they were all dangerous. And Jane seemed to be implying that Darcy was using one.

"The soul stone," Jane put her hand on Heimdall's sweaty brow as medical staff began to storm the bridge room.

Lightning crackled throughout the sky. Perhaps out of all the infinity stones, the soul stone had been best hidden, and the reason was likely because out of all the stones, it was the most dangerous. Mjolnir arrived in his hands and he stared down at a writhing Heimdall.

"My mother imbued you with the power to see souls," Thor realized how the mysterious Heimdall had been able to see so much. Thor’s vision from over a year ago meant much more to him now. "And it is tied to the soul stone."

"To---to channel enough of the power so that the stone would seem harmless," Heimdall gasped out, struggling to his knees, allowing Jane to attempt a vain assist, as he was far too heavy for her to give any kind of support. "In an attempt to hide it from forces that would use it ill."

"And Darcy uses it now for the broken soldier's soul?" Loki guessed.

"She doesn't have complete control over it," Heimdall admitted.

"Control?" Thor demanded angrily. "You think her to be capable of controlling such things?"

"HEY!" Jane snapped. "Who of us has the cleaner soul to be able to handle that thing?"

The wind flew from Thor's sails and he forced himself to step away from his all consuming worry about Darcy. He watched as the energy sapped back into Heimdall, as obviously whatever Darcy was doing on Earth with the Soul Stone began to be more controlled. Thor knew that of all the souls he had touched, Darcy's was akin to Frigga's more so than anyone else, and she would be able to withstand the dark temptation of power just as his mother had.

Whatever initial toll had been taken on Heimdall, it was over as the guardian drug himself to his feet and stood at the gate, tense and searching. Thor's tactical mind began working through the rest of it,
now that one part of his initial worry was eased. He knew that Darcy could handle the stone well enough, hopefully. She and Jane were sisters of the heart for a reason. Jane had survived the Ether. Darcy would survive the Soul Stone. They were both of such good souls.

But there were others in the vast realms that were not of good souls.

"I can feel it," Heimdall whispered to the ethos.

Loki looked to Thor as they drew to the same conclusion. If Heimdall could feel the power being unleashed on one person down on Midgard...then others could, certainly.

"My Jane, stay with Heimdall and my brother," Thor insisted as he stepped forward towards the gateway.

"That's not gonna happen," Jane scoffed. "My best friend is down there and if you have your mean grumpy face on, that means something bad is going to happen to her."

"It's merely a precaution," Loki tried to placate her.

"Shove it up your thin and pasty ass, trickster monkey!" Jane snarled at him. "I'm not going to believe a guy who has playing dress up as his dad for the last few years!"

"Jane, there are those that would attempt to take such power from Darcy, and they have little care of keeping her alive," Thor said quickly. "And no one but Darcy would probably think to use it in such a benevolent way."

"What's she doing?" Jane demanded as Heimdall was still clearly feeling the after effects of his painful episode, but worked on opening the portal anyway.

"She's mending his soul, taking the fractures that the torture has created and making it whole, pulling out the ill intent that others have placed on his soul," Heimdall revealed. "Undoing such horrors for one individual while the rest of the world stays in normalcy..."
"It's not so easy, huh?" Jane nodded. She took a deep breath and reached out and grabbed Thor's hand that wasn't wrapped around Mjolnir's handle. "Okay, let's go. We can do this."

"Jane---"Thor hedged.

"Look, if there are power crazed half deities sniffing out Darcy right now, you are going to need to come out hammer swinging," Jane said calmly. "And I'll work on crowd control and as information girl. I will cram helpful information down throats, and not try to bash deities in the balls. Mostly."

"She has a point," Loki admitted.

"And, if Cooper and Laura can help me, I'll work on portals to zap the bad dudes somewhere particularly nasty," Jane shrugged with a half smirk. She patted Thor's bicep consolingly. "That's only if you can't hit a homerun, honey."

"I will, presumably, stay here?" Loki sighed.

"Aye, and it seems best to play dress up for now," Thor advised. "The general populace of Asgard may take offense to you suddenly being left the keys to the kingdom."

"Fine," Loki rolled his eyes before rolling the glamour over himself, taking on Odin's appearance once again. He pointed a thick, weathered finger at Thor. "Protect my favorite little Heldottir."

"Of course," Thor promised.

"The elderly soldiers should come secondary," Loki added.

"She'll be THRILLED to hear you said that," Jane sneered as she stepped towards the portal with Thor.

"Well, don't tell her I said that," Loki snapped peevishly, his voice coming out of Odin's mouth looking odd and unseemly.
"Go now," Heimdall ordered, knowing that Jane could argue and poke at Loki all day long. The rip of power from him earlier had been painful, but it had come back home to roost and he could better assess what was happening on Midgard. He gave Thor a nod, "Captain Rogers and the Widow Romanoff are in a state of unconsciousness. If a threat does appear on Midgard, you will not have its greatest warriors."

"Huh. Probably no Iron Man, Vision, War Machine...no Captain America, no Winter Soldier, no Hulk and no Black Widow. Yikes," Jane wrinkled her nose. She shrugged and gave a hopeful smile up at Thor. "You always have Clint!"

“Don’t underestimate the archer’s capabilities,” Loki warned.

“Oh yeah, cause he kind of kicked your ass once with a paleolithic weapon?” Jane taunted.

“Go now!” Heimdall roared at them, and pushed at Thor and Jane to step into the portal. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes momentarily, hoping that the little Darcy would be safe from all those that could surely feel what she was doing as well. “May Frigga be with you, hearth keeper.”

Chapter End Notes

I just really love the idea of teenaged Clint being moony eyed over Peggy. I really, really do.

Also, I really love writing Jane. I can't believe she's been gone from this story for so long!

Thanks for reading!
Sometime, Elsewhere

"What---what was that?"

Steve winced at the tone of Natasha's voice. If she was this panicked and disoriented, he felt he should probably feel more panicked and disoriented. But he didn't. Quite the opposite actually.

He felt calm. And entertained.

Darcy had put her hands on Bucky in whatever dreamscape they had been in before, with the smokey monster she had slain, and then, everything faded to black. From that point forward, Steve had just been a captive audience. Literally, he felt as if his entire body was delicately cradled in soft warmth and he could only watch what was happening in front of his eyes.

As far as tv shows went, he supposed it was entertaining enough. Clint and Laura had been fanatical about comedy shows in the time that Steve had known them. They'd been careful to introduce him to only the best ones from the last seven decades. So he was used to I love Lucy. Good Times. Golden Girls. Friends. The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air. Community. Parks and Rec. Steve had seen quite a few of those shows on long quinjet flights where Clint had the control of the entertainment.
So whatever he and Natasha had just watched, and starred in, he found it familiar enough.

He wondered if Natasha's dismay was because she DIDN'T get the Barton introductory course to situational comedy shows. That seemed impossible to Steve, as Natasha had known the Bartons for far longer than he had. And she'd known Darcy longer too, and Darcy considered sit-com watching as a prerequisite to friendship. The end credits had rolled on the cliffhanger, and Steve was still in that safe warm space, and he couldn't see Natasha next to him, but he could feel her presence.

"It was probably closer to Full House or maybe Boy Meets World than a more adult, single camera kind of---"

"Fuck you Rogers, for three months in 2009, I had to watch every single DVD box set that Laura Barton owned," Natasha spat back. "What the hell was it? And you're awfully calm about the screams of pain that show ended in---"

"She's okay, they're both going to be okay," Steve said softly, sounding surprisingly resolute. He didn't know how to explain it in this space. He knew without a doubt that Darcy and Bucky would be okay. It was as if Darcy were right there, holding his hand, reassuring him of that fact.

This space the soul stone had created was strange.

He felt connected to Darcy on every level. And yes, he could feel how hard she was working. She was stripping Bucky's soul bare, painfully levering off the pieces that Hydra had tried to ruin and burn.

Natasha was still understandably panicked. She didn't do well with the unknown. She preferred to know what hand was going to be dealt to her years in advance, if it could be managed. She hadn't planned to be pulled into the non-corporeal state she was in now, stuck in a dark room with an entirely too content and nonplussed Rogers. And someone kept pushing girl power pop anthems into her head, the kind that she and Darcy used to sing at Avenger's Tower while Natasha sipped at Stark's expensive vodka and Darcy baked her Russian treats.

As if on cue, the chocolate smell of baking chocolate spartak cake wafted up her nostrils.

"Darcy!" Natasha hissed out. "I know you're trying to calm me, but I'd prefer knowing what was going on."
The screen in their field of vision that had gone black at the end of the strange television show about Bucky's life blinked back to life, as if a set of eyes was opening and the field of vision was filled with a coffee shop, and from Steve and Natasha's non corporeal point of view, it felt like they were standing in the back of the line.

In front of them was a spry old man, wearing something Steve might have worn when he had just woken up from the ice, the khaki trousers sitting up high on the senior citizen's waist.

"Kids these days," the older man huffed. "Always need to know things fast."

"I'm older than you, son," Steve chuckled in delight, recognizing the man as one he had seen before at a New York City coffee shop.

"Then you should now, gramps that some things take time," the man sassed back.

"I'm not the one complaining about what's going on," Steve reminded him.

"Seriously?" Natasha demanded. "You're going to have an old man-off?"

"You need to take a chill pill, like---all of the chill pills," the old guy advised Natasha. "Do me a favor and buy yourself a decaf."

Natasha took pause at the phrasing. If she could, she would have let her head lean to the right and survey the little old man curiously. Darcy used to tell Stark to take chill pills. To take all of the chill pills.

"This is so bizarre," Natasha breathed in. "Darcy?"

"Just a piece," the guy shrugged. "The piece that can't do the hard stuff."

"Rogers?" Natasha asked.

"Yeah?"
"The love of your life has a little old crankpot of a man inhabiting a space in her soul," Natasha said slowly.

"Just a little piece," Steve nodded.

"I'm a visual representation of Darcy's patience," the old guy rolled his eyes. "You'll notice, I'm thin."

Steve snorted with laughter.

"Where are we?" Natasha sighed in exasperation.

"You're in Wakanda," Patience answered back impudently. "Fallen on the ground fairly gracefully, no bruises, not that the two of you have to worry about that."

"I find it unbelievably amusing that Darcy's visual representation of patience is testing my patience," Natasha muttered.

"We're in a safe spot, our souls are in a safe spot," Steve guessed. "While Darcy does the stuff that could hurt."

"Bingo bango bubbo," Patience smirked. "I can see why the visual representation of Darcy's love and adoration wears a Captain America onesie."

"Oh, can we see her?" Steve asked hopefully.

"She's a little busy," Patience rolled his eyes as the line for coffee moved forward. "Oh---or wait...no, almost done. Give us a minute and then buckle up, buttercup."

"Buckle up for what?" Natasha demanded hotly.
But then everything went black again.

"Rogers?" Natasha questioned.

"Yeah, Nat?" Steve sighed, as if he knew what was coming.

"Fair warning, I'm gonna shake your lady when all of this is done."

"Somehow, I doubt that'll happen."

Steve really didn't know how time worked in this safe spot, which he was beginning to understand was actually a piece of Darcy's soul. He just knew that one second he and Natasha were just conscious thought and the next they were standing on solid ground in a big, ornate room, filled with a lot of random stuff.

There was a hammock corner and he smiled at the sight of it. Another was a big kitchen, the kind that Darcy had always said was her dream kitchen, with loads of counter space, fancy appliances, and more than two ovens. There was a wall full of televisions, playing a lot of very different things. Political documentaries, Bill Nye the Science Guy, Disney movies and random musicals, and a lot of feed from previous Avengers ops, focusing on Natasha kicking a lot of ass. And then there was the corner that was built up like a shrine to Steve Rogers. It was violently pink and had pictures of him all over the wall, with bright, lurid kiss marks on them.

Steve grinned at that. He imagined if they could take a look at his soul, it'd have something similar, filled with pictures of Darcy.

"Where are we?" Natasha blinked, solid and real and standing right next to him in this large, but still cozy and homey space.

"I thought you were supposed to be the all knowing spy," Steve gave her a little half smirk. "You're really slow on the uptake today, Romanoff."
"Why are you so chipper, Rogers?" Natasha asked, her annoyance level high as Steve seemed absolutely fine with everything they had so far been through.

"I like it here," Steve sighed happily, walking leisurely towards the little kitchen and grabbing a large chocolate chip cookie off of a plate. "Feels like home."

"Cornball," Darcy popped up from behind the kitchen counter, a lime green apron on her with Kiss the cook written in lurid hot pink over the front of it. She added another plate of something, looking suspiciously like chocolate spartak cake.

Natasha stepped forward carefully before grabbing at one of the treats Darcy had laid like an offer for her. She bit into it and smiled at the familiar taste.

"Darcy, please, what's happening? Where is James?" Natasha asked when she was done, even as Steve leaned over the counter and placed a kiss against her lips before taking another cookie and jamming the entirety of it into his mouth.

"He's uh, taking a break before we move onto the other stuff," Darcy admitted. "I thought it would be better to be here rather than---there."

"Here being?" Natasha blinked.

"Darcy's soul," Steve answered. He smiled at his surroundings. "I love it here."

"Cornball," Darcy poked at his side.

Steve nodded and kissed her again, grabbing a third and fourth cookie before meandering around the clean and bright room. It was as big as the whole common room back at Avenger's Tower, but was filled to the brim with lovely little spots. He wandered to the corner where his shrine was set up and there was a little doorway, about as high as he used to be back before the serum. He went to open it and Darcy called out,

"Don't do that, yet!"
"Okay," Steve 'Don't Tell Me What to Do' Rogers shrugged and walked away easily.

"What is the soul stone doing to James?" Natasha asked Darcy.

"Nothing at the moment," Darcy answered truthfully. That wasn't enough for Natasha though, who avidly ignored the desire to stuff her face with baked treats and looked at Darcy for answers. The woman in question sighed, "There isn't really a manual for this kind of stuff. I just need to control it, and ask it to do what I want it to do and hope for the best."

"What did you ask it to do?" Natasha persisted.

"To heal Bucky's soul," Darcy answered back easily enough. "To pull out the pain and the things they forced on him. Bucky never wanted to be a murder-bot. It rankles the soul, and---it damaged it."

"So the entertaining show, was you cleaning it?" Natasha wagered.

"No the entertaining show was a distraction while I metaphorically yanked all the bad parts off of his soul," Darcy answered. "Steve!"

Steve was standing in front of a cheap, but serviceable and durable Ikea bookshelf that was anchored securely into one of the walls. All the shelves were lined up with snow globes and he picked up the emptiest of all of them. It was familiar to him. It only held two little intricately carved and detailed figures standing on opposite sides. One was definitely him, tiny and small and dressed in a suit. on the other side was Natasha, red hair, wearing a slinky black dress.

"It's too empty," Steve blinked.

Natasha took a breath when she saw what was in Steve's hands. She rushed towards him and held out her hands, holding the snow globe in concert with him, staring into it.

"That's James," she whispered.
"When you're real friends with someone, you give them little pieces," Darcy nodded, smiling at the bookshelf full of snow globes. Some very big, and some small, but all hers.

"It's too empty," Steve repeated. "That's not Bucky."

"No, it's not anymore," Darcy nodded. "But it's not the Winter Soldier anymore either."

"Now what?" Natasha demanded.

"Now---yes, now," Darcy nodded, sensing something from the soul stone that neither Steve nor Natasha could feel. "Now we go and find the pieces when they were full and good and clean and we grab a copy."

"And where do we go to do that?" Steve blinked down at her curiously, reaching out for her hand nevertheless, ready to follow her anywhere.

"To where the pieces were clean and full and good," Darcy nodded, reaching out for Natasha. "This is about to get weirder."

Natasha snorted in disbelief.

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

Brooklyn, 1922

"What have you done?"

"Shhh," Darcy pinched Natasha's arm.
The orange light that had signified their arrival had gone unnoticed in the bright orange light of the crisp, autumn sunrise. Natasha wrinkled her nose at her small, beloved friend. If anyone else had wanted to pinch Natasha, she'd have had them on their back with a busted nose for their troubles. But Natasha refrained from doing so to Darcy.

One, she loved Darcy very much, and wouldn't want to hurt her.

Two, she would never think of invoking Steve's disappointed puppy face should she accidentally hurt the young woman in her defense of the pushing.

Three, she would not want have to defend herself against Darcy's retaliatory attack, which she knew could probably be formidable, especially since apparently the girl had control over souls now. And also she was vicious in psychological warfare should she have to.

And fourth and finally, she didn't know how they would get home ---or back to their normal bodies, without Darcy.

She surveyed the landscape, they were standing next to a little stoop leading up to a shabby, but sturdy two story brownstone. One look at the street told her they weren't quite in their own time any longer, thanks to the trolley running out in the street.

"Don't touch anything," Darcy whispered to Steve, who was looking around in a wonder.

"I know that building," Steve said in astonishment, pointing to the corner. "Bleaker's grocery store...you could give 'em a penny and get a little bag full of sweets."

"We're in 1922," Darcy whispered. Steve nodded in agreement, knowing it was true. Darcy looked to Natasha and said, "I need to put things back into Bucky's soul, and the only way to do it, is to go back to when it was new and clean."

"It won't hurt him?" Natasha's voice was so low and quiet that it was barely audible. Darcy gave her a deeply unimpressed look and Natasha had the good grace to give her an apologetic smile. Darcy would never hurt Bucky if she could help it. "Why now?"

"Because he told me about this before, the first time he ever felt like he had a job to do, the first time
he realized he could make another person happy just by loving them," Darcy admitted. "Fair warning, I'm going to need you guys to contribute some other locations to pull it out. I only have like—half a game plan here."

"I know where we should go next—oh, hey," Steve blinked in astonishment as the door to the brownstone opened and Bucky—certainly, definitely Bucky, dressed in pants that only went to his knees, a smart little buttoned shirt and a jaunty little cap hanging sideways off of his head. "I never saw him this little before. Met him when I was seven."

"Shhh, cutie," Darcy put her hand on Steve's shoulder, because the man looked like he was seriously about to step forward and smother the young version of his best friend in hugs.

Little Bucky sat down and blinked up at the sky, his face far too contemplative for such a little man. He was precious and beautiful, with rounded cheeks and a mouth clearly missing a lot of teeth. His bright blue eyes blinked up at the sky, the babyish long lashes dusting his cheeks with every blink.

"Dear God," he whispered. "Lath night I got a baby thither."

Natasha swallowed and Darcy reached for her hand and squeezed. The lisp thanks to the missing front teeth was really too much for either woman to handle. Steve grinned, clearly remembering that Bucky sometimes would slip into the lisp every once in a while until he was a teenager.

"The'th tho beautiful," Bucky continued. "Ma named her Rebecca but thaid I could call her Becca. And we can be Bucky and Becca. And God? Ma thaid I had to protect her. But I don't know how to do that. Tho, I thought you could help me."

Bucky shrugged and looked unsure as he stared up at the sky some more.

"Becca ith a baby now, but thomeday th'ell be big and need help," Bucky nodded. "I can teach her the betht platheth to hide from Pop when he'th angry. And I can teach her how to get pennieth for the candy. And if anyone ever trieth to hurt her, I'll punch 'em real hard!"

Bucky's little mouth turned into a tilted line, and he looked just like a grownup Bucky when he was thinking over complicated plans.

"Ith that okay?" Bucky wondered.
Darcy dropped Natasha's hand and let her other one drop from Steve's mouth. She stepped forward, keeping to the shadows, moving as quietly as she dared. But it was obvious that all of Bucky's keen senses weren't forced into him by programming, some of them were just inherently present in him, at all ages. He took a little gasp and saw the pretty lady stepping forward towards him.

"You an angel?" he whispered.

"Yes," Darcy nodded with a gentle smile, holding her hands out. The glow emanated from them and Bucky pressed his eyes tightly shut against it. He felt the warmth from the angel and it was so good and made him so happy that he knew that God thought his plan of protecting his baby sister was right and good.

When he blinked his eyes back open, the pretty angel was gone, but Bucky didn't mind. He knew what he had to do now. He pulled himself up off the stoop and rushed back up the stairs.

"MA! MA! I CAN HELP PUT BECCA TO THLEEP!"

1940, Brooklyn

Steve had never been so sick before. Every single time the damned schmuck got sick with pneumonia, it seemed like it was so much worse than the last time. Bucky was worried out of his skull for his best friend.

They were barely into their twenties now, finally in a flat all their own. It was drafty and cold and had a leak that wouldn't stop dripping rain water on their heads, but it was their own. Steve no longer had to try to tough it out on his own and Bucky no longer had to answer to his parents. Sure, everyone thought they were queer, what with the neighborhood and the fact that they were splitting a one bedroom. There wasn't anything wrong with being queer though, so Bucky just went on as normal, working two shifts down at the docks most days, getting an art class with Steve every once in awhile, and generally just enjoying every good thing he could get his hands on.

But when Steve was sick, which was often enough, the dates at the dance hall had to be put on hold. The second shift had to be cancelled too, because to hell if Bucky was going to let his friend suffer...
alone all through the afternoon and night. So he'd come home, cook up some soup with whatever was on hand, then read to Steve when the tough little shit could barely hold his head up off the pillow.

Tonight had been okay. But Bucky was weary from an extra hard day of work and he found himself snoozing in the chair by Steve's bed before he even got to the second chapter of the newest pulp novel Bucky had purchased.

He was asleep before the orange glow.

Steve's sleep wasn't so deep though. He coughed and opened his eyes blearily, barely seeing anything in the daze of slumber but a bright orange glow.

"SHIT, you're supposed to be asleep!" a tinkling voice, like a lovely bell, echoed.

"Sorry," a deep voice answered. "Thought you were an angel I imagined in a fever dream."

"Moving along," a different voice, feminine, deep and scratchy could be heard.

Steve blinked and tried to get a better look, even though it was clearly a dream.

"M' I dead?" he whispered. The light receded and he saw curly brown hair and the vague outline of a feminine face.

"No, cutie, you're not dead," the lovely tinkling bell voice promised. "Not gonna happen on my watch."

"You my guardian angel?" Steve asked, and he could hear the deeper voice saying the same words as him at the same time.

"No," the angel answered. The view became sharp for one second as Steve felt a lovely pair of lips press against his. Then she took a step back, towards Bucky in the chair. "I'm his."
"Does it count as cheating since she technically kissed you?" the deeper feminine voice asked.

"Stuff it, Nat," the deeper voice called out.

Steve reached out a hand to get the angel back closer, but then the orange glow got bigger and brighter and before he knew it, he was waking up in the morning, feeling a little better now that the fever had broken. Bucky was also blinking awake on his chair and Steve peered at him curiously.

"Didja have a girl over last night?" Steve wondered drowsily.

"Nah, Dot was preoccupied with her Uncle Ivan visiting from Siberia or somethin'," Bucky shrugged. He stretched in his chair and said, "You'd think I'd be sore from sitting on that chair all night. But I feel great. Not even cold...feel a little warm even."

"Hm, that's nice," Steve nodded, writing off the hallucination as fever induced. "Hey, what happened in that last book you read me? Where a future guy met himself in the past?"

"Whole universe exploded," Bucky wrinkled his nose. "I don't like that one so much."

"Yeah, that seems bad."

1944, England

"Where's Barnes?"

Colonel Phillips often asked the question in the few short months that Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes had been under his command. The youngster was slippery as the dickens, managing to slink out of recon meetings unnoticed, and then never found again until the next meeting.
"Uhhh," Steve blinked.

"Firing range," Dum-Dum answered quickly.

"Said he's gonna beat your record," Morita added, the little shit.

Steve was very happy to have the Howling Commandos at his side in that moment. He'd always been a terrible liar. But lie he would if it meant keeping the heat off of Bucky, who was still having an awful time of it after being recovered in Azzano. Bucky was prone to breaking out into violent cold sweats just standing still. He'd space off into a sort of daze and not realize where he was when someone jostled his shoulder. He was jumpy and suspicious, and seemed to barely be holding it together at that point.

It was to be understood, according the rest of the Howlies. Steve couldn't know what Bucky had been through.

The Howlies, of course, had HEARD what Bucky had been through. And they all knew that not one man had ever come back alive from what Bucky had been through.

So they were all about covering the man's bacon from Colonel Phillips.

The last thing they wanted was for him to get an honorable discharge. First, and most important, no way could anyone back at home help Bucky the way his brothers in arms could. People just couldn't understand what a man had been through, and would just blame it on shell shock and avoid him like the plague, making him a leper in a society he had risked his life to save.

Secondly, his down times only came when the Howlies had downtime. Bucky was still a hell of a shot in the field, and was an integral part to their team. The way he anticipated every fool move that the Captain did was invaluable.

Morita, Dum-Dum and Steve watched as Phillips stalked off, miserable and dour as usual. Steve took a deep breath and turned to his comrades and friends and asked,

"Where is he really?"
"Usual foxhole," Morita answered. "He had the shakes for a spell earlier. Jones took him upstairs and gave him the last chocolate bar to try to bring him out of it."

"Thanks, really," Steve genuinely gave an appreciative smile to the men who had become like family to him in a few short months.

Steve immediately rushed out to the foxhole, which was a little hollowed out house that had fallen victim to some bombing two months ago. Sure enough, Bucky was where all of the Howling Commandos would go to in order to unwind when they needed it. Peggy had magically gotten them a well worn little couch to hide in a small room in the back that still had the roof. Inside the little room was a kerosene lamp, a bookshelf full of the most eclectic bunch of books the Howlies could get their hands on, and a few cozy blankets that Dernier's latest romantic conquest had knitted them.

Jones was sitting on the couch with Bucky, pretending to read a book that had been written in Japanese. He rose quietly when Steve came to stand in the doorway and took the Captain aside.

"He's alright, just a little spacey," Jones admitted quietly. "Ate the chocolate bar. I offered him a blanket and he said he didn't need it. Felt extra warm inside?"

"Thanks, Gabe," Steve gave him a pat on the shoulder as the other man nodded at him and walked off back to base. Steve took Gabe's space on the couch, with Bucky sitting on the other end, a book in his hand, opened but unread. "Hey jerk."

"Hmm," Bucky nodded in acknowledgement.

"Feeling better?" Steve ventured.

"Feel better than I have in a long time," Bucky nodded, looking perplexed by it. He looked down at the book he had meant to start reading to calm himself down.

It was one of the sci-fi paperbacks that Dum-Dum's sister had sent him. None of the other guys liked them so much, but they'd always been Bucky's favorites, even before the war, all the spare pennies he had in his pocket went to buying the latest fantastical tome. Bucky looked down at it now, his brow a little furrowed, but not looking to be in that shaky state that he so often found himself in.

"You believe some of this stuff?" Bucky whispered.
"Pal, I used to be five-foot four on a good day and had never been over a hundred pounds my whole life until last summer," Steve reminded him. "Course I believe it."

"I mean, yeah, sure," Bucky nodded in agreement. "I mean, the red faced guy. What we saw...that was science fiction for sure."

"And real as anything else we've seen," Steve assured him.

Bucky nodded again, keeping silent for a moment longer than seemed necessary. He sighed and nodded, turning to face Steve with a very serious expression on his face. A few years ago, such a furrowed brow and tense jaw would have looked foreign on Bucky, who was more apt to be smiling in their youth than anything. Now it was almost a welcome expression to Steve, who preferred Bucky's gravitas now to his shaking despair.

"You're gonna think I'm crazy," Bucky huffed out a tired laugh. "I'm not crazy. I don't think I'm crazy."

"You're not crazy, Buck," Steve promised. "Just--just been through too much."

"Jonesy brought me here cause I had one of those---things again, shakey and cold," Bucky admitted. "Then I got here, and he gave me the chocolate bar that the girls give to us to give to you so you'll make time with 'em..."

"Off topic," Steve rolled his eyes with fondness. His best friend was always keen to dig at him for his lady troubles. Including not being able to get more than ten minutes at a time to talk to Peggy most days. "Jonesy said you were warm now?"

"Yeah, but I don't think it was the chocolate," Bucky said quietly, staring off into the distance. "Think an angel came and sat on my shoulder and said something. Then I just felt, a little better and then...warm."

Steve blinked, trying not to let his face show disbelief. It was important to keep Bucky talking about his troubles. Hiding them wouldn't help, and discounting his honest confession would probably get him hiding in no time.
"An angel?" he asked.

"Called me Buckster," Bucky frowned, then shrugged. "Weird name, but sounded sweet anyway."

"She a looker, then?" Steve did smile at that.

"Didn't get a clear look at her," Bucky said seriously. He remembered being a child and his mother telling the priest that her boy had seen an angel. He remembered answering a lot of questions and then being given a lot of penance for being a liar. But he knew he saw an angel once. He knew it, he had just learned not to talk about it at all for fear of being called a liar and a crazy person. "Felt her hand on my back, then the glow and warmth. Jonesy didn't notice at all, and when I turned, it was just a flash of brown hair."

"And you're partial to red-heads," Steve teased.

"And you're partial to putting your foot in your mouth sideways, punk," Bucky teased back.

"What exactly did your Angel say?" Steve said carefully.

"Here's the kicker---" Bucky wrinkled his nose. He took a deep breath. "Don't touch, Stevie baby."

Steve's eyes widened at that.

"Sounded like she was scolding YOU," Bucky clarified.

"I didn't do anything," Steve protested.

"And then it was the orange glow and then--warm, no more shakes," Bucky sighed. "Hope it lasts. M'not much good as a sniper if I can't stop my hands from shaking like the last leaf on a tree in November."

"You did alright last week," Steve assured him. He blinked and shook his head suddenly, as if trying to rattle something into place. "Did you say orange glow?"
"Yeah...why?"

Steve pursed his mouth and then could only manage a shrug. "Seems familiar, is all. Just---strange. But you feel better now, and we'll have to thank that Angel someday for that."

"Yeah," Bucky nodded. "But not for a long, long time. I'm not ready for those pearly gates any time soon."

Paris, 1983

He wasn't quite sure where he had come from, or how he had gotten to the point where he was. He did know that he had done what he was supposed to do and now was to be rewarded with one perfect night.

The handler was getting old. He had started out very young, boyish and cruel. And now he was old, gray and generous. The Asset found that he couldn't complain about the overall weakness of the handler that would probably not be alive the next time he woke from cryofreeze. He’d let Bucky out of cryofreeze for a long time now. And he hadn’t had his memories wipe since he last woke up. He would never complain about this time he got, no matter how many lives he had to spoil and take.

How could he complain when sprawled in his bed was the reason for all good things in his life?

"Natalia," Bucky whispered, easing himself down on the bed the woman had practically dove into less than twenty minutes earlier. He lay on his side facing her, his eyes going over the face he had did his very best to commit to his memory. Her nose was a thing of beauty to him. He remembered tweaking it playfully after that first fateful meeting when the handlers had told Natalia to attack him, and he'd managed to have her flat out on her back in less than ten seconds.

The handlers hadn't been amused that he grinned down at her, reaching a metal hand out to squeeze the tip of her nose fondly.
But they had used it.

"I love you," he whispered into the night, his face close enough to hers that a red curl that had fallen against her cheek moved slightly.

He smiled to himself, obviously pleased. He couldn't ever remember loving a woman the way he loved her. And it certainly didn't feel like something they had taken away from him. This was new. This was real. This warm feeling of surety about his steadfast feelings for the hurricane of a woman lying next to him was a luxury that he would never take for granted.

His eyes slowly blinked closed and it didn't take long for his breathing to even out and for sleep to overtake him. His body turned slightly so that he lay on his stomach, throwing the metal arm over the slender waist of Natalia as deep nightmare-free sleep overtook him.

Natalia blinked her eyes open as soon as she was sure he was asleep and finally reacted to what she had heard him whisper to her. Her mouth fell open slightly as she took slow, shallow breaths. She could feel her pulse radiating and nodded minutely before whispering into the night,

"I love you, too."

Sleep took her as well, pulled down into the unfamiliar comfortable rest of the truly safe and content. They were both so deep in slumber that they didn't stir as the orange glow took over the room.

"This right?" Darcy whispered to Natasha.

Natasha couldn't speak as she tried to control her emotions. This memory had been taken from her first. It had been the hardest to bring back, as well. The pain of it had been meant to deter her from finding it again. If she had only swept the room for bugs properly, they might never have even heard it.

"Does it hurt him?" Natasha asked. "Does he---will he miss it?"

"No, it's just a copy of what's important, what they tainted before they tainted it," Darcy promised. "It'll make him feel---"
"Warm," Natasha answered, blinking in confusion. "This isn't the time stone, Darcy, how are you doing this?"

"Souls don't care about time," Darcy answered easily enough. "And you know what else they don't care about?"

"Chicken soup?" Steve ventured with a little smirk. He shrugged and said, "It was a book that Stark tried to make me read as soon as I got out of the ice, said it was the new Bible."

"They don't care about chicken soup," Darcy let her hand lay on the small of the sleeping Bucky's back and they were both illuminated with an orange glow. She hummed in satisfaction and smiled at Natasha. "He really loves you."

"I know," Natasha whispered, feeling a little tremulous and out of control.

"Souls don't care about time," Darcy pulled away from Bucky and walked back to Natasha and Steve. "They care about that which makes them strong and what makes them damaged."

"What else don't they care about?" Steve wondered.

"Dimensions," Darcy answered, before reaching out and grabbing their hands, blinking out of the room in that hazy bright orange light.

Eventually James from 1983 blinked his eyes open and wiggled on the bed, wrestling with his clothing until he was shirtless. He paused for a few seconds before nodding and removing the pants as well.

"What?" Natalia whispered.

"Warm, too warm," James complained, but not sounding like he was annoyed. The warmth felt fantastic, truly.

"Liar, you're trying to tempt me from well earned sleep," Natasha accused.
"Is it working?"

Natalia smirked, even with her eyes closed, she managed to get him on his back as she straddled his body, she finally blinked those gorgeous eyes open and stared down at him with an arched brow.

"What do you think?"

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed it, and I hope this gave a semi-clear picture of what Darcy is doing (and what she will be doing next).

(And yes, that was a Stan Lee cameo as Darcy's 'Patience')
Chapter Forty-Eight: Dimensional Osculation

_Sometime, Elsewhere_

Natasha was exhausted.

She remembered the one time she had gone out with Darcy for a day of relaxing shopping on a Saturday in April a few years back. She had assumed they'd head to a few stores, pick up a few things, and spend most of the day drinking cocktails at a fancy restaurant and send the bill to Tony when they were done. She had been so very incorrect in her assumptions.

Darcy had run her ragged for ten hours straight, from five in the morning until three in the afternoon before they managed to stop for a meal. Shopping for Darcy had consisted of going to the docks and arguing with shipyard owners about getting the latest batch of Thor merchandise from the manufacturer. Then they'd managed to go to a large outdoor market, where Natasha watched in amazement as Darcy put in massive orders for fish in bulk. Apparently Thor missed Midgardian Salmon and would need enough to last a year on Asgard.

After that it had been a lot of little shops, strange and curious ones where Darcy wound up with over fifteen bags of the most random merchandise Natasha had ever seen. It had been Christmas gifts for minion scientists that had managed to not screw everything up for Darcy. Christmas gifts. Purchased in April.

But this? This was so much worse than that day shopping with Darcy.
They'd visited Bucky hundreds of times in his lifetime. Back and forth and back and forth. Most of the time he'd been sleeping. Some of the time, they'd had to dive out of the way to not be seen when the orange glow had receded.

"I'll be right back," Darcy announced, her energy level still high, even after hours of exhausting work. She pointed at Steve, who was still eerily reminiscent of the Steve who had drunk a bottle of Asgardian meade as he walked around the little space that represented Darcy's soul. "Don't touch what you're not supposed to."

"Give us a kiss first," Steve reached for her and managed to get the barest edge of a fingertip on her arm, which was all the leverage he needed to haul her in close. He gave her a fierce, blazing kiss and kept kissing her until he felt her go a little boneless.

Natasha rolled her eyes at their antics fondly before turning and looking around the cozy space. The little doorway that Steve had been warned not to open earlier was rattling, vibrating really, off its hinges, threatening to burst open. Darcy broke the kiss and the little door stopped its movement.

"Hold on, I've got work to do," Darcy insisted as she wiggled out of Steve's arms. She dodged his next grab. "I'll be back and then we'll see what else we have to get."

"Rogers?" Natasha said softly as Darcy disappeared to parts unknown, presumably to wherever Bucky's soul was, waiting to be filled back up with its missing pieces, shiny and new.

"Hmm?" Steve wondered, reaching for a cookie on the counter. They were still warm, and the chocolate melted against his tongue.

"Where does that door go?" Natasha wondered.

"Not supposed to touch things, Romanoff, you know this," Steve sighed, walking towards the door that Natasha was referring to.

"I didn't tell you to touch it," Natasha defended herself.

"Didn't you?" Steve blinked at her. "You wanted to know what it was."
"And how does that translate into TOUCHING it?" Natasha gave him an incredulous look.

"Well, how am I supposed to know where the door goes unless I open it?" Steve reasoned back, clearly reaching.

"You're going to blame it on me when Darcy gets mad," Natasha guessed.

"I really, really am," Steve grinned before reaching out and grabbing the door knob's handle. He turned it and pushed inward and frowned at what he saw.

"Her secret shrine to Tony Stark?" Natasha wondered.

"It's sadder in there," Steve sighed.

Natasha pushed him to the side to see as well. And it was a sadder room than Darcy's. But it was familiar to her. It looked like the big hangar they had walked into years ago in New Jersey. It was filled with hundreds of shelving units, filled to the brim with snow globes that were decidedly darker and less joyous than the ones that Darcy had cultivated. And they were dusty.

"Rogers, is this your soul?" Natasha whispered, her eyes zeroing in on the middle of all the shelves, where there was a bright spot. If she squinted, she could see a dozen bright snow globes, a big spotlight shining down on them.

"I don't know why she likes it there," Steve admitted. "Dark and sad and full of old things. I like it over here better. It's brighter over here."

"Well---I imagine that soon, the door will be open completely," Natasha reasoned. "And the brightness will seep into your room, and everything will be more evenly distributed."

"Yeah...real soon," Steve grinned, shutting the door.

Natasha narrowed her eyes at Steve as they straightened and he headed back to the cookies. She stood there, staring at his retreating back appraisingly.
"Rogers?" Natasha questioned.

"Hmm?" Steve asked around a mouthful of cookie.

"Did you propose to Darcy already?" Natasha guessed.

Steve swallowed and then tried his hardest not to grin. He failed spectacularly.

"James won the pool," Natasha blew out an astonished breath.

"He knows us well," Steve shrugged.

"He knows you well," Natasha corrected.

"He knows us," Steve shook his head. He gestured around him and said, "She's his guardian angel. She's just popped into his life and touched his soul over forty times."

"Forty-two," Natasha said softly.

"He knows her," Steve smiled. "He just didn't know it."

"Okay," Darcy announced, popping up from behind the counter again. She rolled her sleeves up and looked at Steve and Natasha curiously. "Are you guys willing to go weirder with me? Or do you want to stay here?"

"I want to go with you," Steve said quickly. Because as much as he loved being in this lovely space, he would always want to be with Darcy more.

"Where else could you possibly go?" Natasha wondered. "Any other time would be him in cryo-freeze or in Hydra's control."
"Yeah," Darcy nodded. "I've exhausted this timeline."

"THIS timeline?" Natasha repeated.

"I told you souls don't care about time. Or dimensions," Darcy shrugged. She held out both of her hands. "Ready? Just a few quick stops, I promise."

Natasha sighed, but grabbed Darcy's hand nevertheless. It felt just like that time they went out shopping and after grabbing a quick lunch at 3 pm at a hot dog cart, they were back on the road again, this time, taking five different buses to get to New Jersey to purchase a very special signed DVD of Space Jam for Clint.

She hoped that this trip would at least be less smelly.

"Don't go!"

Natasha was pleased to see that it wasn't smelly. This time. It smelt like freshly baked bread, actually.

"Doll...I gotta."

The voice was raspy and familiar. The three travelers each carefully peeked around the corner of the alleyway they had appeared in. Sure enough, that was Bucky standing at the bottom of a Brooklyn brownstone stoop, looking terrified.

"Please, just stay, don't leave me, Bucky."

Steve gasped a little and tried to get a look at who was speaking at the top of the stoop. He knew that voice. It was his favorite voice in the whole world.
"I love you," Bucky whispered.

"Steve, no," the Darcy at Steve's side whispered desperately, trying to get a grasp on his shirt. She failed, but Natasha did not, easily getting the suddenly angry and simmering Steve into a compromising position, his arm bent behind his back at an unnatural angle.

"Natasha, let me go," Steve hissed. "I'm gonna pop that rat fink bastard upside his head---like I shoulda done when we were nine and he kissed Sally Davis before I could get the courage to..."

"Steve, it's not our Bucky," Darcy tried to allay his fears. "And that Darcy is not---ME."

"We're in a different dimension, Rogers," Natasha reminded him.

Steve glared out into the street and physically flinched when Darcy ran down the steps and threw herself into a stunned Bucky's arms. She kissed Bucky frantically and repeatedly and Steve squirmed in his place in the alley.

"I'm no good for you, doll," Bucky whispered in between quick, fierce kisses. "Everything I touch---"

"You touch me all the time," the other Darcy shook her head. "And I'm fantastic. I mean, you've met me. You LOVE me, you know I'm fantastic, totally not ruined. Not dead. Not destroyed. I'm fantastic. And I'm yours. I'm yours, Bucky, forever. I love you too."

Steve scowled and the grip Natasha exerted on him let up just a second, but it was enough for him to scramble free. He rushed out of the alley with none of his usual grace, feeling more like that jealous elementary school kid as he glared at this version of his best friend. He was clean cut, with his hair as short as it had been before he shipped out to England in the forties. He looked good. Healthy. Happy.

And he was still holding Steve's girl in his arms.

"Stevie," Bucky gave him a confused smile. "You were right."
"What?" Steve glared at him.

"She's stubborn and wouldn't let me just---get away," Bucky sighed, smiling as Darcy kissed his nose and cuddled in closer.

"I don't like this," Steve announced.

"Motherfucker," the other Darcy hissed from the alley.

"Steve?" Bucky questioned. "You told me that you---you approved. Told me to get my head outta my ass."

"I changed my mind," Steve wrinkled his nose.

"Put me down," Darcy demanded of Bucky. She turned on Steve, glaring, "Look here Cap---you may have been able to pull that 'I'm leaving you to protect you thing' on Wilson ONCE, but don't you dare think that you---"

"WILSON?" Steve blinked at her in confusion.

"There you are!" Natasha called out, grabbing Steve by the collar. "Steve hit his head, got a concussion. He's confused. I'm taking him back to medical. Carry on."

"Uhm...thanks?" Darcy blinked at Natasha. "I'm taking Bucky outta rotation, make sure Coulson knows he's off missions for at least a week."

"Got it, honeymoon," Natasha nodded, dragging a squirming Steve away.

She threw him into the alley and said, "Do you want to continue on with this journey or not?"

"Wilson? Sam Wilson?" Steve repeated. "I mean, don't get me wrong, he's a swell guy, handsome
"It's another dimension," Darcy repeated as she snuck back around the corner, the faint orange glow in her hands. She must have snuck around to Bucky when Steve was getting manhandled by Natasha. She was flushed in the face and looked to be out of sorts.

"You okay, magnet?" Steve wondered anxiously as Natasha allowed him to get to his feet.

"Just---weird. I was really kissing Bucky a lot out there. Like---a lot," Darcy whispered, clearly distracted by the thought of it. She looked to Natasha and shrugged, "Your guy clearly knows how to kiss. Didn't even notice me put the whammy on him."

"What exactly were you looking for here?" Natasha asked, pleasantly enough.

"Selfishness," Darcy gave a sad smile. "You really don't want to see what happens here in a few days."

"What happens?" Steve worried.

"Let's go, next stop," Darcy reached for their hands. "And please, Steve, whoever is kissing me in this one, you can't---you can't---"

"Okay, Magnet, 'm sorry. Just was a shock," Steve sighed, squeezing her hand. "Let's just hope you're kissing me in one of these different dimensions."

"Are you going to behave?" Darcy whispered at Steve when their feet had found solid ground again.

Natasha looked around and found that they were back at the Avenger's Facility in upstate New York. They were stuffed into a large, nearly empty closet, but one peek out the crack of the door showed that they were on floor three of the living quarters. The floor that held Steve, Natasha and Wanda's quarters prior to the events of last May. Obviously, this had to be a separate dimension
from their own, because Bucky had never set foot into this facility. Steve looked around curiously too, then arched a suspicious brow at Darcy.

"That depends, is my best friend gonna be stealing kisses from my dame this time around?" Steve wondered.

"He wasn't STEALING them," Darcy wrinkled her nose at her secret fiance. "I'm at least one hundred percent certain that other me totally wanted to kiss him."

"Magnet!" Steve pouted in a whisper.

"And you're just going to have to deal with whatever happens in this world, Mister," Darcy said authoritatively. "Because anybody that has my face here, isn't technically your dame."

"Rogers, if you can't stop yourself from meddling in other realities, then let Darcy send you back to the room," Natasha advised. "You can eat cookies and be euphoric on your own."

"I'll try to be good," Steve sighed.

"Try so hard that you actually DO it," Natasha advised. She jumped when she heard a manic kind of squealing and giggling echoing down the hall. It sounded like children. Happy, energetic, excited, absolutely unrestrained children. That was not a normal sound to hear in the Avenger's facility.

"Run, run, run!" a joyous shout bounced off the walls. "Hurry before Cookiebutt catches us and makes us take a bath!"

A quartet of footsteps, two louder and clunkier than the other two could be distinguished by Natasha's practiced ear. She carefully positioned herself to see what Steve and Darcy could not and her mouth fell open as she finally saw the children rushing down the hall into the large space that contained the closet she, Darcy and Steve were currently crammed into.

"Nats don't wanna baff!" a tiny red-headed toddler declared decisively. "Birdybutt can no make Nats take a baff!"
There were four children in very messy states indeed, looking like they were coated in ice cream and sprinkles and little bits of whipped cream. Two small brunet boys, possibly around the age of six, with happy smiles painted on their faces. A little girl who was incredibly petite, her shining black hair divided into neatly braided pigtails, looking decidedly less messy than her compatriots and a little less joyously rebellious. And there was the tiny red headed girl, who looked to be between two and three years old.

Natasha took a deep breath through her mouth, a silent gasp, as a small metal hand patted the red head on the top of her riotous red curls.

"Darcy," Natasha whispered. "What is this?"

"Different dimension," Darcy reminded her. She and Steve both angled for a better view and Darcy put her hand to her mouth at the sight of the four children, who were clearly looking for a place to hide from 'Cookiebutt'. "Oh god...they're so cute."

"Why am I a baby?" Natasha shook her head in wonder as the toddler version of herself pulled chocolate sprinkles off of small Bucky Barnes' cheek and popped them into her mouth.

"I'm going to blame science, probably," Steve said wisely, staring at the children as they set up a booby trap in the hallway to stop whoever was chasing them. It involved one of the little cleaner bots being spring loaded with confetti that the one little girl had. If he had to take a guess who the girl was, he would say she strongly resembled Doctor Helen Cho. "It's always science. Unless it was a magic stone. It could have been that too. I mean, we're here because of a magic stone."

"Let's hide now!" the little Bucky encouraged.

"I don't want to lose good behavior gold stars!" the little Helen fretted. "Maybe we should just get baths. Cookiebutt is only trying to babysit us, and we're making it too hard and he'll tell Mommy and Daddy when they get back from their date and then we'll be in so much trouble and get at least five gold stars taken from us."

"You can't just go and give him what he wants all the time Hells Bells," the little boy WITHOUT the metal hand said knowledgeably. "This'll keep 'em on his toes! It's important for when you get married, cause then he'll know he gots to listen at you all the time. You gotta assert domino ants."
"Holy hell, that's Tony," Steve breathed out.

"Nats knows where to hide," small Natasha nodded, and she led them towards the closet that Darcy, Steve and Natasha were in.

Natasha quickly dove for the corner, elegantly and efficiently melting into the wall and the small stack of boxes that were labeled with four names, Bucky, Tony, Helen and Nats, and the title "growth spurt clothes". Darcy and Steve looked around wildly for a place to hide, Steve grabbing Darcy by her waist and intent on pushing her up into the ceiling tiles when the door was opened wide.

"MOMMY AND DADDY!" the little Natasha called out excitedly.

Grown-up Natasha clapped both hands over her mouth to stop any unwanted sounds of surprise.

"What you doin'?" the tiny Nats demanded.

"Dad, you were apposed to take her on a romantical date!" small Tony looked disappointed. "How are you gonna get the right mood to make a baby if you hide in closets instead of going and eatin' the fancy food we got for you at the restaurant?"

"Uhm---" Steve blinked at him, Darcy still held firmly in his arms.

Bucky was staring up at him curiously, his brain trying to process what was happening right at that moment. He smiled then, slow and genuine and laughed to himself.

"Tony, it's alright, this is romantical enough," Bucky nodded. "C'mon, let's give them their piracies, so they can get back to Oh Hell Sweetheart."

Darcy cooed at the little man and pushed at Steve's arm to let her go. Once she was on her own two feet she rushed at the children, going for Bucky first, wrapping him up in a hug and kissing his face all over, heedless of the melted ice cream and sugar disaster that he currently was.

Steve wrinkled his nose a bit, but it didn't last long, as the tiny Nats began climbing up his legs until
he reached for her and held her appropriately.

"Nats'll get you pizza for dates in closet," the baby nodded before squealing excitedly and doing an adorable shimmy shake in his arms. She then proceeded to smack her own messy and chocolate smeared mouth against his own. "Love you, Daddy!"

"I love you too," Steve replied in wonder.

"Alright parenting units," Tony got his own kiss and snuggle from Darcy then before he wiggled away and shot finger guns at them. "You guys get back to your closet...thing you were doing, and we'll catch you on the flippity flop."

Darcy moved kisses and hugs to Helen and then finally Natasha before dropping to her knees again and hugging Bucky tight.

"Your huggin' feels extra warm and cuddly, Ma," Bucky whispered in her ear.

"Oh sweet boy, I would give you all the extra warm cuddle hugs forever, if I could," Darcy cooed at him, taking another sweet, smacking kiss against his rounded cheek.

"Okay, alright, enough, Mommy and Daddy need alone time for Oh Heck Sweethearts," Helen clapped her hands. "Cause it's the right time of the month for it and everything, so c'mon, let's go get baths from cookiebutt."

As if on cue, they all heard a loud crash in the hallway, followed by a loud squawk of pain.

"Uhmm...if Sammy says we did somethin' bad, he's totally fibbin!" Tony said quickly. "Have fun makin a for real BABY brother this time, bye!"

The little Natasha did another little happy dance and grabbed Bucky's metal hand, dragging him away from Darcy, despite the fact that Darcy didn't seem to want to let go. Bucky gave a big grin and obnoxious sort of wink to Steve before all of the children exited.

"So what was that?" Steve blinked down at Darcy as Natasha unhid herself, in an unabashed state of
shock and wonder.

"Joyful innocence and unconditional love," Darcy whispered. "A two-fer special."

"Next please," Natasha said softly, completely shell shocked at having seen herself as a small, adorable baby. She had been such a happy little child, full of love and affection for the two people she had called her parents.

It was something that Natasha really couldn't fathom, seeing as she couldn't remember it from her own timeline and reality.

"Sure," Darcy nodded, trying to compose herself. She leaned into Steve when he wrapped an arm around her and smiled up at him softly, "See, me kissing Bucky isn't so bad, is it?"

Steve kissed her temple and gave a hum of contentment before admitting, "Yeah, I guess, but I'm holding judgement on what I see next."

They hit solid ground again, this time hidden in the hallway of an apartment building that looked suspiciously like something in Brooklyn that Steve had existed in during his time fresh out of the ice in 2012. And right there in the living room stood three figures huddled tightly together: two tall and broad and imposing men sandwiching a woman that was small and curvy and very familiar to Steve at that moment.

The two tall and broad figures were certainly Steve and Bucky, and they were definitely filthy making out with each other as Darcy painted marks on Steve's neck with her mouth and had her hand rubbing up and down Bucky's chest covetously.

Steve could feel Darcy blushing violently next to him and HEAR Natasha's smirk as the trio who were blind to their appearance switched it up, leaving other Steve and other Darcy to kiss while Bucky somehow got close enough to suck on the other Steve's neck.

Steve's jaw was practically unhinged and he took in a shallow breath before barely whispering, "Well, I'll be damned."
Crossover event! (In case you don't know, the dimension/universe with the tiny versions of Nat, Tony, Helen and Bucky is from my other story, "Darcy, I Shrank the Avengers", if you are ever in need of fluff, you should check it out.

Oh boy. I think the weird chapters are close to an end. Probably this arc lasts another chapter. If anyone has a request of an alternate dimension/universe for the trio to land in, please feel free to let me know.

And then maybe...possibly...there might be an ending coming up soon. (SHOCK! CRAZY, RIGHT???)

Happy Thanksgiving to all that celebrate it!

I'm off to bake pies with my mom, nana and sister. FUN!
Chapter Notes

warning, there are some feels ahead.
(WARNING: ALLUSIONS/MENTIONS OF ABORTION, please stop reading if this is worrisome or offensive to you!)

(AND WARNING, OFF SCREEN CHARACTER DEATHS IN AN ALTERNATE TIMELINE ARE MENTIONED. Please stop reading if this is worrisome or offensive to you!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 49: A World without Darcy

Brooklyn, A Different Timeline

"Don't tell me you've never thought about it," Natasha muttered out of the side of her upturned lips, looking at Steve as he flustered at the sight of the threesome about to happen in front of them.

"I---well, it---," Steve stammered.

"Stop tormenting him," Darcy scolded Natasha playfully. She popped up on the tops of her toes and placed a kiss on Steve's slack jaw.

"Darcy's clearly thought about it," Natasha continued to torment, despite Darcy's direct order not to.

"Hmm, usually there's another addition to the party," Darcy narrowed her eyes at Natasha. Her tone clearly meant that the addition was one certain red head currently trying to torment Steve as the threesome started to progress in the living room. Clothing was being shed very quickly and tossed here and there. Darcy pursed her lips together in a quick kissing motion at Natasha and teased, "Should I find us a dimension to embarrass you too, Tash?"

Natasha went silent as she considered the possibilities. On one hand, it would fluster Steve, and that
was always great fun in her book, it was one of the reasons why she was so fundamentally good with Bucky. They both liked to tease their friend. On the other hand she had just witnessed herself as a toddler, claiming Darcy and Steve as parents and didn't really want to see what Darcy's unspoken innuendo suggested.

She nodded at Darcy just once and promised, "I'll be good."

"Good," Darcy smirked, before immediately dropping to the ground and going into an army crawl as she made her way into the living room, where the trio of lovers, because with the amount of bare skin and spit swapping and hands fondling between this other version of Darcy, Bucky and Steve, there was no denying that they were in a very comfortable, very practiced three way relationship.

"Hey!" Steve hissed at her. He pouted and looked to Natasha, "Those mooks don't deserve ANOTHER Darcy."

Natasha was too busy leering at the wicked way the other Darcy was torturing the other Bucky at that point, little hands finding a ticklish spot at the base of his spine that Natasha would certainly try to exploit on her own Bucky when all was said and done. The man was in such a state of bliss as other Darcy kissed his neck and other Steve kissed his mouth, two sets of hands wandering and petting and caressing everywhere that Bucky didn't notice another finger on the tender spot on the back of his knee where the crawling Darcy reached out, pulling a small piece of orange glowing matter from him and then quickly letting him go before reversing her crawl.

She popped back up to her feet in front of a still pouting Steve and fanned at her flushed face.

"Good lord, the possibilities are a little overwhelming," Darcy whispered. "I still don't think I'm ready for an all American threesome, cutie."

"Good," Steve huffed out. "Because no offense to Natasha's taste, but I don't want to put my mouth where---where other me is putting his mouth right now. Are we done yet, Magnet? Please?"

"A few more," Darcy gave a chagrined look to Steve. "You're not going to like them."

Other Steve let out a groan as other Bucky's hands went into dangerous territory and Steve fidgeted under Natasha's smirking, teasing look.
"Anything is better than this."

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**England, Another Timeline**

"Stephanie, god dammit, get back here right now!"

The feminine shout was loud, low, and angry sounding.

The tall and intimidating blonde woman, who just happened to be wearing what looked like one of Natasha's black SHIELD catsuits, except, decidedly in the colors of Steve's star spangled uniform stopped and turned, glaring at the brunette woman, whose pale blue eyes were full of fire and brimstone.

"You go off halfcocked like that again, and Colonel Phillips will have your head," the brunette advised, she was dressed in a blue pea coat, similar to what Bucky had worn when they had missions with the Howling Commandos.

"Lay off of it Becky," Stephanie shook her head. "You woulda done the same."


"You woulda," Stephanie argued. "Your ma woulda been ashamed if you hadn't."

"Don't go talking about a girl's ma, Rogers, you know better," Becky smirked at him.

Steve gasped from the hidden hallway they had landed in.

"Holy cow," he whispered at Darcy. "I make a pretty beautiful dame."
"Course you do, cutie."

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**Manhattan, Another Timeline**

"I don't get it," Natasha wrinkled her nose.

"Well, they're like---werewolves?" Darcy ventured as she watched the Avengers in a big cuddle pile that looked like it might be the start of an orgy.

"They aren't werewolves," Steve shook his head in dismay as he watched a different version of himself rubbing his nose in Bucky's neck. "Two trips ago we went to a world where me and Sam were ACTUALLY werewolves. With claws and fur and a snout and...howling."

"Yeah," Darcy nodded and shrugged. "Bucky's the omega here, and he's distressed, so everyone is trying to help calm him."

"I don't get other realities some of the time," Natasha sighed. She cocked her head to the right and considered the very nice pile of people in the Avenger's common room. "It does look appealing, though."

"I wouldn't mind cuddling with my Magnet," Steve nodded as Darcy snuck into the big room, approaching the nest of pillows and blankets, intent on getting a touch to the Bucky currently being smothered with animal like affection at that point.

Natasha blinked and looked around.

They'd gone to seven more realities after the Bucky, Steve and Darcy threesome realm. And she was just starting to notice something a little disturbing. When Darcy came back to them and held out her hands, indicating that they were going to another world, Natasha hesitated.

"Where are you, Darcy?" she demanded.
Darcy looked to Steve, who looked thoughtful as he went over the last few short trips into different dimensions. His face went from calm and placid to entirely devastated in just a few moments as he realized what Natasha was getting at.

"Last one," Darcy promised.

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February 17th, 1989

The trio landed on solid ground once more, and were in a clinic where a young woman who looked a lot like Darcy except for the eyes were less blue and green and more solidly green, and her nose and chin weren't quite right, just a little off. The woman was crying softly, looking down at her hands as she waited on the uncomfortable chairs.

"Oh," Darcy sighed, fretting for the first time since they'd begun their journey together.

"Magnet, sweetheart, is that—is that your mother?" Steve wondered. She'd shown him a picture once. The only picture she had of the woman who was long gone now.

"Yeah," Darcy whispered.

"Miss Lewis? We're ready for you?" a nurse called out kindly.

Darcy reached for the stone around her neck and looked at it with tears in her eyes.

"I don't want to see this part," she demanded of the stone.

"What part?" Steve blinked.
Natasha took a deep breath and realized what kind of medical facility they were in and realized what was happening.

"Sometimes it happens this way," Darcy whispered, her eyes blinking back tears rapidly as they watched Darcy's mother take a deep, bolstering breath, nodding resolutely and heading back with the kind nurse. "She wasn't ready for me. Some realities she keeps me and gives me up, but this is one of the ones where---you know, she just couldn't do it."

"Magnet," Steve's bottom lip wobbled and he reached out for her, pulling her in close for an all encompassing hug. "Take me back to the room, I don't want to be here anymore."

The stone had other ideas, flaring up and blinking them out of the clinic.

Twenty-six years later, in the same timeline, Coulson sat at his desk in the darkened office, sighing heavily. He was tapping away at a keyboard diligently, not in any kind of skilled way, but with a dogged determination that didn't show signs of failing.

From their landing spot in the alcove behind him, Steve, Darcy and Natasha could read what he was typing into a little messenger box that might have been found on a late nineties chatroom website.

"Why would they need to revolutionize?" Steve whispered.

Natasha was looking around, worried and distracted. It looked like a low level SHIELD office, one with cubicles and desk dividers. This was usually where massive amounts of chatter were sifted through by low level SHIELD recruits, flagging potentially dangerous chatter and forwarding it onto more experienced agents.

"Darcy---what happened to Thor?" Natasha whispered. “What happened to Thor in a world without you?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Darcy glared down at the stone.
The locked front door to the office was forcefully kicked open, and the most unusual strike team any of the had ever seen rushed in. They looked like a strike team, except that some of them were Chitauri, some of them were human, and all of them were armed to the teeth with dangerous looking alien weaponry. Two dozen ran into the room quickly and surrounded Phil Coulson at his desk.

He stood with his hands up, but his face was resolute, stony and determined. That is until the last member of the strike unit came into the room.

Natasha swore softly in Russian.

The Winter Soldier, with his muzzle on, and a pair of dead, emotionless eyes along with a blue powered weapon in his hand murder strutted his way into the room to stand in front of Phil Coulson.

"Mr. Barnes," Coulson said softly. "Mr. Barnes, please. You need to help me. You are not what they've made you into. Together we can find where they put Steve."

The Soldier's eyes remained cold and unblinking as he brought his gun up and pointed it at Phil.

"No, no, no, no," Darcy whispered, struggling against the hold Natasha suddenly had on her, as she wanted to run out and help him. "Bucky, no."

"You don't exist here," Natasha warned her. She glared at Steve as he clearly wanted to do something. "You do exist, Rogers, so keep it together."

Steve gave her a pained look and then looked to Darcy, who was crying silently and still struggling against Natasha's hold.

"What did we come here for, Magnet?" Steve wondered, his voice so soft it was hard to make out what he was saying.

Darcy turned to him and gave him a tortured look and shrugged, "I think it's hope where there is none."
Steve nodded before reaching out for Natasha, grabbing her with enough strength that she dropped her hold on Darcy.

"BUCKY!" Darcy shouted, rushing from the hiding space.

Chaos ensued, as Steve dropped to the ground, crawling towards the line of Hydra men surrounding Phil and taking them out one by one. Natasha quickly followed suit and the surprise of it gave Phil a chance to duck beneath the desk and grab hidden weaponry, throwing one to the little brunette woman who had appeared out of thin air.

She didn't use the weapon though, instead she placed herself solidly between the Winter Soldier and Phil, staring up at the blank expression that she was used to seeing so much more from. She stuck out her chin in that stubborn way that Darcy had, even though her hands were trembling with fear.

"What is this?" the Winter Soldier asked in Russian. "Little doll, step aside."

"Never," Darcy answered back in Russian. She wrinkled her nose a bit in frustration before the stone on the necklace began to glow, and she held her hands up, the glow appearing in her palms and growing brighter and brighter until even the Winter Soldier had to blink his eyes shut in response.

When the light receded, all of the Hydra were on the ground, and Natasha and Steve were hidden once again, leaving Darcy to stand in between a stunned Phil, and a suddenly bewildered Bucky as he pulled the muzzle off.

"What'd you do to me?" Bucky whispered in English, sounding more like the Bucky she knew.

"Gave you back some copies of pieces that were missing," Darcy nodded, looking flushed and tired. "Let's go find Steve."

"He's in sub-basement seven," Bucky answered.

"Oh God," Phil whispered.
Darcy winced and sighed, "That really doesn't sound like a good sub-basement."

Sub-basement seven was definitely not a good sub-basement. But it did answer a lot of questions. They passed one cell, where Thor was sitting, looking forlorn and lost. Natasha and Steve followed at a safe distance, watching as Darcy and Phil worked at opening up cells that made the Raft prison cells look like luxury hotel rooms.

"Darcy was the one who gave Jane the idea that Thor's story about being the Prince of Asgard was true, and she's the one that hacked SHIELD to get him out," Natasha whispered. "He's been in custody of SHIELD now for who knows how long, which means he’s been in custody of Hydra...and if Loki found out, he’d do anything to keep him here, presumably."

Another cell was opened and another version of Natasha walked out, looking hardened and distrusting as she glared at Phil and Darcy. She then saw Bucky and walked towards him, staring up at him in wonder.

"Where are Clint and Stark?" Darcy demanded.

"Dead," Phil answered softly. "Loki and the Chitauri took Clint. And Thanos destroyed Stark."

"Oh God," Darcy whispered. "Thanos?"

"Big purple guy," the other Natasha whispered. "Rules the seven realms with the infinity stones. Ask the Soldier here, he's the one who works for him now."

"No," Bucky shook his head. "I didn't...she did something."

"Steve?" Darcy whispered, almost not wanting to hear the answer.

"The conditioning never stuck, they've been trying for years. It hasn’t been pleasant," other Natasha
Darcy and Bucky walked slowly to the cell Natasha had nodded towards and Steve was strapped into a chair that Hydra might have used to wipe Bucky on as well, in a room just big enough to hold the chair. He was awake and tense, his eyes darting everywhere at once.

Bucky smashed the panel that held Steve's cell door closed and Darcy quickly squeezed into the room after Bucky wrenched the door open.

"Hi, hey," Darcy whispered as she went to work on straps. "We're friendly. It's okay...you're okay."

"You an angel?" Steve rasped out, his voice ragged and rough from disuse.

"Some of the time," Darcy answered back as she got Steve's last strap loosened and pulled up and out of the chair. She winced under his weight as they got out of the room.

"Steve?" Bucky whispered. "I'm sorry."

"Buck," Steve looked conflicted. He was physically smaller than he normally was, as if he'd been starved for so long his body started eating away at those muscles a little. His skin held a grayish hue and those beautiful blue eyes that Darcy loved so much looked to be full of pain and terror. He was a far cry from the happy, well, wonderful Steve that was hers. "What happened?"

"This angel here happened?" Bucky blinked, a little confused himself. He looked down at Darcy, clearly perplexed. "Got---got stuff back in my head all of a sudden."

"You got a plan, Angel?" Steve asked. Darcy could only blink up at him in silence, afraid that if she opened her mouth she'd burst out crying. He looked to Coulson and blinked at him. "Is anybody out there fighting still?"

"We go underground," Coulson nodded. "Fury is working on something."

Darcy slowly backed away from Steve, hoping to get out of the way and out of this trainwreck of a
dimension with her own Steve and Natasha as soon as possible. She felt gravity take her though when her back collided with a human shaped brick wall. Large hands wrapped around her shoulders and Darcy turned her head to see Thor standing there, looking nothing like the regal man she knew from her own reality.

"You don't belong here," Thor whispered. He furrowed his brow and looked down at the stone. "You must leave, traveler."

"I know," Darcy nodded. She turned and reached a hand to pat at Thor's shoulder. "I believe in you, you're a good man. And Mew-mew will come back to you, I promise. You're worthy."

"Nay, I am not," Thor shook his head. "But I shall be. Go back to your own reality, traveler."

"I could help," Darcy offered.

"There shouldn't be two of those stones in one reality," Thor wagered. "And Thanos rules over us all with that orange stone in his gauntlet amongst the other stones. I fear what could happen if the two should meet."

"Reality bending in on itself, I'd wager," Darcy sighed. She patted at Thor's shoulder again and said, "Find Jane Foster...make sure she's okay, for me?"

"Aye," Thor nodded.

Darcy reached out and hugged Thor impulsively until she felt another large hand on her shoulder, she turned out of Thor's relatively timid embrace and was staring up at this shadow of Steve.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"For what?" Steve blinked down at her.

"I have to go," Darcy's bottom lip was trembling as Steve shook his head immediately.
"Don't?" he whispered. "I don't know who you are---but, but you did a miracle with Bucky. Stay, please?"

"I can't," Darcy shook her head, her voice cracking as her first tear fell. She could feel the sobs building deep within her and she threw herself at Steve very suddenly clinging to him as if he were her own Steve. The first of her heartbroken cries snuck out of her lips when Steve's arms went around her, just as her own Steve might.

"Don't go," Steve begged. "You feel---you feel right."

"I have to go," Darcy shook her head, trying to pull away, but although Steve's muscles looked diminished, they certainly weren't that much weakened as they held her firm, his cheek laying against the top of her head just as her own Steve's did so many times. Darcy tried to look around for an assist, but Bucky and Natasha were staring at each other warily, and Thor was staring at the sky. Coulson was clearly unwilling to interrupt Steve's comfort, but he was still staring at Darcy like she was a puzzle to be solved,

Which was just how Phil Coulson had used to stare at her in her own reality.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a flash of red and knew that her own Natasha was working at getting her the hell out of there. Darcy drew in a deep breath before pulling away from Steve with dogged determination. And he only let her because she began inching up on her toes, her arms going around his shoulders in an embrace and she pressed her lips to his, firm but chaste, just long enough to make Steve chase after her for more when she pulled away.

"Wow," Steve breathed out.

"Good bye," Darcy smiled.

The lights went out and gunfire echoed. Steve turned and pushed Darcy behind him, intent on protecting her. In the next moment, slim fingers gripped her hand and yanked her away into the hallway, where her real Steve was waiting, his eyes red with tears. They gripped hands and the orange glow was swift and brutal in getting them out of there.
Sometime, somewhere

Bucky blinked his eyes open. He’d been watching them, had seen everything they had seen. His Natalia and Steve and Darcy, running through time and reality to bring him back pieces of himself that he’d lost.

He looked to his left and saw that Darcy was standing by the snowglobes, looking over each one while she fretted.

“Thank you, Darcy,” Bucky whispered. “I---that was amazing.”

“Yeah,” Darcy whispered.


“I had to send them back,” Darcy’s voice was still quiet and soft, and Bucky knew, soaked with tears.

“You did what you could for them in that last world,” Bucky promised her.

“I know,” Darcy nodded. She let her hand drift on a snow globe with a hammock in it and sighed. “You have to go back now too.”

“Alright, let’s go then,” Bucky smiled, reaching a hand out for her.

“I---I did a bad thing,” Darcy admitted. “I wore myself out a little in that last reality. It’s not easy to go to places where you’re not meant to be, much less change so much.”

“Okay, then we’ll make sure you get rest, whatever you need,” Bucky promised, although his eyes grew large and concerned. Darcy simply shook her head at him, her eyes filling with tears. “No,
doll, no, please. C’mon, you come back with me now.”

“I’m not there anymore,” Darcy shook her head. “I wandered too far and too much, and the body doesn’t like that so much.”

“Then where are you?” Bucky blinked at her in confusion.

“Valhalla, I hope?” Darcy shrugged. “I’m not dead, I just, I have to figure out how to get my body and soul back together.”

“Little Rainbow Widow, I’m so sorry,” Bucky’s bottom lip trembled uncontrollably, his eyes filling with tears.

“No,” Darcy shook her head decisively. “It’s not your fault. I love you, Bucky. I’d do it again, a thousand times over. Just, just tell Steve I’ll be back as soon as I can, okay?”

“What can I do, what can I do to bring you back quicker?” Bucky wondered.

“I don’t know,” Darcy admitted.

“Me and Steve and Natalia, we’ll find a way,” Bucky promised. He rushed at her and hugged her tight. “I love you, kitten. You’re the best little sister-in-law that Stevie could have ever brought home.”

“Tell him I love him, and I’ll come back to him as soon as I can?” She felt Bucky nodding against the top of her head. “I’ll see you soon, Sarge.”

---

**Wakanda, the Correct Timeline**

Steve blinked his eyes open, his hand grasping around nothing but air. He sat up slowly and saw
that Natasha was doing the same. They were back in the room where Bucky had put himself back in cryo, laying on the floor as the orange glow began to fade away.

Natasha got to her feet first and went to the machinery that the Wakandans had used to put Bucky into his deep sleep. She pressed a few buttons and a sedate electronic voice announced that the reanimation sequence had begun.

"Darcy?" Steve called out, looking around the room anxiously.

Bucky's chamber opened and he fell forward a little in a stumble. Steve rushed to him and held him up, looking down at his friend curiously as Natasha came to stand with them, supporting Bucky's other side as they made their way to the examining table that Bucky had just said farewell to Steve on hours ago.

"Darcy?" Steve called out.

"Steve," Bucky whispered.

"Where is she?" Steve asked. "She should be here. Maybe---maybe she's still in the hallway."

"Steve," Bucky shook his head, his eyes full of tears.

"Don't," Steve blurted, heading towards the door, intent on finding his Magnet.

"She can't come back right now," Bucky managed to whisper. "It was too much, too hard, she said to tell you she'd be back as soon as she could. And that she loves you."

"Where is she?" Steve asked desperately. He had just seen a handful of worlds where Darcy didn't exist. He didn't want to be stuck in this one if she wasn't there too, he'd find a way to her if she couldn't come back right away.

Bucky winced as he stood, the thawing not hurting so much as when Hydra did it, but the little sharp stings in his muscles were annoying. He squared his shoulders and nodded.
"Do you know how to get to Valhalla?"

Chapter End Notes

I know that Wintershock is a very popular ship and I do love it too, but I also really love the Bucky and Darcy platonic sibling dynamic. It gives me feels.

So...this is the end of the weird chapter arc. Are you guys ready for some action and a couple new characters for the final arc?
Family Reunions

Chapter Notes

FI F T I E T H  C H A P T E R !  H o l y  c r u d .  T h a n k  y o u  a l l  f o r  t h e  a m a z i n g  s u p p o r t  i n  t h i s
meandering crazy story. I really appreciate it.

Are you guys ready for what's about to happen here? It was hinted at all the way back in
Chapter Thirty-four...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 50: Family Reunions

1987, Boonville, Missouri

"Petey, get back here right now!" the frustrated yell echoed throughout the empty house. Twelve
year old Laura Quill ran through the house in an attempt to get her eight year old cousin under
control.

This was the worst five dollars she had ever made in her entire life. Laura's own mother had
accompanied Laura's Aunt, aka, the woman who this evil child had come out of, to a doctor's
appointment down in Jefferson City, promising the pre-teen girl an extra five dollar bump in her
allowance if she could manage to keep Petey alive overnight.

And she NEEDED that five dollars, because she absolutely had to have that new soldering iron that
the local hardware store got in. And not because she was going to use it to solder her cousin Petey's
pants to a dining room chair. Not at all.

She ran out of the house in chase after the kid, who was running out into the nearby cornfield, his
head staring up as the stars began to twinkle in the sky.

"Petey, honestly, you gotta come back in the house. Your mom said you needed a bath and to be in
bed by ten," Laura sighed. "Which is pretty dam generous for an eight year old, man. Like, for real.
My mom used to make me go to bed at seven thirty. You can't even watch the whole episode of Wheel of Fortune if you go to bed by seven thirty."

"Sssshhhhhut up," Petey put up his grubby little hand, inches away from Laura's face as he gazed up at the stars.

Laura rolled her eyes and looked up to the skies as well. Sure, stars were pretty. But they lived in Nowheresville, USA. Stars were in abundance. What wasn't in abundance? Fancy soldering irons.

"What are we looking at, exactly?" Laura wondered.

"Just---it makes me feel calm," Petey admitted. "Didn't you ever just look up and think, nothing can be so bad, cause there's all that out there?"

"No," Laura shook her head. "I look out there and see all that and think, crap, I'm really small and I better figure out a way to protect myself for when the aliens come down to eat us."

"I don't think aliens would EAT us, Laura Lee," Petey gave her a face that clearly said he thought she was insane.

"Well, if they aren't going to eat us, what are they going to do, smartypants?" Laura demanded.

"I don't know," Petey shrugged, sitting down on the ground and leaning back on his hands as he stared upwards. "Hugs maybe?"

Laura smirked and plopped down to sit next to her cousin. The kid could probably use some hugs. She knew what it had been like. The Quill sisters had been eerily similar. Both had lived in small town Missouri. Both had gotten knocked up by the age of eighteen, and both of them had raised their kids alone, with the father long gone.

She remembered wanting some hugs when she was littler, like Petey was. So she reached an arm around his shoulders and gave him an awful pat.
"You're kind of shit at comforting people, Laura Lee," Petey muttered.

"Yeah? I'm telling your sweet mom that you just said a 'no no' word, you little shit," Laura countered.

"You should probably never have kids of your own," Petey said seriously.

"Dude, I know," Laura laughed.

They remained silent as they both stared at the stars. Petey wondering how to get up there, Laura wondering how to keep whatever was up there from coming down here. Finally Petey sighed and held up his walkman.

"Wanna split the headphones?" Petey offered.

"Only if you don't make me listen to Spirit of the Sky again," Laura said sagely.

"It totally rocks!" Petey defended quickly.


Peter offered her one side of his headphones and took the other. The cousins sat side by side, listening to Peter's questionable 70's rock music while the sky fully darkened and the stars twinkled above them.

"Thanks for not making me take a bath, Laura Lee," Petey said softly. "Sometimes the stars are just better than baths."

"You're a silly bastard, Petey," Laura snorted. It was something they had been calling each other since Petey had started in daycare. Laura reasoned it was better to toughen him up right away, than to let him come home crying about it.
"You're a smart bastard, Laura Lee."

---

**Present Day, Wakanda**

"Holy shitballs," Laura breathed as she looked up at the sky. She reached for her phone with a shaking hand and pulled up the last person she had called. "Babe?"

"Laura? Hon, not now, the glowy orange ball of energy thing-a-ma-jig seems to be calming down, we think that they might be done doing whatever they're doing in there," Clint answered immediately. It was clear he was talking to people around him as well as his wife on the phone, "We gotta go in and see what kind of medical they might need. They've been at this for more than a day, we don't know what was happening in there. Focus on Darcy, please, she's the only unenhanced in that building and who knows---"

"Babe," Laura repeated as she looked to Cooper. Thankfully Darlene Wilson already had Nathaniel in her arms, having gotten a look at what Laura had been looking at for the past two minutes. Cooper was staring up at the sky, all the while occupying his hands with bits and bobbles sitting on his work table that he and Laura had been working at before everything...

Well, before a space ship appeared in the sky and began a slow and cautious descent.

Right towards the island that Laura was on.

"Oh hell no," Laura shook her head. "Dummy?!"

"What the fuck was that!" Clint yelled.

"It's a motherfucking space ship, dude, aliens are coming to eat us," Laura yelled into the phone.

"No---something just---it just flew out of the center of the glowing building, was that a fucking BODY?" Clint demanded of the people around him. "Was that Darcy?!?"
"CLINT, TURN AROUND!" Laura shouted into the phone. She heard the rustle of the wind against the phone as Clint did what she said. She hoped he was looking in the island’s direction, because something was going to land. And soon.

Darlene allowed Laura to kiss Nathaniel before making a beeline for the escape hatch out in the wilderness of the island. Sam and Wanda had already gone down five minutes earlier, intent on getting to the main island to help Clint out. Darlene knew better than to argue with Cooper, who was rapidly putting together tiny little defense measures. They looked like rat traps, but Darlene knew the child well enough to realize that they were a lot more dangerous than they looked.

But Cooper's eyes were on the sky as the large ship still floated down from the heavens, looking unlike any quinjet any of them had ever seen. Cooper may have got his mother’s tinkering habits, but he also was the proud recipient of other Quill traits. Namely, her cousin Petey's tendency to want to sort of be in love with the stars.

"What's that?" Scott asked, marching up to Cooper and Laura as they continued to stare. "Uhm...that looks like...an alien spaceship? Holy shit, we're being invaded!"

"I fucking, know dude!" Laura yelled. She turned to the phone and yelled, "SEND WANDA AND SAM BACK HERE!"

She then hung up on her husband unceremoniously and dialed a number she knew by heart.

"I'm assuming this is about the anomalies that were reported to me five minutes ago?" Fury answered.

"Anomaly...spaceship invaders, sure, whatever the hell you want to call them," Laura spat out. "GET YOUR FLYING CITY HERE NOW!"

She hung up on Fury too, and looked through her contacts anxiously before finally pulling up the one that would have patched her through to JARVIS back in the day. She hoped that it would interface with Friday as well.

"Get me to Tony," Laura demanded when the phone picked up, not waiting for a response.
"Boss, you have a priority call coming through," Friday announced as Tony finally sat down next to Rhodey and Pepper at the dinner table. It had been a long few days, and Tony honestly didn't feel like taking another call.

"If it's Ross, tell him to eat me," Tony grumbled before reaching for a container of Chinese takeout that Pepper had had delivered.

"It's not Ross, this is a priority call," Friday insisted.

"I don't have such a thing as priority calls, and if this is Darcy trying to rewire you again, I'm going to decommission you, Friday, and bring in KIT from Knightrider, because at this point? He'd be better," Tony grumbled.

"Rude," Friday remarked, utilizing some of the programming that Darcy had managed to sneak in. "Patching in the priority call now, Boss."

"There is no such thing as a priority call!" Tony whined, looking to Pepper and Rhodey. Rhodey looked just as perplexed as Tony was annoyed, but Pepper...

She looked a little undone.

"Stark! Mount the fuck up!" Laura Barton's voice was extra loud coming from Friday's speakers. "Giddy up, Iron Dude, time to shine. Send---send, oh fuck, send everyone, everything, all of the things, keep sending them and when you run out of things to send, we'll go and find some more, and we can keep sending them."

"Who the FUCK is this?" Tony demanded.
"Laura-fucking-Barton," She announced. "And Wakanda is under attack. Aliens, dude. SUIT UP ASS WAD AND GET HERE."

With that she hung up and Tony blinked up at the ceiling in confusion. Rhodey actually rose from the chair with the aid of the partial suit that he was testing out with Tony when Pepper reached out a hand for him.

"Rhodey, you're not ready for this," Pepper said gently.

"I missed the last few times Aliens came down from the sky," Rhodey shook his head. "I can manage it in the suit."

"Friday, if you're done being a grade A jerk, can you get Vision? Hell, get Cho and those dunderheads of Lang's while you're at it," Tony nodded. "We're bringing everybody."

He turned to Pepper, who still had that unusual look on her face from earlier, something Tony filed away to talk to her about later.

"Do you still have a failsafe way to get in touch with Asgard?" Tony wondered.

"Shouting up at the night sky and hoping Heimdall still thinks I'm cute enough to answer?" Pepper shrugged. She'd only done that the first time on a dare. And yes, Heimdall did think she was cute enough to answer.

"Get in touch, we should probably bring like---all the Asgardians. Maybe empty that Asgardian heaven too."

"Valhalla?" Pepper arched a brow.

"Yeah. Sure, all the places. Bringing everything like Mama Barton wants."
"Hello sweet girl. Beautiful Heldottir."

"Holy crap. That worked," Darcy breathed, looking around. She was an astral projection at the moment, and there wasn't enough weird in the world to describe that. Felt itchy all over, but there wasn't anything to scratch, as she was just a projection in freaking Valhalla.

And standing in front of her with a smile was one of the prettiest ladies she'd ever seen.

"We have not had the chance to meet," the woman smiled warmly. "I am Frigga."

"Woah," Darcy whispered. She couldn't help the big gap-toothed grin as she waved. "Thor's said a lot about you."

"And he has also been known to chat at length about you, little one," Frigga smiled. She turned and Darcy's day got even stranger, because there was her body, lying against a slab of marble, looking peaceful and happy in sleep. Which was a lie, because Darcy never looked like that when she was asleep. Steve knew---

She felt a tug at her middle and the itchiness all over intensified.

"Have a care, little hearthkeeper, I'm trying to bring you back together as quick as I can," Frigga shook her head in amusement. "Don't be pulled home too quickly by the call of your other heart."

Darcy managed a nod and tried to turn it off, watching as Frigga turned back to her work. It was hard to turn it off though, because it was Steve, and she wanted to him to be right beside her once more. She always wanted to be right beside him.

"I never thought I would see another attempt to use the soul stone again," Frigga said softly. "I was no master of it, I managed to hide some of the power away in Heimdall, but then my only job became to hide it."

"It was kind of untamed," Darcy nodded. "Seemed really eager to want to play after all that time on
the shelf—or in your jewelry box, whichever."

"Sentient power that wants to play," Frigga snorted. "You have a singular way of phrasing things, little Heldottir."

"I've been told that a time or two," Darcy nodded.

"When you return, you do realize that life is going to be very different for you," Frigga began to perspire a bit as she worked hard over Darcy's prone body, obviously working as fast as she could to make things right.

"Me and Smokey the Soul Stone are buds now, he's not going to try to eat my fiance's soul anymore, or any of my friends' tasty souls and we're totally just going to lie low, and occasionally maybe visit other dimensions, cause that was totally a blast," Darcy admitted easily.

"It is not your mastery of the stone, Darcy," Frigga said with amusement and patience that could only come from the mother of Thor. She let her hand rest on the orange jewel hanging around Darcy's neck. "It is the stone itself. There will be those who would take it from you. Actually, one person in particular seems hell bent on reuniting all of these dastardly stones."

"And—let me guess...ruling the universe?" Darcy wrinkled her nose in distaste.

"If only," Frigga sighed. "I fear, that Thanos wishes to DESTROY the universe and rebuild it to his specifications."

"Gross," Darcy sighed out in annoyance. "So----is there anyway you can you know, add cool new features to the base model before I have to head back down there and kick some aaaa---butt?"

Frigga shook her head in amusement at Darcy's exuberance.

"You have already received a longer life than you might have normally had," Frigga reminded her. "And your ability to heal is greatly improved. Had you not had it, the stone might have torn you in half."
"Smokey the soul stone wouldn't have done that to me, we're TOTALLY buds now," Darcy disputed amiably. "And sure, living as long as my future hubs is gonna be sweet. But he has super strength and I have wet lasagna noodles where my muscles are supposed to be, so maybe I can get something---I don't know, fun and zappy?"

"You will bear this stone for so long as you are able," Frigga assured her. "Believe in me that it will be weapon enough. So long as you are up against those that have souls."

"Ohhh, I don't like the sound of that," Darcy shook her head. "Are you sure you don't have a zappy kind of electric power? Like Mew-meuh has a little sister or cousin or something? I could work with that."

---

**The Milano**

"Huh---what? Where am I?"

Racoon eyes rolled in a laborious fashion, exuding an unhealthy amount of exasperation as Peter Quill jerked awake in the pilot's seat of his ship. The half-human wiped drool from his mouth and looked around in confusion.

"How long was I out for?" he rasped out.

"Twenty-seven hours," Drax answered faithfully.

"Shut it," Rocket hissed.

"Why would I be out twenty-seven hours? What? Who does that? Did I slip into a coma?" Peter wondered, his panic growing.

"No, Gamora poisoned your dinner twenty-seven hours ago, and you fell asleep," Drax continued to answer honestly and helpfully. He demonstrated with his hand upright, "One minute, awake."
He let the hand fall with a slap to his thigh.

"The next, completely asleep inside a bowl of d'lackthaouefs. It was entertaining to watch the remnants of your meal be plucked from your hair."

"My hair?" Peter's hand went up to brown, curly locks with worry. He knew Gamora well enough to know that if she had to groom food out of his hair, he might have wound up with a shaved head.

"Your hair is fine, pretty boy," Rocket assured him. "We just needed you passed out so's we could pilot the ship to parts away from where we were."

"Why? Were we being chased? That shouldn't happen anymore, we're like---galactic superheroes," Peter insisted.

"No, because we needed to go somewhere you didn't want to go," Gamora blithely announced as she walked into the cockpit. She stared at Peter's hair discerningly.

"Did you get all the space eggs outta my hair?" Peter wondered distractedly. "And where exactly are we goin---oh no. No, guys, c'mon. NO. Please?"

"Groot got readings off the wave spanner," Rocket shrugged. "We had to check it out. Something big just happened on your home planet, Quill. Something huge. And you know, when big huge things happen, trouble tends to follow."

"I am Groot," the tiny little tree sapling agreed. The little thing was perched on the edge of his pot, big enough to be out of soil some hours of the day, but not brave enough to wander too far just yet. Groot turned to face Rocket fully and repeated with gravitas and a high pitched voice, "I am Groot."

"Screw you, man! Trouble doesn't follow ME, alone, it's all of us," Rocket glared at his formerly large companion. "Your attitude is a serious problem lately. You weren't like this when you were bigger, you little smartass."

"Guys, seriously, there's no need to go back to Earth," Peter insisted. "I mean---something big and huge is probably the Earthlings just blowing each other up. Or destroying the environment. Or blowing each other up."
"If Groot could figure out that something powerful is here, on your home planet, then my fath---then Thanos could as well," Gamora insisted. "We had to come here. Surely there's someone left on the planet that you wouldn't want dead, Quill."

Peter sighed and his hand reflexively went to his head, hoping not to find space eggs stuck in there.

"Yeah, I can think of someone I wouldn't want blown up, or whatever."

Chapter End Notes

I was honestly a little anxious about writing the Guardians of the Galaxy crew. I didn't think I'd ever get this far in the story to have it happen. But here we are. And can I say that I love writing Drax? Who knew?

Thanks for reading!
This cast is getting unwieldy.

What have I done in assembling all of these people????

Thanks for being patient while I went on a Christmas story writing spree. I hope that everyone had great holidays!!

-----and on with the show?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Fifty-One: Pre-Game Huddles

Wakanda, 1993

"You shall never defeat me, for I am Super T'Challa, the most amazing of all the super humans!"

King T'Chaka couldn't help the smile from forming on his face as the sound of children playing on the back patio of the newly built family home on the private island in Wakanda assaulted his ears. He had spent the day in phone call after phone call, countries pleading for aide, countries demanding aide, and some countries having the audacity to demand more from him. Demands such as access to his cherished homeland, access to its resources and technology and considerable finances.

They were demands that T'Chaka would never listen or cater to. He authorized aide to be sent where it could, but those supposed superpowers of the World that demanded to know and have what Wakanda had would never set foot in his beloved homeland.

"But I am very super Shiri and you shall bow before me!" T'Chaka's only daughter yelled out, and it was soon followed by the sound of T'Challa in predictable pain.

"You're a child," N’Jadaka accused haughtily.
T'Chaka sighed as he watched the children play from the shadows. His own children were happy and buoyant and healthy. But like a dark cloud, N’Jadaka sat, mocking the children. The thirteen year old’s own father was suspect, and T’Chaka was only being merciful and allowing him to stay in Wakanda because of the boy. But that might not last the month with all of the horrible things that N’Jadaka’s father was doing within the country.

"You will never lead this nation," N’Jadaka scoffed.

"You will never lead anything," Shiri defended, and the other children chorused in with their agreement. "My brother is good. And he will be great like our father."

"He plays child's games and knows nothing of the world," N’Jadaka disputed. "Super hero play time taken off of the pages of books your father forcefully keeps out of the country."

T'Chaka watched his son process the words spoken out against him. It was true that T'Chaka was keeping his son a little sheltered. But he was a special boy. He had been affected by the vibranium as no other had been since T’Chaka's own father. It made him stronger, faster, more resilient than others. T’Challa would truly become the Black Panther and protect his people, just as his ancestors had done before him.

But the boy was sheltered, he was more innocent than the fourteen years on the Earth should have allowed. T’Chaka was reluctant to let him go into the world. There was poison there, and he feared his sweet, thoughtful boy would be tainted. Shuri had already gone to boarding school for a year in France and had enjoyed it. But T’Challa's younger sister had a sort of resilience that T’Chaka feared that his son did not have.

"You're wrong," T'Challa's voice was deeper than it had been when he had been playing with the younger children. It was full of promise and of strength. He didn't often speak to others in such a way, but his father was not there to speak for him. He had to do it himself. "You're wrong and angry, and it's because your own father has done wrong and will be punished for it. That's not our fault. Your frustration is understandable, but aim it for where it should land."

N’Jadaka glared and stalked off. T’Chaka knew the boy and his father should leave, and the sooner the better. He would speak to his advisors in the morning. In the meantime, he sat at the marble kitchen island and watched as his son continued to play with the other children, leading them through subtle exercises and teachings that the littlest ones may have balked at having to learn otherwise.

He was ready. T'Chaka knew he was ready.
And he knew that someday, T'Challa would be the greatest King that Wakanda had ever seen.

Present day, Wakanda

"Captain Rogers," T'Challa had a grim look on his face as an unharmed Steve, Natasha and Bucky barrelled out of the building they had been holed up in during the twenty-seven hour phenomena.

"I have to---I have to get to the island," Steve nodded. "Darcy is---"

"Darcy's body exited the building ten minutes ago," T'Challa told him. "Where she went, I do not know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Steve blinked in uncertain confusion, finding that a little unbelievable. He had fought against and also side by side with T'Challa before. He saw everything. Always.

"It is not everyday you see your friend's body ascend into the sky and get enveloped in a gold light," T'Challa admitted wryly. "I am not overly familiar with what the interplanetary transport looks like from Asgard, but from what I have read and researched, it might have been just that."

"I need---I need the meade," Steve nodded, shell shocked and dazed from the past twenty-seven hours. "It'll take me to her."

"You drank all the meade," Clint reminded him from T'Challa’s side. "It was hilarious and awesome. But you haven't had a chance to---put the meade back. If you know what I mean"

"We have a larger problem," T'Challa reminded all of them, knowing his friends well enough to know that they could get side tracked easily.
"Bigger than Darcy being gone?" Steve furrowed his brow, his tone one of abject disbelief.

"Yes, bigger than that," T'Challa said with some measure of patience. He knew that for Steve, Darcy was the most important thing in the world. But for T'Challa, his country was the most important thing in the world. And at the moment, his country was at risk.

He turned and looked toward the private royal family island, where the alien craft was still about ten minutes from touching down on land. They could not know what threat was inside and therefore had to prepare for the worst.

"What are the chances they have Darcy? Is that where the light went?" Steve blinked at the approaching alien ship. He didn't wait for an answer.

"Captain Rogers!" T'Challa shouted as he took off, Bucky and Natasha quick to follow as they rushed toward the hangar to access the underground tunnel that would lead them to the island. He took a slow, calming breath, even as Clint clearly was itching to chase after his teammates and might have if Lila wasn’t standing with Shuri as the Princess of Wakanda worked diligently from a makeshift command center.

Steve was in no place to exercise caution, obviously. T'Challa understood that. While he had yet to embark on a great love as Steve had done, T'Challa did understand that sense of devotion that Steve had to Darcy's well being. It was exactly how T'Challa felt about the nation that his father had entrusted to his care.

A nation that was at risk as Steve Rogers went rushing off to rescue his lady love. Again. T'Challa was well aware of the amount of destruction that Rogers and company could cause against an enemy. He had hoped to keep the enemies out of Wakanda and thereby keep the destruction out of Wakanda, to no avail.

"Your Majesty," Clint said softly, still itching to rush towards the island his children were on. Lila, who had been napping before everything started to go down, was still at the little relief and command center that Shuri had set up, anticipating injury.

"Ninety-three percent of our populace is now underground in the Vibranium mine strongholds," Shuri announced as she confidently walked over to her brother and King. "The remaining seven percent are first responders and essential personnel. Your orders, my King."
"We will fight to defend Wakanda," T'Challa ordered.

"And if Darcy is on that ship?" Clint whispered.

T'Challa looked up to his sister. He loved his sister just as he loved his great nation. But Darcy Lewis was an ally and a friend. He had offered her and her compatriots protection in Wakanda. With the current political climate in Wakanda and the poisoning of his people that had been done by N’Jadaka, any damage or casualty connected to this attack would be detrimental to his current reign.

Above everything, his father and mother had wished for him to be a good man. Not a good king.

"We do not allow the ship to leave," T'Challa ordered. "Shuri, work with W'kabi on the gravitational devices."

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**New York, Avenger's facility**

"Hello?! Heimdall, can you hear me? It's---It's Pepper Potts."

The CEO of Stark Industries felt a little silly, shouting into the void of the night sky. She'd done it before on a dare from Jane Foster (and consequent egging on from Darcy) a few years ago on a girl's night in. It hadn't been for any reason in particular, just mostly because Pepper had refused to believe that there was a grade A hottie looking over her at all times.

She had been happy to be proven wrong.

The portal that Thor had used often since the facility's inception glowed a weak orange and Pepper furrowed her brow. It had been a lot more powerful the last time she had seen the portal. It kind of added to the grade A hottie-ness of Heimdall. Mysterious glowing orange portals had that sort of effect.
The man in question appeared in front of her, gorgeous and resplendent in his Asgardian armor, but Pepper noticed right away there was a tightness in his posture, and when she looked to his eyes---

There was barely a glow of orange in them. They looked to be mostly blank and unseeing, devoid of the power he had been so virile and potent with before.

"What happened to you?" Pepper blinked at him, her tone soft and concerned.

"I was hoping you would not notice, but you are a clever woman, Virginia," Heimdall aimed a small smile her way that had Pepper's pale cheeks flaming just a little bit.

Pepper turned to the nearest surveillance camera and gave a hand motion to the ever watching Friday. The last thing she needed was for Tony to discover her eternal crush on the gatekeeper of the Rainbow Bridge. She and Tony were just starting to properly mend fences once again, and Stark's ego could definitely NOT take such a blow.

"I am temporarily weakened while my new mother heals," Heimdall revealed.

"New mother?" Pepper repeated, eyes wide with astonishment.

"There are some things that are too difficult to relay between the All Speak," Heimdall nodded, taking a slow breath as he tried to figure out a way to explain what was happening properly to the beautiful Midgardian warrior. "The one who will imbue me with my power and purpose now that she has assumed the responsibility of it from my last mother."

"Fascinating," Pepper breathed out. She didn't understand what he was saying, but she would willingly listen to him continue to say it for hours on end.

His eyes flared with orange and Pepper gulped, putting a slightly trembling hand over her fluttering pulse point in her neck. The smile on Heimdall's face grew more catlike and he nodded.

"I would not deny you of any pleasure, Virginia," Heimdall said in low trembling tones. "However, I must go and prepare to hear my mother's orders."
"We're being invaded!" Pepper blurted. She was so unused to feeling this way, this nervous school girl shyness. It was more than a bit of a thrill, but there was work to be done. "An unknown alien ship is descending on Wakanda. We ask for assistance from Thor and---and anyone."

Heimdall blinked and his eyes flared orange again briefly. "I cannot open the portal to Wakanda, but I can maintain this portal. Thor can transport himself to the island from here, but any other Asgardian assistance would need transportation."

Pepper looked above and saw the faint outline of the helicarrier shimmer into view as the cloaking veil was disengaged. She nodded and her smile was shy and coquettish as she assured Heimdall, "They'll have transportation, just---send everyone you can spare."

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**Helicarrier**

"Is he---is he TOSSING them?" Dave blinked out of the observation deck of the helicarrier. He watched as another Asgardian warrior, this one at least smaller than the enormous bearded one, cannon balled into view, zooming past the lower level observational deck that Helen and the Three Wombats were currently on, after having been piloted there by a man-less drone airboat.

"NO! IS HE?" Helen asked, clearly a little distressed at the thought of Thor throwing his compatriots to the helicarrier.

"Uh Oh," Kurt said softly, nudging Luis in the torso. "You got competition for the lady's heart. And other body parts."

"Nah, man, we cool," Luis promised with smug succinctness that seemed out of place for him.

"We're talking about Thor, my friend, future Ruler of the Nine Realms and People’s Sexiest Alien alive four years running," Kurt argued. "I would beg for a scrap of affection from him, regardless of my love for all of the ladies."

"We cool," Luis repeated, his mouth pursing in silent victory.
"Here comes another one," Dave announced as a lady Asgardian hurtled upwards towards the waiting helicarrier. He blew out a short, soft whistle and shook his head as the brunette lady warrior zipped on by, "Oh shit, she is fine as hell."

"Oh that cheeky Asgafdian MOTHER FUCKER !" Helen spat out. "Of course. I mean, of course he would do something like that when he knows I'm half a mile upwards of him. I mean, do you understand the kind of money I could make from that? Between captured stills and video of that blond slab of Asgardian beef throwing super fine warriors into the air, and then the AUDIO of the grunting that millions upon millions of men and women everywhere would use for---special needs, I would never have to worry about money again. He and Jane and I had a damned agreement that he'd give me exclusives to all the hot things he did, and he broke it, and I don't know what kind of court systems Asgardians have, but oh, buddy, oh man, his perfectly perfect and boring ass is SO grass."

Kurt and Dave stared at Helen, who was breathless from her impassioned rant. Their heads then swiveled in unison to a smugly smirking Luis, who had the audacity to pat Helen's shoulder soothingly and mumble soft reassurances to her that 'Yes, sweet thing, Thor is an asshole ' and ' those Asgardians are tricky as all hell about business. I will totally avenge your earnings, sweetness '.

"How in the hell?" Dave whispered, his face a complete picture of shock and awe.

"I have no idea, man," Kurt answered. He shrugged and held up his hands in a waving gesture and sighed, "It is a mystery."

"Furious one, how fast will we arrive at the battle? Hogun is overly eager and I fear for your weaker subordinates’ well being. Because soon he will be unable to contain the beast within and your subordinates will be thrown into your flimsy plastic walls"

Fury sighed and ran his hand over his mouth. The Asgardians had landed on the ship less than ten minutes ago, and they were already on his last nerve. He had dealt well with at least Sif in the past, but she was busy being useful, going over potential alien threats that could access Earth with the senior staff Fury had on hand. Volstagg was at least trying to be helpful, telling Fury about Hogun's need for violence, but Volstagg had no inside voice and was also obviously called into battle during dinner, as he was still stuffing some kind of roasted beast into his gullet, and getting bits of it all over
Fury's command console.

And Fandral was flirting with Cameron Klein. Unsuccessfully.

"Someone occupy them?" Fury yelled out.

"Hogun, Volstagg, Lady Sif needs your assistance in the staging area down three floors," Maria stormed onto the helicarrier bridge, Sharon following closely behind her. "She needs practice dummies to demonstrate how to destroy beasts from some kind of Alfheim swamp."

Hogun let out a victorious cry before rushing towards the elevator Maria and Sharon had just exited. Volstagg looked a little disappointed. He had enjoyed his time being helpful to the Furious one but he took another bite of his dinner and followed an overly eager Hogun.

Fandral's eyes lit up at the beautiful women that had arrived and abandoned his earlier fruitless efforts with Cameron to approach a stone faced Maria and a discerning Sharon. He grinned at them, the expression at once lecherous, giddy and somehow foolishly innocent as he stood directly in front of the women.

"Fair maidens, how would you occupy my time?" Fandral wondered. "I have many talents that I lay at your feet in supplication."

Sharon couldn't help the slight pink hue appearing on the tips of her ears when Maria looked at her out of the corner of her eye with her lips pursed and just moving the slightest fraction of an inch to the right side of her face. Sharon cursed the brunette's ability to speak wordlessly to her at the moment. It came in handy during a firefight, but was completely unnecessary at the moment.

Because it was clearly saying 'Oh, don't worry pretty Asgardian boy. We have slots to fit your talents in, but that will come AFTER the disaster at hand.'

Fandral, to his credit, didn't falter in his expression, staring delightedly between the two Midgardian warriors, nearly panting like a dog with a treat dangling just before his nose.

"Get the HEL! off of my bridge with all of that nonsense!" Fury roared out.
"Come along, Asgardian," Maria arched a stern brow. "We'll see if you can be of any assistance in identifying the style of the ship about to land."

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Wakanda

Laura looked down at her phone to see two new text messages. One from Friday, stating that Tony was scheduled to arrive in Wakanda in two hours, and the rest of the backup she requested would be there in four.

And the second message was from her husband,

*Working on sthng w/ Shuri. Lilas safe. hold down fort. <3 u smarty-pants.*

"Hold down the fort, sure, yeah, I can hold down the fort," Laura nodded, taking deep breaths to slow down the panic. She felt a strong hand on her shoulder and let out a war cry as she spun and put her fist into the chest of the oncoming attacker.

Namely Steve. Thankfully. So her punch just sort of did nothing except jam her wrist in an uncomfortable sort of way. She shook it off though and launched herself at Steve, hugging him within an inch of his life.

"Thank fucking GOD, dude. I sent Sam and Wanda to guard Darlene and the baby and I so totally did not want to have to have me and my kid and fucking Lang fight off an alien invasion!" she gasped out against Steve's chest.

"Hey!" the aforementioned Lang looked annoyed at being called out like that.

"Dude, what was your last plan?" Laura leveled him with her best Mom face.

Scott fidgeted in the suit and his eyes rolled up to the sky, where the world's slowest landing space
ship was still a few minutes from making landfall. He sighed and said, "I thought we should make food and put it on a platter and try to capture them Looney Toons style. You know, just in case they're actually really small aliens."

"Seems like kind of a big ship to be small aliens," Bucky smirked.

"Uncle Bucky!" Cooper called out excitedly. He rushed to the little locked chest he kept all of his work in and quickly did the combination. He pulled out another exo-skeleton arm, this one even more advanced than the last, containing a lot of vibranium plates in critical places. "I didn't know you'd be back so soon, or else I would have worked on THIS instead."

"S'okay, kiddo," Bucky smiled down at the little boy as he put on his safety goggles and got his small, custom made blow torch ready.

"C'mon Lang, get your fingers outta your nose and let's do this!" Cooper shouted.

"Jesus, can't even the kid give me some respect?" Scott huffed out, his hands indeed somewhere in the vicinity of his nose. His attitude was still a little cheery, knowing that under normal circumstances, Laura and Cooper did show him about as much respect as he could handle. "I have a whole crew back in the States and they give me assloads of respect."

"They're on their way, bee tee dubs," Laura nodded. She looked up at Steve and shrugged, "I kind of got everyone. Like....everyone."

"Good work," Steve nodded at her. "Did you see Darcy--floating or flying towards the space ship?"

"What?" Laura blinked up at him in confusion. "No? I mean--how would that even happen?"

"Are you sure?" Natasha asked softly, sensing Steve's growing desperation.

"I'm pretty sure I'd notice Darcy flying towards a spaceship," Laura scoffed out. "And I've been staring at that thing for a long time now. Where is Darcy? What happened?"
"Stevie, the Little Rainbow Widow is not on the space ship," Bucky tried to reason with his best friend, knowing inherently it was all for naught. Steve wouldn't rest or be reasonable until Darcy was back. "She said she'd be back as soon as she could."

"Where's Auntie Dar Dar?" Cooper worried as Scott shrank down. He scooped up the little man and set him on Bucky's shoulder, getting to work despite the very grown up situations happening around him.

"Pal, I appreciate that, but we don't know that," Steve shook his head at Bucky. Any gentleness quickly melted from his expression as he glared daggers at the landing ship that he suspected of foul play. "She's missing and this spaceship is HERE now, so I'm going to assume that they have ill intent and they have the way to get my Magnet back."

"Oh shit, thank god Helen's coming," Laura whispered. "The invading aliens are going to have so many holes in them, she's gonna have a field day."

The Milano

"Quill, are you absolutely certain that we can breathe out there?" Gamora asked again, staring out at the boring blue ocean they were looking at for the last twenty minutes. She had asked that question at least ten different times. And when she wasn't asking the question, she was looking at the breakdown of the atmosphere on the display unit warily. It seemed like far too much oxygen to be healthy for any living thing.

"I mean...I can breathe out there," Peter shrugged. "And you guys can breathe where I breathe—"

"I am Groot!" the tiny tree called out, sounding accusing.

Rocket snickered as he landed the ship on sandy shores and shrugged, "The annoying baby tree is right, you were wrong about that moon back in—"

"Yes, yes, yes, I know," Peter huffed out. "Maybe we should just, you know, call it a day? I mean, head back up into outer space and not risk the chance that, you know, you might all die because of
Earth's toxic atmosphere, leaving me on my own to rescue the galaxy night and day."

"You would not rescue the galaxy without us," Drax disputed amiably. "You told me months ago that if you were ever rid of us, you would go back to your pitiful life of incessant thievery and ridiculous whoring."

"I didn't say those things!" Peter argued passionately but immediately deflated and then shrugged, "I didn't say exactly those things."

Gamora looked unimpressed.

"I mean, I would be devastated to lose my awesome space buds, for sure," Peter continued to ramble. He nodded and said, "I'd be depressed, absolutely. Would I go looking for comfort to fill the void without you---probably."

Gamora lifted one unimpressed eyebrow.

"Not. Probably not," Peter backpedaled.

"So, are we gonna go outside any time soon? That water looks inviting," Rocket admitted, before looking down at the spanner and nodding. "And also, we got Nebula on the way, so you know, there's that."

"What?" Gamora rushed to the spanner and looked down. "Quill, if there is anyone worth saving on this planet, it would be best if we went out and saved them. My sister is close and I fear she will not be merciful like before."

"Merciful like before?" Peter repeated incredulously. "That was merciful? Holy crap."

"How easily do normal Earthlings perish?" Drax wondered curiously. "They must be a resilient sort of stock, seeing as you are an Earthling and clearly defective, and yet you've managed to survive this long."
"Shut it," Peter hissed at him. "Hey---uh, where's the sapling?"

"I am Groot!" the sapling in question called out happily from the bay doors. One tiny tendril off of his arm branch had extended well above his six inch size, and he pressed against the panel and began to open said bay doors.

"No, shit, no," Peter grumbled as he rushed to stop him.

"I fear that the atmosphere will not kill us at all," Drax hypothesized loudly. "Instead, certainly it will simply make us all like Quill. Walking, talking idiots."

"You know what?" Peter asked with a sort of manic exasperation as he battled with Groot's tiny, but surprisingly strong tendril for the bay door, which kept beginning to open and close every fifteen seconds. "I'm going to leave you all here on Earth. And I'm going to call my cousin Laura Lee Quill to take care of you. She hates aliens and outer space and once won the sixth grade science fair by building a stinking LASER. Good luck schmucks."

"You're wasting valuable ship power that I could use to build my own weapon to take your probably disgusting cousin out," Rocket called out. "Stop messing with the doors, Quill!"

"No!" Peter petulantly disputed. "We're not ready to go out yet."

Something made contact with the bay doors. Something loud and solid. Like a really harsh metal object embedding itself between the sturdy doors of their ship. Peter's eyes went wide and he turned very slowly to see that a red white and blue circular shield was stuck in the door, preventing it from closing again.

"I am Groot!" Groot said with an adorable sort of cheerfulness before making a rush out the door.

"Hey, get back here, moron!" Rocket yelled out. He began smashing buttons on the console and sighed, "we always look out the window like idiots. We forget that we have the fancy new backup camera now."

Rocket pulled up the camera view and wrinkled his snout.
"Well shit," Peter blinked.

Advancing towards them with expert caution were two really large buff dudes, not as buff as Drax, but still, intimidating. And a shorter, curvy red head. They also saw Groot running into view, waving his arm branches merrily at the newcomers.

He stopped his cheerful greeting short though, when a bunch of small, bug like metal creatures began rushing to him, looking less than friendly.

"Quill?" Rocket said quietly, staring at the view of the very unfriendly welcoming committee.

"Yeah, Rocket?" Peter muttered.

Rocket pointed to the screen, towards the tall and bulky brunette on screen,

"I'm going to need that guy's cool metal arm."

Chapter End Notes

Pepper's crush on Heimdall and his ridiculously suave acknowledgement of it is something I had written down as a random thought bubble on the original story outline (not so much an outline as a big strange web). I am ridiculously pleased to have brought it to the written word.

And also....come on. Of course Rocket Raccoon is going to want Bucky Barnes' metal arm!!

Thanks for reading! (over 200k words, holy macaroni!)
Chapter Fifty-Two: Friendly Fire

Boonville, Missouri, 1988

"Laura Lee Quill! You get back here right now! LAURA!"

The shouting went completely ignored. There was nothing that Grandmother Quill could do to get the headstrong teenager to come back to her. No one could make Laura Lee Quill do what she didn’t want to do, not since she figured out how to walk on two legs. It was something she had inherited from her foolhardy and headstrong mother.

Well, they hoped it was inherited only from her mother. It would be something else entirely if she had inherited a double dose of stubborn from both sides of her genetic contributors. Sometimes Grandmother Quill thought that was entirely possible.

Laura ran through dusty fields, the cracked and dry earth begging out for rain, but getting nothing but hot summer winds in response. She ran as fast as her legs would carry her, feeling the muscles of her legs burning unpleasantly before she came upon the little shack that she and her cousin Petey had built the summer prior.

She undid the complicated lock system she had built onto the door of the flimsy looking shack and walked in. Inside it was obvious that the first hard blown wind wouldn't be knocking the shack over. The walls were covered in metal that insured that the small structure would be solid even in the middle of a tornado. She stomped towards her work bench and pulled out the last thing she had been working on, glaring down at the clever little water gun that she had improved upon considerably.
The intake valve had been upgraded, and she could reload the gun with water in one tenth of a time it took a normal water gun to be reloaded. She never had to pump the gun like other kids had to do with their super soakers, that was for amateurs and mouth breathers. Her gun did the work for her with a press of a button. And she had amped up the spray, so that it might hurt if it hit a tender spot.

Laura was in such a state of irrational anger that nothing on the gun seemed to be good anymore and she quickly undid all her work, aiming to start again from scratch and make it even better. She wondered if she couldn't try to figure out something to pull moisture from the air and condense in the gun so that it would automatically refill whenever it was idle.

"That wouldn't help in combat though, I guess," Laura sighed, looking over the parts spread out before her.

Tinkering calmed her, it always had. She had first learned to self soothe as a toddler with her lego bricks, building tall towers that were just a little bit higher than she herself was. Grandmother Quill hated that she tinkered, but her mother had thought it adorable. That was until she created her first mechanized sling shot at the age of six. She'd set it out on Grandmother Quill's gardens, taking out wayward critters that dared to try to eat the turnip greens.

Her mother had cried when Laura had done that. And not out of joy.

"Laura Lee?" Petey's voice could be heard on the other side of the door. "I forgot the codes."

"You'd forget your damned head if it weren't attached to your dumb body," Laura huffed out, her harsh words only heard by herself. She put down her weapons' parts and stomped towards the door, muttering all the while about idiot boy children and how it couldn't possible be so difficult to remember a thirty-two digit code that changed day to day based on a sequence differential. She yanked open the door and stared down at her cousin, sounding less annoyed and more fond when she demanded, "What are you doing here, you silly bastard?"

"Mom has to go to Saint Louis again, remember?" Petey shrugged, looking a little pale and upset, walking into the clubhouse when Laura stepped to the side. He held up a little paper bag and said, "I spent my allowance on penny candy. Wanna split the swedish fish?"

"Heck yeah," Laura nodded.
They split the candy and Petey watched Laura work in fascination. His cousin was always really good with machines and gadgets, but usually she worked with a sort of happiness and amusement. She was not happy or amused at that point though, she was slamming things around, her mouth set in a grim line.

"What's the matter?" Petey whispered.

Laura blew out a breath, and looked up at the nine-year old. He looked tired and pale and a little underfed. He was going through so much, and Laura had overheard her mother saying that Petey's mom, her Aunt Meredith wasn't taking to the chemotherapy very well at all. For the last eighteen months, he had been constantly on the edge, with his mother so sick and weak. They didn’t think she would make it through the summer at this point. The last thing he needed was a hormonal teenager heaping her stupid problems on him.

"I'm okay," Laura promised.

"Nah, I'm not dumb, Laura," Petey shook his head, something like a knowing smirk on his face. "I mean, I know I seem dumb, but I'm pretty good at figuring out when people are mad or upset."

"Yeah, you are," Laura nodded. She shrugged and said, "Grandmother Quill says I can't dip into my trust fund."

"You have a trust fund?" Petey blinked. He scrunched his nose up and wondered, "What's a trust fund?"

"Apparently, when I was born, someone with a lot of money put it in a bank and said that it should be used to raise me and feed me and clothe me and put me through whatever school I wanted to go to," Laura said bitterly. "And whoever put all the money in it gave the control to Grandmother Quill. And she doesn't think I could hear her when I was five and she called the bank my Dad, but I did, so I think that's who set it up."

"How much money goes into a trust fund?" Petey wondered.

"A lot," Laura admitted. "Too much. I mean, I'll never get through it all, no matter how many schools I go to and how many degrees I get when I'm older. You'd think that it wouldn't matter if I just took some of it and put it towards the bills for your---for...things."
"For the mortgage on Uncle Mike's house?" Petey blinked. "That he's getting cause of my mom's hospital bills?"

"I should be able to help too," Laura whispered. "It's not like I did anything to get a stupid trust fund anyway. And besides, if I emptied it out and spent the money on candy and electrical wiring, couldn't I just go to the jerkwad that set it up and make him put more in it?"

"We should find the jerkwad that set it up," Petey suggested. "That'd be a fun project. Cause I mean—hey, what if it IS your dad that set it up?"

Laura was a little speechless at that idea. Her mind immediately began going through the steps of how she would need to accomplish that task. Clearly she'd have to get into the bank's files somehow to be able to see who set up the money in the bank in the first place. And getting into the bank would mean disabling security cameras. And if she could get enough allowance saved up to buy more of those RV sets, she could definitely make little robots that would be able to accomplish the task.

Petey grinned at her as Laura's frustration ebbed away as she pulled up blank paper and began sketching things out. He preferred watching his cousin work with the happiness and amusement she usually had. Not a lot made sense in his life right now, and Laura Lee Quill writing up plans to technically rob a bank was definitely a bright spot.

Present day, Wakanda

"HEY, dumbass? How long is it going to take for you to get here?!? I knew I should have hacked into JARVIS the minute you announced to the world that you were Iron Man and taken a look at your suit schematics. Obviously something is lacking because you are currently the slowest asshole on the face of the planet when it comes to high pressure situations!"

For the first time in a long time, Tony Stark was speechless.

For one, he didn't understand how Laura Barton kept getting through his AI and connecting her calls to him automatically. Even Phil Coulson couldn't have done that in his prime, and he was the quintessential man in black, doing everything that others had deemed impossible.
Secondly, he had spoken to Laura Barton a grand total of three times in his life, and once was when she had asked him to fix a tractor on a farm in Iowa, and the second time was when she had insulted his work hours later, calling it SHODDY and LAZY. And the third time had been a few hours ago, when she'd essentially put out a call to assemble the Avengers.

"Why in the hell do you think you can talk to me like that?" Tony demanded.

"Because she talks to everyone like that," Fury cut into the comm systems as well. "Really, Quill? You couldn't get Rogers and the Russian murder twins to put on comm units?"

"Fuck off, Fury," Laura advised. The man had never gotten around to calling her by her married name. "You try getting Steve Rogers to do anything when he's got his serious face on and is missing his Magnet."

"I'm ten minutes out," Tony advised. He began to splutter as the diagnostic reading on his output screens began to change. Someone was taking over. "What's going on?"

"I'm giving you a boost," Laura advised, sounding a little like a snot nosed brat.

"How are you doing this?!!" Tony's shout was vibrating as the suit was clearly pushed to the edge.

"Fuck off, dude!" Laura advised. She looked up from her place on the front veranda of the royal mansion and saw as the tiny battalion of little metal critters that Cooper had hastily built and programmed swarmed on what looked like---a tiny tree?

"Oh! It's so cute!" Cooper blinked from his mother's side. He watched as the tiny tree like being stopped in his tracks and offered a little gentle wave of a branch at the advancing creatures. "Oh no! My insect-i-killers are gonna chomp on him. I gotta stop them!"

Laura put her hand on the top of Cooper's head before he could do any re-programming. The tiny tree continued to wave and say something repeatedly that Laura couldn't quite make out. When the first of the insect-i-killers got within claw distance and tried to snap at one of the tree's extended branches, it got a metal grip on the edge of the branch/arm.
The little tree's eyes went wide with shock, then his brow furrowed menacingly in a heartbeat and a little mouth opened in a snarl. The branch pulled back quickly, and the first insect-i-killer went flying into the distance.

"I AM GROOT!' the tree shouted very loudly, so loud that both Laura and Cooper could make out the words.

"What the hell does that mean?" Laura whispered. "Friday, what's a groot?"

"Stop hacking my AI!" Tony warned.

"Hey! My insect-i-killers!" Cooper whined.

The tree had more tendrils appearing off of his branch arms and they were deceptively strong, pushing at the bugs heading its way and causing them to fly off in the distance, most of them breaking on impact with the ground. The last metal bug was lifted up in the air, about four feet, as high as the tendrils and branches would grow, before being mercilessly slammed onto the ground.

"OH HELL NO!" Cooper shouted, going straight back to his little end table he had drug out from T'Challa's ornate entranceway. He began busting through his available tools and materials, intent on building something better and stronger. "That adorable tree is going down!"

"Holy Cow," Bucky's shocked words were barely audible, but Natasha knew the enormity of Bucky, whether he be fully healed or not, saying such a thing as they headed towards what looked like certain battle with unknown and powerful forces.

Steve would have known too, but he had that stubborn, mulish look on his face, meaning that if something that wasn't directly related to the mission, in this case the mission being getting to Darcy, it didn't register in his brain. Bucky could have sung a Japanese pop song in falsetto at that point and Steve would have still kept stalking towards the spaceship that he had thrown his shield at a few moments earlier.

"It's a tiny tree," Bucky breathed out. "With a seriously cute face."
"Offense taken," Natasha rolled her eyes. "You call me cute all the time."

"Cause you are," Bucky nodded. "But cute in a different way, babydoll."

"I told you to stop calling me that in the field," Natasha muttered.

"You told me that decades ago," Bucky's shoulders shook with a snort of laughter. "How's a fella supposed to remember all that, Red?"

Their banter finally must have connected to Steve's ears and brain, because he turned to them with an angry, stiff look and he didn't even break his stride as he scolded, "I'm gonna tell you what I told Dernier and Jones over seven decades ago, keep up with your flirting on the field and I'll find a way to get you on latrine duty."

"Harsh," Bucky nodded in acknowledgement. Steve turned his gaze away from them and Bucky took that opportunity to look at Natasha and purse his lips at her in an obscene kissing gesture. He then looked back to the tree, which WAS cute, but apparently very, very strong as it made quick work of Cooper's first line of defense.

Steve didn't spare a glance towards the tiny humanoid tree as he approached the spacecraft and went towards the bay doors where his shield had landed. He went to reach for it, when it was suddenly forcefully ejected from its place in the doors, flipping end over end without any of the grace that Steve usually used in handling the shield. It caught him off guard as he made a grab for it and managed to get it under control in just enough time to hold it in front of himself as a very large, very strong looking, very shirtless man with blue skin came barreling towards him.

Alien muscle connected with vibranium and an unprepared Steve found himself sliding backwards in the sand at the force of contact.

"You attack us?!" the alien shouted. "You dare to attempt to harm the friends of Drax and Drax himself? This planet is indeed full of idiots! Qui---"

The alien's obnoxious yelling, reminiscent of Thor's friends when they had had too much sugar, was cut off as Bucky spear tackled him to the sand, before elegantly flipping off of him and landing in a crouch five feet away.
"Definitely evil," Bucky nodded. "All the evil people talk about themselves in the third person."

Natasha shrugged and nodded thoughtfully, "I don't know about that, there was that time in Rio where we---"

She stopped her attempt at levity as a glimpse of green entered her line of sight. Her body, which had appeared relaxed and almost lazy as they had strolled towards the suspected invaders instantly went rigid, muscles suddenly in line to defend and protect, her spine a taut line as she prepared herself to strike and be struck.

"You are making a mistake," the dulcet tone insisted from behind Natasha, even though it was clear she was moving in such a way to attack from the side. "We are not your enemy."

Natasha made one step, and out of the corner of her eye she saw the green woman advancing with the stealth of a cat. She waited until the green woman was close before spinning with just enough torque that her clasped hands were a deadly weapon swiping the temple of the green woman and sending her flying.

But it wasn't enough to completely knock her on her back, as the green woman simply did exactly what Natasha would have done in that situation, using the blow to her advantage and letting a weapon fly. Natasha dodged though as a wicked blade flew past her face.

"Helpful hint," Natasha said dryly. "If you aren't the enemy, throwing knives and attempting to tackle us isn't your best bet."

"You're talented," the green skinned woman acknowledged as she stood, assessing the situation carefully and obviously planning at least ten to fifteen. "I can tell."

"Thanks," Natasha muttered. She looked to where Bucky was handling the blue Drax fellow and Cooper had sent another wave of his bug robots, one of which was being ridden by a shrunken Scott towards the freakish small sentient tree. They'd be fine if they could keep their heads about them and stall for reinforcements. "What do you want here?"

"You attacked my friend, I don't have to tell you anything," came the response, a cat-like smirk curving around dark lips.
A battle cry erupted from the ship, where Steve was steadily heading towards again, convinced now more than ever that Darcy was aboard and being held hostage. Natasha's eyes went wide with shock as a three foot tall raccoon ran out to meet Steve. The vicious shout was coming from the raccoon, and it had two of the most impressive guns Natasha had ever seen in each of its tiny paws.

"BACK OFF THE TREE YOU UGLY BASTARDS!" the raccoon yelled, his laser gunfire hitting Steve's shield and bouncing off with a sonic sort of pinging sound. "You can kick around Drax and Gamora but don't hurt the tree!"

Natasha's shock at seeing a walking, talking, shooting at Steve's shield raccoon was enough for the aforementioned Gamora to take another swipe at her, barely landing a very strong fist against Natasha's midsection. They began an elegant dance, obviously two skilled and well matched warriors, barely getting fingertips on each other's person, but doing maximum damage with every glancing touch they managed.

Bucky would have wolf whistled if he wasn't currently riding the back of the rampaging blue alien.

"Stop playing with your food!" Bucky advised Natasha cheekily. His next words were in Russian, "A true Widow doesn’t torture her toys!"

"Gamora, beware!" Drax called out. "These heathens intent is to devour you. Avoid their gaping maws."

"You’re a literal son of a bitch," Bucky chuckled.

"You dare to insult my mother! I will take this puny metal arm and award it to Rocket as a trophy so he can do what he will with it!" Drax shouted. "I hope that he uses it as a means to unclog the facilities in the ship."

"Puny metal arm is doing a fine job of choking you right now, pal!" Bucky taunted, because indeed, his left metal arm was wrapped around the thick and muscular neck of the alien, squeezing as hard as it could. The taunting seemed ill-advised, as an immediate after effect seemed to be having the blue Drax renewing his vigor in attempting to jostle Bucky off of his body. "What's it gonna take for you to go to sleep?"

"Usually a warm cup of Mleathir suffices," Drax answered, almost amiably except for the grunting
as he tried to toss Bucky from him again.

"I AM GROOT!" the tree squeaked again as Ant-Man finally connected with him, managing to evade tendrils that the insect-i-killers could not. The smaller Ant-man took ahold of one of the tendrils that had been strong enough to crush the metal killer bugs, and had the tree shrieking out with delight as he swung him in a circle and sent him flying towards the sand.

"BOOYAH!" Scott yelled out. "I AM SCOTT!"

"I'm coming, buddy!" Rocket shouted, shooting at Steve again, who could do little more than compact himself behind the shield and advance inch by inch towards the shooting raccoon.

Above the pinging of the other worldly firearm against vibranium, Steve heard the sound of an Iron Man repulsor and managed two steps backwards just in time as Tony flew with unusual speed, even for him, right into the little raccoon. He couldn't come to a stop though, and even without a comm unit in his ear, Steve could hear Tony shouting behind the mask, BARTON-WIFE GIVE ME BACK CONTROL OF MY SUIT DAMMIT!

The raccoon was a nimble little thing and he managed to go from Iron Man's gauntlet to his head and seemed intent on tearing the mask from Tony's suit as they went crashing into the sand when the thrusters suddenly cut out. Steve looked around where his teammates were battling. Natasha seemed to be holding her own just fine, even if he could tell she was holding back a little as she tried to figure out her opponent’s intent, and Bucky and Scott were doing almost as well with their alien opponents. But if anything worse came out of the ship, Steve would need more of his team there.

As if on cue, a humanoid figure came walking off of the ship, almost timidly. He was dressed in leathers and seemed mostly normal, except for the seriously freakish mask covering his whole face, complete with red-tinged goggles. Steve's jaw set and he rushed at the new arrival, a little shocked when no new space guns were drawn.

"Heeeeeeey," the man said, his voice distorted through the mask. "This is totally a misunderstanding, and we should all just you know—talk it out, just chat about it and figure out—woah, is that Captain America's shield? Where'd you get one cause when I was a kid you had to special order it and my cous——"

Steve let the shield do the talking, connecting harshly with the invader's gut and causing him to fall to his knees in the sand, choking and gasping for air.
"QUILL!" the green woman shouted.

"I'm okay, it's cool, just you know, a little patriotism to the gut," Quill answered a Steve bypassed him and kept walking towards the ship. "God Bless America and stuff."

"Quill?" Laura whispered. She blinked and looked around in confusion. She put a hand to her ear to secure the comm unit needlessly. "Stark!"

"Yes, pain in my ass, I'm a little busy right now, pain in my ass, maybe it would be good for you to call back at a later time, pain in my ass," Tony answered back. "Ouch, dammit, this thing's got claws. I swear to god, if you give me rabies...."

"Screw you, asshole!" The raccoon could be heard over the comm units.

"Stark, did that green one just say QUILL?" Laura demanded.

"I don't know, I've got a fucking squirrel attacking me," Tony answered, clearly very irritated with the entire situation.

"I'm a raccoon you robot asshole!" the raccoon shouted.

Laura looked to her son and pointed the very dangerous and very potent Mommy finger at him. "Stay. Here."

Cooper blinked as his mother went running for the scene of the battle. The thirteen year old was powerless to resist such an order. Even if he wanted to get a better look at the blaster guns the raccoon had been using. Even if he wanted to pick that little tree up by its adorable feet and see what made it tick. And even as thunder began roaring down from the clear blue skies.
"Ow," Peter grumbled. It was supposed to have been a peacekeeping mission, really. Like Bono and the rest of Farm Aid. Just land on Earth, find out why they had infinity stone energy coming from the sandy shores of Africa, and then totally leave before anything could happen.

But then Groot had been attacked and the rest of the team wouldn’t stand for it and now they were at war with some seriously STRONG Earthlings. And someone with Captain America’s shield. He watched as the tall blond with the shield ran onto The Milano and winced again as he tried to get his breathing back to normal.

He and his crew had saved the damned galaxy, and now, ten minutes back on Earth, they were getting their asses handed to them. Well Gamora was doing okay as she played seriously sexy cat and mouse games with the red head. And Drax seemed to be having fun wrestling with the metal armed dude. And Groot was now trying to ride one of the killer robot bugs. And now, Rocket was trying to get into the robot guy who he had been tackled by.

No doubt to harvest it for spare parts.

Peter flipped his mask up and took another big gasp of air, finally feeling some of it hit his lungs that time.

"Man with Captain America's shield?" Peter called out hopefully. "I'm Starlord, and I come in peace."

The blond stopped at the doorway to the ship.

"Where is Darcy?" he demanded gruffly.

"What's a Darcy?" Peter wondered. "Is it like an artifact or a machine or is it a feeling you get? Is this a philosophical question? Cause that's not fair, I totally didn't finish high school, man."

The lightning struck the beach and Peter shrieked and looked up, watching as a man taller and more jacked than Drax flew from the sky, landing in the middle of everything with a sexy ass hammer, looking ready to dole out punishment.
"The planet of Midgard is under my protection, vagabonds," Thor shouted. "You have made a serious mistake if you think to invade and harm those that I call mine."


"Friend James, release this foolish man and allow me to introduce him to Mjolnir," Thor encouraged.

"Hey! I don't know what Mole near is but back off Shakespeare!" Peter yelled.

"Only Lady Darcy is allowed to honor Mjolnir with pet names," Thor grumbled, pointing the hammer at Peter. "You have earned no such right."

"NO! NO! NO! STOP! STOP!" Laura Barton shouted as she ran onto the beach at full speed. She then bent in half, heaving for breath. She held up a finger and gasped out, "Gimme a second---that's a lot---of---cardio---and---my lungs---are gonna---explode. Jesus H Fucking Christ, dude."

Peter blinked at the brunette as she ineptly fanned herself with her hands and stared at him in return.

"Everyone STOP FIGHTING!" Laura yelled, and something in her tone actually made everyone STOP. Even Drax went limp. She turned in a complete circle before pointing at Peter accusingly. "You silly bastard."

Peter's eyes went impossibly wide. "Uh oh. Uhm...hey Laura Lee. It's ah...been a while."

Laura looked incredulously at the sheepish man child standing in front of her. “Petey? Where in the HELL have you been!??”

Chapter End Notes

....I really, really hope that you liked this chapter! Thanks for reading.
A shorter chapter today, but still, it has some fun moments in that I'm proud of (Bucky, they're mostly Bucky).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Fifty-Three: Welcome to the Family

Manhattan, 1976

"Mother is very mad."

Edwin Jarvis suppressed the sigh that threatened to push from his lips. It was an old, practiced sigh and it was certainly warranted for the occasion. Anthony Stark, six years old, dressed up to the nines for once, with a tiny three piece suit that made him look like his father's tiny doppelganger had been uncharacteristically quiet since the nanny had brought him back from the tailor appointment.

Jarvis wished the nanny had kept little Anthony out longer. Now wasn't exactly the most opportune time for him to have to entertain the young man. But the woman had been yammering on about twelve hour work days and going home to her own family.

And Jarvis couldn't really relate to that any longer.

Peggy had warned him that a storm was coming, thankfully. An old fashioned sort of storm that they hadn't seen the likes of in over a decade. They were used to cleaning up Howard Stark's messes in the last thirty years. They had mistakenly hoped that these wild days were over and that the man had finally matured a bit.

Peggy was currently in Missouri tending to very concrete evidence that Howard Stark would never
"Yes, your mother is upset," Jarvis smiled down at the boy.

"Mother is mad at father," Anthony clarified, looking up at Jarvis with shrewd, sparkling brown eyes. "She isn't upset with me at all, is she?"

"Has she got a reason to be upset with you, Anthony?" Jarvis questioned back with his own specific brand of shrewdness.

The six year old's smile was positively mirthful, very, very reminiscent of Howard Stark about to dive head first into trouble.

"Nothing that you can prove, Jarv," Anthony gave the family butler a wink.

The sound of breaking glass, Jarvis suspected it was one of the very expense vases that he kept in Howard's study, smashing hopefully against the wall and not against Howard's head echoed throughout Stark Manor. Maria Stark, who never usually let her voice rise above a polite and dignified warble in the house, was screaming at the top of her lungs at her husband. And there was the sound of shattering glass again, and then the very undignified screech of 'I WILL CUT IT OFF IF YOU CANNOT KEEP IT IN YOUR PANTS!'

"Anthony, I think that you will not be doing the family pictures that your mother had anticipated doing today," Jarvis admitted. "I believe it might be nice to go and find some kind of fun and exciting dinner."

"Burger King?" Anthony asked hopefully.

"Fine, Burger King," Jarvis nodded as Maria continued to screech at the top of her lungs about backwater Missouri and how Laura Lee was bound to be some kind of backwoods nightmare that would RUIN Maria's legacy in the future.

"Shouldn't I get changed?" Anthony looked down at his new suit. He liked it quite a bit, even if it was a little itchy around the collar.
"No, it's the King's restaurant, we should show some kind of respectability there."

---

_Wakanda, Present Day_

"Laura? What is going on?"

Steve’s question from the bay doors of the Milano, looking between the man who looked to be about his age, sans ice, and the Barton matriarch. They were sizing each other up, looking up and down in wonder before settling on each others faces, identical looks of delight and wonder etched onto their features. Steve pursed his mouth in a disappointed line. He trusted Laura's judgement above a lot of other judgement's. She was right up there with Natasha as far as her advising capabilities.

And if Laura Barton was looking at the leather clad space visitor like an old friend, then that meant they were, despite all outward appearances, friendly. And that meant that they didn't have Darcy held hostage on the ship. It put him back to square one as far as finding Darcy, which was more than a little disappointing.

"This is my cousin, this is Peter Quill," Laura announced, seeing that Steve no longer seemed intent on ripping the ship apart piece by piece, but was now interested in answers, for the most part. She looked around in wonder and realized that the only person that would understand was her husband, and he was still on the mainland of Wakanda. "He went missing when he was a kid, just, poof right off the face of the planet. Gone."

"Yeah, literally," Peter nodded. "I went to outerspace, Laura Lee! It was---it IS awesome. I mean, mostly awesome. When people are shooting at me, or trying to take over the galaxy, it gets LESS awesome."

"What?" Laura's eyes narrowed, her voice low and whispered.

Bucky straightened up at that and noticed Natasha took a small step back. He and Drax had been stuck together in mutual headlocks since Laura had come barrelling onto the scene. But the sound of the woman's voice was TERRIFYING for anyone who had a ball buster for a mother. Steve seemed exempt, while he had a ball buster for a mother, for certain, she had always been busting balls other than her precious, sickly Steve.
Bucky tilted his head to the right in contemplation. That explained so much about Steve when he thought about it enough.

"uhhhhhhh," Peter answered, unsure of what to do. He hadn't been privy to much of the ball busting mom voice either.

"You've been in space for nearly thirty years?!?" Laura screeched out. She took her right hand and slapped it against the side of his head. "I was worried sick about you!"

"I know---"

Another smack and Laura yelled, "I searched for you for a decade!"

"OH geez, I'm so sorr---"

"I emptied out my trust fund to pay for the searches, the flyers, the rewards for tips!" Laura smacked him three times in a row.

"Your trust fund? Laura Lee---I didn't---"

"Without that trust fund I had to put myself through school!" Laura hissed, smacking him again. "Do you know how hard it was to keep looking for you at sixteen, trying to go to Caltech at SIXTEEN, while still looking for your dumb cousin who went into space like a dumb idiot? AND work at freaking Burger King?!?"

"You went to Caltech?" Tony had flipped up the face mask of the Iron Man Suit while he and the raccoon perched on his shoulders watched Peter get at least a mid-grade concussion with all the head smacking from Laura. He didn't want to have her ire pointed at him, but as an MIT graduate, Caltech was his sworn enemy. "That's disgusting."

"Fuck off Stark!" Laura growled at him, smacking Peter upside his head again for good measure.

"Stark? Well, Laura Lee, you coulda just asked him for--- OW!" Peter yelled as Laura grabbed him
by the ear and twisted until he bent at the waist and was now eye level with her.

"I was so, so, so WORRIED," Laura's anger seemed to have blown out of her with the last twist of his ear. She yanked one more time and wrapped her arms around her younger cousin, who had always been tall for his age, but her advanced years had allowed her to tower over at him before he disappeared. Now, he was as tall as Captain America, at the very least, and she made a squawking sound when Peter lifted her up in a tight hug.

"After mom died, you were the only thing on Earth that I missed."

"What about Grandmother Quill?" Laura laughed. As loving as their grandmother had tried to be, she had been severe and pretty menacing to the kids.

"She used to smack me with a wooden spoon, that was just not cool, Laura Lee," Peter sighed.

"This is awkward and confusing," the blue Drax announced from Bucky's side, looking to his fellow warrior for agreement and only getting a look of disbelief in return. "Perhaps it might be better to hug our distant relatives later, and to prepare for the certain pain and death that is about to come down to this disgusting hovel of a planet."

"What?" Stark stopped staring at Barton-wife and her cousin finally, the scrutinizing expression on his face gone and instead replaced with a little panic. Alien invasions usually didn't go so well for him, after all. "I thought you guys were the invasion."

"Idiot," the raccoon grumbled. He leaned over and tapped at the arc reactor in Tony's chest. "We got a squadron of bad guys coming your way. They want to get at the power from whatever infinity stone you got on planet. And to stop them, I'm gonna need this shiny energy source in your chest, Robo-goatee."

"Rocket, you don't need anything from anyone," Peter disputed.

"Lies," the raccoon disputed.

"I am Groot!"
Rocket and Tony simultaneously looked down to see that the small tree had seemingly tamed one of Cooper's insect-i-killer robots, and was riding it happily in the sandy beaches.

"That's some really great work on that exoskeleton," Tony murmured.

"I want the design on that bug-bot, I'll fill the whole damned Milano with bugs that serve me snacks," Rocket said covetously.

"We are not invading you," Gamora finally spoke again. "But you ARE going to be invaded. And soon."

"Because of the soul stone," Natasha guessed.

"Soul stone? Like...cool soul music?" Peter wondered hopefully as he placed Laura back down on her feet, but grabbed her hand in his, like he used to when he was little. Hand in hand, the Quill Bastards against the world. Or Galaxy now.

"Not quite," Natasha looked at him skeptically. She turned to Gamora, knowing she could at least converse in a sensible manner with the alien warrior. "The stone was in use on the planet a little over an hour ago, but it's gone now."

Steve wrinkled his nose at that, his gut twisting unpleasantly in reminder of Darcy being nowhere in sight.

"She is in Valhalla," Thor announced. "Heimdall has said his new mother is weakened by extensive use of the stone. They are bringing her soul back into her body."

"What?" Steve stumbled forward, looking at Thor with wide, hopeful eyes.

"I TOLD you she was in Valhalla," Bucky grumbled. His words came out mumbled and taunting, "You never listen to me, not big ole dumb Steve Rogers, let's just invade Austria and get what was taken from me, and I don't care, cause I'm big ole dumb Steve Rogers."
"HA! A fitting name!" Drax slapped Bucky on the shoulder hard. He pointed at Steve then and nodded. "Big Ole Dumb Steve Rogers!"

"She is well, my friend, or will be," Thor promised Steve, who bent in half at the news of it. "She is in the finest possible care. And while she is looked after and mended, you and I and all of these strange warriors will look after Midgard."

"Is there a way to put the trace of the stone out into space?" Cooper asked, walking towards the assembled group of aliens and super heroes. He ignored his mother's eye roll at his inability to stay hidden. He had at least brought out Sam and Wanda with him.

"Vision and I could work on energy, blast it into space, our energy derives from the mind stone," Wanda looked to Thor for answers.

"Like a wild goose chase for bad guys!" Cooper nodded eagerly.

"You'd need some kind of containment vessel," Tony shook his head.

"I can build one," Cooper insisted. "Me and my mom can build anything together."

"You'd need an energy reserve to get it far enough," Rocket disputed. "And no offense to you and your mommy, kid, but Earth ain't got nothing powerful enough to get beyond your other crappy planets in this solar system."

"Wrong, fleabag," Tony smirked, tapping against the arc reactor in his chest.

"Dammit, I really want one of those," Rocket muttered under his breath.

"Time is not on our side," Gamora shook her head. "My sister is on a mission to retrieve the stones for Thanos. She will not rest until it is in her hands."

"Well---" Laura let out a heavy sigh. "Shit."
Asgard

"How did I get Manuel the Fluffy feeding duty? What have I done to deserve this? I mean, I'm the freaking future queen of the freaking nine realms," Jane Foster huffed out in annoyance as she looked down at the gigantic wooden barrel full of Manuel the Fluffy's mid-day snack. It was roughly fifty freshly slaughtered Asgardian chickens. And it was disgusting.

Manuel the Fluffy didn't seem to care WHO was bringing him his meal, just so long as he got it. He plopped his considerable rear end on the ground with a resulting smacking sound of slime on stone. The mid-day snack took no time at all, because Manuel the Fluffy grabbed the barrel between his paws and brought it up to his gaping maw, making quick work of the fifty chickens.

Jane's nose was ridiculously wrinkled the entire time.

"You're so gross, Manuel the Fluffy," she sighed. "Why couldn't Darcy have just adopted a bird or something? A tiny parakeet. A goldfish might have been nice too. I would TOTALLY watch a goldfish for her."

Manuel the Fluffy had no answer for Jane, at least not a verbal one. Instead he shook himself off, and some slime went flying, causing Jane to shriek and rush out of the way.

"NO! NOT AGAIN!" Jane yelled. She had dealt with this at Manuel the Fluffy's breakfast time as well. "This is not the time for slime the astrophysicist! Bad Manuel the Fluffy! BAD!"

"You seem to be enjoying yourself," Loki, dressed in Odin's visage came ambling up to Jane as she continued to try and dodge the slime from the happy beast. "Your training sessions with Sif are obviously a worthy use of your time, you have not been coated with the foul beast's secretions."

"Ugh, go away," Jane grumbled hotly. The man dropped the illusion of the All father and appeared just as normal Loki would. She would have never dreamed of speaking to real Odin like that, mostly because she never actually wanted to SPEAK to the real Odin. He had been an asshole, and now
that Jane knew who Odin had actually been for the last couple of bearable years, it made her hate real Odin even more.

"Rude," Loki shrugged. "Lady Sif has---"

"Stop trying to bring her up," Jane advised, jumping to avoid a particularly impressive rope of slime. "I'm not going to chat with you about your crush."

"Rude," Loki repeated. "And I do not have a crush as you so crudely put it with your Midgardian eloquence."

"Obsession?" Jane offered with mock helpfulness, edging closer to Loki with her avoidance techniques, hoping to get some slime to splatter on his pasty face. "Forever unrequited love?"

Loki decided to drop it. Thor and the rest of the warriors had rushed toward Midgard a few hours ago. Darcy was plotting at the gates of Valhalla with his precious mother Frigga and Heimdall. Jane was the only one in all of Asgard who was brave enough to deal with Darcy's pet beast. She was most unused to having the honor.

He smiled at her, looking like a shark with slicked back black hair and Jane wrinkled her nose in anticipation.

"The Lady Darcy would like to have her beast saddled to prepare to take her into battle if necessary," Loki said with so much saccharine sweetness and light that Jane contemplated grabbing Manuel the Fluffy's slime directly from his antlers and smashing all over Loki's smirking face.

"You do it, she's your great great great great great great great great granddaughter," Jane advised. "Give or take a couple of greats."

"She requested a gentler hand," Loki arched a delicate, mischievous brow.

"Tell the truth, liar fire pants," Jane grumbled.

"She did say that this might finally make you even for ---Antarctica," Loki nodded.
"For ALL of Antarctica?" Jane wondered, suddenly eager. She and Darcy had been arguing about that for three years now.

"Presumably," Loki nodded.

Jane heaved a sigh before nodding. "Hand me the saddle."

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**Wakanda**

Planning started quickly and was intense. Laura, Tony, Cooper and Rocket were standing over the table that Laura had been using as command central and Cooper had been using as gadget central. Well, Rocket was standing ON the table.

Natasha and Gamora were going over other issues quietly by a table on the patio. Sam and Wanda were marveling at Groot and using Thor as a translator. Drax was demanding that Scott shrink and expand like a delighted child asking for more of their favorite cartoon.

Peter found himself standing in between Captain America and Bucky Barnes, of all people.

"I had your doll---your action figure," Peter announced suddenly. He looked to Bucky and grimaced, "Not yours, cause no offense, your outfit sucked. But I had Captain America's action figure."

"Why'd mine suck?" Bucky wondered, highly offended at the idea. He had always been the more stylish between himself and Steve.

"Uhm, you were like--Justice Lad, or something, with like a mask and tights and briefs and just---nah," Peter shrugged. "Captain America was cool though. You're a lot smaller than I thought you'd be, actually, because my action figure was like, a barrel with legs."

"I'm not a LAD," Bucky huffed out. "Why was I a lad? I'm a year older than this schmuck."
"Yeah, no offense, but how are you guys like, alive?" Peter wondered. "I mean, you were Saturday morning cartoons to me, and now you're---you know, breathing and stuff."

"Long story," Steve muttered.

Rocket and Tony began arguing at the table, only to have Laura enter the fray and not end the argument, but instead, point out a different avenue and argue just as hotly as the other two.

Steve heard the whizzing of the arrow and turned to the beach, watching as it hit the door to the Milano and a forcefield came over it, and Steve was no expert on machinery, but he'd have to say that it PROBABLY ruined some of the more important parts of the ship.

"MY SHIP!" Peter yelled out, dropping the soda pop that Laura had handed him ten minutes ago and making a dash for it.

"We forgot to tell T'Challa they were friendly," Steve whispered, remembering now that he was calmer and knew Darcy was okay that they had left T'Challa and Clint to prepare defenses on the mainland.

"Well, shit," Bucky muttered before nodding and making a run for it simultaneously. He managed to tackle the Black Panther to the ground before the first swipe against Peter as Steve threw the shield to block one of Clint's arrows.

"Friendly, they're friendly!" Steve shouted.

"They're friendly," T'Challa repeated dubiously from behind the mask.

"Yeah, but they know that some pretty nasty people are about to follow them here," Bucky revealed. "The smart people and---raccoon are over at your house working on it. They could definitely use you, for the diplomacy alone."

"A raccoon?" T'Challa tilted his head slightly in consideration. Clearly the opportunity to do exciting science trumped whatever reservations he had, because the helmet came off and he began trotting
towards the royal villa.

"I swear to fucking God, Cap, if you don't start taking a comm with you wherever you go, I will fucking permanently embed it into your ear!" Clint shouted out as he made his way down from the tallest tree. He took a deep breath and asked, "Everyone alright?"

"Everyone is perfect, and Darcy is---she's on her way back," Steve nodded.

"I told you that and you didn't listen to ME," Bucky grumbled. "Big blond and burly comes down from the skies and flicks his pretty goldilocks and zaps a little lightning and sure, you believe him."

"You're going to be a hell of a lot of fun all healed up, Barnes," Clint remarked.

"No shit, sherlock," Bucky smirked.

"Who's the idiot crying in front of the space ship?" Clint wondered.

Bucky's smirk turned into a grin. "That, is your cousin-in-law. Peter Quill. Good luck making a better second impression there, pal, cause you just fried his ship."

Chapter End Notes

I hope that you enjoyed this chapter. Thanks for reading!
A Solid Plan

Chapter Notes

We're moving right along here. I promise, soon we're gonna have a battle royale. Soooooon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Fifty-Four: A Solid Plan

Afghanistan, 2009

"We have a problem."

"Duuuude, I don't know if you know this, but we're knee deep in metaphorical shit and ankle deep in ACTUAL shit. And I love you man, I do, but if you open those ridiculously pretty lips and tell me something WORSE is happening, we're going to end our bromance forever and ever. Amen."

Sam rolled his eyes at Riley. They'd been trapped down for four days in the foothills, with no clearance from their commanding officers to take off. It was supposed to be a simple retrieval. A drone had gone down in enemy territory and apparently, that drone and its tech were worth risking two souls to get it back.

They'd gotten the drone, but had lost their air clearance. Four days of medieval camping had ensued, and while Sam considered Riley his best friend, they obviously weren't meant to take camping trips together. Friendship was a lot easier to cultivate when there was running water, plentiful food and...toilets to be used.

Sam's patience was wearing thin, even as Riley became sillier and more irreverent with every passing minute. His partner was shirtless and covered in finger dirt painted scribbles, his shirt was tied on his head and his goggles seemed to be permanently attached to his head, making him look like a bug eyed Mad Max road warrior of some kind. And he wouldn't SHUT UP. Not even a little bit. It had been four days of Riley chattering on non-stop.
And now that Sam had checked the radar and comm units for the hourly report and come up with something bad, Riley was having none of it. Sam worried for a moment that the man would try to stage a mutiny. He could imagine his partner ripping Sam's shirt off and drawing over him in nonsensical dirt scribbles and forcing him into some kind of wacky tap dancing initiation ritual.

"We got heat seaking bogeys coming in. Base said they're Stark made, so they're gonna find us, you know that," Sam sighed. They had settled close to a water source with their rescued drone, which meant they were also close to a small civilian populace.

"Fuck Stark, ain't he supposed to be Iron Man now?" Riley demanded miserably. "One day, Sammy, I promise you with all that I am, I'm gonna walk up to that show boating mother fucker and take a razor and just buzz off half of that stank ass goatee."

"Seems like a good goal to have in life," Sam admitted honestly. "What's our play here, man?"

"I'm gonna cram this drone up somebody's ass," Riley promised, unwrapping his shirt from his head and popping it on quickly, followed by his kevlar vest. "Bonus points if it's Stark's ass."

"Dream big, high flyer," Sam rolled his eyes.

"We gotta get the signal into open space, far enough away from the civilians so we don't have a fucking blood bath on our hands," Riley popped on his wings as Sam went about checking the radar for an appropriate place. "And then you're gonna turn on your camera, and we're going to take the sickest video of me out flying a Stark missile and then we're gonna post it on Youtube."

"Got a place," Sam nodded before putting his own wing pack on. "What are you thinking?"

"Pong. Let's do pong. It's been a while," Riley nodded.

Sam wrinkled his nose, wishing it had been pac man instead. Pong took a lot more abdominal strength. He had no doubt that it would have to devolve into pac man eventually. But first they'd hover in the sky with their wings, half a football field away from each other, going up and down in the air as they bounced the drone back and forth to each other, playing an intricate game of keepaway and confusion for the Stark missile.
Sam hated pong. What he wouldn't give for some pac man.

"You know when we signed up for this, I thought it would be a lot more rescuing of fucking humans and a lot less rescuing of fucking intel," Riley muttered.

"You kiss your mother with that mouth?" Sam rolled his eyes.

"Nah, I kissed your dad with this mouth though," Riley cracked back before sticking his tongue out and zooming away on the wings with the drone in his hand.

Sam sighed and started up his wing pack, taking a deep breath before muttering, "What'd I do to deserve all this?"

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_Wakanda, Present Day_

Sam had never been in a more ridiculous briefing situation before. And he had been at the van doors back at the airport in Berlin, where Scott had waxed poetic about Steve's muscle-y muscles. He'd been witness to Tony Stark and Rhodey arguing years ago during a briefing, not about the upcoming mission, but about what they were going to have for dinner when they came back. He'd been witness to Natasha hogtieing Barton when it was revealed that the fun bait and switch mission he'd been promised was ironically switched with a boring recognisance mission.

Not to mention all of the things that Riley had put him through during their time together in the military.

But this took the cake.

He looked to his right, where Wanda was, delicately petting the top of a tiny, sentient tree who was COOING back at Wanda with the repetitious _"I am Groot"_. To his left was a mother fucking talking raccoon, who was salivating over Bucky Barnes' metal arm, that both the King of Wakanda, Princess of Wakanda, Cooper Barton and Laura Barton were all rapidly working on while it was still attached to the man himself. Scott was shrunken down on the man's metal shoulder, helping to
install the numerous articulate vibranium plates.

Tony was hovering nearby the arm installation, looking sour and as if he wanted to put his two cents in, especially whenever Laura Barton would sneer at him, as if challenging him to open his mouth. But he miraculously refrained.

Clint was trying to offer soda cans to someone who had been introduced by Laura as Peter Quill. Peter Quill had then insisted that everyone call him Star Lord, which was just a ridiculous name. Peter was wrinkling his nose at the soda with every sip, declaring that everything had changed too much after every sip. And then he started tearing up about his ship and how it could never be made right.

And then of course, on the opposite side of the table was the blue guy who was finishing all of Peter's barely sipped cans of soda. The hot green woman who was talking with Natasha, who had not even reacted to his most flirtatious greeting. Bucky and the arm crew were of course by Natasha's side, and would steal concerned looks at Steve, who was standing by the patio railing, looking up into the sky with a mixture of anxiousness and hopefulness. Thor was actually at the grill, declaring that he would need to prepare a feast to thank his friends when they arrived. He wondered if the Asgardians would like the veggie burgers that everyone else on the island had refused to eat.

And to his right, were Wanda and Vision. And the courteous attention that Vision was paying Wanda since he touched down in Wakanda was somewhere between adorable and infuriating. Sam didn't want to know why he found it infuriating. It was better left unexamined when he thought about it. But at one point, Vision held out a cautious hand to move a lock of Wanda's hair away from her face.

Sam didn't want to think about how pleased he was when Wanda sat back and away from Vision and pushed her own hair behind her ears. Because he wasn't thinking about things like that in regards to Wanda. Not at all.

"Your girl will be back, Rogers, come and help us," Tony grumbled as Laura kept trying to annoy him.

"I just---leave it Tony," Steve sighed. He didn't keep his eyes off of the sky, but he still attempted to participate. "What's going to happen when the person who wants the soul stone gets here and realizes that it's NOT here?"

"Soul stone," Peter wrinkled his nose at the newest can of soda that was placed in front of him. "Still
can't believe it's not about music at all. Totally lame. I mean, have you heard of the Queen of Soul? Why name it after soul if it's not about music?"

"Focus, Petey," Laura snapped her fingers rapidly without taking her eyes off of the work Cooper was doing on the elbow joint of Bucky's arm. He did something particularly impressive and Laura must have felt Tony's eyebrows rising in surprise, because she looked up at him with a smug, combative look.

"Barton, can't you get your wife to behave?" Tony demanded.

"You're an idiot!" Shuri laughed to herself from her place at the bar where she and W'kabi were working on maps of the surrounding areas that may need to be evacuated. Lila was watching avidly, and Shuri smartly put her hand on top of Lila's head, lest she go to attack Iron Man for insinuating that her mother could be controlled by anyone.

"Failure is not an option," Gamora told Steve, who quickly looked back to the sky as the late afternoon sun glinted off of the water. She rolled her eyes and sighed, staring at Rocket in commiseration, "I feel fairly confident in making the observation that these Earthlings are easily distracted by shiny objects and hilarious bickering."

"Indeed, as my grandfather used to say of the Vlgarik, if you gave them an inch, they would take all of the clothing off of your back," Drax nodded.

"You're not wearing a shirt," Bucky shook his head at the alien he had fought against in confused amusement.

"The Vlgarik," Drax nodded, as if that answered all questions.

"After what happened with Ronan and the power stone, there is no way that Nebula will go back empty handed after making the trip," Gamora nodded. "She will raze this planet to the ground. If it is not here, where we read it to be, she will go to every corner of this small planet and destruction will follow in her wake."


"Did your reader pick up on the fact that it was the soul stone?" Clint narrowed his eyes at the
"Why do you think we're here, dumbass?" Rocket wrinkled his snout in annoyance.

"What he meant is, can we fool her with another stone's signature readings?" Wanda piped up, her Clint Barton translation skills invaluable.

Sam perked up at that and he looked between Vision and Wanda curiously as the pair of them exchanged calm and determined looks.

"No," Sam shook his head. "Absolutely not."

"Sam," Wanda sighed. They had talked about it so much, how sick she was of being coddled by Clint and Steve and sometimes even Bucky.

"I am Groot..." the tiny tree said softly in understanding, looking up at the woman who had been touching him (inappropriately but not unwanted).

"No," Sam said resolutely.

"Where could we go to lay the red herring and avoid any civilians?" Steve stepped away from the railing for the first time in ten minutes, giving Wanda a nod and Sam a commiserating smile.

"Oh hell no, you don't give me that 'be brave little soldier' smile at me," Sam stood up. "You get to tear apart the world for Darcy, and I'm supposed to let Wanda go with Vision and be a shiny, infinity stone distraction to an alien with plans to RAZE the Earth to the ground?!

"Wanda is an Avenger," Steve said softly, hoping to pull the conversation away from the public eye in hopes of Sam saving face about Wanda, who was staring at Sam in slight confusion.

"Fuck that," Sam huffed out.

"I am an Avenger," Wanda insisted.
"Doesn’t mean we should hold you up as bait or lead you into certain death," Sam grumbled.

"Sam," Wanda said softly, confusion still etched on her pretty features.

Vision watched the two of them very intently, bordering on creepy, as usual. He was confused at Sam's current problem. The flyer had seen Wanda go into battle before, surely none that was so ambiguously dangerous and dire, but he had never had such a reaction before. Vision caught Tony’s gaze from across the room and his creator gave him a shrug and a sympathetic smile.

"Jesus, this is just like that show Drax loves so much, The Glorp Files. So many damned feelings and unspoken emotions," Rocket huffed out. "Here’s the deal, she’s looking for a stone, that guy’s got one on his head, but it would probably be a bad idea to hand him over."

"What if we made a fake?" Bucky questioned, looking solely to Natasha for approval.

"Is it possible?" Natasha turned to Gamora. "Wouldn't they be able to tell?"

"Stark, Barton," Steve pointed between Tony and Laura without waiting for Gamora's answer. If anyone could make it happen it was this team of geniuses. "Go with Mr. Rocket and figure it out. Your highness..."

T’Challa nodded, "I will assist and bring my brightest to assist. Shuri, work with Agent Romanoff to find a more appropriate place to have this battle."

"Helicarrier is here," Natasha announced.

"Let’s head up and work from there, we’ll be ready to move," Steve nodded. He pointed at Rocket, "You are not to ask Fury for his eyepatch."
As it turned out, Fury had a whole host of places set aside for battle, devoid of humanity and large enough to contain the horror of a nuclear level attack. He had such a spot on every continent on the planet. Favors had been traded, promises had been made, and now the helicarrier was hovering in the Sahara, and the Avengers, Asgardians and Guardians were doing everything they could to make their inhospitable surroundings work for them in battle.

"You can't get an ETA on Nebula's ship?" Steve wondered.

"I am Groot."

"Armada is more accurate, you're right, Groot," Rocket nodded.

"Armada," Steve swallowed, pouring all of his concentration and worry he had for Darcy's well being into a small box to be brought out bigger and better when this threat was dealt with. He had to make sure there was a home for her to come back to.

"You are the last of your kind," Hogun blinked down at the tree.

"I am Groot," the tree answered the warrior who had sat down in the headquarters tent to polish his various blades, but was more enraptured with the tree than the already shiny knives.

"Yes, I am a last of my own kind in a way as well, for now," Hogun answered.

"You can understand him?" Steve questioned.

"You can't?" Rocket blinked beady eyes up at Steve, his mouth quirking up slightly in a tell that he was just being a little shit.

"Aren't you supposed to be helping Stark and Barton and King T'Challa?" Steve demanded.

"One of the king's people has a pet dander allergy, whatever THAT is," Rocket huffed out. "'sides, I'm better off with weaponry and the Stark-Barton kid wanted me to fix the confetti blaster in the
metal arm to finish it off."

Steve couldn't help the huff of laughter, light and joyous and beautiful, just like his Magnet. She'd get her way whether she was there or not when it came to the damned confetti cannon in Bucky’s arm. He took a deep breath and nodded, catching Sam's eye as the man came into the tent and dropped off rations and a water source. They truly didn't know how long this battle would last and were taking every precaution.

Unlike the hasty Chitauri invasion response, they had the luxury of planning. Unfortunately for Sam, they were planning something fairly terrifying for someone who was very important to him. Steve followed him as he went to a recently landed quinjet, intent on emptying it of its rations and provisions.

"Sam," Steve called out.

"Leave it," Sam sighed.

"Sam, I understand," Steve gave him a sad smile. He shrugged and said quietly, "You and I have something we can commiserate over that doesn't involve war and road trips and Bucky. For the first time ever, I can be a help to you instead of you always helping me deal with a never ending shit storm."

"Wanda's my friend," Sam insisted. "I don't want her to be hurt. I don't want this Nebula thinking that SHE's the stone when she uses her powers. I don't want her lost to me."

"I know," Steve nodded eagerly. "I know exactly how you feel."

"It's not like with you and Darcy," Sam insisted. "I mean, Wanda's a kid. I care about her, but she's a kid."

"She's a young lady, yes," Steve nodded. "And half a year ago, I said she was a kid. Before everything went to hell and she went into battle for me, she risked her life, her freedom just on my word. And she got treated like a fucking animal by Ross, and she made it through with strength and grace. She's not a kid. She's a grown woman. And a helluva grown woman at that."

Sam nodded and put his hand over his face, rubbing back and forth in an annoyed gesture.
"Barton's gonna put an arrow through my ass," Sam sighed.

"Don't give him a reason to, make sure you treat her right and you don't have to worry about any of us," Steve smiled.

"You're lucky Darcy doesn't have five father and brother figures who just so happen to be superpowered," Sam said dryly.

"Pal, I don't know, but have you met Thor lately?" Steve laughed. "And let's not get started on what Doctor Jane Foster is capable of if I ever wronged her best friend."

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"MANUEL THE FLUFFY! I WILL PORTAL YOUR ASS TO THE ANTARCTIC!" Jane shouted. "Let me get buckle this or I swear to fucking all that is holy that your slimy ass antlers will be in another dimension."

"Oh this was SO worth it."

Jane huffed out a harsh breath, wiping the slime off of her hands one last time before spinning around in an absolute fury as she glared at her best friend, who was flanked by Heimdall.

"We. Are. Even." Jane ground out.

"Totally," Darcy nodded, then winked at her best friend.

"Where's your armor?" Jane demanded. Because Darcy wasn't dressed in what she had been in when she last blipped off of Asgard. She was dressed in flowing red silks that were fashioned into a lovely gown, similar to the one Jane had but very rarely wore in Asgard. It was difficult to go so hard at science when you were wearing a billowing Grecian gown.

"I don't think it's going to come down to needing armor," Darcy shrugged.
"Thor seemed to think it was serious," Jane shook her head.

"Yeah, but I got this shiny ass stone thing," Darcy said glibly, dangling her infinity gem in her hand.

"Oh my god, I'm going to have to come up with a way to portal your ass out of your grave," Jane sighed.

"No, not really, but can I borrow Big Bertha?" Darcy wondered sweetly, giving Jane her best innocent smile.

"NO!" Jane scoffed.

"Please?" Darcy asked earnestly.

"NOoooooooooooooo," Jane shook her head adamantly. She held up a stern finger and the look in her eye was maniacal as she stopped Darcy from saying anything more. "And we're even now, so don't even try it."

"Indeed, Lady Jane, it would help me greatly," Heimdall piped in, his orange eyes renewed and bright and fierce and the velvety voice and the overall Heimdall of it all was just a little ridiculous.

"That's not fair," Jane rolled her eyes, her shoulders slumping in defeat. "If you get a scratch on her, I'll murder you."

"Well, I mean, there's only one way to make sure I don't scratch her," Darcy grinned impishly.

"NO," Jane stamped her foot.

"Can you pop it onto Manuel for me real quick? Thanks Janie, Love you, BYE!"

Chapter End Notes
I hope you enjoyed this. Thanks for reading!
Chapter Fifty-Five: The Fight

September 2012, Upstate New York

After nine straight weeks of setting snares, it was clear the rabbits and various other woodland creatures had begun to wisen up. Steve sighed as he checked empty snares again. He and Bucky had tried snares just once, out of desperation, when it felt like both of their stomachs might eat themselves if they had to deal with boiled potatoes one more night. They’d checked out all the books that the library had to offer on wilderness survival and carefully practiced the knots for days before trying it out.

Unfortunately, they had chosen a sparse little bit of green on a corner in Brooklyn, not one particularly well known for wildlife. Bucky had suspected they had gotten a rat, perhaps, because the rope had been chewed through the next day. They had been no closer to glorious meat, but a laughing elderly woman had given them each an apple, so it hadn’t been a complete bust.

The snaring lessons had been very helpful in the mountainous wilds of war torn Europe. They had impressed the rest of the Howling Commandos with their skill set, and had netted them plenty of fire roasted critters on cold, quiet nights. But they had constantly been on the move then. The wildlife hadn’t gotten smart.

“Stark said it was bad, but I had no idea.”

Steve looked up in surprise, not used to the sound of another human being, to be honest. Tony had visited a month ago, offering him an apartment in the newly named Avenger’s Tower, trying to convince him to come back to civilization and work with him in keeping New York City, and the
And when Steve had demurred all of those offers, aside from coming in during an emergency, Tony had tried to get him to throw ‘a rager’ at the small cabin that Steve had purchased after his trip around the States.

And now, Natasha Romanoff was standing on the edge of the clearing, dressed in civilian clothes, her leather clad arms crossed over her chest as she stared down at Steve in the closest approximation she had to dismayed horror.

“If you’re out of food, Rogers, I can make sure a drone drops off some things every week,” Natasha told him.

“I’m not out of food,” Steve rolled his eyes. He wasn’t. He had a chest freezer set up in the utility shack next to the cabin and it was full of the foods he would need to get by for at least another month.

“So—diseased forest vermin are just what you’re craving?” Natasha smirked.

“Yeah,” Steve huffed out. “It’s like the caviar of the wilderness, really.”

Natasha actually chuckled at that and nodded, “It’s good to see you, Rogers.”

“You too, however unexpected the visit is,” Steve amended. Natasha had been the only person leftover from the Chitauri attack that he had kept in constant contact with, through little to no effort of his own. He’d found the cellphone in his inside jacket pocket an hour after driving his bike out of Manhattan. She’d been texting him every few days with updates on Clint, the state of the world, and what that world was saying about him and his recent return to the land of the living.

He got along quite well with her, when all was said and done. They shared a dry sense of humor and a similar sense of what was right and what was wrong. He was happy to call her a co-worker and he suspected he wasn’t too far off from calling her a friend.

“Is there an emergency?” he wondered with hesitation. He knew that if there was a worldwide emergency, he would answer the call, but it would take its toll. He’d gone from ne fight against the Red Skull, crashed in the Arctic, then woken up in the circus they called the twenty-first century. The Chitauri had come quickly after that.
Natasha said he was suffering from post traumatic stress disorder, what he had called shell shock back in the day. He knew that he had trouble sleeping thanks to nightmares, had a little difficulty being in a crowd without being overwhelmed with the hidden dangers everywhere, and would sometime zone out and come back to awareness after a significant amount of time. Natasha had set him up with a counselor who would talk to him over the phone, and she had sworn to him that no one in SHIELD would know.

So far, so good. He could only imagine what Nick Fury, the man who tried to plan for every contingency known to man would do if one of his ‘weapons’ was malfunctioning in such a way.

“No emergency, just wanted to see you face to face for once,” Natasha shrugged. Steve wasn’t buying it so Natasha shrugged. “Clint had a breakthrough. Apparently that involved wanting private time. Without me.”

Steve blinked at her, trying to get a read on her, all for naught, as Natasha was as she ever was, which was unreadable. He didn’t understand the relationship between Natasha and Clint. They seemed closer than two people who weren’t sleeping together should be. But he got the distinct impression that they weren’t sleeping together. He brushed those thoughts off. The personal lives of his teammates were none of his business, just as his personal life was none of theirs.

“So, find any mountain women yet?” Natasha wondered.

So much for that.

“I got a nice mountain lion that visits every once in awhile, but she comes with the baggage of kids, so I’m not sure it’s going to work out,” Steve tried to arrange the trap in a new an interesting way, hoping to catch the smart rabbits off guard.

“I see you’ve been getting through the multimedia package I sent you,” Natasha nodded. She’d asked Darcy Lewis, to assemble a comprehensive list of music, television and movies for someone who may have forgotten seventy years worth of memories. It had been beyond comprehensive.

“I like that show, with the gay fellas and the lady with the hair...Will and Grace,” Steve smirked. “And also, you know, the Golden Girls are right up my alley, age wise.”

“I figured as much,” Natasha nodded. Her brow furrowed and she took a few quick steps forward, picking up one of the snares. “Where did you learn to tie that knot?”
“Huh?” Steve replied, wondering what had gotten her riled. It was just a knot. “Leftover relic from a time gone by. I learned it from a book with my pal, Bucky.”

“I’ve seen it once before,” Natasha whispered. The handlers had marveled over the knot he’d created, deeming it unique and effective. He’d confided in her later that he’d gotten it from a book, messing up an original knot and coming up with something better.

She shook herself out of her James induced reverie and said what she came to say, “The World Security Council is getting vocal about your absence.”

“They should stuff it,” Steve advised. “I don’t work for them.”

“But you could,” Natasha offered. “You could negotiate a contract with SHIELD as a consultant. You’d do some good in the world. Instead of wasting away waiting for a squirrel to jump in that net. Unless, I mean, this thing with the mountain lion is serious.”

“Her kids aren’t really fond of me,” Steve shook his head. She had a point. He knew it would give him a sense of purpose in this strange new world. He needed something. Everything he cared about wasn’t there anymore. He’d visited Peggy once and only once in the last few months and his heart had been broken as the recognition had faded from her eyes ten minutes into his visit.

“When there’s nothing left to fight for, we fight for the only thing left that matters, which is what’s right,” Natasha said softly, as if reading his mind. “SHIELD may not always be right, and it could use someone to raise their voice when they start backsliding.”

“I’ll come in after Christmas. I promise.”

Present Day, Sahara

“So, uh, how exactly is this going to work?”
“What do you mean?” Peter looked to Scott as they stood next to each other as the blazing hot desert sun began it’s torturously slow descent in the sky. Peter made a little uncomfortable movement of his hips. He was seriously going to have to rethink his clothing if they were going to be in such warm places. Usually in space, he didn’t have to worry. It was pretty temperate in space when he thought about it, never quite raising above seventy degrees. It did get pretty cold some places too, so the leather came in handy.

But at the moment it was sticking to places he would prefer it not sticking to.

“Earth to Milk Box Magee, come in Milk Box Magee,” Scott waved his gloved hand in front of Peter’s face.

“Huh?” Peter blinked.

“Petey, stop spacing out!” Laura yelled out from her place under the well defended and hidden tent with all of the electronics that she could have reasonably carried.

She had souped up everyone’s comm units, glaring at Tony until he left her alone to do whatever she wanted. Most importantly, they now would work at very long ranges, using every last ounce of strength off of the Stark satellites in the sky. Tony had even given her an approving shrug, and then questioned her for fifteen minutes about how she got control of his satellite signals. When she’d answered Darcy, that had been enough for him and he went about his own business.

“I’m not spacing out Laura Lee!” Peter automatically defended himself, and sounding just a little like a whiny eight year old.

Scott and Rocket both snorted at the man’s response.

“I’m just curious, because I saw the footage of the Chitauri thing——” Scott continued. “And that was like a big shining column of alien assholes zooming out of the sky.”

“Hold on, you had an invasion of Chitauri?” Rocket demanded. “And you’re all still alive? How?”

“Indeed, this planet should be a pit full of darkness and slime,” Drax agreed cheerfully, looking away from the slow descent of the helicarrier as it hovered at a good distance to either make a quick getaway or to land in the sand. “Congratulations on instead being a pit full of irritating dirt granules and obnoxious sunlight.”
“Well, I mean, the Avengers,” Scott shrugged.

“What are the Avengers?” Rocket shrugged back.

“We already whooped your ass, vermin,” Sam huffed out as he came to stand by the waiting gaggle of heroes. “That’s who the Avengers are.”

“You were not present at any whooping of ass,” Drax disagreed. “You were hiding in a cave with your woman.”

“She’s not—whatever,” Sam rolled his eyes and walked away.

“We’re badass though, we beat the Chitauri,” Scott reiterated to Drax and Groot.

“ We?” Natasha called out from the tent.

“I was there in—spirit. And prison,” Scott shrugged.

“I have been unjustly held in prison as well!” Drax rejoiced, then walked away with no further follow up.

“Cool,” Scott nodded. He turned back to Rocket, as Peter was lost in thoughts again, staring at the sky. “So yeah, how’s this gonna go?”

“I am Groot!” the little tree screamed from the tent, and sure enough, two ships appeared as they broke through the atmosphere, each one five times the size of the helicarrier and at least twice as fast.

“It’s happening, now,” Rocket sighed, hoisting his gun up in his arms. “Gather your Avengers, weird helmet guy.”
Scott watched as the talking raccoon trotted off with his gigantic gun. And he stared back up into the sky, wondering how the hell they were going to get out of this one.

“Actually, it’s uh, Assemble!” he called out, a little too late. “We assemble the Avengers.”

“What?” Peter looked around in confusion. He looked up at the sky and his eyes went a little wild. “Shit, they’re here. Dammit.”

“You good to go?” Natasha’s question was the only announcement that she had come to stand next to Steve. Sure enough, she was on his left and Bucky was on his right, both of them were armed to the teeth with guns, knifes, taser weapons (Natasha) and high grade explosives (Bucky).

“Of course,” Steve answered, gripping his shield tight as the first wave of invaders unloaded from the ships a mile up in the air. Fury was holding the helicarrier low, but with guns trained into the sky.

A round of ammunition went into the sky, from the helicarrier, but as Gamora had warned them, it rebounded harmlessly against the force fields of the ship. The green warrior snorted as she stood by Natasha’s side as her advice had just been validated. Vehicles similar to the lifeboat began to float down at high speed and Fury let another round of ammunition fly at the boats with expert precision.

“Your kind don’t listen well,” Gamora sighed as the ammunition bounced off of smaller force fields. “Just like Quill.”

“Here’s the thing about our kind, doll,” Bucky smiled genuinely at Natasha’s newest friend. He flexed his shoulders lazily, and the plates shifted neatly on the newly rebuilt and complete left arm. “And I learned this from watching Stevie here for the better part of my life. Even if someone tells us no, we’re still gonna try.”

“How have you all not died, yet?” Gamora wondered in return.

“Resilient little fuckers, we are, we are,” Bucky nodded in agreement with himself. He unsheathed his favorite knife, spun it and gave it a flip before gripping it tight in his fist. He would take
Gamora’s advice, unlike Fury. She’d told them that their ballistics would have little to no effect on the exoskeletons. Blades would work though, creating gashes so that bullets could get where they needed to go.

“Steve,” Natasha said quietly, even as she too prepared herself for hand to hand combat. “Are you here with us?”

Steve gave her a soft smile, knowing what she was alluding to. Darcy was still MIA. He ached to have her with him, he truly did. She was his other half. She was going to be his wife someday, and hopefully the mother to his children. She was his magnet, and he felt the pull to find her, to have her with him.

“She’s got to have a home to come back to,” Steve smiled. He thought about his little cabin in the woods, close to where Tony had planted the New Avenger’s Facility. Maybe when it was all said and done, they could take a honeymoon there. “We all need something to fight for. I shoulda listened to you years ago when you told me you had someone I should meet.”

“It all worked out, pal,” Bucky patted him on his back with his free hand. “And we’ll just stop an alien invasion, send them on their way after a false lead, and your sweet little Darcy’ll be back in time to kiss your boo-boos.”

“Boo-boos?” Gamora whispered to Natasha.

“Wounds,” Natasha explained.

“The goal is to not get wounds,” Gamora gave Bucky and Steve looks of disbelief.

“You’re talking to the wrong fellas, doll,” Bucky grinned before making a run for it as the closest transport unit made landfall.

Gamora watched as Bucky charged, with Steve quick to follow. The metal shield that the Captain wielded was flung through the hot, dry air, meeting the enemy before Bucky could get to them. The disc went into the chest of one approaching enemy and somehow ricocheted, knocking another in the head before bouncing towards Bucky, who caught it with his left hand and sent it flying immediately back into the enemy.
Steve was there in time to catch the shield himself, and between he and Bucky, they had immobilised an entire lifeboat full of alien invaders. Steve knocked their exoskeletons open and Bucky would shoot.

Thor and the quartet of Asgardians came rushing to the lifeboat, intent on getting a piece of the action, but were too late.

“Don’t even say it,” Steve warned as Thor looked to the sky to taunt the invaders.

“You could have left us something to play with,” Volstagg complained.

Another three boats began to travel swiftly down, and Fury tried to unleash another round of ammunition just as they broached the forcefield line of the massive ships.

“We never stop trying,” Natasha nodded at a peeved Gamora. “We never stop fighting.”

Laura stared at the readouts in the tent, ignoring the sound of gunfire. She believed Gamora when she said it would be useless. Laura even ignored the overwhelming need to do upgrades on the fly as Tony began flying above them, firing repulsors at force fields to try and break them. If Cooper weren’t safe back in Wakanda, she figured that he could help, and between the two of them, they could work with Friday and make Tony’s repulsors effective against the force fields.

But her kids was safe, and she had other work to do, concentrating on finishing up the propulsion system of the decoy soul stone container so that they could get the god damned aliens off of her god damned planet. The adorable tree was staring at a screen, the raccoon had taken some equipment off of his ship and set it up on a free monitor. It was showing one dot at the moment, right where she knew Vision and Wanda were outside of the tent.

She figured it tracked infinity stone energy, and she’d be interested in seeing if Darcy popped back onto the screen anytime soon.

Darcy was always fun to have around in a firefight.
“Got it,” Laura whispered at the little arc reactor powered engine that she had put together. She put her hand to her comm unit and said, “I need a pickup in here, this needs to go to Vision and Wanda to fill up with—completely ridiculous nebulous energy that is stupid and makes no sense.”

“Hey, just cause something doesn’t make sense, Barton, doesn’t mean it’s real,” Tony was quick to argue.

“Fuck you, Stark,” Laura came right back. “You’re just being a shit, to be a shit. I know you care more about things being scientifically feasible than the average bear.”

“Other Barton, you need to do something about your little woman,” Tony advised. “She seems cranky.”

“Really, Fuck you, Stark,” Clint advised him.

“I will take your contraption,” Sif announced, both over the comms and as she strode into the tent. Laura handed it off and gave a quick demonstration on how to close it. The Asgardian warrior was quick to run out again, obviously eager to get back into the entertaining fray.

“Other Barton, see if you can get an arrow through here, I think I have a hole!” Tony called out.

Laura looked up into the sky and saw that Tony was using his repulsors at full blast, and it seemed to have opened up a half dollar sized hole in the force field. He had to dodge a spear thrown by one of the invaders, but he kept it up long enough for an arrow to fly in through the north and lodge itself right in the hole.

“Oh shit,” Laura said in excitement. “Babe, if you can do that again, I can make you an arrow that disrupts the forcefield.”

“Then it’s open season,” Clint said with excitement. “Get on it, smarty pants. I knew there was a reason I married you.”

“You married me because you knocked me up on our first date,” Laura reminded him.
“Laura Lee, honestly! Didn’t you listen in that school lecture about garden watering and lady flowers?!” Peter gasped over the comm unit. “You made a vow with Jesus not to let boys touch your flower!”

Luis was a little bored.

He was a lot bored, actually.

He thought that once he was on the helicarrier, it would be taking him to adventure and danger and having really dope ass conversations with sexy super heroes. He was willing to put in the grunt work. He had helped Helen fill a lifeboat with medical supplies, even missing out on seeing the Asgardians leave. And according to Dave, that had been life changing.

Luis had wanted to see badass Asgardians flying off the battle too.

And he didn’t even get a chance to get down to the action with Helen. She was standing by, and was surprisingly silent as she went over her inventory, making sure she had enough liquid stitches for whatever Captain Steve America and Sergeant Uncle Bucky could manage to get themselves into. Apparently she needed a couple of gallons for Captain Steve America alone.

“Lozado, what are you doing?”

Luis wrinkled his nose and looked up at Maria, who was overseeing the loading of one of the lifeboats with ammo. Apparently Sergeant Uncle Bucky needed a lot of ammo. And Mrs. Barton’s husband needed loads and loads of arrows.

“Waiting?” Luis shrugged, a little churlish in his response.

A beat passed with maria staring at him in waiting and Luis couldn’t help himself.
“And really, dude, this waiting is bullshit, I mean, they said all hands on deck, and here I am, a pair of perfectly useful hands, and I’m on deck,” Luis gestured to the clear helicarrier deck where crews were preparing the only four quinjets that Fury currently had at his disposal. “And me and my crew are being iced cause we’re too squishy and human and whatever. Which is bull, because we took down bad guys too, you know? I could be doing something down there, like at the very least giving emotional support, telling Captain Steve Rogers that he looks good while he’s knocking out aliens and stuff. Those little compliments go a long way to the male psyche, you got no idea.”

“I have some idea,” Maria rolled her eyes.

“And hold up, what do you mean, your crew?” Dave questioned. “Your crew?”

“I am most concerned that you wish us to go and fight, Luis, this is nonsense, you know this,” Kurt said quickly. “They are very dangerous aliens. They look like they came straight out of Thundercats.”

Maria thought about that for a moment and nodded. The aliens did look a little like muted color Thundercats, muscular, hairy and incredibly deadly looking. Luckily, they were only armed with spears and an incredibly thick skin. They were also lucky that the ships seemed to be there just for transport and had not exhibited any advanced tech.

So far.

“We gotta rise up, though,” Luis pouted. “This is our time to shine and protect Earth and impress Captain Steve America and Helen and---”

“And there it is,” Dave chuckled.

“Nah, son, it ain’t all about that,” Luis promised. “We can be brave---”

The rest of his speech was cut off by loud, high pitched shrieking. Luis’ loud, high pitched shrieking. Because Heimdall chose that very moment to open up a large portal on the deck of the helicarrier, and when the light receded, Darcy was there, sitting in the saddle on top of a slimy antlered beast that was the size of a short school bus, dressed in floating and beautiful red robes. There was an orange necklace around her neck, glowing just barely and in her hand she held what looked like a small video game remote control.
She grinned at the small crew of people on the deck of the helicarrier, throwing a little wink Luis’ way before cheerily asking,

“What’s up nerds? I heard you got an infestation problem that needed to be handled.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! I hope you had some fun.
Chapter Notes

Chapter title is shamelessly stolen from Barney Stinson.
We're getting closer, guys. SOON I'll be able to put a fork in it soon. (for the most part).
Here, have a load of flashbacks...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Fifty-Six: Legend---wait for it

New Mexico, 2011

"Sir, Doctor Selvig has agreed to go to Project Stargate."

Nick Fury nodded at Clint and the archer almost grinned in response. He had been trying to get the project renamed to Stargate ever since he saw the portal like arch, and Fury had been noticeably and predictably reticent to the name change. This was the first time he hadn't glared at Clint for using the name.

Like any good SHIELD agent, Clint felt that this was the time to push his luck.

"Codename Blond Beefcake has not reported back to Codename Teenie Tiny," Clint continued his unique briefing. "And the paperwork was successfully filed for my codename to be changed from Hawkeye to Senor Biceps."

"Barton, call Mrs. Biceps," Fury ordered with his trademark irritability. "She took over my western satellite for the last time, you let her know that."

"Negative sir, no one tells Senor. Biceps what to do," Clint shook his head sagely. He knew who his real boss in life was. And that was his brilliant wife.
"Then tell her to give me the intel I need and I'll call it even," Fury nodded.

"Intel, sir?" Clint furrowed his brow.

"She'll know what I'm alluding to," Fury promised. He wrinkled his nose suddenly and the irritation that Clint had thought he would have invoked with his ridiculous names was suddenly on his face. "Now, where the hell is the intern?"

"The intern, sir? Lewis?" Clint blinked in confusion. Sure he had let Darcy and Jane get a little (or a lot) buzzed on half of the 7-11’s slushie inventory, but that had been because Erik Selvig had just told them he was leaving. And Darcy Lewis on a sugar high only talked faster and louder, she stayed the same amount of troublesome. "She's playing nice with the nighttime agents."

"Playing nice? Is that what you're calling it?" Fury chuckled. "She's unionizing them."

"Oh shit."

"When Romanoff gets back from her op, Lewis is gonna be her problem."

---

**Iceland, 2012**

"WHAT in the HELL are you doing?"

Darcy looked up at the new arrival with a zen-like calm that seemed foreign on her usually lively features. She hadn't known the redhead SHIELD super spy for very long, but she had the presence of mind to realize that Natasha Romanoff didn't often lose her cool. Apparently, Darcy had managed to accomplish the impossible.

"Organizing a coup?"
"In one of the most peaceful countries in the world?" Natasha's voice was calmer, but those green eyes that were usually so practiced and measured were certainly not at the moment.

"They wouldn't let me leave the country with the ten pound wheel of chocolate that I needed."

Natasha pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. As troublesome as Clint often was, Darcy was a whole new level of ridiculousness. The redhead was reminded of her long lost James, not in that he was as mischievous as Darcy, not by a long shot. But James had gotten stuck in a memory one day watching a stubborn bird on the windowsill trying to fly despite a broken wing. He'd told the bird that it was a reckless punk who didn't think before he jumped and always landed into a boiling hot pot of water. James couldn't remember his friend's name, but he had been amused by the fragmented memory and Natasha had in turn finally understood what bittersweet actually meant.

And now, Natasha knew two people like that now. But she had a plan to take care of two crazy birds with one stone. It might be in the realm of possibility to avoid having to bail Darcy AND Steve out of situations they jumped into feet first...if she could get them together.

Alternatively, linking them romantically just might end the world.

Natasha sighed as Darcy calmly gave orders to one of her underlings. Coulson had clearly done the right thing in withholding the girl's political science degree. She'd be slightly more employable and thereby infinitely more dangerous if she had it.

“Give the ambassador my list of demands,” Darcy ordered. “Tell her I need fifty pounds of that chocolate. We’ll high ball it and see if it works.”

It might just be worth the risk of ending the world to alleviate the pressure on the redhead, and of course just to see Darcy boss Steve around a little.

---

London, 2013

"Shit."
"I TOLD you, that we'd be late if you had to finish your pizza. I told you," Maria Hill muttered to Clint as they watched the aftermath of the Convergence unfold from the surveillance on the quinjet still in transit for London.

In particular, Darcy Lewis was on screen running away after gathering alien weaponry in her arms. Weaponry that would undoubtedly be used for some untold nefarious purpose.

"Can you get Romanoff here?" Maria demanded.

"Double shit," Clint sighed. The only thing more bothersome than dealing with Darcy when she was a little out of control (or a lot out of control) was having to call in Natasha to do cleanup. She would never let a person live it down.

"Nevermind. Let's torture Carter with it," Maria said hopefully, whipping out her phone. "It's time she earned a Darcy encounter."

---

Japan, 2015

"Why exactly am I here?" Sam demanded in annoyance.

"You need to put a bid on something for me at a private, silent auction," Natasha told him over the telephone.

"Seriously?" Sam huffed out. "I should be in Europe with you guys. The news is saying all of Sokovia was up in the air."

"Wilson, I'll owe you," Natasha insisted, the sound of a pretty intense fight in the background.

Sam sighed. That was pretty huge. Natasha never owed anyone.
"What am I bidding on?" Sam asked.

"Tony Stark."

"Like—a doll of Tony Stark?" Sam guessed, walking into the nondescript building that could have just been any hole in the wall shop. Instead, it was opulent black marble, floor to ceiling, looking like a deep, dark vacuum of light. One person was standing behind a black marble desk, dressed in a tuxedo.

"No, someone put the real Tony Stark up for auction," Natasha sighed. "She was not happy that JARVIS was gone. I don't know how she managed it, but it's actually airtight and legal."

"Tony Stark, actual human person is up for sale?" Sam muttered in disbelief.

"Maimed or whole, it's the bidder's choice," Natasha admitted. "At least it's not dead or alive."

"Holy shit," Sam muttered. "Who has the power to do that in the span of three days?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Natasha laughed.

"Oh sure, the mysterious and completely fabricated Darcy Lewis," Sam rolled his eyes. "Alright, what's your bid for Tony Stark?"

"Pepper's allocated half a billion," Natasha said tersely. "But Darcy is aiming for insult here, so she's been keeping the bids intentionally low. Put down a twenty dollar bill and we'll donate the rest of the money to charity."

Upstate New York, May 2016
"Ms. Romanoff."

"Vision."

"I am unable to determine where your loyalties lie at the moment, Ms. Romanoff," Vision said with his characteristic android bluntness. "This is not a surprise of course."

"I try, Vision," Natasha promised as she pushed another cart of supplies from the Barton farm onto the quinjet. She didn't have much time, she had to get to the pickup point to grab Darcy and Jane as well. "Thanks for noticing."

"Indeed," Vision said, sounding confused. "I am concerned."

"About what in particular?" Natasha wondered. "The fact that members of your Avenging team and Wanda in particular are currently being cruelly held in an underwater prison?"

"Ah---that wasn't what was on my mind," Vision admitted. He sounded extra morose at the realization. "The probability of Wanda being mistreated are high, I fear I am to blame. There should have been a better solution---"

"There was," Natasha said with some borrowed bluntness. "It will be handled. What else are you concerned about?"

"Miss Lewis is showing signs that are familiar to previous signs that have led to pandamonium," Vision said, his voice a surprising whisper. "Usually you are the one to handle the aftermath."

"Yeah, I know," Natasha nodded. "Don't worry, Vision. Darcy and Jane will be handled. They'll be departing shortly. And soon---very soon Darcy is going to have someone ELSE to handle the aftermath."

"Excellent, you have a candidate ready?" Vision asked hopefully.

"No, but he'll either calm her down or---yeah, I'm still going to go with end of the world."
"ROMANOFF!" Fury barked over the comm units.

"Woah, Red. That's a dulcet tone right there. I understand why you're so loyal to Fury," Bucky snarked. "That's a voice that could tell bedtime stories to tiny children if I ever heard one."

Natasha stopped her own fighting for one second before looking up at the helicarrier, which was lowering closer to the ground. She squinted and thought she could make out something that looked like it was the shape of an elephant. A brilliant smile lit up the redhead's face as she lifted a baton and smashed it into the face of an approaching alien.

"She's not my problem anymore, Fury," Natasha announced with uncharacteristic glee. "You'll have to see the Captain if you hope to contain her this time."

"This is for faking my death, isn't it?" Fury hotly demanded. "This bilgesnipe is ruining the new deck to my helicarrier and you're not gonna stop it because I faked my death and didn't tell you?"

"Revenge. Served cold," Bucky cracked.

"Bilgesnipe?" Steve cut in. He could be heard grunting in the fight. "Did you say bilgesnipe? Is it--is Manuel the Fluffy here? Is Darcy here?!?"

"Uhm...yes," Laura confirmed over the comm as Steve went running through the enemy towards the descending helicarrier, smashing into enemies with the shield along the way, letting Natasha and Bucky clean up in his wake. "And I know you have some serious tonsil hockey to play since you know, you've been missing her for so many long HOURS, Cap, but can you tell her to stop using the damned stone? It's a BEACON on the screen."
Steve's reunion kiss would have to wait, because apparently the invading aliens were told via their own communication systems where the spike in energy had been seen and they began swarming towards the helicarrier. Even more troublesome, the output of aliens from the mother ships started to come out doubletime.

"Barton, I'll handle my Magnet," Steve insisted. "You figure out how to get those force fields open so we can have some air support here."

"Did you try---"

"Fuck off, Stark!" Laura automatically interrupted.

"Laura Lee, not NICE," Peter scolded. "You should get along with him better, I mean, he's your---"

"Petey wet the bed until he was seven and a half!" Laura called out quickly, as petty as petty could be.

"RUDE!" Peter huffed out. "I'm not a bratty little kid anymore, Laura Lee! You can't just torture me with your RUDENESS."

"I am Groot," the tree announced, staring at the screen that was telling him that not one. Not two. But THREE infinity stones were currently on Earth.

"What do you mean there's another one?" Rocket demanded.

"Impossible!" Thor bellowed, the Allspeak allowing him to understand the brave and intelligent being currently working with Laura under kevlar strengthened tent walls. That would mean that nearly every last one of the Infinity Gems had found their way to Midgard.

Which made the future Asgardian ruler worry what someone had been planning for the planet currently under his protection.

"I am Groot," the tree insisted. "I AM Groot."
The helicarrier began shooting at an offshoot of the alien craft which looked like it was trying to head East. Again, there was little effect.

"New York City," Rocket translated. "Quill, what happened to the Old York City?"

"Uhm...I didn't get that far in History," Peter admitted. "What do we do? They can't head to New York City, it's unprotected."

"Not quite unprotected," Tony insisted. "I have Pepper and Rhodes and Peter."

"Me?" Peter wondered.

"No, other Peter," Tony sighed. "Peter One."

"Is he older than me?" Peter disputed.

"The spider kid? He's a KID," Bucky grumbled. "Steve dropped a plane on the KID."

“Darcy doesn’t have a comm unit, you can’t get him in trouble with her right now,” Natasha reminded him.

"Well, then I should be Peter One," Peter insisted. "I'm the oldest and best of Peters."

The helicarrier had come down low enough in the sky for the beast to jump from its deck, and Peter nearly dropped his currently useless gun as he saw a woman, a pretty, little buxom kind of woman, dressed in red silky stuff rode on the saddled back of the ugliest creature Peter had ever seen. And the beast was currently smashing the bodies of alien attackers beneath its hooves, so really, that was a good thing.

"Darcy! Sweetheart!" Steve called out with real excitement, sounding like Christmas had come way early. His attitude was sunny and joyous as he happily smashed against alien heads with the shield, steadily working his way to the slimy antlered beast that definitely was a little too dangerous looking
to be considered an ally.

“Is Darcy the woman or the bilgesnipe?” Drax asked curiously. “For if it is the foul and dangerous bilgesnipe that has a sweet heart, then your Captain is delusional.”

"LOOK OUT FOR BIG BERTHA!" Darcy shouted, holding up her little boxy device to the sky. "Duck and cover, people!"

Steve's eyes widened and he turned, rushing for Bucky and Natasha and somehow managing to get all three behind the shield as they dove for cover. Darcy pointed her device at the sky and pressed a small black button, her face scrunched up in anticipation.

The sonic boom rippled the fabric of the tent and Laura's hands hesitated for just one second before she finally managed to attach what she needed to Clint's arrow. One down, maybe a couple thousand to go.

"I am Groot?" the tree asked her.

"It's Darcy, I'm assuming she blew something up," Laura sighed.

"Close to it," Natasha confirmed. "One of the ships is gone."

"What do you mean, gone?" Laura blinked, picking up the tiny tree and running to the flap of the tent. Sure enough, there was now only one invading ship in the sky. "Holy shitballs."

"I can't believe you're a mom and you swear so much, Laura Lee," Peter grumbled. "What's a Big Bertha? Is that some new Earth weapon that I like---missed?"

“The foul bilgesnipe is Big Bertha, surely,” Gamora intoned, clearly almost as confused as Drax.
"Holy shit, Jane let her have Big Bertha?" Laura gasped. Big Bertha was in the testing stages. Jane had been trying to create a portal device to simply zap away something that she didn't want people to have.

Truth be told, it had been Tony's coffee. And Jane didn't want him to have it because she was annoyed with him. So she created Big Bertha, which was small, compact and astonishingly overpowered. Instead of coffee, she had portaled Tony's favorite, ridiculously expensive car into orbit around Jupiter.

Obviously since then, it had only become more powerful.

"Where did you portal them?" Steve shouted over the comm, obviously running fast towards Darcy again. The sound of Darcy answering him was distorted and far away and Steve came back with, "Where's Grazylchyuck?"

"Graz of the Chyuck? That hell hole?" Drax asked loudly, uncaring that the comm unit would make his voice a bellow in the ears of his compatriots. "Quill, this Earthling woman is dastardly and ruthless. I like her. We should ask for her to travel with us. You may stay here in her stead."

"Gamora?" Laura called out. She doubted Big Bertha could do another portaling so soon. If it could, Darcy wouldn't have hesitated in zapping both ships out of the sky. "Get this to Clint, Groot and I will work on more, at the very least he can take out one of the boats for Tony and Thor to blast in to keep any stragglers from heading to New York. Peter Two probably couldn't handle all this."

"Yeah, but you know what he could probably handle?" Tony said thoughtfully. "Stopping wherever the mystery infinity stone signal is coming from. Barton-wife, get me those coordinates. Now."

"Ugh," Peter grumbled quietly. "Rudeness runs in the family."

"Darcy!" Steve called out as Manuel the Fluffy bent low to allow Darcy to dismount. She pressed a gentle hand to his snout before the beast went off to play, finding new aliens to squish beneath him.
Darcy grinned like a loon as she ran towards Steve and in no time at all, the pieces slotted back to right for the two of them as Steve held her in his arms and gave her a crushing kiss.

"Is now the best time to be sucking faces?" Rocket wondered. "I mean, I'm all for seeing this progress in a better setting, but we got an alien invasion on your planet, lovebirds."

"We had a plan," Steve said breathlessly, looking down at the infinity stone hanging around Darcy's neck. "We were gonna send them off on a wild goose chase."

"Oh, that's a good plan," Darcy nodded. "But it's more fun to send them to exile on an inhospitable corner of the galaxy. And also, my way will stop them from coming back."

"Tell your mate that it isn't that easy," Gamora advised Steve. "Nebula will stop at nothing."

"You guys blast more aliens," Darcy insisted. "If any of you know how to get their leader down on the ground, I can make sure she never tries to come back again."

Chapter End Notes

So much dialogue. I really enjoy writing dialogue, though. And so many characters, but also, that's like catnip for me too.

Thanks for reading!
“Steven Grant Rogers! What on God’s green Earth have you been doing, my love?”

Steven looked up at his mother, big blue eyes in a small, angular face. A face that just so happened to be scratched up, with little lines of blood marring his pale skin. Sarah Rogers dropped to her knees and went for a clean handkerchief in her pockets before tenderly wiping at the scratches on his face. His eyes were red and watery, as if he had just stopped crying a moment ago, but Sarah knew better.

Her son very rarely cried. Even when he was sick and miserable and hungry, he hardly ever cried, choosing to snuffle and show a brave, needlessly defiant face to whatever ailed him at the moment. Steven usually only cried when something hit him deep in his emotions. When he had been old enough to ask about his father, she had sadly explained to him why his father would never return from the Great War, he had cried then, soft and sad and inconsolable. She doubted his watery eyes had anything to do with sadness, given the stubborn tilt of his wee little mouth.

And then he sneezed. He sneezed three times in a row.

“Steven Grant, what have you gotten up to now?” Sarah sighed, dabbing the handkerchief on another thin little scratch near to his left eye.
“There was a camanalash,” Steven mumbled, turning his head away so his mother couldn’t begin to make out his explanation.

Sarah sighed. He was a cunning thing, even at five years old.

“Steven,” she said with all the sternness her own Irish mother had used upon her during her wild days as a girl.

“Mother, they was hurting the kitty!” Steven pouted miserably. “I couldna let them hurt the poor kitty, it couldna protected itself!”

“Oh Steven,” Sarah sighed, putting the handkerchief to the side and leaning into kiss her boy’s forehead. “You can’t go running off into fights all the time. The boys who did this to you must have been much bigger than you.”

“It wasanthebleh,” Steven said quickly, looking away again.

“Come again now, laddie?” Sarah asked stern as the dickens.

“It wasn’t the boys who scratched me,” Steve whispered. “It was the kitty after I rescued her.”

Brooklyn, 1935

Bucky had known Steve for ten years, and it was really a surprise to him to realize that this was the very first riot Steve had ever started. He would have expected that shit stirrer Rogers to have started at least half a dozen in his first seventeen years of life. But this was his very first one.

He thought of how proud Sarah Rogers would be of her son when he told her about Steve screaming in some awful bigot’s face who was upset that a negro had supposedly stolen a job from a white man. Bucky also thought of how pissed off his own mother would be if he and Steve got arrested.

Steve got punched and went flying, landing and rolling on the ground until he was sprawled out in
front of Bucky’s feet.

“I’ll make a deal with you, pal,” Bucky sighed, rolling up his sleeves carefully, not wanting to give himself away with the state of his shirt after all was said and done.

“Oh, hey, Buck,” Steve gasped out as he got to his feet fairly quickly. “These awful assholes are spouting lies, someone needed to stand up for---”

“Why’s that someone always gotta be you?” Bucky asked seriously.

Steve stood up straight and could only shrug. “Seems right to do?”

“Yeah---yeah it does.” Bucky smirked before taking a deep breath and beginning to walk to the guy that had hit Steve who was still screaming disgusting lies in someone’s face. He tapped the bigot on the shoulder and wasted no time in punching the sucker in the face the minute he turned. “C’mon, punk. I’m not doin’ this alone!”

Arkansas, 1943

“Aww, Jesus Christ, what the hell is Rogers doing now?”

“Uhm...what?” Dolores blinked up at the stage manager with large, innocent brown eyes. She’d been picked by Steve and the girls for one reason, and one reason only. It was generally accepted that no one could ever think Dolores was up to no good, not with those big, innocent doe eyes.

“Dolores, don’t give me those eyes,” Stage Manager Arnold sighed. “They don’t work on me no more on account of me asking you to do them for me to get me outta that jam with that union manager.”

“Oh shit, we forgot,” Dolores sighed, rolling those big, innocent doe eyes in a very sarcastic way. When she wasn’t playing the putz to get the heat off of ne’er do wells, she was quite the potty mouth.
“Where the hell are the other girls? And where the hell is Rogers?” Arnold demanded.

“Well, hell Arnie, Rogers caught wind of that internment camp for the Japanese and heard that people was sick cause of the sanitation condition so off he went and he managed to get all the girls to go with him,” Dolores said quickly. All the girls including her. “You know Rogers got a way with that earnest eye blinking thing, they went to rob a warehouse, Robin Hood style to get those poor Japanese what they need. Rogers said they ain’t done nothing wrong, just that fear is blinding folks and, oh hell, he said it better…”

“Fucking hell,” Arnold sighed. “He’s over six feet tall and as broad as a barn.”

“Yeah, I know,” Dolores shrugged.

“He’s gonna get himself arrested. Again. C’mon kid, break out the doe eyes, we got cops to occupy.”

---

Scotland, 1944

“Pooch me hame and piss up me kilt ya scabby bassa!”

Bucky looked around at the bar, wondering how in the hell it had gotten so bad when he had just gone to hit the head. It was literally two minutes.

“The hell Rogers?!?” Bucky screamed as the man in question fended off the inept attacks of a half dozen drunken Scottsmen.

“They insulted Gabe, and me, and Dernier, and they called you an Italian fascist hiding behind a Scott’s noble name,” Morita explained calmly as he held up a copper serving tray just in time for it to meet the face of an oncoming attacker.

Bucky sighed and began rolling up his sleeves.
“I swear, if he can get through just two days without falling into a fight, I’d hand over every penny of my hazard pay to the person who could manage it,” Bucky admitted wryly, taking a drunken bastard who rushed at him with a bottle by the collar and throwing him back into the bar.

“Maybe after the war, Carter’ll calm him down some?” Morita said hopefully.

Both men let out guffaws of laughter. Like that’d be even possible with the two trouble loving lovebirds.

New York City, 2012

“He’s been pretty boring,” Maria admitted to Clint. “You should be fine for the next twelve hours.”

Clint nodded at the woman, knowing she meant he could text the crap out of his wife for the next twelve hours before he had to head back to the cube and the scientists trying to break the cube. Cap-watch was the sweetest gig a Shield agent could grab, to be honest. If you needed a break, you watched the surveillance cameras on the newly thawed Captain America.

Fury felt it was important to keep tabs on all the moving parts of the Avenger’s Initiative, especially Rogers, who no one had anticipated would be available for the Avenger’s Initiative. On account of him having died a few decades ago.

Clint felt for the guy. Ever since Rogers came back from the Retreat, every day had pretty much been the same boring experience. He woke up, left his apartment, went to the local library to try to get up to speed, then headed to the gym. Then it was straight back home to the sad, empty apartment.

Clint figured he was going to get bored eventually. He wanted to help the dude out, but Fury and Hill said Rogers needed time on his own.

“Uhoh, what’s that?” Clint tilted his head as he watched the surveillance feed show Steve turning down an alleyway and waiting in the shadows.
Barton watched in amazement as Captain America, the World War II hero, waited patiently until about fifteen feet away from the entrance to the alley, a mugger ripped the purse out of the arms of an elderly woman. He waited patiently still until just the right moment, stepping out and clotheslining the dumb asshole who wanted to steal from someone’s nana.

“How in the hell---” Clint blinked at the screen. “Does trouble just find this dude or what?”

Washington DC, 2013

“How did this happen?”

Maria smirked as she watched Steve fend off six burly men easily in the corner of a bar. She looked back to Natasha and managed a nonchalant shrug.

“Someone was hitting on one of the waitresses and then decided to pinch that waitress’s ass,” Maria explained calmly. “Apparently, that kind of thing doesn’t happen on Steve Rogers’ watch.”

Natasha let out a small huff of laughter. “I never thought it would.”

She reached into her back pocket and pulled out one of her local police badges.

“Let him have a little fun,” Maria requested. “He might not be such a tight ass at the next briefing if he gets some of this extra fight out of him.”

Natasha smirked and shrugged as Steve tossed one of the attackers into another attacker. “Something tells me that you can’t really get the extra fight out of this guy. He needs a distraction.”

Idaho, 2015
“MOM! MOM! THE RANCHERS!” Lila shouted as she ran to the house. She’d been sent because she was the fastest by far, even managing to outpace Sam Wilson.

“What?” Laura looked up from her laptop, her brow furrowing.

“The ranchers are running their cows close to the fence line,” Lila revealed.

“Those motherfuckers,” Laura hissed. She looked to the laptop and said, “I’m gonna bankrupt them.”

“Uncle Steve is gonna defend the farm!” Cooper yelled, trailing his sister and way more out of breath than the tiny, elite athlete.

“He’s gonna defend our farm?” Laura blinked. There wasn’t much to defend. She just didn’t want to deal with cow patties when it came time to cutting the grass. It was more of an annoyance and totally didn’t deserve a Captain America call to arms. “Wait---how?”

Cooper shrugged. “I think he’s fighting a bunch of cows?”

“Holy hell,” Laura sighed. “We really need to get your Uncle Steve a date with your Aunt Darcy. Together? They’d kind of be unstoppable.”

Sahara Desert, Present Day

“Is everyone else seeing this?”

Bucky’s question went unanswered, because yes, they were all seeing what he was seeing and they were fascinated by it to the point they were speechless. It was a thing of beauty, really. Darcy was riding a gigantic slimy beast, looking pretty as a picture and essentially using her beast as a vehicle for alien slaughter, smashing and batting oncoming aliens with hooves and antlers.
And Steve was using both the shield and the damned antlers in order to swing himself back and forth, a human wrecking ball that never strayed too far from Darcy. Every once in awhile, he even managed to swing himself up to where Darcy was saddled and give her a quick, sweet kiss.

They were decimating the enemy easily. Alone. By themselves. Just the two of them.

“I don’t know about everyone else, but this is the culmination to a lot of years of catching Steve Rogers getting into fights,” Bucky continued, sounding proud and yet also appalled at the same time. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

“They are well matched!” Drax called out exuberantly. “The mating must be glorious indeed!”

“Heathen, that is my sister—or grandniece,” Thor paused, clearly contemplating which he liked more. “You will not disrespect her this way.”

“The shield bearer is the one disrespecting your sister niece,” Drax chuckled.

“Wait—what?” Tony demanded.

Thor sighed heavily, “It is a long story best saved for after battle.”

Thor frowned and looked at Steve and Darcy once more. He didn’t know if he liked that very much. Steve should have asked permission, really before consummation---

“Hey, Lightning God, you wanna zap some of these ships?” Clint demanded as he sent three quick arrows off into the air. “Tony is kind of showing you up here.”

“Stop stroking his ego, it’s plenty large enough,” Thor sighed.

“You tell him, baby,” Laura agreed.

“BABE!” Clint gasped. “That was Thor you were talking to.”
“I regret nothing,” Laura insisted. She began typing madly on one of the laptops that T’Challa had provided her with. Shuri was monitoring along with a team of scientists in Wakanda. “Hey, baby?”

“Yes, mighty Barton shield maid?” Thor asked.

“If I could get the big ship’s force field down, could you zap it out of the air?” Laura wondered.

“I could---” Tony began.

“No one asked you!” Laura cut him off. “You’ll be unavailable, could you do it alone, Thor?”

“Indeed!” Thor chuckled.

“Vision and Wanda could assist,” Tony pouted. “And why would I be unavailable, shrew-woman?”

“Boss, you have Peter on line one,” Friday interrupted.

“I’m calling Tony Stark?” Peter wondered.

“Let’s go with last names, people,” T’Challa suggested. “Wakandans do not have this ridiculous naming problem.”

“I’m Peter One,” Peter Quill insisted. “Call me Peter One.”

“OH! Then I can be Scott One!” Scott said with excitement.

“Spidey, do you have good news?” Tony demanded.

“Uhm, hey, Mr. Stark. Just to let you know, I try to keep my extra curricular crime fighting activities
to later hours. I can’t really cut school anymore, cause of—"

“Sure, kid, sure,” Tony said quickly. Rhodey wasn’t listening in yet, but he didn’t want to hear more reprimands about involving a sixteen-year-old kid into super-heroing. “Did you see something weird in the coordinates I sent?”

“Well, see, you didn’t send coordinates, so much as made that watch you gave me talk out loud during study hall and give me directions, and that’s just---you didn’t tell me the watch had surveillance---”

“Tony!” Natasha scolded.

“Who is the child on the communication systems?” Thor wondered. “He sounds most adorable!”

“The stone, kid, the STONE, did you see anything?” Tony demanded.

Peter sighed heavily. “Okay, so, you took me to Central Park, and there were a bunch of people that looked like they were Harry Potter wannabes, and one of them had a glowing stone…”

"What's a hairy Potter?" Peter One questioned. "Is that like some new Earth slang? I feel like I'm missing something here."

"You poor, pitiful man," T'Challa was the one to answer first, which was saying something, as Wakanda had been a shut off, closed nation for decades.

"I have been saying that for a long time now!" Drax laughed heartily. "Poor, pitiful Peter."

“Me?” Peter Parker questioned, sounding offended.

“No, me,” Peter Quill answered.

“Who are you, again?” Peter Parker wondered.
“I’m you in the future, we regret not asking Susie Mae to the dance and everyone has gills now,” Peter Quill answered. “Also, beware of 11:12 PM of next Thursday. You will trip and it’ll be bad.”

"Uhm, anyway," Peter Parker sounded like he was more confused than normal. "So the wizard was there, his stone glowed and now he is totally gone, just blipped right out right in the street. Do you have a read on that signal anymore? Because I checked from above and found nothing---"

"I am Groot."

"Ah---cool?" Peter Parker's voice scaled upwards.

"No readings, tiny spider child," Laura shook her head. "I'll have Friday give you a call if we see him again. And if you see him, it's imperative that you tell him NOT to use the infinity stone until we can mask all the signals."

"Wait---what, mask the signals?" Tony questioned. He paused and sucked in a sharp breath of annoyance. "Of fucking course."

"Swearing runs in the---"

"Petey!" Laura interrupted. "Come and get these arrows and bring them to Clint."

"So you're going to hijack all of my satellites---" Tony began.

"I'm going to hijack all of the satellites. ALL OF EVERYONE'S satellites," Laura insisted.

"I am Groot," the tree said, clearly impressed.

"And you're going to cloak Earth," Rocket translated. "No signals going out."
"If Darcy and Steve can get rid of the aliens currently here, I can make it so that no one can ever hear a peep from the infinity stones ever again," Laura confirmed. "You know….if Stark gives me all of Friday's processing power."

"ALL OF HER POWER?" Stark balked.

"Bigger picture, Tony," Clint encouraged.

"But I need SOME of the power!" Tony insisted. "Or else I'm dead in the water and useless."

"And how is that different than normal?" Laura cracked.

"HA! The females on this planet are far superior to the males, I enjoy being in their company," Drax laughed. "Quill, no wonder you left, they would have easily made you the whipping boy."

"Speaking of whipping boy." Peter One sighed, looking to the skies as the exit point for the invading forces widened to allow for the bigger girth of the sleek, two creature piloted fighter gliders.

"Gamora, do they have force fields?" Natasha asked succinctly.

A bullet echoed in the noise of the desert, hitting a fast moving target dead on in the center of the newly released gliders, causing it to slow down. Two more shots rang out, and each of the larger aliens tumbled from their aircraft, falling over one hundred feet to the ground.

"Nope," Bucky answered cheekily. "Open season on alien bastards, people. Just try and keep up with me."

Natasha smirked at Bucky, her eyebrow arching in a very sultry way as he continued to shoot with exact precision, making it rain aircraft and aliens. She went for her guns though and kept pace with him at a closer range as he slowly moved to his weapons cache and switched out his guns for a sniper rifle. She kept giving him sneaky little looks, her lips pursed slightly, green eyes twinkling as Bucky handled the long range ships and she handled the closer range ships. A deadly duo working in perfect harmony.
"Uhm," Rocket held up a small hand as if asking a question. "Do Earthlings have the intercourse out in the open? 'Cause Red here is about to devour Shiny Metal arm."

**

Gamora watched as her sister descended on a private glider. She resolved then that she would be the one to battle Nebula. The other warriors, both Earthling and Asgardian, were busy defending the planet from the monsters that Nebula had unleashed upon them. Gamora would be sure to protect them from her sister at the very least.

Nebula landed elegantly and immediately began running towards Gamora. It was eerily reminiscent of when they were younger, sparring as a way to stand out in front of their adoptive father, hoping to gain his favor and approval. Nebula had always run towards Gamora, screeching her anger and pain as loud as she could, leading with her right hand---

This time Gamora was easily able to dodge the right swipe of her sister and continued to dodge the almost predictable moves. The angrier Nebula was, the more she resorted to old tricks. And with every hit that failed to meet the mark, Nebula became more incensed.

“You’re a fool to defy our father in such a way,” Nebula accused.

“You’re a fool to still consider that monster your father,” Gamora came back calmly. “He is an abomination and he cares nothing for you. There is nothing you can do to make him ---”

“Shut up!” Nebula yelled.

“Manners,” Peter taunted as he rushed towards where Gamora and Nebula were engaged in hand to hand combat.

“Dammit Quill,” Gamora sighed as Nebula stopped engaging her and went for Peter instead, pulling a few incendiary discs and tossing them Peter’s way.

An arrow flew through the air and neatly went through three of the discs at once. Peter stopped in his tracks and then did a three hundred and sixty degree spin, looking all around for Clint with no success.
“Thanks cousin-in-law,” Peter called out.

Gamora shouted in pain as Nebula got a cheap shot in at the base of her spine and she fell to her knees, vulnerable to another hit. Knowing her sister, Gamora was sure that it would be a killing blow.

“Hey! The green one is my friend. I think, and you don’t mess with my friends,” Darcy shouted from about fifty feet away.

The shield preceded her, causing Nebula to duck and roll out of the way, directly underneath the raised hoof of the giant, filthy bilgesnipe.

“The stone,” Nebula whispered as she looked up, seeing it weighing against the human’s throat. “Give me the stone, and the invasion stops.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Peter sing songed as helpfully as he could, rushing to Gamora and going to his knees as he needlessly fussed over her.

"You're going to change your mind about the stone," Darcy promised.

"Are you all as dumb as Quill?" Nebula spat out. She glared at a wounded Gamora, who was still pushing away Peter's attempts at assistance. "Really, sister? This is the race you tie your loyalty to? They should have gone extinct eons ago."

"You think so?" Darcy nodded as if considering that. She slid off of Manuel the Fluffy and stood next to her pet bilgesnipe, her arms crossing under her chest as she stared at the alien that would definitely try to burn Earth to the ground if it got her the stone. "Well considering eons ago, a bunch of these fucking stones landed in our fucking backyard and have been here ever since----sure, yeah, extinction seems likely for us. Or maybe, just maybe, they're here for a reason."

"You dare to think you can use the Infinity Stones?" Nebula laughed bitterly. "They are meant for greater purposes than Earthlings. You couldn't dream of using them."

"Well, for one, my best friend survived one already. And two? I have used this one, and if I didn't,
you wouldn't be here right now," Darcy fingered the orange stone around her neck. "And third-ly? It's probably not about using them so much as it is about protecting them. They were sent to us for a reason. We’re meant to protect them from the likes of you and Thanos."

Nebula laughed and spoke into her own communication device. "Begin dropping the explosives, I can pick up the stone from out of her ashes."

Gamora made a noise, clearly the explosives wouldn't have been so great. Darcy nodded and turned to Steve slightly.

"I'll be right back, take care of the bad guys and when it's all over you and I are gonna put that meade back in the bottle," she advised before the light began building in intensity on the stone that lay around her neck.

“Love you, Magnet,” Steve smiled at her sweetly. “See you soon, and I’m gonna enjoy the hell outta putting that meade back in the bottle.”

"GROSS," Sam grumbled.

"Indeed," Thor agreed, glaring at Steve for good measure.

“You give your consent here?” Darcy looked to the green woman who seemed to know the blue one.

“Consent?” Gamora questioned.

“To rewire her soul,” Darcy put her hands on the glowing stone, which was definitely excited at the prospect. “I don’t have it in me to clean it and redo it perfectly. But I can reset her priorities.”

“Do it,” Gamora nodded.

“You may have to be responsible for her after,” Darcy warned.
“Uhmmmm,” Peter put up his hand as if asking a question in school.

“Do it,” Gamora repeated, putting Peter’s hand down forcibly.

Darcy turned back around and gave Nebula a small, crafty little smirk before really letting loose.

"Go ahead Smokey. Let’s change her mind about this planet and its inhabitants, we could always use another protector."

“We go by Guardians….of the Galaxy, actually,” Peter corrected her to no avail, as Darcy was seriously concentrated at that point.

Nebula's eyes widened even as the light became blinding, staring into it in horror as every muscle in her body froze. And then her scream of pain ripped through the desert landscape.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this. Thanks for reading! We only have a few more chapters to this story, believe it or not!
Boonville, Missouri, 1989

Peggy Carter was certainly used to this by now. She hadn’t been expecting it on this little farm in the middle of nowhere, but there was something very familiar about walking up to a door and suddenly having dangerous looking robotic arms coming very quickly towards her face, pincers at the ready. She sighed and hoped she wouldn’t have to do battle with home built robots for the second time that week.

“Miss Quill? Would you please turn off your over zealous security system so that I might have a word with you?” Peggy asked hopefully.

The metal pincers clacked ominously near Peggy’s eyes in response to her request.

“It’s about your trust fund,” Peggy announced. “Or, more accurately, how you drained your entire trust fund in the span of three months while trying to find your cousin, Peter.”

The robot pincers receded and the door to the little metal shack was yanked open to reveal a tiny brunette. Peggy had to call upon all of her dastardly spy skills to mask the reaction she had to little Miss Laura Quill. Except for her long, stringy brown hair that fell carelessly past her shoulders, she was the spitting image of young Anthony.

They had the same dark brown eyes inherited from their father. The same deep chocolate brown hair, slightly wavy, just like Howard’s had once been. Even the little nose was the same, straight and perfect and attractive. Little Miss Quill also had the same dark circles that both Howard and Anthony were prone to getting under their eyes.
Howard and Anthony usually won the marks of the tired after a night of too much work for the sake of work and discovery. Peggy knew that Laura Quill, the illegitimate and hidden daughter of Howard Stark, was not staying up late due to insatiable curiosity and innovation alone.

Her Aunt had passed months ago, and her young cousin had disappeared the night she died. Laura’s grandmother had passed shortly after that, and it had left Laura’s poor mother a depressed shell of herself. It was up to Laura, fourteen year old, brilliant wunderkind to keep up the search for her cousin.

“Who are you?” the teenager demanded, looking just like little Anthony in her anger and sullenness.

“I’m---a family friend,” Peggy said honestly. “I’m your Great Uncle Frank’s best friend’s wife.”

“Great Uncle Frank is a bastard, he doesn’t have friends,” Laura disputed.

“Everyone has a friend,” Peggy promised her. “I’d like to be your friend, Miss Quill.”

Jarvis should be doing this. No, Peggy reconsidered that quickly. Howard should be handling this. Howard should be standing in front of his amazingly smart, angry young daughter, explaining everything and offering to care for her.

“How did you empty your trust fund?” Peggy asked softly.

Laura snorted out, looking far more bitter than anyone had the right to be at the age of fourteen. She crossed her arms in front of her and gave a slight nod to something to her right. Suddenly the metal pincers were back and were right in Peggy’s face once more.

“You work for Stark?” the teenager demanded angrily. “Because if you do, you can fuck the hell right off.”

“Firstly, watch your mouth, young lady,” Peggy warned. “Secondly, I do not work for Stark.”
“Sure, just like that other British dude didn’t work for Stark,” Laura scoffed. “Get off my lawn, lady. I’m not buying what you’re selling and I don’t want anything else from Daddy dearest.”

“Laura,” Peggy sighed. “Can we please talk about this as civilized human beings?”

“Nope,” Laura said, popping the ‘p’.

“Did you know that you have a brother?” Peggy asked. “And did you know that at that moment right there, looking at you was like looking at him in a wig?”

“I don’t care,” Laura hissed out. “Get off my property. I don’t want anything from Howard Stark, much less a brother.”

“Please take my card,” Peggy held one up to her. “If you ever want to accept help, I’ll be here for you, and I will never report back to Howard about it.”

“I don’t need your help,” Laura insisted stubbornly. “And I never will.”

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**Sahara, Present Day**

“BARTON!”

Clint flinched from his perch twenty-five feet away. Usually when Tony yelled like that, it was because of some badly drawn up plan used during a prank skirmish. But Tony wasn’t screaming at him. The battle was still ongoing, but quickly winding down. Darcy and the bald alien lady had disappeared in a flash of orange light, and Steve had immediately turned and given the slimy bilgesnipe a salute and then chaos had ensued as the Avengers and the Guardians went on the offensive.

Tony had immediately fallen from the sky, thankfully, he had only been about fifteen feet off the ground.
“I didn’t do it!” Clint said automatically and reflexively, but Tony wasn’t clunkily walking towards him in a dead suit. He was stalking towards the camouflaged and hidden tent that served as their headquarters and Laura’s center of command. “Uhoh. Quill, can you go make sure the guy in the red and gold robot suit doesn’t murder your cousin?”

“What?” Peter called out a little loud. “Mr. Stark is gonna murder Laura? NO, that’s like...some kind of fancy word-icide.”

“What now?” Clint blinked at him, notching another arrow to send at a slow moving platoon of aliens moving down towards Earth.

“MR. STARK WAIT!” Peter yelled as he ran quickly towards the tent, only to realize he couldn’t find it, as it was cloaked completely with a large net provided by the Pirate on the flying boat. “Shit, where’d it go again?”

"Barton what in the hell do you think you're doing?!"

Tony painfully made his way into the tent. The suit was powered down, which meant he was trapped in it, and it wasn’t moving on its own. It was not easy to force a half ton suit of metal to walk around under his own power. But he had done it for nearly half a mile after falling from the sky into the sand. Because he was going to rip Laura Barton a new one, whether she was an ally or not.

He didn't know what he'd done to the woman. Frankly, at that moment, he didn't care what he'd done to her. She'd been absolutely piss poor awful to him almost five minutes after he had met her, and he'd come a long way to realize he didn't deserve to be treated so badly when he didn't even know what he'd done wrong. He glared around the room and saw the tree standing on a table top, looking up at Tony curiously.

"I am Groot," it said softly.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. BARTON?!” Tony screamed out.
"I am Groot," the tree repeated, its inflection changing slightly, less soft, more sass.

"I am Tony Stark," Tony glibly replied, glaring down at the tree.

"I am Groot," the adorable little thing nodded, its mood lifting immediately. "I am Groot."

"I am Tony Stark," Tony repeated, wrinkling his nose down at the tree.

"I am Groot," the tree smiled. He looked around the tent and pointed to where Laura was sitting down next to a mobile power unit, a laptop in her hands as she typed madly. "I am Groot."

"I am Tony Stark," Tony flipped the tree off.

Groot, to his credit, knew what it meant and returned the gesture two fold.

Tony stalked off, metal grinding and creaking thanks to the absence of his electronic joint system. His noisy arrival didn't alert Laura to his presence as she continued to work madly, muttering under her breath the entire time about weak sauce algorithms and firewalls as delicate and weak as a nut sack. Tony noisily brought his arms up, with a fair amount of strength, so that the could cross them in front of his chest.

He cleared his throat, and Laura only held up one finger, her middle one, of course, for a brief second before going back and working.

"I didn't say you could unpower the suit," Tony complained. "I didn't give my permission for any of what you're doing right now."

"Don't care," Laura muttered. "By the way, I'm using your digital fingerprints to grab satellites from hostile countries. It's a trick Darcy taught me after SHIELD fell..."

"That little stinker, I KNEW that was her," Tony rolled his eyes. His face went even redder and his left eye began to twitch on its own accord, "And I definitely didn't say it was cool to use my digital signature. Give me power back to the suit so I can go out and help!"
"I am Groot," the tree huffed out.

"Listen to Groot, they have it handled. If you want to be useful, take off the useless suit and figure out a way to give me forty percent more power from Fury's overly large battery pack," Laura grumbled. "Maybe you'll figure it out before my kid is old enough to join the battle and do it for you."

"Man, what in the hell?" Tony nearly shouted, causing the tree to flinch. "What did I ever do to you? Why are you such a bit----"

"NO! Don't do it, dude!" Peter's shout could be heard on the other side of the tent's walls. It fluttered and bunched up as Peter desperately tried to find an entrance.

"Go fight aliens, Petey!" Laura yelled.

"Come on, where's the opening, what in the hell, why can't I---"

Peter's mumbling cut off as he became tangled in the camouflage fabric of the tent. He tripped and fell forward, his head appearing on the ground. He grinned at finally being able to see and he began scooting his body under the opening, which was only slightly too small to fit him completely. He got stuck around his shoulders and wasted about thirty seconds trying to get past the impediment.

"A little help, Groot?" Peter asked, to which he received only an arched sort of wooden brow from the sentient tree. "Right, okay, yeah."

A full 90 seconds later, he was inside the tent and hopped to his feet, looking around with a goofy smile of accomplishment. It was then quickly replaced when he saw Tony glaring at him, and Laura completely ignoring his presence. Peter sternly pointed a finger at Tony.

"Don't call her a bitch, dude. Uncool," Peter advised.

"She's being a stone cold bit---"
"Uh uh!" Peter interrupted. "Uncool!"

"Why, why is it so uncool to call a bitchy spade a spade?" Tony's exasperation was clear, his entire face going a little red.

"Cause she's your half-sister, man, don't be a douche wagon!" Peter scolded.

Silence reigned at Peter's reveal for a few extended moments. Laura broke it with a heavy sigh before the sound of her keyboard work came back. Groot, to his credit, rolled his eyes, and turned away from them to go back to view the monitors for any additional infinity stone readings on the planet. Tony stood in the center of the tent, completely gobsmacked, his hands dropping very slowly and noisily to hang at his sides.

"What?" Clint's voice came over the comm units. "WHAT ?!?"

"Thanks, Petey, you dumbass silly bastard," Laura sighed. She turned off her comm unit and gave Tony a blank, bossy look. "Stark, seriously, take off the junk and give me more power here. There are more important things than this."

"WHAT ?!?" Clint still repeated.

Tony was rapid fire blinking, as if continually doing so would somehow bring about some kind of greater understanding of what Peter Quill had just blurted. Eventually, he began to painstakingly remove his armor, piece by piece, placing the useless metal into a heap by one of the work tables. Peter watched in silent amazement as his cousin Laura Lee and her half-brother Tony Stark went into wordless work.

Laura continued to type away madly, every once in a while snapping her fingers and getting Tony to look at the screen. Meanwhile, Tony salvaged bits from the useless suit to open up the power source, cobbling together something that was mostly stable and way more efficient.

"You guys are strange," Peter announced. "Uhm---sorry I blurted it out Laura Lee."

"I've been waiting for you to blurt it since we found out thirty years ago," Laura waved him off with an air of disinterest. "Go and help outside, Petey."
"We're almost clear," Natasha reported. "Quill, Gamora says you have some kind of intergalactic police that might be able to contain these people?"

"Yeah, I'll call them," Peter nodded, waving at the newly revealed Stark siblings.

Tony found that they worked pretty flawlessly together. They seemed to be on the same wavelength, and didn't seem to mind the muttering aloud to themselves.

"Seriously, Fury, are all your people dysfunctional in the brain area?" Tony grumbled at the archaic battery unit. "I told them I'd arc reactor them up and here we are, subpar battery with no give---"

"Fury doesn't like listening," Laura muttered. "Like he should have listened to me when I said not to build giant helicarriers and to focus on the eighty bajillion satellites going up into orbit."

"Was your mom the maid in 1975?" Tony asked bluntly, not even trying to segway gently into the abrupt change of subject.

"My mom wasn't a maid," Laura disputed. "That's just what your dad told your mom so she could spend time in your house."

"Jesus," Tony sighed. "Why didn't you---"

"Peggy and Jarvis didn't think it was necessary for me to know you back then," Laura said shortly. "And when I went looking after your dad and mom died, your handler made sure to let me know you weren't interested in a family reunion with your gutter trash redneck relations. And after I managed to dodge the first attempt on my life from him, I kind of figured it would be wise to keep quiet. And hidden."

Tony swallowed at that. He felt angry, but not at Laura. His sister. He had a sister. He had family.

"I didn't know," Tony said softly. "Stane---he never told me."
Laura looked up at him sharply. She'd been led to believe that Tony HAD known of a missing sister out there, but he hadn't cared, and had only wanted her to sign off on the rights to any Stark inheritance. Her already spent trust fund had been pay off enough apparently. Identical brown eyes stared back at her, right down to the thick black lashes. She saw Lila in his expression. When she was overwhelmed, and felt scared due to an overabundance of emotion. Her baby girl was great at dealing with the physical aspects of life, she'd been aspiring to be Natasha from the day she could lift her head up off of the pillow. But Lila had never been great with dealing with the more emotional aspects of life.

Laura realized after Clint's professional life began running in tandem with Tony's, that it wasn't something instilled in her by her godmother. The inability to deal with the overwhelming feelings of sadness or anxiety or even happiness sometimes was a Stark trait, inherited from Lila's grandfather. Laura had seen it with her own two eyes when the Avengers had come to the farm.

She'd felt sorry for him. For about two minutes.

"How long have you known?" Tony asked, trying to keep his tone neutral to the point that he sounded a little bored by his own question.

"Since I was thirteen," Laura revealed.

"Jesus," Tony breathed out. "I'm---"

"Don't apologize," Laura said sharply, looking up from her laptop very briefly before looking back down and typing madly. She shrugged. "You didn't do anything."

"But you hate me anyway?" Tony wondered, not daring to look at Laura in the face as he continued to work on freeing his arc reactor core out of his suit to put into the power cell.

Laura sighed heavily and pounded on her keyboard with excessive force. She hated doing the computer work. She'd rather have Natasha or Darcy on hand to do these things for her while she had her hands full of suit and arc reactor. But she knew that the only person on the planet who excelled beyond her on energy based mechanics was her half-brother, sitting in the dirt with his hands full of parts.

"I am Groot," the tree whispered, gently and prodding.
"Yeah, yeah, I know!" Laura snapped. She stopped typing and said, "I don't hate you. I never hated you. Was I jealous? For about ten seconds after Mr. Jarvis came and visited me and told me to stop snooping because it was dangerous for me, and I quickly realized how much your life was just as sucky as mine was."

"We can get into a pissing contest about it later, because I think I probably won," Tony's smirk had returned a little, looking more like himself.

"I'm just—I wanted to be better than you," Laura said softly. "I wanted Howard Stark to see that without the money, or the prep school or the butler and the nanny, that I was just as good as you. Better. Smarter. More clever."

"You managed to have a fully functioning personal life," Tony input helpfully. "You got me beat there by a mile."

"Clint was pretty helpful there," Laura admitted. "Peggy had me brought into Shield, wanted me to work on weapons. And then...Clint."

"Holy shit, the birdbrain is my brother-in-law," Tony whispered. "Shit. SHIT."

"You rang?" Clint came traipsing into the tent, an eyebrow arched at Tony. He looked to his wife then and shook his head in wonderment at her, "Nearly thirteen years of marriage, and I find this out NOW?"

"Surprise?" Laura offered hopefully. "It wasn't something that I thought should ever be brought to light. I mean—I thought Tony didn't want, you know. Me."

"Babe," Clint gave her a sad smile. "I coulda told you he needed you more than anything thirteen years ago. I mean. Look at him."

"Hilarious," Tony said dryly. The power cell began to glow intently and his eyes widened.

Clint knew what that meant. He'd seen the same expression on Laura, Cooper and Tony's face before. It meant whatever was currently being tinkered with had a fifty percent chance of exploding.
He hit the ground for cover and wasn't surprised when Laura and Tony did the same. Even the sentient tree had the good grace to fall to the floor and bury himself halfway into the sand. A few moments passed by and nothing happened, so Tony got back up and dusted himself off.

"You have enough power now to launch about five hundred thousand satellites," Tony announced.

"Cool dude," Laura gave him a thumbs up. "I'm only gonna move about three thousand of them though."

"What are you doing now?" Clint asked.

Laura turned her comm unit back on and asked, "Cap? How's it looking out there?"

"Vision says the mother ship's empty. We're waiting on Quill's people to come clean up, Fury, get that boat back on the helicarrier, you aren't taking a god damned thing from the aliens," Steve warned aggressively. "What happened the last time you did that?"

"As soon as Darcy is---back?" Laura blinked, wondering how the stone worked. She went a little glazed over in her expression at the thought of getting a better look at it and figuring it out.

Clint watched in amazement as Tony and Laura got identical looks on their faces. He snapped his fingers, getting the both of them out of it.

"I don't think I've ever been attracted to you, Stark, but hell if I shouldn't have realized you're just like my damned wife some of the time," Clint sighed.

"Disgusting," Tony flipped him off the same time that Laura did. The newly discovered half-siblings shared a fist bump immediately after.

"Shit," Clint whispered. "This is going to be trouble."
Steve listened in with a little smile on his face. This was a good development. He couldn't wait to talk it over with Darcy. Tony would have another anchor in the world, another relationship lifeline to help him whenever he got too far over into his pain and neurosis. He didn't trust Laura to reign the man in on any of his well meaning science experiments, but that's what the rest of the team was for.

He watched as Bucky and Drax fought side by side in hand to hand combat with the last remaining alien invaders, laughing heartily and genuinely in their violent joy. T'Challa had given Steve a respectful nod before removing his mask and heading towards the tent, eager to start in on the science that was underway. They'd survived. Again. They'd done it. They'd made it through and now the most brilliant people on his team were working on a way to hide Earth from dangerous eyes.

"This is very boring again," Fandral announced as he stood next to Steve. "I wish to go back to the ship and try to woo the warrior women of the Shield."

"Uhm?" Steve blinked at him.

"The severe ladies who will certainly know how best to handle my charms," Fandral grinned at him.

"Tell that rotten faced Asgardian he's not getting anywhere near Hill and Carter," Fury warned over the comm unit.

"You know what, pal, you head up on the ship," Steve advised. "Have Hill and Carter get a quinjet fueled to go and retrieve the rest of the team from Wakanda."

Fandral grinned and gave Steve a grateful, appreciative nod before rushing off. Manuel the Fluffy, having run out of fun aliens to trample trotted up to stand beside Steve, who he clearly recognized as his de facto humanoid when Darcy wasn't around. Steve pet the giant beast, avoiding the slimy spots and gave him a hopeful smile.

"Darcy shouldn't be too long this time," Steve guessed. "I don't think that blue woman could have been half as messed up as Bucky."

"Rude!" Bucky called out as he and Drax threw an alien back and forth with glee and verve.
"And then, maybe our pal Tony wouldn't mind bringing us back to the New York base," Steve shrugged. "Fury, I'm sure you put the footage out to the press now?"

"You're heroes again," Fury assured him. "Standing invitation from everyone with half a brain cell to come back home."

"Maybe Tony'll build us a stable and you can live here with us," Steve told Manuel the Fluffy.

"No," Fury answered back. "Lewis can't have her pet on Earth."

"Well, he just did a pretty good job protecting Earth, so I'm thinking he can stay at a five star hotel if he should want," Steve countered. "Don't make me set my Magnet on you, Nicky."

Fury's heavy sigh was the only answer.

"Steve, the minute Darcy gets back, let me know," Laura advised. "We're ready to cloak Earth."

"And then?" Natasha wondered, sidling next to Steve and the bilgesnipe as they watched Bucky and Drax continue to entertain themselves.

"Then, we'll need to repair the Guardians' ship," Steve nodded.

"DIBS!" Laura and Tony shouted simultaneously.

"And then---I'm gonna marry my Magnet, that is, if it's alright with Thor," Steve looked to the Asgardian who was approaching them warily, his eyes trained on the filthy bilgesnipe.

"I am not the one you have to ask, Steven," Thor squinted at him. "Although she is my chosen sister, I am not her closest relation left on the mortal plane of existence."

"And who would that be, by the way?" Natasha asked, smirking a little like she had already figured out the answer.
"Lady Darcy is descended from Loki's own daughter, Hel," Thor replied. "Forgive me for saying this Steven, but he is not overly fond of you."

"Well...damn," Steve sighed. He shrugged and gave Thor a confident smile. "That's just gonna be too bad then. Because nothing is stopping me from making Darcy Lewis my wife."

"Stop trying to rig the betting pool, Thor!" Sam called out from where he and Wanda were working at moving the aliens into piles. "You should all know by now that Nat and fucking Barnes are gonna win it all."

"Where are we?"

Nebula looked around in childlike wonder at the sprawling, open space, it was comfortable and smelt nice, like a treat that the caretaker used to give her and her sister.

"In a safe spot, Nebula," Darcy promised. "How do you feel?"

Nebula blinked owlishly at the question, wondering how to answer it exactly. She felt...good. Free. Unburdened.

"Hungry," she answered.

"That'll work," Darcy shrugged. Smokey and Darcy had just done a bit of rewiring once the rusty bits of Nebula were knocked off. She was worried that Nebula may have regressed, but she seemed just the same as before, "Do you trust your sister now?"

"With my life," Nebula answered automatically. She looked puzzled at that. "Why?"

"Why?" Darcy repeated.
"I hated her before. Why do I trust her now?" Nebula demanded.

"Because she is good, and truthful, and loyal," Darcy answered. "And she and her friends will protect you. You're going to go with them, and you're going to help them."

"Are they my friends as well?" Nebula wondered. She shook her head and scowled humorously. "I don't think that I am friends with them. Perhaps the tree. On occasion the little furred beast, but only because he delights me with his anarchy. But certainly not the Earthling. The hair at the side of his face upsets me."

"I get that," Darcy nodded in agreement. "Manscaping is a personal preference."

"My father is a monster," Nebula announced suddenly, completely changing the subject. "The weight of him is missing here."

She gestured to her temple and smiled, the expression foreign on her face. She still looked dangerous and glowering, and the smile made her look feral to boot. But thanks to her connection with the soul stone, Darcy knew that Nebula didn't mean any harm. Feral, glowering and dangerous was just her default setting. At least this way, she would be directing all that energy to protecting the galaxy instead of devoting her skill set to Thanos, the mad king.

"Do you know, that the forcefield your clever friends wish to build won't last," Nebula whispered. She sighed and admitted, "Thanos will find a way. He won't rest. It may be many generations for Earth, but he will find a way."

Darcy couldn't help by smile, a defiant brow arched in challenge. "Let him try. No matter how long it takes, we're going to be ready for him."

Chapter End Notes

I hope that you enjoyed this chapter. THanks for reading!!
I'm thinking that this story will be done in two chapters. I'm so excited I could probably faint.
Raise a Glass

Chapter Notes

I can't believe I'm almost finished.
I can't believe it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Fifty-Nine: Raise a Glass

Undisclosed Safe House, Summer of 2014

"To Nick Fury," Sharon Carter held up her glass, and smiled when the rest of the SHIELD loyal churused their appreciation for the former SHIELD director.

"Smart bastard," Maria Hill shook her head. She looked at all the other agents, with their wildly disparate clearance levels. Some had been on the job for forty years, others had just signed on a month ago. But they all had one thing in common. When Captain Rogers had made the call to arms, they had answered and survived.

They had countless other brethren laid up in the same hospital that Rogers was quickly recovering in. Maria looked down at her phone and cursed.

"What?" Sharon wondered, automatically stiff and ready to pounce on whatever had caught up with them.

"Rumlow," Maria rolled her eyes. "He made it through surgery and is already missing."

"Shit," Sharon wrinkled her nose. She had a black and blue knee that she'd like to address with Rumlow. Namely by shoving her foot so far up his ass that the bruise on her knee met his asscheeks. She reached for her own phone and sighed, "Who do we have to put on his tail?"
"It's a waste of time," Maria shook her head. "Stark is on it and will keep JARVIS looking."

Sharon stared at her drink, almost full except for the one gulp of whiskey she had taken, for what felt like hours. The rest of her companions went off to find a softer place to sleep in the spartan safehouse. Only she and Maria remained at the steel table, both of their whiskey nearly untouched.

"Fury?" Sharon asked quietly.

"Back to the medic," Maria confirmed. "He busted all but ten of his stitches in his chest when he flew that helicopter. The doc says he'll be out of commission for another three weeks, at least."

"Might take Rogers that long to recover anyway," Sharon nodded. "Aunt Peg called me and left me a voicemail when everything was happening. She wasn't happy."

"I can imagine," Maria nodded, she reached out and put her hand on top of Sharon's, providing a solid anchor point for the woman who was having a little trouble staying grounded at that moment.

"What do we do now?" Sharon furrowed her brow. "The FBI has the Triskellion under lock and key, but we have to recover Rogers' shield."

"Taken care of," Maria smirked. "Lewis."

"Well shit, that must have been fun," Sharon huffed out a laugh. "Didn't even know she was in the area."

"She wasn't," Maria answered. "She took out Barton and came rushing down."

"Okay, what now?" Sharon asked.

"I'm going to head up to New York, get a solid position with Pepper, bringing what we can trust from SHIELD into Stark Industries," Maria said calmly, sounding like she had just detailed her plans to go and pick up a few kitchen staples. "It won't be a seamless transition, but it'll bring what's important over and leave all the bad out."
"Smart," Sharon nodded.

"I could use eyes in the other Alphabet agencies," Maria said casually, her hand squeezing Sharon's tenderly.

"My Dad always told me I should have gone into the CIA instead of following in his sister's footsteps," Sharon said ruefully. She looked at Maria out of the corners of her eyes and shrugged, "I don't know about you, but I could use---some levity."

"Coming right up," Maria winked at her as she let go of Sharon's hand, heading to the lone cabinet in the kitchenerette. She opened it up and took out the false bottom, and pulled up a very small bottle of something shimmering and blue. "Barton stole it off of Thor after London happened. Apparently, it's highly potent and leads to some interesting antics...well, at least it did for Lewis. She rescued Tony Stark from the sewers and pinched Rogers' ass three times without him even seeing her."

"To that ass," Sharon laughed as Maria handed her the bottle. "Aunt Peg was right. That is a fine ass, enough to launch a thousand ships."

She took a swig of the mysterious Agardian drink and handed it off to Maria, who did the same. The drink had two disparate tastes, ones she couldn't quite identify. Tart cranberry juice and some kind of soda, possibly lemon fresca or sprite. The effect was instantaneous, all at once she felt lecherous. And adventurous. And buoyant in some way. In the very next breath she felt smart, strong, capable.

"Well that's a hell of a thing," Sharon said wryly. Her eyes went over Maria again, drinking her in like she was parched. "You are, incredibly beautiful my lady."

"Speak for yourself," Maria laughed, a foreign sound to her own ears, but welcome nonetheless. Sharon laughed, even when things were bleakest, and that was always something she admired. "I may perchance know of a private place for us to sojourn for the evening."

Sharon offered Maria her hand once more and they walked off, feeling the interesting sensation of two very different personalities taking residence in their psyche in turns. The gold, shimmering light of a portal illuminated the dark safehouse and both turned to it, welcoming and ready.
"Thor's not scheduled to come down for another two weeks," Maria said thoughtfully.

As soon as the light went up, it went away again and Sharon shrugged. "C'mon, Hill. Time for you to make good on a few promises."

---

Present Day, Tony Stark's private island in the Caribbean

"TO REVELS!" Volstagg shouted, holding up a large bottle of blue liquid.

"To Revels!" Thor agreed. "We have protected Midgard and so much more this day!"

When all was said and done, and the last alien carcass had been picked up, it had been decided that Wakanda was no longer a wise place to host the misplaced Avengers. However, they weren't quite welcome back in the United States, but it was clear they soon would be once the media cycle got through the latest surveillance showing the Avengers working together to protect the planet. Pepper Potts and her people were working overtime to make sure it was clear that when given the choice and the ability, the Avengers would always opt to have the action happening far away from the civilian populace.

But Tony had a place not quite as grand and wonderful as Wakanda, but still, a tropic piece of paradise that would ease the transition from Wakanda to the United States. Everyone that could be spared arrived on Stark Island, including the Asgardians, the Guardians, the Barton kids along with Sam's mother, and the human contingent that had been safe aboard the helicarrier the entire time. Even Manuel the Fluffy was there, although he was stabled a little ways away from the party, still enjoying himself as the Barton kids used a sling shot to launch fresh chicken into his gaping, dangerous maw.

"I know that drink," Sharon turned her head to the side. Not only had she seen Steve and the rest of them lose their damned minds over it, she’d had it once before with Maria. Nothing much had come of it, but now she understood why one of the tastes was a bitter ale that Maria had declared her favorite.

They’d never found lemon fresca though.
"Steve and Darcy put most of it back already, right there in the closet to the damned plane where I had to listen with my own two damned unenhanced ears, so you know what? Now we can all partake," Sam held up his cup and threw Wanda a wink before he downed the shot Volstagg had poured for him.

Wanda smirked back, a precursor to the expression that grew on her face when she took her own shot of Asgardian meade. Her posture changed immediately, like her muscles all suddenly un-tensed as she went into a lounging position in her chair. She gave that growing, dangerous smirk to Sam, who was sitting straighter, his eyes downcast at his hands in his lap.

"You're cute," Wanda offered quietly.

Sam rolled his eyes and blushed. "You're cute."

"Disgusting," Clint said bitterly.

"Oh, oh!" Steve called out from the other end of the patio, he ran to Volstagg and held out his cup.

"DUDE!" Wanda yelled at him. "You literally just put a half gallon of that shit back in the bottle, why would you get more already?!?"

"I love being like Darcy," Steve defended. He held out his cup expectantly and threw the shot back the moment it was poured. He flipped Sam and Wanda the bird, "Suck it, haters."

"Hey, what are you doing?" Darcy skipped from where she had been cuddling Jane and Sif near the fire pit. She grinned at him and said, "You look adorable, cutie."

"You look adorable, cutie," Steve repeated, with the exact same nuances and inflections that Darcy had.

"Oh god, there are two of them," Wanda huffed out in annoyance.

"Stuff it, witchy woman!" both Darcy and Steve chorused at the same time.
Darcy tilted her head and looked at Steve curiously. "I don't know if sleeping with you right now makes me a narcissist."

"Who cares, like, even the teeniest tiniest bit?" Steve laughed, picking Darcy up and throwing her over his shoulder before walking away from the patio, intent on finding a private part of the beach. "Leave us alone for like, an hour or else you'll all go blind and then I'll set my Magnet loose on you."

"I'll bankrupt your great grandchildren!" Darcy promised with a cackle of laughter as Steve began sprinting away.

"So gross," Wanda wrinkled her nose.

"Leave them alone, they're adorable," Sam admonished her.

"You leave them alone, they're adorable," Wanda mocked him petulantly.

"The only way that meade they just drank is going back in the bottle is over my dead body!" Clint roared from the fire pit where he and Peter Quill were talking over the Star Wars movies that Peter had missed.

"STUFF IT OLD MAN, YOU AIN'T MY DAD AND I'M A GROWNASS WOMAN THAT'S GOT NEEDS!" Wanda tossed back. She gave a jaunty salute to Vision and said, "Needs you don't need to be addressing, sorry not sorry."

"So fascinating," Thor chuckled, watching in amusement as Wanda easily took on Sam's more obnoxious, cocky qualities, while Sam sat there looking shy, but also kind of calculating in how he was observing everyone else. He looked around at the party, eager to give Sam and Wanda a distraction so that they could find their own private place to allow the meade to do its work. He directed Volstagg to a quiet corner, where Maria Hill and Sharon Carter were leaning against each other, a glass of nearly untouched whiskey in front of each of them.

"Partake!" Volstagg cried out, handing the bottle to Sharon first.
"The last time this happened it didn't work out so well for us," Sharon demurred.

"Impossible, the meade is never wrong," Volstagg promised.

"It was broken for us," Maria nodded, shrugging a little in resignation. "Two different tastes. Two different feelings and mannerisms, and there were only the two of us the whole time. Broken."

"Two?" Volstagg blinked down at them. "Surely that means you have a third, they must have tried to come to you, to be sure. Drink! It will bring them forth now!"

"Bullshit," Maria rolled her eyes, ready to argue about it when Sharon shrugged and took a long gulp of the meade.

"I wish for more lemon flavored bubble drink. Where is our hearth keeper, Lady Darcy? She always brings the best of treats," Fandral appeared immediately, looking around with an empty cup.

"By Odin's beard," Volstagg whispered. He looked back to Maria, who had not drunk. "When did you last imbibe the meade?"

"Two weeks before you came down to Midgard the last time in 2014," Maria recalled perfectly.

"Why hello," Sharon murmured coquettishly up at Fandral, who mirrored her expression as he stared down at her and winked. Sharon turned to look at Maria with some excitement, "Might we try him out to fill the spaces in between?"

"My Lady Sif stopped Fandral from activating the portal at that time, his soul wanted to come to you," Volstagg explained quickly, with the way Sharon and Fandral were making eyes at each other, he doubted Maria would be available to explain to for much longer. "I apologize, I had no idea you had the meade, my lady, for surely I would not stand in the way of such a match---"

"Hey!" Maria pointed at Jane, who was still at the fire. "You said the meade always finds a way, right?"
"It doesn't rest until it's done, dude," Jane shrugged. "It gets weaker, but it'll keep trying to look for an opening to bring you together."

"Holy shit," Maria muttered. She pointed at Volstagg. "This entire thing is your fault!"

"Don't lay blame, my dearest," Sharon cooed at her.

"Lay with us instead," Fandral finished the thought.

"Disgusting," Wanda called out, ruining Sam's plan of getting her out of sight quietly. "Mother fucker, put me down!"

"Lila! The arrows!" Clint called out. "I'm going hunting for pheasant."

"Not enough of that chocolate sauce, kid," the Brooklyn accent was even more pronounced than Steve's was when he was extra tired and angry. Chocolate had never sounded so Brooklyn. Chalk-awl-ette. It was a pure kind of thing, soaked in a sort of wry levity.

Tony had never thought it would have come from James Buchanan Barnes, at least not since he had learned that the man was actually alive back in 2014. Tony kind of wished he could see the face, because he was pretty sure the expression was something that had only been seen in exclusive footage at the Smithsonian exhibit. Barnes sounded happy. He sounded amused.

Tony didn't envy him for it. He supposed that after everything Barnes had gone through and been forced to do, it made some sort of cosmic sense that he'd been made whole and right again so quickly. Tony's own experience with having his thoughts and actions controlled by another had given him a kind of empathy that he never had wanted. He wasn't jealous of Barnes for his happiness.

He was jealous that Bucky was in the large, spacious, always stocked vacation house kitchen, with the three Barton kids and the Black Widow, making use of the ice cream all of Tony's houses always had stocked. Those Barton kids hadn't been too amused with him when he had last seen them during Ultron. They'd been more excited with Natasha.
And now Barnes.

"Uncle Bucky!" Cooper called out. "WATCH!"

The sound of the whipped cream cannister squirting directly into Cooper's mouth was immediately followed by Nathaniel shrieking with delighted laughter.

"That ain't sanitary," Bucky laughed. "But it looks good, gimme some of that, kid."

"I know Stark's gotta have sprinkles here," Natasha sighed as she looked through cabinets that the Guardians had already been through. "Tony, come out of hiding and show me where the candy coated things are."

Tony wrinkled his nose and came into the room with shuffling feet, his hands firmly in his pockets. He gave a terse nod to Natasha, who was smirking at him knowingly before looking to Barnes, who did look happy. It was sort of refreshing. And also annoying.

Laura was working with Shuri, T'Challa and Scott, eager to make the shield protecting Earth as strong as possible. But she'd huffed at him in annoyance when he'd suggested something she'd thought of already, and he knew when to cut and run. They'd made a lot of progress over the last eighteen hours. Laura was no longer completely pissed off every time she saw their father in all of Tony's features.

They were going to be okay.

Or at least, that's what Pepper told him when he had sent her fifty-three text messages in the span of five minutes, worried sick that he'd done something wrong to his newly discovered half-sister. And then he had forwarded screenshots of his panicking text messages to his therapist and requested that they add that to the pile of things he needed to work on. He couldn't go around being paranoid of himself constantly.

But now Tony felt a little sullen. The three small fry in the kitchen with the duo that Mother Russia crafted with pain and torture, they were HIS relations. He had thought himself alone for so many years in the world, reaching out for connections just to push them away or keep them at arm's length, and here there were three small, impressionable people who might understand that tricky Stark eyebrow twitch, or the insatiable curiosity that burned in him all through the day. And maybe
someday, one of them might be able to commiserate with him about that paranoia that was always at
the edge of his brain.

Tony Stark had family and they were currently calling Bucky Barnes *Uncle*.

"Heya, Stark," Bucky greeted with a wave of his vibranium hand. He had the baby cuddled against
his chest, trying to get him to sleep to no avail.

The air was quiet, the kids staring at the newly arrived Iron Man.

"You're our uncle," Lila accused.

"Uhm, what?" Tony gave a few rapid blinks. He, Clint and Laura had agreed after the cleanup
started that they would all wait a day or so before introducing him to the kids as an uncle.

"She's nosy," Bucky chuckled a little. He nodded towards Natasha with a smirk and said, "Takes
after my old lady."

"Barnes, she'll smother you in your sleep," Tony warned seriously. He gave Natasha a shrug and
threw out the flat, slightly terrified compliment, "You look very young today."

"Cooper's the one that figured out the surveillance," Lila shrugged. "I just asked for it."

"Smart," Tony smiled genuinely. "Yeah, so, turns out, I'm your Uncle."

"Can I have a lab budget?" Cooper asked excitedly.

"Kid, in Candy Land, there are no budgets," Tony couldn't help but grin.

"Oh boy," Natasha sighed. "I want no part in this. Laura's only just forgiven me for teaching Lila to
make a garrotte when she was three. James, come along. Let the family get acquainted."
Before Tony could do anything to stop him, Bucky had placed the small thing, the boy that was somewhere between baby and toddler, and he'd hightailed it out of the kitchen with Natalia, leaving him to tend to his niece and nephews alone.

"Uhm, I don't like to have people handed to me---how do I---I've never held one of these before!" Tony yelled after Bucky and Natasha. He looked down at Nathaniel, trying to see if he could see any resemblance. The child was all Clint in the coloring and the features. But he was a fat little guy.

Tony had been a fat little guy too. He smiled as the baby surveyed him curiously before cocking his head to the left in slight approval and finally burrowing into Tony's chest, which was not nearly as poofy and comfortable as Nathaniel's favorite chests (Steve, Darcy, Bucky, Mommy, in that order), but it would certainly do.

"So," Tony swallowed and managed a sort of half smile at the other two children, who were surveying him carefully. "What do you think about building a robot that can make sundaes?"

"Or attack intruders?" Lila asked shrewdly.

"Sure. Yeah. Why not?" Tony pursed his lips and shrugged. "What could go wrong there?"

Steve watched in interest as Bucky and Natasha walked hand in hand down the beach as the sun set in the sky. They were frolicking, if truth be told. Bucky was doing his best to kick some of the gentle surf at Natasha as they sought out a quiet, unoccupied spot on the previously secluded, lonely island.

"Hmmm," Darcy hummed in his arms. She had fallen asleep shortly after the mead Steve had pilfered had been put back in the bottle.

Steve had no qualms with holding her against him as he sat on the little bungalow veranda they had commandeered for the evening.

"Hmmm," Steve answered back. He nodded slightly towards the sight of the two former Russian
assassins that looked very similar to two young and carefree teenagers who were highly enamored of one another.

"I do good work," Darcy bragged.

"That you do," Steve agreed. He kissed her forehead and let out a happy, contented sigh. "You gonna marry me some time soon, Magnet?"

"Whenever you want, Cutie," Darcy promised. "You can even go with me to Asgard when I put Smokey the Soul stone back in hiding."

"Why would I---" Steve wrinkled his nose. "You're not gonna make me do it, are you?"

"Steven Grant Rogers, he's the closest thing I've got to blood kin. You're gonna have to ask," Darcy smirked.

"I'm rethinking our timeline," Steve said thoughtfully. "If I get you in the family way, then Loki has to let me marry you."

"Well, at least we don't have to track down the Norse Goddess that is named after HELL to ask," Darcy smirked. She melted against him a little, loving that she could just let all her muscles go into goo-like states and Steve would just continue to hold her without breaking a sweat. "How long do you think we have before the bad dude comes?"

"Dunno," Steve sighed. "We've got people that are loyal to him here on Earth still. We'll have some work to do, tracking down Stane and everyone he was involved with."

"Life will never be boring, will it?" Darcy questioned.

"Sweetheart, with you in my life, I seriously doubt it could ever be considered boring. You gotta way of livening things up around here."

Chapter End Notes
Still...can't believe it. Can you believe it??

(Also, the Maria/Fandral/Sharon thing has been on my wish list since chapter 9. I wanted it so bad).
I'm not crying, you're crying. I cannot, cannot, cannot believe that I finished this story. Thanks to everyone who supported me throughout this fun journey. I really appreciate it.

Thank you to romanoffsbite on tumblr for making me this AMAZING fanfic cover. It's beautiful.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Chapter Sixty: Flash Forward

Upstate New York, Four Months Later

“Quick, quick, let’s take a selfer!”

Darcy snorted with laughter where she was sitting on Steve’s back as he did push up wizardry. Seriously, at one point it seemed as if Steve was doing push ups with no hands whatsoever. This was the extent of Darcy’s workout. Natasha was mainly just impressed that Steve got Darcy to set foot in a gym.

Peter Quill held up his Starkphone and stood next to Drax and Bucky, the trio grinned into the camera as Peter tried to press the center button on the screen.

“Quill, you idiot, just put your finger on the side button and press!” Drax’s brilliant grin disappeared and was replaced with his much more customary angry shouting face.

Bucky only laughed harder. He got a kick out of Drax. Something about the alien’s savage, simplistic humor tickled Bucky’s funny bone. He was a little like Steve in his dry straightforwardness, but with even less knowledge about modern Earth customs. The blue alien and the metal armed former assassin had become great pals in the last few months. Pepper Potts and her amazing public relations department had found a way to capitalize off of Drax and Bucky’s friendship in the last few months that the Guardians were stuck on Earth.

Their joint instagram account had been the quickest in history to gain a million followers.

“Drax, I can take a selfer, shut up,” Peter griped. He wrinkled his nose and his thumb kept missing that center shutter button on the phone that he both loved and hated so much.

“Is this the Stark 10? If it is the tenth of the Starkphones, it has voice activated commands,” Drax informed him. “Starkphone, selfie us!”

The picture snapped and Peter’s constipated and confused face was immortalised along with Drax’s
winning smile and Bucky cracking up with laughter.

“Starkphone! Post that on the Instagram for BlueSteel,” Drax ordered regally.

“No! Come on!” Peter grumbled. He sighed in defeat and shrugged, “Starkphone, toggle that as, Hashbrown, two jerks and poor Peter.”

“Stevie, c’mion, get in on this picture,” Bucky ordered.

“Busy,” Steve answered as he continued his push ups with Darcy sitting prettily on his back.

“Show off, Natalia’s always too busy to help me show off,” Bucky pouted.

“Nice selfie, bro!” Luis called out as he entered the gym with Helen, hand in hand. Both were dressed in an overabundance of workout gear that looked to be straight out of the box. They came to the gym every other day, in the same kind of get ups, always new workout gear, and never once used anything in the gym.

Luis had no problem acting as a distraction as Helen took photos and videos of the superhero workouts.

“So yo, Drax, my dude, I know you guys are leaving real soon---”

“Indeed we leave tonight!” Drax said with his usual loud exuberance.

“And like, I know that I wasn’t cleared to go into outer space by Director Hill, which is wack, cause I’d make like a cuddly and adorable astronaut, let’s be real, right Uncle Sergeant Bucky?”

“I will miss you chatty friend!” Drax clapped him on the shoulders as Luis continued to talk.

They did that. No one understood it, but out of all the aliens and all of the humans, Drax and Luis communicated the best (Laura Barton and Groot were a close second). But Luis would talk nonstop at Drax, the alien would interject with heightened volume, and Luis would never stop talking.
Bucky figured it was because Drax was so loud, that Luis caught what he was saying, but didn’t bother slowing down his trademark chatter.

“And look I know she’s your girl, but if I catch her playing with my paints again, we’re gonna have some trouble, just so you know. And like, I would let her paint, because bro, that’s the dream, right? Being able to share art with others and give them the skills to create dope ass art? It’s totally---”

“Indeed! Art is important! But I understand Nebula gets carried away---”

“Cool, and I’d love to travel into outer space with my sweet doctor girl over there, and I’d like paint the galaxies and teach Nebula and all kinds of shit, but I’m not allowed cause of potentially being a reason aliens might want to make us extinct in the future, so instead I’m totally gonna hook your girl up. And I want you to send me pictures of her progress whenever you can.”

“And send me pictures of you shirtless and doing stuff,” Helen added. “For monetary reasons that you don’t care about, I’m sure.”

Nebula, the curious new Nebula, stopped throwing a twenty-five pound barbell in the air in a game of her own design, and walked to stand next to Helen as she muttered about demographics, every body is somebody’s type and good money to be had in blue skin. Nebula stared at the phone thoughtfully.

Darcy watched eagerly from the sidelines, always wanting to see how Nebula was adjusting to her shiny, clean, scrubbed up soul. She wasn’t childlike, per say, she was just more of a delightfully blank slate, with the ability to be even more incredibly frank than Drax. And to Darcy’s great delight…

“Your photographs alone get thirty percent fewer love tributes than the sexy Sergeant’s,” Nebula barked at Drax. “Increase the love tributes or be a failure to your ancestors forever. Take off your pants and turn around.”

Nebula had absolutely no filter. For either her words or her actions as she broke into a sprint, trying to chase a fearful Drax down and disrobe him entirely while Luis kept chattering and Helen kept snapping pictures.

Bucky looked at Helen curiously and asked, “How much money would you make from me if I took my pants off and turned around?”
Helen thought about it and wrinkled her nose, “I have to ask Laura Barton if I’m allowed to break the internet, or if that might mess with the super shield protecting us right now.”

“STARK!” Clint shouted, his voice echoing and bouncing off the walls of the common room.

“What’s going on?” Laura looked up from her laptop, where she was working with her favorite Wakandan engineers to work on the long range satellites that would allow Earth to communicate with the Guardians. She had spent a long time looking for and missing her cousin Petey. She just wasn’t about to send him back off into space without a way of getting in touch.

“Your brother!” Clint raged on, slamming his bow on the countertop.

“Is a buttmunch?” Laura offered helpfully.

“Is an asshole,” Clint accused. “He built Nathaniel an exoskeleton like Rhodey’s.”

“Oh,” Laura nodded, going back to her work.

“Oh?” Clint repeated. “OH?”

“Yeah, oh,” Laura shrugged, looking very much like she was about to tell a whopper. She was fidgeting a bit, and Clint once again thanked his lucky stars that his wife was incapable of telling a lie.

“Lucy. What did you and Ethel do?” Clint sighed. To Natasha’s great relief she now split her Ethel time. With Tony.

“Look, we thought it would be fun, a nice family bonding thing,” Laura sighed. “I mean, it’s not like Nathaniel can get into trouble, he’s two.”
“He ran up a tree, babe!” Clint revealed. “Thirty feet in the air!”

“Well, I blame that on you really, that’s your genes shining through,” Laura reasoned. “My folk and blood kin don’t like climbing trees.”

“So you Stark folk decided to build our baby boy bionic legs for shits and giggles?” Clint sighed.

“I don’t know why you’re so upset, he’s obviously fine, we have safety measures where the legs could be overridden by me or Tony to bring him back. And if something truly bad happened, Friday would have sounded the alarm,” Laura smirked at her husband. “Where is our baby boy anyway?”

“Napping on Steve’s boobs,” Clint shrugged.

“So, the bionic legs got our rambunctious two year old to take a nap for the first time in a week?” Laura was victorious and absolutely unbearable in her smugness.

“Yes,” Clint huffed out.

“Friday? Mark that down, bionic baby legs are a go,” Laura laughed. “Can you imagine when we make a set for Darcy and Steve’s future kid? That’ll be so awesome.”

Clint blinked in disbelief and shook his head. “I married a supervillain.”

“‘You’re sure you’re okay?’ Natasha asked, unmasked concern in her soft voice.

“We will weather the storm,” T’Challa gave her a nod, his image projected on the big screen of their war room, which had not been used as a war room in the last six months.

Not unless wedding planning was war. And it very well might be classified as such with Darcy and company doing the planning. It had started out small, with just Steve and Darcy planning a little, family and friends only event on Tony’s island in the Caribbean. But what had started as just Steve
and Darcy, wound up being Pepper Potts, Natasha, Bucky, the Bartons, Kurt and surprisingly enough, Nick Fury all doing the planning.

It was understandable that it would get a little out of control.

“We could suit up, and be there in four hours,” Steve promised. T’Challa was having some trouble in Wakanda, and everyone who had found safe haven in T’Challa’s country felt more than a little guilty. They had been the reason why Killmonger had been able gain a foothold with his anti-T’Challa rhetoric.

“All will be well,” T’Challa waved off Steve’s concern.

“And no offense, Captain, you’ll only make it worse,” Shuri chimed in, her head popping into the shot, sharing a knowing look with Natasha.

“The wedding, ask about the wedding!” W’Kabi chimed in from outside of the camera’s view.

“We’ll see you in six weeks,” Darcy answered him. She may have co-opted the war room to the Avenger’s and their business but she’d be damned if she stopped working on seating charts that Pepper insisted needed to be reworked.

“We’ll see you then,” T’Challa nodded. “And unless I put out the call for you, please...stay where you are.”

“Was that to the whole team or just Darcy?” Steve asked knowingly.

“I elect not to answer at this time, it is not wise to insult the bride.”

Three Weeks Later

“You know what I love?”
“Money!” Scott called out the answer to Tony’s question from his workbench, before thinking about it and realizing, “No, that’s me. I love money.”

“Lifts that you wear in your shoes?” Pepper’s response was a teasing smirking thing that made Tony shiver in his spot a bit.

“ME?” Cooper called out.

“Yes, I do love you,” Tony agreed throwing his nephew the sign for rock and roll. “Now go back to work on figuring out that connector for me, tiny minion of Science.”

“Oh, hey, did you pack a bag for the trip to New York?” Pepper wondered.

“Yes, yes I did,” Tony grinned. “The engagement party for Steven Grant Rogers and Darcy Pain-in-my-ass Lewis, on the day that one redhead assassin and one metal armed jerkwad had picked as the day that said Steve Grant Watch-Me-Spin-and-Punch-This Rogers and Darcy Watch-Me-Get-Arrested Lewis would be wed.”

“Hmmm,” Natasha looked over Lila’s work and pointed out the flaw in the blueprint the child had been working on, figuring out the building’s most easily accessible spots for infiltration.

Tony narrowed his eyes at the woman his niece and nephews called Aunt. They were like in-laws of sorts, really. It seemed natural that they peck at each other a little. But Natasha’s wordless response made Tony’s muscles tighten in annoyance. She knew something.

“Where’s Barnes?” Tony demanded.


Tony narrowed his eyes at the spy in front of him. There were secrets to be had. He just knew it.

“Stop,” Pepper smacked him upside the head as gently as she could. “C’mon, come and make
“dinner with me.”

“Yes, dear.”

New York City, The next day

“YOU SNEAKY SONS OF BITCHES.”


“Dude, we talked about this,” Clint rolled his eyes. “Give me a warning. The earmuffs thing was in a movie cause it was brilliant. At least tell me fire in the hole.”

“Sorry, but, seriously?” Tony looked around the elegant little hotel ballroom, a hidden gem in a city full of in your face gems. It was decorated beautifully, and there were white chairs formed to make an aisle, and up front there was a trellis covered in ivy and flowers and white twinkling lights and billowy white fabric.

“Hmmm?” Natasha appeared before him out of nowhere, Bucky giving him a little smirk.

“Go sit down so I can get married, dammit,” Darcy hissed out from behind them, where she was waiting to walk down the aisle, clinging on to Jane’s arm. She pointed at Bucky and said, “Best man, go make sure Steve hasn’t passed out again.”

“Ma’am, yes ma’am,” Bucky saluted her before leaning in and giving Darcy a kiss on her cheek.

“YOU!” Darcy pointed at Tony. “Are late, go sit.”

“But---why do you always have to make Natasha right?” Tony pouted. “Can’t you just wait the next three weeks? Then I’ll be right.”
“SIT,” Darcy ordered.

“Listen to the bride, Tony,” Natasha patted his shoulder and went about her ushering duties, guiding both he and Pepper to their seats next to the Wakandans who had managed to get their after the smoke had cleared from their own crisis.

“So, you know Thor tried to invite Loki, right?” Jane said softly to Darcy. “He said no. Something about how he refused to acknowledge your marriage to the child in blue tights.”

“Rude Gramps,” Darcy shrugged. “He should know better than anyone that when my mind is made up, there is no swaying me. He’s better off protecting Asgard, anyway.”

“You do know your great grandma or other is going to be trying something,” Jane sighed. “We might need to help.”

“Janie, honey, of course we’ll need to help,” Darcy assured her. “Thor and the Asgardians would be lost without the both of us.”

“So I mean, no babies, right?” Jane squinted at Darcy. “There’s no reason for the shotgun behind this wedding.”

“Your bet is still safe,” Darcy laughed, taking Jane’s arm more securely in hers and leaning her head on her shoulder. Her words were silly, but her tone was dreamy as she revealed, “We’re going to enjoy being good and married for a little while before we start trying to take over the world with our progeny.”

Jane smirked and leaned her cheek against the of Darcy’s perfectly curled hair.

“Thanks for applying to that internship, and you know, not running away when you saw the trailer we were gonna have to be in,” Jane whispered as the bridal march began to play.

“Thanks for taking me on. And bailing me out. And dragging me into this crazy world,” Darcy whispered back.
“You ready for this?” Jane asked as the small congregation of friends stood and turned to look at Darcy.

Most importantly was the man at the end of the aisle, standing tall and proud as he stared at her, the dreamy state of Darcy’s words reflected in his eyes. It seemed right to scrap the original, over-inflated wedding plans and do this lowkey surprise wedding. Their friends were still there, the same friends who had been trying to make this event happen for the better part of a decade.

They’d put this off long enough.

“I’m ready.”

Elsewhere

“I cannot connect to any of your emissaries on Earth. It’s almost as if—they just disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” the massive purple alien glared down at his minion. “Have they betrayed me?”

“I’m unsure, sir,” the minion answered. “The whole planet, is gone. The absence of it is causing an ever widening hole in their system, soon, we won’t be able to find their sun.”

“Nebula?”

“Gone,” the minion whispered. “One of her ships was found in the outermost reaches of Quatrespo. The other ship and Nebula herself have not been found.”

Thanos sat back and glared at the bringer of bad news. He felt the anger rising within him just thinking about the puny planet that somehow had managed to become so important in regards to his plans. A weak race of easily crushable beings had somehow found the favor of Odin and now the protection of Odin’s son. The pathetic humans had been attracting the admiration of other beings for centuries. But most importantly, the stones.
The stones had all found their way to Earth in one form or another.

The pesky planet would not be lost to him. The son of Odin and the wretched heroes that protected Earth would not derail his plans.

He rose from his throne and advanced on the poor soul who had won the opportunity to ruin Thanos’ day. His neck snapped easily under Thanos’s meaty hand. The rest of the underlings within hearing distance shuddered in fear. He sneered at them.

“Send out the battalions. Destroy every planet from here to the last known coordinates of Earth. We will find them again.”

Chapter End Notes

I don't know that I'll ever write a story this long again, but it was a lot of fun.

And you'll notice---there's an opening there. For the future. We'll see if I can't find some muse to try and work out a (SHORTER!) sequel someday.

Thanks again for reading! I really appreciate every single one of you!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!