Darcy Lewis is not, exactly, who she says she is. Yes, she was a Culver student before the Thor incident, but before that she was a CalTech graduate who'd been home-schooled since the age of 5 by her father's AI. Since her father became Iron Man, her life has only become more surreal, what with alien gods landing in New Mexico and all. So sitting through the latest Stark misadventure with her grandpa and his recently defrosted WW2 buddy didn't actually seem too strange to her.

(An alternative universe where Howard Stark survived the car accident and Darcy is Tony's adult daughter)

Various forms of this story have been floating around my head for a while, and it would not leave me alone until I wrote it. So here it is. The title is from Ryan Adam's song "Two" which seemed appropriate for the arc of the story.
This is not Beta'd, so any mistakes are my own.
“I was promised a real family Christmas in LA this year. Complete with a goose. I had no idea if I’d like it, but you promised dad.” Darcy told him even as she unpacked her bags.

“I know, and I’m sorry, but…” Tony started, his face projected on the tablet in front of her. He looked exhausted and anxious. She wanted to see him, to make sure he knew that it was ok. He may be her father but she’d perfected taking care of Tony Stark at a very young age. She hoped he couldn’t see how terrified she was.


“He’s in critical condition but he’s stable. I’m going to head to the hospital now.”

“Ok. Tell him I demand that he get better. It always worked when I was little. And be safe, ok?”

“Will do kid. Stay with your grandpa –“

“I will. I promise.”

“You’ll break the news and apologize for me?”

“I always do. I love you dad.”

“I love you too Darcy.” She hung up her phone, turning to find her grandfather standing in the doorway to her room. He was remarkably spry and light on his feet for a 90 year old. Not to mention he really didn’t look 90, it was kind of impressive really.

“We’re…that explosion in LA. Happy was there. He’s critical, but stable. Dad’s going there now. But if they’re in LA, he doesn’t want me near the danger so how does Christmas here sound?”

“It sounds lovely, you know that I’m happy to spend the holidays with my favorite grandchild wherever.”

“As far as we know, I’m your only grandchild.”

“God willing.” She smiled, touching the picture of the three of them she kept by her bed here in the mansion. “Would you mind then, if I were to call an old friend?”

“Not at all. Call Captain Rogers. I think it’ll make dad feel better, and I’m sure he’s doing nothing since you make me hack his Shield files for you on a weekly basis. Which is sort of creepy and stalker like grandpa. But I’ll get the guest room ready.”

“I question how you’re related to myself and your father sometimes.”

“It’s Pepper’s influence.” She walked over to her grandpa, looping her arm through his. “I’m going to go down to the kitchen, see what we need, make a list and send out for it. Is there anything that I would normally make that will offend depression era sensibilities?”

“Everything, but I think he’s been in the modern long enough that he can handle it.”

“Good. I’ll get you a scotch, you can call Captain Rogers, and I’ll look forward to hear his
embarrassing war stories about you.”

“He won’t tell you any.”

“Want to bet?”

Steve was surprised to get Howard’s demand that he come to the Mansion for the Christmas Holiday, mainly because he had assumed he’d already be in Los Angeles with Tony. He was not surprised to be escorted into the large family room by a security guard, nor was he very surprised to find a beautiful young woman sitting on the couch across from Howard. She was typing away on her phone, not paying attention to anything around her. He assumed she was a nurse or assistant. The news was playing in the background.

“I think we’ll all be staying in for the night Tom, you are free to go.” Howard said in way of greeting. That also didn’t surprise him, at all.

“Mr. Stark, Mr. Stark would not…”

“I will call my aunt, she’ll tell you to leave Tom. You know she runs the show.” The young woman told Tom. “It’s Christmas, you probably have a bit more shopping to do. I’ve met your daughters and am sure they are adding to the list daily, if not hourly.” She looked up from her phone, smiling widely at the security guard and himself. She had a nice smile. Tom looked sheepish, nodding in reply. “The Toys-R-Us in midtown has the Princess Sophia Vanity and the My Little Pony they asked for. They’re on hold for you.” She put down her phone, leaving it on the side table next to her. It was the first time he’d seen anyone of her generation put down their phone.

“Miss Lewis.”

“We were supposed to be heading off to LA, you were supposed to start vacation. Go, now. Don’t make an old man order you, it just sounds funny now.” Howard added.

“Alright, Merry Christmas Miss Lewis, Mr. Stark.”

“Merry Christmas Tom. We’ll see you after New Years.” Howard said as the guard turned and headed out for the night. “Sit down Rogers, you look stupid standing there in the door.”

“Ignore him, he’s old and cranky. And also mean and difficult.” Miss Lewis said. “Tom gone?”

“Yes.” Howard said. “Rogers, meet my granddaughter, Darcy Lewis-Stark. Darcy, Captain Steve Rogers.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” Darcy said. “I promise I am less annoying than my father.”

“Tony is your father.”

“Yes.”

“Tony Stark? Has a kid?”
“We’re actually surprised there aren’t more of them.” Darcy commented. “But yes, he does. Me. As far as we know it's just me too.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t…How does no one know? How does Shield not know?”

“People think she’s Pepper’s niece. Who Pepper adopted. Which she did, to make life easier for Darcy when she went to CalTech.” Howard told him as Steve finally sat down in the recliner next to him. “Shield doesn’t know because it’s not relevant. Agent Coulson was the only one to put it together and agreed that it was need to know only. He knew that they’d just use her and that would end badly for all parties.”

Darcy turned to the TV as it cut to the hospital. Tony was leaving the hospital, surrounded by journalists. They all watched as he called out, threatened revenge on, and then finally gave his address to the Mandarin. All on live TV.

“Did my dad just bait the leader of the terrorist organization who, along with that snake Obie, was responsible for his disappearance and give out his home address?” Darcy asked. “ON LIVE TELEVISION!”

“Apparently yes.” Howard said.

“I am going to kill him.” Her phone beeped. She picked it up, reading the message. “Pepper says she gets first dibs though, as she’s closest.”

“She should remember that you and I had no choice in the matter, she chose the idiot.” Howard said. “I’ll have an unmarked plane waiting for them at Bob Hope.”

“He’s not going to leave.” Darcy told him. “He was right, when he said it was personal just then. JARVIS, can you get me through to my dad.”

“I’m sorry Miss Darcy,” the AI pronounced. Steve was glad he’d been introduced, as it were, to JARVIS after the battle of New York or he would have been slightly terrified of the disembodied voice. “Your father has requested that I not put any of your calls or his father’s calls through, as he knows what you are both going to say.”

“Can you just tell him to be careful?” Darcy asked quietly.

“I will attempt to do that Miss.” She got up off the couch.

“So, I will order pizza and we will wait.”

“I hate waiting.” Howard said.

“But it’s what we have to do.” Darcy sighed.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Darcy takes a phone call, news breaks, and there's a bit of a late night chat.

Chapter Notes

I am so glad people seem to be enjoying this weird alternate universe that would not leave me alone. I'm hoping I'll be able to update this again over the weekend, but I'm prepping for two job interviews on Wednesday that I'd like to go well. It would mean leaving the middle of nowhere (where I currently live and work) for my hometown where all my friends and family live.

In the meantime, I can be found at mollykakes.tumblr.com

As always, any mistakes are my own.

“Grandpa, I know you want a scotch. Captain Rogers, we have every alcohol imaginable, soda, water, orange juice…”

“A water would be fine. And it’s Steve, Miss Stark.”

“Darcy then. Only the AI gets away with calling me Miss Stark.” Her grandfather looked at her as she headed towards the kitchen. Steve had to admit that he was impressed with Darcy’s strength. He’s not sure many other dames, women, would be able to handle their father putting his life at risk with as little drama as she had. He imagined, for a moment, that it had to be extremely difficult being Tony Stark’s daughter. Even before Tony Stark was Iron Man.

“You may want to wait just a few seconds because the land line’s about to ring and she’s not calling to check on me.”

“It’s late there, she’s probably…” The phone rang. “You two need to market your insane ESP or whatever it is that you two have.” Darcy said, picking up the phone from its place next to Howard’s chair. “Hi Aunt Peggy. No, I’m not in Los Angeles, obviously, you’ve just called the New York…I know I shouldn’t sass you, it’s very wrong of me….” Steve watched as Howard looked at Darcy with an amused expression as she walked towards the hallway.

“She’s Peggy’s favorite.” He remembers seeing a few baby and toddler photos around Peggy’s room when he visited. There were a few of her nephew’s children, but most were of her goddaughter. The brunette girl with a big smile who seemed to always be laughing in every picture she was in.

“The chubby baby picture on the nightstand?”

“That’s my Darcy. She was rolls upon rolls when she was little.” Steve laughed as Darcy gave her
“Grandpa’s calling me chubby Aunt Peggy…No, No, since we weren’t going to LA he called Captain Rogers…well, I’ve only known him 10 minutes, I assume he didn’t have plans because he got over here quickly and grandpa makes me hack Shield on a weekly basis. Because apparently no one taught the super soldier’s how to pick up a phone in the 1940s to mollify an old man – yes, he’s in the room. No, he’s met both my grandfather and father, I’m sure this is expected.” She smiled widely at Steve as she said it. He smiled back, instinctively. It was nice to have a girl smile at him, like they were familiar. He supposed he was, to her at least. “Well, I’m rather stressed right now, my dad just gave our address out to the terrorist who helped hold him for 3 months and is responsible for shrapnel in his body that is only being repelled by a miniaturized arc reactor that he installs himself. So yeah, I don’t really care what I’m going to say to people…” She stood against the door jam, facing away from them all. “I know…I know Aunt Peggy. Ok. Yes. Yes ma’am. Yes. I will call you…I know. I’ll tell them both. Ok. Love you too.” Darcy hung up the phone. “You – “ She pointed at Howard “are to call her tomorrow and if need be she can be on a flight mid-afternoon. And you –“ She pointed at Steve. “She said to tell you that you’ve had this conversation and she does not want to shoot you. Also I am to tell you that I have good aim and I will shoot at you if she tells me to. It’s sad, but it’s true.”

“Ok.” Steve agreed, smiling again.

“Excellent. I’m going to get drinks and order pizza.”

“Lovely, thank you Darcy.” Howard said, watching as Rogers subtly checked out his granddaughter as she left the room.

“Your granddaughter is…something else.”

“That she is my friend.” Howard smiled. This development would absolutely drive Tony insane.

When the pizza arrived Darcy turned on a Christmas Carol, informing Jarvis to cut in with any news. Darcy smiled as Steve and Howard told increasingly more embarrassing stories about each other during the war. Most of them she’d heard growing up, from the Commandos, from Peggy, or from Howard. But there was something new in the way Steve told the stories. She suspected it was because it was really only a few months for him, instead of decades. And he hadn’t had many people to talk to. She understood that era’s mentality, where you don’t express yourself and instead keep it all inside. Hell, she could write a paper on the impact of that mentality on her own family. The years of daddy issues her father had stored up were the direct result of her grandpa’s inability to express himself in any way except disappointment when it came to Tony. Not that she had any opinions on all that crap or anything.

“You’ve probably already heard all these stories before.” Steve pointed out as her grandfather re-told the fondue story.

“I don’t mind.” She said. “It’s a different perspective. Also, unlike my grandfather, I don’t buy your innocent act. You heard fondue and your mind immediately went to a dirty place. I imagine there are lots of stories from your show girl days that you are too polite to tell.” She had to stop herself from laughing when he turned very bright red. “If you could please just confirm that you’re not that innocent, maybe make a joke or something, around my dad when he gets back from being an idiot that would be great because I’d get a good sum of money and I would split it with you.”

“You made a bet with your father?”
“Making bets with my father was an intrinsic and sacred part of my childhood.”

They were getting to the good part, where Scrooge wakes up and clings to his bed linens, happy to be alive. She always loved that part. She loved this version and how happy Patrick Stewart was in this scene. Then it went blank.

“Jarvis what…” he cut to their house the moment the rocket hit. “I…” My house. That’s my house. She couldn’t breathe. Someone was launching missiles into her house. Her dad was there. The closest thing she had to a mom was there. She watched as it started to hang off the cliff, then as one of the helicopters went down. Then the other helicopter was hit; before it crashed into the house. She felt her heart stop as the entire house began to fall into the Pacific Ocean. “Did you see him? Did you see the suit? Pepper?”

“I can see Pepper.” Steve said softly.

“But not my dad.” Darcy nodded. “Ok. I need to make Christmas cookies…”

“Darcy…” Howard started.

“I have all the makings for your lemon raspberry bars and do you like chocolate chip cookies Steve?”

“Darcy Maria Stark.” Howard told her, commanding her attention. “He’s the most stubborn man alive. I say this with respect and love, because he’s my son and I raised him to be like that. He’s made of iron.” She wanted to laugh, bitterly then. Made of iron. Iron could still bend and break, it wasn’t indestructable. She was so tired of watching and waiting.

“I know. I know he is…just…that was my house.” She took a deep breath. “That was my home.”

She heard from Pepper, who told her not to fear the worst, that the suit has been built and rebuilt for every eventuality. It was a plus side to his PTSD and anxiety, at least now. But for her, for them, it’s a repeat of Afghanistan all over. Waiting and hoping and feeling increadibly nauseous. At 11, after he fell asleep in his chair, Darcy escorted her grandpa to his room, telling him that Jarvis would wake them up if there were any change. She showed Steve the guest room and heads to her room, trying to fall asleep. After an hour she knew that she wouldn’t be sleeping.

“Can’t sleep?” Steve asked, noticing Darcy sprawled across the couch, a 24-hour news channel playing, and he immediately wished he could take it back.

“What gave me away?” She asked quietly. “Do you need anything?”

“Well, the talking definitely gave you away.” She smiled at him as he sat down in Howard’s chair. "And no. I've just slept enough, that's all."

“It wasn't the eyes being open?” He appreciated how she batted away and moved past the reference to his time on ice, like it wasn't important. It probably wasn't to her. He liked that.
“No, people can sleep with their eyes open. Dum Dum used to do that.”

“Oh, I know. He fell asleep like that once when I was little... I was about 6, maybe? They’d all get together around the 4<sup>th</sup>…” She paused for a moment, remembering that she was talking to the reason they all gathered. Which, if she were completely honest, was still not the weirdest thing to happen in her life over the past few years. “I had a lot of nightmares, for a while, and one night before coming out here to go to the Hamptons with Grandpa I may have watched a scary movie with my dad. It wasn’t like a slasher movie, just a ghost one. Still, too scary for a 6 year old. Anyway, I woke up in the middle of the night and walked downstairs for a drink and Dum Dum was sitting in front of the TV, eyes open... snored, so loudly. Terrified me. I screamed, woke up the entire house. Every time I was in a room with Dum Dum that weekend I would run the other way. Or hide. Which was sad, because he had the best stories about the circus.”

“He didn’t tell you the ones he told us, did he?”

“No.” She laughed. “Every time he started on his less than clean circus stories, my grandpa would threaten to kill him. I think he thought he could get away with it once with my dad, when I was about 11. But he shut that down real fast. It was ‘if I want my daughter to hear about stories of drunkenness and sleeping around, I’ll tell her all of mine.’” Steve laughed.

“That sounds like Tony.”

“He’s a good dad.” She told him. “People don’t think of Tony Stark and fatherly responsibilities, but he was completely hands on growing up. I had rules and everything. He didn’t want me to turn out like him.”

“He turned out pretty ok. Don’t ever told him I said that though.”

“Of course not. He doesn’t need anyone else to stroke his ego.”

“Where’s your mom, in all this?”

“She died. When I was 5.” Darcy reached for the water bottle that was at her side. “I don’t think it will surprise you to learn that at 20 years old, on his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, actually, shortly after my grandmother died, my father knocked up a stripper in Las Vegas. She was a little bit older, 25... and she didn’t tell him she was pregnant. She knew who he was, but she didn’t want anything from him. And didn’t want my life to be his, you know. She wanted me to have a choice. So she had me, in January. I was born Elizabeth Darcy Lewis. And then in April he came back for his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, before the company announced he was taking my grandpa’s place, and saw me, with her and stole my binky. Had it run against his DNA, realized he was the dad. My dad. He came back, to Vegas, with papers. He was just going to cut and run. I don’t know what changed, but he didn’t. Would come to Vegas once a month to visit, I’d spend weekends and time with him, even as a baby. But... my mom, when I was about 2, maybe, got in with the wrong crowd. She started drinking a lot. She started leaving me on my own, I guess, she started drinking, doing drugs. I was 3 when my dad paid for her to go to rehab. He took me the entire time she was there. She hid it better, after that. But when I was five she was driving home from work and then an all night party when she hit a tree going 75 miles an hour. The cops found me home alone in our apartment. I’d been there for 2 days by myself.”

“Why didn’t you tell your dad?”

“I loved my mom, and she told me not to.” She bit her lip. “Happy was her next of kin, on paper at least, so he drove out with Tony and got me. And I’ve lived with my dad ever since.”
“What about school and stuff?”

“I was home-schooled. I’d draw too much attention in a public school and in a private school…I had tutors for history, literature, the arts, and music. But my dad handled math and science. Then CalTech, when I was 13.”

“Not MIT? I thought Stark’s went to MIT.”

“They did. My dad didn’t want me 3,000 miles away though, and I didn’t want to go 3,000 miles away. It was a thing. My grandpa’s still a little bitter about it. But after I graduated from there when I was 17, my grandpa tried to convince me to go to MIT to get my masters, or my doctorate. But Dad and Pepper said I should have a real college experience, with kids my own age. So I went to Culver. Majored in Political Science. Again, it’s a thing.”

“What do you do now?”

“I work with an astrophysicist, Dr. Jane Foster. I’m her assistant. She’s Thor’s sort-of girlfriend. We hit him with a car and then I tased him when he first landed.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. We actually hit him with the van twice.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

There's a phone call, some breakfast, and some more bonding.

Chapter Notes

I'm so excited everyone seems to be enjoying this so far. Again, it's not beta'ed so any mistakes are clearly my own.

They settled into a comfortable silence as Darcy put on *It's a Wonderful Life*. (“You’ll like this Christmas movie, I promise. It’s in black and white and everything”). Every so often she’d make a comment or clarify something for him, or he would ask a question. When Uncle Billy misplaced the money, Jarvis paused the movie and broke through.

“Miss, there is a secure call for you, should I put it through?”

“Yes.” She quickly grabbed the phone, pressing talking. “Hello?” She knew, at the moment, how desperate and terrified she must sound to her dad, if he was the one on the other side of the call. There was no playing it cool for him just then.

“Oh Kid, I’m so sorry.” He told her. She took a deep breath, so grateful to hear her dad’s voice.

“I’m painting all the suits pink, and programming them to do the Macarena.”

“Ok.”

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah. I’m in…well, I’m in Tennessee right now…”

“Why are you, you know what, I don’t want to know.”

“AIM, the think tank, they wanted to recruit you out of Cal Tech, right?”

“They did. They wanted a biologist and a chemical engineer and I was the only one in my graduating class that was both.”

“Why were they recruiting you?”

“They wanted to perfect something. I don’t know. It sounded like nonsense. It seemed off…people start talking about perfecting the human race and I get antsy and want them to remember their history.”

“Who did you speak to?”
“Aldrich Killian who was mondo creepy and his version of Happy. Savin? That was his name.” She heard his ragged intake of breath on the other line. “Dad.”

“Sorry, he’s working with the Mandarin.”

“I got that.” She said. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Name the last stupid thing I did.”

“Well, besides giving our address out on national television while threatening a maniac, you also got Pepper a giant stuffed rabbit for Christmas which is really stupid.”

“You’ve got a point. Look, kid, I’ve got to…”

“I know.”

“You have security there, right, because you know your shit.”

“Grandpa called Captain Rogers.”

“Good. I love you kid.”

“I love you too dad.” She hung up the phone, turning the movie back on.

“He ok?”

“Yeah. He’s figured out the pieces, at least. Watch though, I think the best part’s coming up.” She turned her attention back to the TV.

Howard watched Darcy carefully as she made breakfast for everyone. Omelets. An Egg white one with vegetables and no cheese for him while Rogers got three of the works. She already had bags under her eyes; he knew she hadn’t slept. At least Rogers had been with her to keep her company. She’d been alone for the majority of her life, not to mention all those nights she stayed up when he was missing in Afghanistan. He’d come downstairs to find her teaching Steve about the Muppets so he could be a part of her yearly *Muppet Christmas Carol* tradition without being completely lost. They also had a deck of cards between them. It was slightly surreal, and he should find it odd that his friend who was technically older than he was, was bonding with his 22 year old granddaughter. Then again, Rogers was really only about 27. Possibly 28. He wasn’t sure how Rogers was measuring time, or how he was being told to measure time, really. And he had no friends his actual age and he had no reference point for this time period. Darcy could help with that.

He’d already called Peggy, telling her that Darcy seemed to be holding it together for the time being. If it ended up going longer than a few days, then he’d call in reinforcements. He was 90 years old; he didn’t have the ability to watch over her like he wanted to anymore.

So he handed her the tablet when she finally sat down with her breakfast.

“Tell me what they did wrong.”

“Are you trying to keep me busy, because I’m planning on baking all day.”

“Yes, but for when you’re not baking.” She took a quick look at the file he’d pulled up.
“I don’t need to look at the file to tell you what went wrong.”

“Really?” Steve asked.

“Oh yeah.” She handed the tablet to him. “What went wrong was that after September 11th, General Dickhead went to the US government and said ‘let’s revive the super soldier program without consulting anyone and let’s add gamma radiation to the equation.’ And the US government said ‘ok, because you do shoddy work with Hammer and let’s hope SI hears about it and dips their toe into it so that you know it actually gets done’. And then Thunder Thighs gathered a group of scientists and then told them that their work was to protect soldiers from depleted uranium. And no one discussed all the various parts because it was forbidden, so when, under rumors of funding cuts one very nice scientist wanted to test it because he wanted to help people and to prove himself to his girlfriend insane father, there was an accident and the Hulk arrived, that same jackass blamed the helpful scientist. And went on a giant manhunt. And when that didn’t work, years later he though, ok, let’s tell this Russian/British dude about what you were really doing and then give him decades old vita ray stuff. And then basically let other guy inject himself with the stuff another crazy dude the poor scientist thought he could trust and when it all goes to hell in a hand basket blame it on the guy who actually tried to help. That is what went wrong here.” Darcy ate a bite of her omelet.

“So what about the science.”

“There’s no way to reverse it. There’s no magic combination that will fix it. Just like there is nothing that will suddenly turn Steve back a 90-pound asthmatic who can’t see color. Because once you change the cells that drastically and completely, there is nothing short of magic, that I’ve found, that will reverse it. Which, I’ve always wanted to ask – was it weird to suddenly see color?”

“I didn’t really think about it. I was kind of busy at the time?”

“You’re killing me Smalls.”

“What…”

“Jarvis, add it to the list.”

“Yes Miss.”

“What list?” Steve asked her.

“List of movies you’ll need to see eventually. The Sandlot is one of them. It’s one of the definitive movies of my childhood. It involves baseball. You’ll like it.” She turned back to Howard. “I know you want to keep my mind of everything, I appreciate it, but I’m fine.”

“I will drug you if I have to, do you understand?”

“Yes sir.” She said softly.

Darcy texted Pepper around noon, then again around one. She tried not to panic when she did not receive anything back. Instead she sent her grandpa and Steve into the sitting room to watch Christmas movies so that she could have a moment to herself. She texted Pepper for a third time while she started on Pepper’s favorite red velvet cake for tomorrow. It was a Christmas tradition,
along with her grandpa’s favorite lemon raspberry bars, her dad and Rhodey’s favorite devil’s food cake and her sweet and salty brownies. She paused for a moment, trying to think of what to make for Steve. She couldn’t leave him out of the dessert buffet. She was even going to include Happy’s peanut butter bars because he’d be here if he weren’t in the hospital. She looked at her phone again. Pepper hadn’t responded. Pepper always responded.

She took a deep breath before heading out into the sitting room.

“Favorite dessert?” She asked Steve.

“I like cookies?” He responded. “You ok?”

“I’m fine.” Howard fixed her with a look before pulling out his handkerchief. “Oh. It’s…Pepper hasn’t responded to my texts. She always responds. And I was cutting onions.”

“In sweet desserts?” Howard questioned.

“Yes?”

Steve wasn’t surprised to find Darcy sitting up again, after dinner and The Muppet Christmas Carol that she had insisted they watch because “it’s my childhood and not Christmas without it.” The news was on in the background and she was working on her tablet.

“Do you need anything?”

“Nope.” She responded. “So, you’ve got my sob story and have spent today watching me barely hold it together, so tell me your sob story Rogers. The parts I don’t know.” She didn’t look at him, just continued to work on her tablet, content to wait for him to talk. She wasn’t pushy about some stuff, and he liked that about her. She was forthright and honest.

“I have no idea where I fit in, in this world today. It’s not the same.” She put down her tablet to look at him. Another thing he liked about Darcy. She wanted to connect with people on a personal level. Even Howard had spent half the day on his tablet while talking, but every time Darcy spoke to either of them, she was off her phone or tablet.

“I get that.” She said. “Things happen that you can't control, the world changes, it moves it evolves. People don’t. People have the same great capacity for evil and hate but the same capacity for love and compassion and humanity, you know? I get that technology is different, and that the people you knew, most of them are gone…but you’re never going to move forward if you want to stand in the past.”

“You just say what you think all the time, don’t you.”

“Pretty much. It’s genetic.” He laughed.

“You’re not saying it to be annoying or right though.”

“Not yet. Give me time. Trust me.” She smiled. “So, tell me more about life before the big sleep and when you were a skinny asthmatic.”

“I was no good at running away from fights or challenges.”

“So, what you’re saying is not much has changed?”
“Exactly.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

A Christmas Miracle, an argument, and Darcy wins a bet.

“I don’t smell a goose slow roasting over a fire. I thought we were going for a Dickens vibe this year,” they heard Tony announce as the door opened. Darcy was up in a flash, running to meet her dad in the entry way.

“It’s a Christmas Miracle.” She told him before hugging him. She let him pull her closer, tucking her under his chin like he’d done when she was much smaller. If either of them teared up, neither mentioned it. “I don’t know how to cook goose. And it’s only breakfast time so,”

“Pancakes?”

“No. French toast.” She broke away from Tony to throw herself at Pepper. “And coffee. The French toast bake is in the oven with the bacon and sausage. Then you two can nap.”

“Presents first.” Tony announced as Pepper brushed Darcy’s hair out of her face.

“We can’t deny your dad presents.”

“Oh, well, then, I’m glad I sent out for extra presents yesterday because even if you were battling evil and what not, doesn’t mean you don’t get super soldier’s presents.”

“I also invited Bruce. I might need his help. And yours. I don’t know yet but rather safe than sorry.”

“Good thing I know you and order presents for Dr. Banner too and why?”

“I got dosed with some extremis. I’m fine. Your dad said I’ve leveled out.” Pepper assured her. “But if we could make it so it’s definitely stable or completely out of my system, that would be great. But let’s not worry about it until after breakfast, ok?” Darcy nodded.

“And presents.” Tony added.

“And presents.” Darcy confirmed.

Darcy was putting in the roast while Pepper helped her with the cakes. Steve stayed in the kitchen, sketching the two women with the pads and pens “Tony” had gotten him for Christmas. Tony had announced he and Howard were going to do science until Dr. Banner arrived. To be honest, he hadn’t heard much science coming from the other room, only a barely constrained argument between the father and son. So he wasn’t really surprised when the shouting started and neither were Darcy or Pepper.

“Four hours. New family record.” Pepper commented.
“Well, we don’t count the 9 months grandpa didn’t speak to dad, right? Because that was the longest they’ve ever gone without yelling at each other.”

“Right. This is obviously the post sort of talking about it father/son relationship they have.”

“Are you going to break it up?” Steve asked.

“We’ve found it’s best to let them yell for a bit.” Pepper told him. “Unless…”

“They go atomic.” Darcy added. They continued to work, as the yelling got louder. Howard seemed to be lecturing Tony about responsibility and support. “Which will be grandpa’s fault, and I expect it any minute now.”

“And your daughter –“ Howard yelled for them all to hear. It was very impressive for a 90 year old. “It’s bad enough that she’s given up on school, but she’s doing nothing, she has no discipline.”

“She’s Dr. Foster’s assistant!”

“Yes, because a mind like that isn’t wasted in that position…”

“Do you want to break it up?” Pepper asked.

“No, I’ll wait and see if they can’t resolve it themselves.”

“At least I’ve let her have a life!” Tony yelled.

“Nope, never mind, I spoke too soon and forgot they are not grown ups.” She said, wiping her hands on her apron before marching out to the sitting room. “Hey, do not drag me and my choices into your father/son spat, alright!” Darcy yelled as the doorbell rang. Pepper laughed, visualizing Darcy rolling her eyes at the timing of it all. “We have guests, both of whom have not had a family Christmases in a long time, so you two will behave yourselves. And Grandpa, it’s my decision. I’m 22 years old, and I’m not ready to take over SI or even play a bigger part then I already do. Bring it up again and I swear to Thor I will dye my hair pink, get tattoos and join AmeriCorps, do you understand? Now, I’m going to get the door and go back to not refereeing the two of you.” Steve looked at Pepper, who was smiling as she iced the red velvet cake Darcy had made the day before.

“Last year it was running away to the circus.”

“This happens every year?”

“Oh, every time they’re together. The first year I worked for Tony, he invited me to Christmas. Darcy was about 9, then. The minute they started fighting over how she should be raised and how Tony was failing her, she made herself trip down some steps. I saw her do it. Stopped the argument then. Rhodey confirmed it was her patented trick. That or she started crying.”

“And it’s always about her choices?”

“Pretty much. Howard wanted her to go get her masters, after CalTech, then her doctorate. To be Tony, really. And she is, a mini Tony, with far more tact and understanding and less ego, but she’s just as smart. Which is terrifying. Tony wanted her to make her own decisions and own mistakes before she has to be a Stark. All the things that come with it; it’s a terrible privilege, as he says. Howard wanted her to be the Stark Heiress. He’s never really agreed with keeping her out of the public eye. So it’s a thing, all the time. And Tony hates it, and Darcy hates it, but Howard needs to be right.”
Hard-headedness must be wired into their DNA.”

“Not so much Darcy’s, thank god. But it’s why it all gets to her, after a while. But those two idiots? Definitely.”

Darcy nearly laughed when she opened the door because Dr. Banner was obviously trying to find a way out of Christmas with the Starks. She didn’t blame him, at all.

“Dr. Banner, it’s nice to finally meet you.” She extended her hand. “Darcy.” He shook her hand, carefully.

“Tony’s daughter. I see the resemblance. I still don’t know how you’re normal.”

“Her name is Pepper Potts and she runs the world.”

“Obviously.” He said, still standing in the doorway. “You’re sure you don’t mind me being here, for Christmas? Because I can…”

“No.” She said, ushering him into the house. “Not at all. If you turn big and green you’ll just add to the festivities. I bet the other guy would look nice decked out in some red garland.” She smiled, walking towards the den. “Dad, he’s already tried to get out of it, you all owe me money.” She told them as she entered, Bruce trailing behind her.

“You couldn’t have waited until after science happened?” Tony asked. Steve and Pepper entered the den to greet Bruce.

“Seriously, already?” Pepper asked, pulling out a twenty and handing it to Darcy. “Mine and your dads. You know he’s not good for it.”

“True.” Darcy said as she turned to Steve.

“You couldn’t have just gone with the madness?” Steve asked Bruce. “I’ve been here for 2 days.” He handed Darcy a ten.

“I would hit you if I thought it would hurt you and not hurt me.”

“Did you two bond? Darcy, you’re not allowed to talk to boys.” Tony told her.

“That would make life rather difficult, considering you’re my father and you’re a boy.”

“You know what I mean, boys your age.”

“This going to be one of those things where you let him be his actual age, but anytime he doesn’t get anything because he was in ice for 60 something years you’re going to hold it against him, isn’t it? By the way, I call shenanigans in advance.”

“I really don’t like this.” He told Howard. “I can’t believe you allowed this.”

“Oh dear god, do you want devils food cake tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Then you will shut up and leave him alone.”
“You play hardball. Welcome to the madhouse Bruce and Merry Christmas.”

“Why did I pick up the phone?” Bruce mumbled.

“Science. We’re science bros. That is why.”

“Welcome to the island of misfit toys. We’re pleased to have you.” Darcy smiled. "Come for the science but stay for the dessert.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Christmas Dinner, the beginnings of a father daughter talk, and a walk and talk to donuts.

Chapter Notes

It's been a while...so sorry. Words were being assholes. This is a longer chapter though, to make up for it. Enjoy!

At 6:30 Darcy called everyone to the table. He was surprised that she was able to put together a festive table without anyone noticing. It was a veritable winter wonderland in the dining room. Rhodey had arrived just as she was finishing up with the meal.

“Your present is in my bag, you’ll get it after dinner.” He told her in greeting, kissing her cheek.

“Where’s my present?” Tony asked.

“I already gave it to you, knocking out that light from at least 50 yards away. And I rescued the President, so there’s that.”

“Before you start, sit down and shut up.” Darcy told her dad.

“What gives you the right to order me around?”

“22 years as your daughter.”

“Good point.”

“Everyone, sit down.” Pepper said, sitting down next to Tony, who was sitting at the head of the table. Darcy sat across from Pepper, so she was closest to the kitchen. Howard took the other end. He sat close to Howard while Rhodey sat next to Pepper. Bruce took a deep breath before sitting between him and Darcy.

“Don’t worry, I don’t bite and I’m less like my father than he lets people believe.”

“She’s lying. She’s a lot like her father.” Pepper said. “But less annoying.”

“Can we eat?” Howard asked.

“No one says grace?” Steve questioned.

Christmas guys, pass me the potatoes.”

“I can’t believe I’m about to ask this, but why ‘thank Thor?’” Bruce ran a hand over his shaved head.

“I grew up in a house with my Dad, and have my grandfather. It was very…non-denominational.” Darcy began to explain. “And then I went to scenic New Mexico, and tased someone who I believed was a drunk Scandanavian in the middle of the desert and it turned out he was the God of Thunder. So, I feel like swearing to him and about him is allowed. We’re bros. He’s also got my BFF on some really long multi-universe type of string. It’s cool though.” Darcy smiled widely, and Steve couldn’t help but grin in response. It was infectious. “Just so you know, Pepper’s already cornered the market on dealing with my father and I with complete exasperation, so you should just settle into resignation.”

“Resignation’s good.” Rhodey added. “It’s how I’ve survived decades with the Starks.”

“We love you too Rhodey.” Darcy teased.

After they had all finished dinner, Steve began collecting dishes to take to the kitchen.

“Nope, sit down, its Rhodey’s year for dishes.” Pepper said. Darcy nodded.

“I saved the President today.” He complained.

“Yeah, and you still have to do this dishes.” Darcy said. “You know this. This is years of you and dad doing this. I will call your mother.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I would. How’s Carol doing?” Darcy smiled as Rhodey got up quickly, picking up his plate and hers.

“Carol? Who’s Carol?” Tony asked, getting up and helping. “Rhodey, who’s Carol?” Bruce turned to Darcy as the two headed into the kitchen.

“That was terrifyingly efficient and devious.” Bruce complimented.

“I know.” She smiled.

“How do you know about Carol?” Pepper laughed.

“You don’t think I make it look like Shield is hacking the Pentagon and vice versa when grandpa gets all old man and makes me check on Steve…which I will no longer have to do because you know how to use a phone, right?”

“Yes Ma’am.” Steve saluted. “I’m also going to ignore the part where you admitted to hacking several government agencies.”

“Two.” She corrected, but smirked when he raised an eyebrow at her. “Ok, they might all look like they’re snooping on each other so I can read classified e-mails. Sometimes Jane goes off on tangents and Erik’s not there to bring her back to reality and it’s so beyond what I understand about astrophysics.”
“Astrophysics? Erik Selvig?” Bruce asked.

“Yes. It’s also because my granddaughter is very devious and likes knowing everything about everything. Since you mentioned Doctors Selvig and Foster, would you like to mention how you tased Thor again?”

“Hey, until New York you all thought I was crazy when I mentioned cut, blond and godly, and I’m one of two people in this room who have brought down a god…so I get to mention it as many times as I want in the very small group of people I’m allowed to mention it around.” She held up her hand and looked at Bruce, waiting. “You’re supposed to high-five me now.”

“Am I?”

“Yes. You’re my dad’s science bro, so you’re like my science uncle. Again, you should probably just get used to humoring me.” Steve and Pepper both snorted, but waited until Bruce gave her a high five. “Excellent. Thank you.”

“If you know Foster and Selvig, then you went to Culver?”

“I did. Political science, after graduating CalTech. But also my masters, quietly, in cellular biology.”

“You never told me that.” Howard scolded.

“No. I didn’t.” She replied easily. “Dad, put on coffee. Rhodey, come get the rest of these plates or I’ll start telling stories about…”

“Alright, Alright, coffee’s on, we’ll bring out desserts…” Rhodey re-entered the dining room and grabbed more of the plates from the table. “You’re in big trouble.”

“I’m your favorite god child, of course I’m not.”

Howard went to bed shortly after the annual Christmas dinner board game. They played Monopoly in teams, with Pepper as the game master so Tony and Darcy didn’t cheat. Bruce ended up winning because he was the only one not to get incredibly frustrated over stupid things and paying rent.

“You should get to bed.” Tony told her as Darcy leaned against his shoulder. “Instead of falling asleep on the couch.”

“I’m fine. I shouldn’t be that tired anyway, I had a lot of coffee and sugar.” She missed the look Tony and Pepper exchanged over her head, and Bruce’s small smile. They must have drugged her somehow. “So, you and Bruce figure out…’ Extremis yet?”

“I think so, we’ll let you look at it tomorrow. You have rats, still, right?”

“At the tower.” She yawned again. “In my lab. You’d what, inject them with Pepper’s blood first, then the anti-serum?”

“Yeah.” Bruce said as she closed her eyes. Within seconds she was out. “She should be out for the night.”
“Thanks Bruce.” Pepper said. “She didn’t sleep at all, did she?” She turned to Steve.

“Not more than an hour.” He told them. “I’m sure she’d have fallen asleep if I wasn’t up…”

“No, she wouldn’t have. When Tony went missing she would go days without sleeping until she crashed. Longest was 96 hours.”

“She hold it together?” Rhodey asked.

“Only time I saw her crack was when she realized Pepper wasn’t answering her phone.” He told them. “And when there was a live news feed of her house falling into the ocean.”

“She didn’t run down to the lab or anything, right?” Pepper pulled Darcy’s feet into her lap while Tony took the pillow from Rhodey. It was the well practiced moves of a group of people who’d been taking care of Darcy for her entire life. Tony then shifted, letting Darcy drop down, her head under a pillow and she was cuddled against her dad. She looked so much younger in her sleep, and relaxed.

“No. Howard did have her read a file but she shut that down pretty quickly.”

“A file?” Bruce asked.

“Shield files. Yours, actually.” He told him.

“Asked her to go over the science?” Rhodey asked.

“Yep. She just went on a rant about Justin Hammer and General Thunderpuss.” Bruce snorted.

“I like that name. I’ll have to use it.” Bruce laughed.

Darcy woke up slowly, feeling refreshed. Her head was on a pillow, which was placed against her dad’s side. He was on his tablet. Her feet were in Pepper’s lap and a blanket covered both of them. Pepper had a book, one of hers that she got for Christmas. *Princesses Behaving Badly*, which made sense. Pepper could use it to learn ways to run a kingdom, or in her case SI.

“I fell asleep…I don’t remember falling asleep.”

“You were exhausted kid, I’m just glad you did.” Tony answered as she sat up.

“You could have moved me, you had to be uncomfortable.”

“It wasn’t bad.” Pepper assured her. “We didn’t want to go far from you.”

“Did you at least sleep?”

“Pepper did for a bit, I did for about an hour or so. Don’t worry, I’ll get some sleep tomorrow.”

“No, today, why tomorrow?”

“I’m going to the hospital, I’m going to get all the shrapnel out.” Darcy got up off the couch, quickly.

“So no more arc reactor?” She asked quietly.
“Yeah, no more arc reactor.”

“Ok. I’m going to get dressed and go run and get some donuts for breakfast…”

“Darcy,”

“I’m not cooking breakfast for everyone again, I just don’t have it in me. And take out, for the rest of the day ok with everyone? Or do you need to just juice because I can call that in…”

“Darcy Elizabeth…”

“Donuts. I’ve been in this house for like, longer than I ever want to be in this house, so I’m going outside. But first I have to get dressed. So…” She left the room in a flash, not wanting either of them to see her like this. She ran up the stairs, past Steve (who just looked incredibly confused and worried), and into her room. “Get yourself together, it’s a night light.”

“That could have gone better.” Tony told Pepper as she folded up Darcy’s discarded blanket.

“Well, what did you expect? We didn’t include her in that conversation yesterday. And…when you got back Tony, you weren’t really back, not for a while and we both know things between you and Darcy have been…stilted. You two…your daughter knows more about you than anyone on the planet, but you got back and wanted to protect her so you stopped talking to her. But she knows you and why you’re doing it…but maybe we both underestimated how she feels about the reactor.”

“It’s not keeping me alive. It’s keeping shrapnel out of my heart. There’s a difference.”

“I know there is Tony. And she will too, once she processes it.”

“What should I do?”

“Let her go get donuts. Then talk to her. I get that you want to keep her safe and away from it all but she’s not Tony. She hasn’t been. She never has been. She’s always been in the thick of it, she’s just like you.”

“Ok.” He was suddenly so very tired. “She goes to London after New Years, right.”

“Her flight is the third.”

“We’ll stay here, until then. I’ll…we’ll talk and figure shit out. You’re right. The last thing I want to do is push her away too…but then we’ll see what we can salvage in Malibu, and look to rebuilding.”

“But we’ll go to the Tower, to recover.”

“God yes. Better labs.”

“Better view. My actual stuff.”

“I don’t think she’s seen her penthouse yet. Think I can get her to forgive me by showing her the library and her lab?”

“No, because I had a hand in raising that girl, she does not fall for that.”
Darcy nearly laughed as she noticed Steve, waiting for her at the foot of the steps.

“You ok?”

“I’m fine.” She told him, obviously lying. There were bags under her eyes and she’d had a good cry in the shower so her eyes were a little red. “Do you have a donut preference?”

“No. Why?”

“I’m going to grab some for breakfast. I’m not cooking today.” She grabbed her coat from the closet by the door and nearly rolled her eyes as Steve followed her lead.

“I’ll go with you.”

“Fine.” She moved towards the sitting room so she could tell her parents she was heading out. “Going to get donuts, Steve’s coming with me. I’ll be back later.” She didn’t wait for a response before heading back and out the door. She didn’t even wait for Steve, knowing that he’d follow and catch up quickly. Three strides and he was next to her.

“Where are we going to get donuts?”

“There’s a new place, a little bit uptown. They’ve got some traditional flavors and some crazy flavors.” She told him. They walked along the park, runners passing by them quickly. She was surprised at how early it was, and how calm it was. She really hadn’t expected this. Her life had been so much chaos for so long that normalcy seemed off. She had just gotten used to her dad being Iron Man, what if he gave it all up? What if he went into the office every day, what if he was home every night?

What if he wanted her to start learning the ropes? What if they were about to go public and that became her new normal? Living life as Darcy Stark, the Stark Heiress instead of Darcy Lewis, science wrangler?

“Do you want to talk about whatever it is on your mind?”

“Have you seen Star Wars yet?”

“No.”

“Star Trek?” He shook his head. “I love Lucy?” Again, he shook his head. “We need to make you a list, or something.”

“I cannot wait.”

“You could be a little more enthusiastic. Howard could help and you’d never leave the 50s, which is not a time period you want to be stuck in, or my dad could put it together and you’ll want to tear out your ear drums because he’ll just give you a list of metal bands. That you do not want.”

“And you’re my only hope?”

“I am. Admit it. I’m your favorite.”

“Your grandfather made a car fly. I haven’t seen you do that.”
“We’re not friends anymore.”

“Damn.” She rolled her eyes, before taking his offered arm. “You’re pretty much the only one I got.”

“That can’t be true. No one at Shield? Not Romanoff?”

“She’s more of a colleague.”

“She’s more of a spy, but let’s not quibble.”

“What did she do?”

“Infiltrated my family company, gained my dad’s trust, and turned out to be a shield agent and they all knew he had blood poisoning. I get that she was doing her job, and my real beef is with Fury, but that’s my dad.”

“Ok, I’ll give you that.”

“He’s getting surgery tomorrow. To get the shrapnel out.” She told him softly. She could trust Steve. It was like it was with Jane, she got him immediately and better yet, he understood her.

“That’s a good thing, right?”

“Yes. Shrapnel is not being kept out of his heart by an arc reactor he built.”

“But?”

“It’s really selfish of me, but…when he was missing…” She paused, before letting go of his arm so she could wrap both of hers around her. “I just…lost hope, after the first month that he was coming home. You know? Peggy had to kidnap me from my grandpa because he had none…spent 70 years searching for you with no result. So he wanted me to get out there. Apparently Peggy and my dad had a pact or agreement or whatever. But I was with someone who knew the futility of looking, in war zones. And someone who knew what losing hope looked like and I didn’t want to be them. So I lost it quickly, and totally. But I had dreams, where we’d just find the body. The arc reactor reminds me that he’s here. That it’s real. That I am not imagining that my dad’s alive.”

“Did you tell him this?”

“No. I told him it was fine and then left. And here we are.”

“Are we walking to Harlem to get donuts?”

“The edge. Yes. What, no advice?”

“I don’t think you need it. You’re entitled to your feelings.”

“Is that the 1940s way of telling me to put on my big girl pants.”

“No. I’d tell you to buck up if I thought you needed to. I get it though…when I found out Bucky was missing…I had no clue what I’d find, so I had to prepare myself, just in case. So when I got him back…sometimes the only way I knew it was real was because of the lost look in his eyes.”

“Did it ever get normal?”
“No. But he was still the same guy, just changed.”

“Do you miss him?”

“If he’d made it out…there’s no way of knowing if he would be here.” Steve told her as she took his arm again. “But yeah, I do.” They walked quietly for another four blocks. “Why are we getting donuts in Harlem?”

“Because they are supposed to be good.”

“They better be worth it.”

“Why, feeling a little winded? Not up for the walk?”

“I’m offended by that. I could run around the entire island while carrying you without getting winded.”

“Well if you ever get tired of Shield, you have something to fall back on.”

“Carrying tourists while running round the city?”

“Yep.”

“I’ll look into it.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Donuts are eaten, father-daughter talks, mother-daughter talks, grandfather-daughter talks, Steve gets introduced to some modern american cinema, and some background on the Stark Family.

Chapter Notes

A week between updates, I can't believe it. There is a lot of talking in this long chapter, but it's the last of the really talky chapters for a while. Enjoy!

“We have donuts. Lots of donuts. Get here quickly or Steve will eat them all!” Darcy yelled as they entered the house.

“I will not eat some of them. Do not worry. Also, that was my ear.”

“Why is Cap carrying you piggy back?” Tony asked, greeting them.

“He said he could carry me and the donuts back from Harlem. I might have insulted his masculinity in order to get him to do it but it totally worked.”

“Good going kid. What kind of donuts did you bring us?”

“6 cinnamon sugar, 6 chocolate, 3 peanut butter cassis, 3 raspberry shirracha, 3 pineapple brown butter, and 3 maple miso.” Darcy announced as Steve carried her in towards the kitchen.

“Ohh, pineapple brown butter. I want that one.” Pepper took the boxes out of Steve’s hands. “Darcy, get down off the poor man.”

“It’s so nice though, to pretend to be tall.” She pouted while Pepper glared at her. “Fine. Thanks for the lift Steve.”

“How’d you even get up there?” Rhodey asked.

“She had to climb on to a bench.” Steve laughed.

“You’ve already had three donuts and I don’t care about your enhanced metabolism, you can’t have more until everyone gets at least 2.”
“Kiddo,” Tony offered as they all finished their donuts. “I’m going to go to the tower, get the rats and make sure the place is ready. Want to come with me?”

“Sure.” She said. “It’s my lab that I haven’t seen that you’re stealing my rats from.”

“I built you that lab, I can take it away.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“I wouldn’t. Want to go now.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re taking the instigator with you. You don’t have to worry about us.” Pepper told her. “I’ll even take care of lunch.”

“Ok.” Darcy agreed, slipping off her stool and kissing Pepper on the cheek. “I’m driving.”

“Fine.”

“This might be overkill dad.” Darcy commented as she took in her new lab, across the hall from her dad’s lab. The labs below would be Jane and Bruce’s, respectively.

“Really? I think it’s nice.”

“You got me a mass spectrometer.”

“I did.”

“And I have an entire wall of lab mice.”

“You do.”

“Has someone been taking care of them?”

“Obviously, yes.”

“And did you just buy me the most expensive compound microscope on the market and is that a terrarium?”

“Yes, and yes.” Tony paused. “Do you like it?”

“I…yes.” She answered, surprising herself with her honesty. “It’s ridiculous and unnecessary, but it’s even better than any of the labs I used at Cal Tech or with Dr. Ross at Culver.”

“You haven’t told Bruce that you know and are close with his ex, have you?”

“No. If she wanted him to know where she was, she would. And if he wanted to contact her, he would. They’re adults dad, do not meddle.”

“But it’s so fun. Did you see the centrifuge?”

“I did.” She smiled, sitting in the chair at her desk. Tony sat on one of the stools next to it. “Thank you.”

“Wait until you see your penthouse.”
“Oh, god, you didn’t. Please tell me Pepper had a hand in decorating it.”

“Your pinterest boards, actually.” She sighed. She should have expected that. “If you don’t want me to get the surgery, I won’t.”

“It’s not that. It’s just…” She looked up at Tony, tucking her feet under her. “I get that you don’t want to have shrapnel being repelled away from your heart by an arc reactor that you’ve installed. I get that you don’t want the reminder of everything. I just, it just reminds me that you’re here. And that this isn’t some really elaborate dream, you know.”

“Darce – “

“I know it’s selfish and stupid of me Dad, and it’s not fair to you but, I’m terrified that if that stupid light goes away – “ She trailed off and looked away.

“Then I will too.” She nodded, wiping her eyes.

“When you were gone, I thought, this is the Stark curse. Not the pressure or the company or the endless expectations Grandpa has that I will never live up to, but losing everything important to you at 19 and having to pick up the pieces – “

“You’re not, I know the past few years haven’t been easy for you and I haven’t been…here.”

“You don’t have to explain dad. I get that you want to protect me. You don’t owe me any explanations.”

“I do. My dad and I got to the point we are because we never talked, ever, and I swore, when I found out about you that I was never going to do that to you. We weren’t going to have that type of relationship and I was not going to make those same mistakes and I have.”

“You haven’t.” She assured him, getting up. “I’d be the first to tell you if you were fucking up.” She hugged him then, letting him comfort her for a moment. She missed this, hugging her dad whenever she wanted to and sitting in a lab and talking.

“Do you want to see your penthouse so you can yell at me for spending too much?”

“Yes.”

Pepper looked at the text Tony sent her. It was simple: “heading back now, had the mostly beginnings of talk – call Peggy and get her out here for tomorrow. Kid not 100% better. If ok with Peggy, Kid can fly back with her after new years.”

She knew it wasn’t going to be that easy, getting through the walls Darcy built to cope with the madness around her in recent years. They’d spent so much time focusing on the madness in their immediate presence they forgot about how Darcy was handling it all. She was always such a calm, cool, confident child, never needy like her father or grandfather. She was always the peacekeeper, always able to go with the flow of whatever was going on around her. Then Tony went missing for 3 months and she lost whatever hope and optimism she once had. Howard was no help, and in retrospect his plans to bring Darcy in would have only resulted in her death. She was no help, trying to take care of everything like Tony was still there. Happy tried but his
solution was to teach Darcy to punch things, and while Peggy was always Darcy’s source of strength and role model, it probably wasn’t the best idea to leave her with a woman who wore her loss like a crucible. Sure, Peggy moved past losing Steve and moved on, but it was still there. Darcy knew the stories.

But she had to hope having her grandmother like person there with her tomorrow would help her, while she, Rhodey, and Howard were at the hospital with Tony. Steve, as much as he seemed to already care for Darcy (which she would watch carefully, because she was not going to set her daughter, who trusted so rarely, up for a fall), still didn’t understand their incredibly difficult family dynamics. So she called Peggy and set up her flight. This, she could do for her kid.

“Dr. B, the lab my dad set up for you at the tower is amazing. He’s even built a Hulk safe room just in case you have a bad day or something.” Darcy announced as she entered the kitchen, grabbing a cookie from the still filled cookie tray. “And you, Steven, have a very nice 40s style gym which I wasn’t supposed to tell you about, because Thor knows Tony Stark doesn’t want to seem like he’s a team player and nice guy.”

“Is this how you betray me?” Tony complained.

“Yes, because letting people know you’re not a douchebag is such a portrayal.” Darcy rolled her eyes.

“Does Capcicle even know what a douchebag is?”

“Considering the word’s been around since the 1700s, I’m sure he can figure out that it’s been morphed into a pejorative slang term.” She took a bite of her cookie, smiling. Steve just shook his head, trying not to laugh.

“I told you, I wasn’t working in your tower.” Bruce added.

“Wait until you see the lab.” Darcy informed him. “We’re a very stubborn people, us Starks. If he’s made up his mind, then you’re pretty much coming with us.”

“Just go along with it.” Pepper added. “It’s a much happier life when you go along with the two of them when they get something in their heads.” Both Starks nodded, smirking at each other. “Howard’s in the study. He says he found some research Darcy might like.”

“You found some research I might like?” Darcy asked as she knocked on the study door.

“I did. It’s old but…”

“So are you.” She teased. “I’m sure I’ve already ready it, I spent so much time pouring through this study when I was little.”

“It’s something I kept hidden.”

“Then I definitely already found it.” She laughed, sitting down across from him at his desk. He handed her the album. “This isn’t research.”

“Well, not really…”
“Look at how chubby my dad was. That’s apparently hereditary.”

“I was never a chubby baby. That comes from your grandmother’s side.”

“Bull.” She looked through the pictures. “So why’d you call me in here?”

“Figured you’d need a break from your dad.”

“He tell you about the surgery?”

“This morning. When you were out getting donuts with Rogers.”

“He has a first name.”

“He still calls me Stark.”

“He calls Dad that too. It’s going to get a little confusing.”

“Just a little.” She smiled at her grandfather. “Your father set up a lab for you?”

“He did.”

“And you’re still going to go to London.”

“For a bit. Jane needs me.”

“You could be doing so much more, then assisting.”

“I know. But I don’t want to.”

“It’s a waste…”

“Not this again. Please.”

“You have a mind that could be even greater than your father’s if you put it to use…”

“I do. I help build machines that will, when we figure it out, connect the Einstein-Rosen bridge to another world, entirely. I’m pretty sure that’s using my brain grandpa.”

“Darcy.”

“I don’t want to be you. And I don’t want to be dad.” She said, getting up and putting the album down on his desk. “It leads to misery. I don’t want this life.”

“You may not want it, but its yours.” She stalked to the door.

“And see how fast I run.” She left quickly, turning down the hall to head to her room, barely noticing Pepper outside the door.

“Miss Potts, you can come in.” Howard sighed. “Do you not rust me with my own granddaughter?”

“Not when I know what you’ll pull, no.” She admitted. “She’s half mine Howard. Has been since she was 8 years old. That’s my daughter. And if you don’t think she’ll run so that she can retain the normalcy she’s created for herself in this merry band of lunatics, then you’ve lost your mind.”

“She is more than a lackey.”
“Yes, she is. But until she decides she wants to take a more active role, she can do what she wants. You’re not in charge of SI anymore. I am. My kid’s not coming into the fold until she’s 110% sure that’s what she wants. And if she never wants to I won’t blame her. It nearly killed both her grandfather and her dad.”

Pepper waited for a moment before knocking on Darcy’s door. Tony had his talk with her; she wanted hers. She’d never claimed Darcy as hers in front of Howard before. Tony, yes, but never Howard. Not like that. Howard always thought her adoption of Darcy was to make life easier for Darcy when she went to school. It was partially that, but Darcy was her daughter, and had been since Tony introduced a very outgoing 8 year old to her a month after she became his PA. Darcy had been in the workroom with Tony and immediately went to show her the robot she’d made earlier that day. Her pigtails were crooked, she had grease on her cheeks, and she was so excited to meet someone new.

Then Tony told her, after Darcy went to go read in her room (part of her JARVIS mandated home school curriculum), about Darcy’s mother, how he made the decision when he found out about her, to keep her out of the public eye. To let her make her own choices without the burden of being the “Stark Heiress.” She agreed to help, to keep Darcy safe from the world. She knew she made the right decision the first time she ever met Howard and overheard one of his and Tony’s fights and saw how Darcy ended them. No child should have that much pressure heaped on them.

She knocked gently.

“It’s me.”

“Come in.” Darcy said softly. Pepper entered, forgetting how much she hated this room. It was decorated for a princess, not for Darcy. It had been this way her entire life. Darcy was packing, getting ready to leave. “How much did you over hear?”

“How’d you know? I didn’t think you saw me.”

“You and dad are pretty predictable.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Never.” Darcy smiled.

“You ok?”

“It’s weirdly comforting, knowing he won’t ever stop trying to get me to do what he wants.”

“Really?”

“Sort of. I’d like to go one holiday or visit without it coming up but he’s old and set in his ways. There’s not much I can do.”

“Do you think about it?”

“What, joining the company?”

“Yeah.”

“I…not today. Soon though. I just…want to see what the world has to offer outside of what I can
“I do.” Pepper agreed.

“And I want to do it on my terms. Not because dad or grandpa want me to.”

“I agree.” She said, sitting on Darcy’s bed. “I hate this room.”

“Me too.” Darcy sat next to her. “When I was little, and all the commandos would be here… I loved Uncle Dum Dum used to say that this was where they were going to keep me locked in the tower.” Darcy sat next to her, putting her head on Pepper’s shoulder.

“Dum Dum was probably right.”

“I was never this girl.”

“No, sweetie, you weren’t. You are your father’s daughter.”

“Not such a bad thing.”

“Not a bad thing at all.” Pepper agreed. “I can sneak you in tomorrow, if you want.”

“No, I’ll be fine, in the tower.”

“You sure.”

“Yeah, I’ll probably freak out or something. Or fight with grandpa, loudly.”

“How’d you like your penthouse.”

“I thought he was joking but did he just hack into my pinterest account or something?”

“Pretty much. He had me go over everything.”

“That library is pretty impressive.”

“That was all me.”

“Best mom ever.”

“Damn straight.”

“So, are the rats still alive?” Darcy asked as she entered the lab.

“They are. Clear of extremis.” Tony told her.

“So it worked?” She looked Tony’s shoulder. “Why did you write it down?”

“To make sure you could see it, so you could double check it.” She rested her chin on his shoulder, like she used to do when she was little.

“It’s right, if you’ve based it on this formula.”

“Well, I figured it was right because I didn’t kill your rats.”
“That too.”

“I wonder if Red survived the explosion.”

“Red?”

“Darcy’s pet rat. She’s had him since she was 8, 9 maybe?”

“And it’s still alive?” Bruce asked. “Rats live 3 years, at most.”

“This rat was special,” Darcy told him. “He’s red. I’m pretty sure I got the earliest form of Erskine’s formula right, considering how red he is and well…Red Skull. Red was a nice rat though, not a neo-nazi rat or anything. If he survived that and is somehow living at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, I will probably eat my hat. Or something.”

“You were able to perfect the earliest form of the super solider formula? At how old?”

“9, right?” Darcy asked. “Don’t mention it upstairs though, god knows what will happen if Grandpa ever learns of that.”

“You could do that at 9?”

“Yeah, I’m kind of a genius.” Darcy laughed.

“Could you…”

“No.”

“I didn’t even ask.”

“I know what you were going to ask, and there’s no changing it Bruce. There’s only controlling it, which you have down. There was irreparable damage to your cells. And if I could, I wouldn’t do it because you know what, the Hulk is a good guy. He’s saved the world. You may call him the other guy and what not, but personally I like him. He did catch my dad and everything. And he punches Thor, who totally deserved it.”

“Thor deserved it?”

“Please, he can handle it. Who doesn’t want to punch a Norse god in the face a few times? I know I do. On earth and didn’t even bother calling my best friend.”

“He was dealing with his genocidal brother.”

“Still could have called once you figured that shit out.”

When they put Tony under, it was the first time in months that he didn’t see death, destruction, and things he couldn’t understand when he closed his eyes. Instead, he remembered.
He stood outside the apartment, two sets of papers in his hands. One absolving him of all responsibility, and the other giving him his rights as her father. When Sadie put Darcy into his arms for the first time, he knew he would never need the first set.

He took a plane out to see Peggy immediately after. He should have told his dad, but he needed this first.

“What do I owe the honor of...” Peggy started when she opened her door. Tony didn’t even wait for her to invite him in, just barged in.

“I have a daughter.”

“Sit down, I’ll get the scotch.”

“A daughter. How old?”

“Three months. Nearly four. I think.” Tony handed her the Polaroid he took.

“She’s gorgeous Tony.” Peggy smiled. “Name?”

“Darcy. Darcy Elizabeth. Lewis, is her last name. For now.”

“Does your father know?”

“I came here first. I’ll tell him after…”

“Anthony.”

“I don’t want her to end up like me. I want to let her make her own choices and mistakes, I want to keep her away from the madness.”

“Howard will not like that.”

“No, but Peggy, if anything happens to me…”

“Tony.”

“I’m not planning on it. Just...you were the most normal person in my life, you and the Commandos. But with the exception of Gabe, none of them stick up to my dad and you do, so if anything happens.”

“I’ll take her.”

Her first steps are in his work room, from him to Dummy, who was recording everything. She laughed and giggled and was off like a spark the moment she mastered putting one foot in front of the other.

By her first birthday, he’s met and hired Happy, who agreed to be Sadie’s brother on paper in case of emergency. Happy, with Sadie’s permission, comes out and gets Darcy at least once a
month for a week. Usually on a Saturday, so Tony could ride out with him, hidden away in the backseat.

Darcy is happy and follows him around everywhere. She learns to use a screwdriver and is taking apart toasters by the time she is 2. He looks forward to her visits every month.

She’s three when Happy gets a call, telling him his sister’s been arrested for cocaine possession and Nevada Child Protective Services has his niece. He was in a meeting with the Secretary of Defense, so Happy leaves him a note simply saying ‘Emergency, back later.’

When Happy returns 10 hours later, arriving at his house, Darcy is sound asleep in his arms, her bag still in the car.

He has her for three months then, while Sadie goes to rehab. He gets them to keep Disney Land open late for them, has everyone sign a bunch of very tight non-disclosure agreements, and she loves it. When Sadie leaves rehab, she swears she’s clean and wants Darcy back. It nearly kills him to let her go, but he thinks, in the end, it’s better for Darcy.

Darcy sobs, begs him not to make her go. That should have been a sign.

She’s five when Happy gets him out of bed one morning at 4am, having rushed over after getting the call. He makes sure Tony gets dressed and assures him he’s already called for a plane and it’s waiting for them at the nearest air strip.

His lawyers are at CPS when they arrive, after Happy stopped at the morgue to ID Sadie and have them release her body to a local funeral home.

Within minutes, the social worker is brought up to speed, signing the non-disclosure agreement and the paperwork, which will be sealed, giving Tony full legal and physical custody of Darcy.

Then they let him see her. She paused in the doorway, accessing the situation.

“It’s ok sweetie.” He told her, catching her as she jumped into his arms. “We’re going to go home, you’re going to stay with me from now on.”

“Mommy’s in trouble again?” He paused, brushing her hair back from her face and kissing her temple.

“No, sweetie. She’s not in trouble. She got into a car accident last night.” He looked her right in the eyes as he told her. “She didn’t make it.”

“Oh.” Was all she said, before curling into him.

It took a few months for her to get adjusted and settled. Every night for the first month, like clock work, she ended up in his bed. It forced him to sleep.

She hadn’t been enrolled in school, so he decided to home-school her. JARVIS could do it. She was a genius and a self-starter. She was happy reading books and giving book reports. By the
time she was 7 she was better versed in American history than he was. European history by 8, and world history by 9. She loved watching the history channel and she read a lot of Howard Zinn.

She developed her love of biology and chemistry by the time she was 7 too. When she was 9 he’s pretty sure she managed to create an imperfect version of Erskine’s formula, which he keeps from his dad.

Virginia “Pepper” Potts enters their lives when Darcy is 8 years old and Tony needs her the most. (It becomes very telling, when he thinks about it, that after Darcy, it’s Pepper he needs the most.)

Pepper fills the gaps for Darcy, teachers her the things that he cannot. She takes her for her first manicure, her first real hair cut at a spa. It’s Pepper who handles the great training bra debacle of 2002, when Darcy is 10. It’s Pepper who he calls freaking out when Darcy has her first period because he has absolutely no clue how to handle it, and it’s Pepper who guides Darcy through the whole puberty thing.

He really hated the crying.

Howard wants Darcy to be a Stark, and all that entails. He loves his granddaughter, that much is clear. He dotes on her whenever she visits New York and despite all his flaws, she loves her grandfather too. He goes along with what Tony wants, at least, until Darcy decides to go to Cal Tech at 13 and live at home rather than MIT.

Howard threatens to take custody, to petition the courts. It’s Peggy who intervenes, telling Howard that he’s less fit now then he ever was to be a parent, and Darcy needs someone present who doesn’t live with a ghost. She tells him that the court will never fault a parent who wants to keep his 13 year old daughter in the area rather than send her away. He imagines a lot more was said behind closed doors because they don’t speak again until Dum Dum’s funeral 2 years later.

He’s amazed (always) watching his daughter grow and thrive. Somehow, before he realized it, the tiny curious little girl became a fast-talking, sarcastic woman who had absolutely no tolerance for bullshit. She was happy, she was adjusted and normal, which is more than he had ever hoped for. He’s pretty sure Pepper, Rhodey and Happy are mostly responsible for that.

Of course, it’s not all laughter. They get in a fight two hours before he leaves for Afghanistan because, while it’s not a new thing for him to bring home a woman, it’s a completely new thing for that woman to be a reporter, who attempted to snoop in Darcy’s section of the house. She’s still unpacking from Culver, having enjoyed her first regular year at college. She calls him selfish before leaving without saying goodbye. He calls her a spoiled brat.

When he was taken, it felt like shades of his mother’s death all over again. He’d fought with both his parents before they got in the car. He told them he didn’t need them any more, he was nearly 20 and not an idiot. So he fights to get back to Darcy because he does not want her to live with that type of guilt.
Pepper tells him, when he gets back, that she was able to tell Darcy before it hit the news. Darcy holed herself off in the lab for two weeks before she and Peggy were able to talk her down. Pepper told him that Peggy took Darcy the minute they learned Howard and Obie were planning to out Darcy and force her to the front of SI.

Her code name has always been American Cheeseburger and he’s pleasantly surprised to find her in the car already at the airstrip, waiting for him. She rests her head on his shoulder and lets him tuck her under his chin like he did when she was little and would cry. She waits in the car with while he gives his press conference and looks proud when he comes out after announcing that Stark Industries was going to stop making weapons. She always hated weapons, never wanted to build anything that could be used to hurt other people. She fought with Obie and Howard, all the time. They wanted her to use her abilities to make biological weapons. Darcy just made things that smelled good in response. Or, in one case, put everyone over the age of 50 asleep. He’s still not sure how she managed that and she hasn’t told him. When they get back to the house she makes a big deal about dinner and then realizes that neither of them have been home in months.

“You’ll be fine? By yourself?” She asks him, so unsure of leaving him, even if it’s to get groceries. He doesn’t want her to go but he’s got to fix this arc reactor and he doesn’t want her to see.

“Yeah kid, don’t worry. I’ll be here when you get back.”

“You better.” She tells him, hugging him fiercely. “I love you.”

“I love you more.”

He doesn’t talk to Howard once he gets back, and outwardly and vehemently refuses once Obie’s true treachery was revealed and all he can think about is his daughter dead by Obie’s hands because Howard didn’t listen to what she wanted. Or what he wanted for her. She doesn’t say anything about the silence. He knows she’s seen her grandfather after it all happened, but that things are strained there as well.

“How is it that you don’t have enough science credits to graduate? Doesn’t your master’s program count?” Tony asked.

“Nope. Dr. Ross suggested an internship with her friend, Dr. Jane Foster.”

“I’ve read her stuff. It’s out there, but brilliant.”

“I’ll only be in New Mexico, about a 12 hour drive. I can do a few long weekends during the semester.”

“It will be easier to fly.”

“People will notice the jet landing in New Mexico every few weeks.”

“I’ll come get you.”

“Yes, because Iron Man arriving every few weeks won’t draw any attention to me either.”
“You won’t do something stupid like starting to prefer green chile sauce over red, right?”

“God no. Even though they’re the same pepper.”

“I refuse to believe that.”

“You can refuse as much as you want, but they’re the same pepper.”

He’s a little surprised to see Coulson again, so soon after the Expo, especially because he’s already had another meeting with Fury.

“There was a small incident in a New Mexico town a few days ago.” Coulson began. Tony was pretty sure his heart was about to go out. “She’s safe, yelling at my agents and in one case punching them…”

“How’d you know?”

“We confiscated her iPod. There was a remarkable amount of code on there. Pepper’s the cover?”

“She legally adopted her, when Darcy was 12. Before she went off to Cal Tech.” Tony paused. “This going in my file.”

“I see no reason for it to, you’ve kept her out of the spotlight for a reason.”

“What happened?”

“Apparently your daughter and her friend ran down a Norse God in the desert, and then she tased him and then there might have been a giant metal thing that destroyed the town. But she’s fine.”

“Do you need a drink? Because I’m going to need one.”

“Also, I told her about the blood poisoning.”

“She’s probably on her way here. And then I really am going to die.”

“I think she’d get away with it.”

“She would. My daughter understands chemistry and biology like no one else. She’d be a really efficient serial killer, now that I think about it.”

“Well, that’s not terrifying.”

They all had one last meal at the Mansion, before Rhodey, Howard and Pepper escorted Tony to the hospital and he and Bruce took Darcy downtown to the Tower. When they got to the tower, Darcy showed him and Bruce their apartments, before accepting the pill Bruce handed her.

“I’ll make breakfast in the morning. I think I’m the only apartment that’s stocked. Just tell Jarvis, he’ll let you in.”
“No key?” Steve asked.

“No. Jarvis won’t even let the elevator up if he doesn’t trust the person.” She took a deep breath. “If you want to science Bruce, Jarvis will lead you to your lab.”

“Thanks Darcy.” Bruce responded as she headed back towards the elevator.

“Night guys.” They both watched as she got in.

“How that girl is so normal I have no idea.”

“I imagine its Miss Pott’s influence.”

“And Tony’s too, which is weird.”

“Yeah, let’s not think about that.”

By unspoken agreement, both Steve and Bruce decided to camp out in Darcy’s apartment during the day while they waited for news on Tony. Darcy decided to use the time to catch him up on some of the most important parts of pop culture. She even handed him a small journal for him to keep track of everything.

“Godfather, before Star Wars.” Bruce told her.

“Really?”

“Yes. Only 1 and 2 though.”

“Agreed. God, no one should be subjected to Sofia Coppola’s acting. No one.” Bruce laughed. “So, popcorn?”

“Yes.” Steve responded as Darcy headed to the pantry.

“Jarvis, load up the Godfather. Steve, prepare to get your mind blown by one of the best movies ever made.”

“That was fantastic.” Steve said as Part 1 ended.

“If you thought that was good, Part 2 is even better.” Bruce assured him as they heard the elevator arrived. “They shouldn’t be back yet…He only went under at 7am, it’ll take at least 10 hours.” All three turned to the elevator which let them into Darcy’s apartment.

“Steve, be a dear and get my bags.” Peggy announced as she exited the elevator. Darcy was up in a flash, greeting her aunt with a hug. “Oh my darling, it is good to see you.”

“Why are you here?”

“Your parents figured you’d want another friendly face around. I’m going to fly back to England with you. I was assured you have a very nice guest room in your apartment for me.”

“I do.”
“Dr. Banner, this is my godmother, Peggy Carter.” Bruce looked at Steve for a moment, having read his file. He nodded as he got up to get Peggy’s bag. “Aunt Peggy, Dr. Bruce Banner.”

“It’s nice to meet you.”

“We’re introducing Steve to the Godfather movies.”

“Excellent.” She kissed Darcy on the temple. “I’d love a cup of tea.”

“Go, sit down, I’ll make it.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Peggy visits, Tony comes home, Darcy hides in a car and Steve helps with some science.

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes into account both Captain America: The Winter Soldier and Agents of Shield, so there are spoilers. You've been warned.

Peggy watched Darcy carefully as they watched movies and waited. Her goddaughter was more open than she usually was, but she suspected it had to do with both the company and the fact that the two gentlemen knew who she was. She was pleased, conversely, that Steve seemed to be opening up around Darcy. When he visited her after New York, she was worried he'd hold back from moving on. He'd come to terms with the world moving on; he'd always been resilient. It was really only the loss of Bucky that seemed to faze him before, and she understood that. Somehow, through it all, she'd forged that type of friendship with Howard. She only wanted to throttle him half of the time after 70 years.

Then she noticed it. The shy, goofy smile Steve used to get 70 years ago around her, when he thought no one was looking. That smile was directed at Darcy as she and Bruce discussed the mechanics of the guns used in the Godfather. That was an interesting development, one she supported wholeheartedly. He'd been in the modern world for 9 months now; it was time to move forward instead of adjusting. And she adored how easy Darcy was in his presence. There was no pretence. She was not na"ive enough to think that she'd see this relationship develop and play out. It was only a matter of time before Darcy noticed and forced everyone to confront the issues.

Darcy made her an early dinner, then insisted she go to bed relatively early do to the time zone change and the fact that she was, no matter how much she tried to deny it, an older lady. Darcy had her there; she was finally feeling her age.

They were halfway through To Kill a Mockingbird when she heard Peggy calling out for Sharon. She and Steve looked at each other. This woman was important to both of them. Darcy was up the moment she heard the door open.

“Darcy, why are you here? You should be at school.” Peggy commented.

“No, I’m out of school Aunt Peggy. You’re in New York, at the tower. My dad’s having surgery.”

“Is he ok, is it his heart?”

“He’s fine. He’s getting the shrapnel out.” She paused for a moment. “Let’s get you back to bed, ok?”
“Ok.” Darcy was so thankful she didn’t see Steve. If Peggy thought she was still in school then she didn’t remember that Steve had been found and defrosted. Darcy took her arm, helping her into bed. “I’m sorry.”

“Why? You didn’t do anything.”

Steve waited until the movie was over and Bruce headed to bed to discuss what happened with Darcy. She knew it was coming, handing him a beer out of her fridge.

“Do you know how long?”

“No. She’s 91. It happens.” She thought of Dum Dum, and the last 3 years of his life and how he didn’t remember her or even Howard. How there were days when she’d go visit him with her dad, and they were strangers but he remembered the times in his life he’d moved on from decades earlier. She was 12, when it started and she couldn’t understand how this giant of a man, this force in her life couldn’t remember who she was. “It could be because she woke up in a strange place or because her memory is going.”

“What happens next?”

“She and my grandpa have a deal, that if it comes to the difficult decisions that they’d be too stubborn to actually make then the other makes it for them. So…we’ll see.”

“You don’t seem surprised.”

“It’s not my first rodeo.” He looked at her carefully, assessing. He wondered, if he’d survived and aged with his friends, would he still be amazed by this girl who took on all of them? Who cared for all of them without even being asked? Someone who asked for absolutely nothing in return? Or would he have become like Howard, unable to see her strength because she was still a child to him? He hoped he’d see her as he did now. It was interesting that, in 4 days, Darcy had become the only person he could completely trust. There were no conditions on her friendship, she didn’t expect more from him or for him to get with the program. He liked that. She didn’t pull punches either, just told him the truth.

“You ok?”

“I’m fine. You?”

“I woke up 70 years in the future Darcy; I figured I’d be lucky if one person was still alive. And I’m grateful for whatever time I get.”

Darcy entered her grandfather’s guest apartment, knowing they had to have this conversation. Howard was aware Peggy was visiting and he didn’t seem at all surprised that Darcy was coming to talk to him. He knew.

“How long has her memory been going?” Howard looked up at her. “She woke up and wondered why I wasn’t in school. This morning she didn’t know who I was.”

“Off and on, for the past year. At least that’s when I noticed it. I’d guess it’s been going on longer than she’d like to admit.” Darcy sat down across from him.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”
“She didn’t want me to.”

“You have to tell her kids.”

“Darcy.”

“You promised. We promised her. This…grandpa. She asked us to make the decision when she would be too stubborn to.”

“What do you suggest?”

“DC. Her kids are there, most of her grandkids, nieces and nephews. Steve. It’s an easy trip for you to visit.”

“Darling, if we do this, you will not be able to see Peggy again.” It was true. She was hidden from everyone’s life, if they put Peggy in a home it would be for family only, and Steve and Howard. Possibly Tony. Not her. She didn’t exist in that world. To Peggy’s family she was Dum Dum’s granddaughter, who Peggy barely knew. She was the girl Sharon pushed at 50th reunion, who cried because her dress had been ruined.

“I know.” She wiped at her eyes. “But she’s not doing well.”

“I know.” Howard reached across to clasp her hand.

“Ms. Stark, Mr. Stark, Sir has arrived with the hospital team, they will be setting him up in his apartment momentarily.” Darcy stood up from her spot on the couch and took a deep breath to center herself.

“Thank you Jarvis.” Howard replied.

“I’m going to go make sure he’s settled. And I want to sit with him for a bit.”

“I’m going to call Michael.” Darcy leaned down to kiss her grandfather’s forehead before leaving his apartment.

Darcy watched as the nurses settled her dad into his room, listening as they gave her and Pepper the rundown on what they’d need to do and what he’d need to do over the next few days as he healed from the surgery. They were Stark nurses, privately contracted, who knew Darcy’s true parentage.

“Do you mind staying with him? There are some fires at SI I need to put out.” Pepper looked at Darcy as the nurses’ left. “Shouldn’t take long.”

“Not a problem.” Darcy replied. “Rhodey go back to DC?”

“For the next few days, the President called him back.” Darcy nodded. “Are you ok?”

“I’m fine Mo…Pep. I promise.” Pepper nodded, walking over to kiss Darcy on the forehead.

“I’ll be back in an hour, two tops.” Darcy nodded before sitting down. She watched her dad sleep for a few moments before kicking off her shoes and climbing into the bed next to him.

She hadn’t done this in a decade, at least. They used to have days like this before she went to college and tried to be so grown up, where they’d watch old movies and stay in their pajamas. Pepper would join them occasionally, or Rhodey, or Happy would. It depended on the movie.
Life was simple then. Grandpa wasn’t as obstinate, Peggy wasn’t fading, the Commandos were still there and her dad was only her hero, not the rest of the worlds.

Howard watched from Darcy’s door as Peggy regaled Steve with a story about her grandchildren when they were little. It was slightly surreal, having Steve looking like he did before they lost him, decades later. Peggy, as always, noticed him first and knew.

“You spoke with Darcy.”

“I just got off the phone with Michael.” Howard headed over to the couch. “You said it yourself, if she noticed…”

“I thought I’d get away with it a little while longer.” Peggy said. “At least until she came out to London.”

“Pepper may yell at us.”

“Pepper will yell at us.” Peggy shrugged. “Tony will too.”

“Why?” Steve looked between the pair of them.

“I’ve been losing time. There are good days and bad. I made Howard swear, years ago, if it got bad he’d be the one to make the call; we both knew, privately, that Darcy would end up making it. It’s not fair to her; that we make her deal with all our problems for us.” Peggy explained. “Where will I be staying?”

“Ingleside, in DC. Residential care.” She nodded. “Michael’s coming up not tomorrow, but the next day.”

“Does Darcy know?”

“She’s with Tony now. She doesn’t know it’s so soon.”

“Ok, I’m a little lost now.”

“To my family, Darcy is Dum Dum’s grand-daughter. It wouldn’t make sense, to have his granddaughter visit me. They think we’ve only met once or twice.” Peggy explained. “So this will be our goodbye.”

Pepper was not surprised to find Tony sitting up with his tablet in his hand when she came in to check on him and Darcy. She was, however, surprised to see Darcy curled up next to Tony, the tear tracks visible thanks to her mascara.

“Do you know what’s caused this?” Tony asked quietly.

“No. I’ll go find out. If it’s your father, I may kill him.”

“Alright. Let me say goodbye to him first if you do.”

“Agreed.” Pepper smiled. “I’ll be right back. Do not move out of the bed.”

“I won’t. Don’t want to wake the kid.”
“Why is Darcy curled up asleep in bed with Tony? Like she used to when she was little? She’s clearly been crying.” Pepper asked as she entered Darcy’s apartment. She looked between the three adults. “I suspect it has to do with why the three of you look like you’re conspiring.”

“Peggy’s memory has been going, for the past year.” Howard told Pepper.

“And you were you and decided to wait until Howard made the call but Darcy’s the one who made it. So that means that not only does she have to deal with all Tony’s crap this week but she has to say goodbye to you.” Pepper looked at Peggy, who only nodded. Steve was silent. “That explains it then.”

“I expected yelling.”

“I’m too tired to yell and I know Darcy’s not the only one who’s miserable right now. When…”

“Day after tomorrow.” Peggy responded. “Michael’s coming up.”

“I’ll have someone go out and pack up your house in Winchester, if you’d like. Darcy will probably volunteer, since she’ll be out there. And don’t start.” Pepper warned Howard. “I’ll go wake her up and tell her, let her handle the rest of the day on her own terms.” She turned around, walking back to the elevator.

Darcy opened her eyes quickly, very aware that someone was staring at her. She was not surprised to find her Dad and Pepper watching her carefully.

“I’m fine.”

“We know about Peggy.” Pepper told her, gently.

“Oh.” She said softly. “I just…it’s been a week.”

“I know kid.” Tony assured her. “I will do my damnedest to make sure this is the only week you have like this, ok?”

“My dad’s Iron Man. My mom’s juiced up with Extremis. Stable but I’d pay good money to see her and Steve fight now. I’m pretty sure we’ve just walked into our new normal.”

“Ok, but we promise it won’t involve surgery and dealing with memories of…” Pepper began.

“It’s…I’m fine. I got it out of my system.”

“We could find a way to get you in, so you’d be able to visit. I could talk to Michael.” Tony suggested.

“Thank you, but I can’t do it again dad. I can’t. It’s why we’ve set it up this way, after Uncle Dum-Dum. They all knew I wouldn’t be able to go through that again.”

“Do you want to call in Trip?” Pepper asked, brushing Darcy’s hair back from her face.

“He’s on assignment. It’s not like I can explain to him why I’m upset.”

“He’s a smart kid, there’s no way he doesn’t know that you’re mine.”

“Or he thinks I’m someone’s bastard daughter that happens to be a super genius and/or mutant and you took me in.”
“He was the only friend you had growing up.”

“I’m aware of that dad. He emailed earlier this week. He knows I’m safe.”

“I’ll call Maggie”

“You’ll do no such thing Dad. It will be a thing. I don't want it to be a thing.” She looked at her parents. “When is Michael coming up?”

“Not tomorrow, but the day after.” Tony explained

“Can I just hide here for a bit longer?” Both nodded as Tony turned on the TV.

“I need to catch up on Dog Cops.” Darcy nodded, resting her head on her dad’s shoulder.

She headed down to her own apartment around 4, tired of hiding. She wasn’t surprised to find her grandfather with Peggy and Steve.

“Can I join or is this for nonagenarians only? Do I have to be able to remember what rationing was like?” Darcy questioned.

“Who taught you to speak to your elders like that?” Peggy laughed.

“Uncle Dum-Dum. Uncle Gabe. Uncle Monty…I could go on?” Darcy paused. “I was thinking we could watch 1776.”

“I think that’s an excellent idea.” Peggy agreed as Darcy sat down next to her. She took her goddaughter’s hand and squeezed, receiving a small smile in response. “When Darcy was little she used to make everyone watch this on the 4th of July, when we were all together.”

“I made everyone sing too.” She added.

Darcy didn’t hesitate, helping Peggy into bed. She remembered Peggy doing this for her when she was little. After her mom died, Peggy came out to LA to help out and Maggie and Uncle Gabe would drive up, sometimes with Antoine. But Peggy would tuck her in on those few nights where her dad was still at work.

“I’m sorry.” Peggy told her softly. Darcy just sat on the edge of the bed. “I didn’t want to put you through this, again.”

“You’re not.” She wiped away a tear. “It’s different this time.”

“No it's not.”

“No, you’re right. It’s not.” Her lip trembled, but she took a deep breath. “I didn’t think it would be this difficult.”

“Oh sweetheart, you are far stronger than you let yourself believe. And you need me less than you think you do.”

“That’s not true. You’ve always been the one to fight for me, even when I don’t fight for myself.”

“Well, I think it’s time you become your own champion. Though if you’re looking for a new cheerleader, I think Steve will happily fill that position.”
“I trust him. Not just because he’s, you know, yours and grandpa’s buddy from the forties or because I grew up hearing stories about him from the commandos but...I like him. He’s a good egg. It’s nice to have a new friend. One where I don’t pretend to be the ditzy intern. I don’t have many of those.”

“You have more than you know.” Peggy sat up. “Tomorrow you and I will hang around and have tea and watch movies. Like we used to do when you were little.”

“I’d like that.”

“And if you don’t mind, I’d like it if you could pack up my house. You’ll know what to send and where to send it...there’s already a box set aside of things that I want you to have...”

“Aunt Peggy, let’s have this conversation tomorrow. Please.”

“Fine.” Darcy leaned down and kissed Peggy on the cheek before getting up. “Goodnight Darcy.”

“Goodnight Aunt Peggy.” She turned off the overhead lights before closing the door and heading to the kitchen. Her grandfather had gone up to check on Tony, she knew that. She didn’t see Steve sitting on her couch, flipping through channels. She grabbed the teakettle, filling it with water automatically before she felt herself break for the second time that day.

She didn’t even protest as she felt arms come around her, pulling her into a hug. She found herself pressed up against Steve’s chest. She didn’t say anything, just sobbed, letting him comfort her. She was unaware how long they stood there, in her kitchen where he

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry...” She pulled away, wiping at her eyes. “Sorry.”

“It’s ok.”

“No, it’s not. I don’t...this is not what I do. I’m going to go to bed, feel free to hang out here and watch TV.”

“Darcy...”

“I’m fine. Goodnight Steve.”

Michael came to pick up Peggy as scheduled. Darcy and Peggy had their goodbye earlier, and then Darcy had quietly disappeared. Tony wasn’t worried, not even when it started to snow, not even when dinner passed and she was not back.

“Shouldn’t someone go looking for her?”

“No.” Pepper counseled. “She’ll be back.” She checked the time, 10 pm. “In an hour or so. She’s 22, Steve, and in the past week she’s been through a hell of a lot and has been surrounded by more people than she’s been around in a very long time, which is rare for her. The fact that it took her a week to disappear is impressive.”

Darcy knew that hiding in the backseat of one of her dad’s cars in the garage was a weird hiding spot. But it was where she always hid during hide and seek at the house when she was little. She was always partial to the hot rods. At Commando gatherings, when it got to be too much, she’d hide in her grandpa’s Bentley. Dum Dum would occasionally come to sit with her and tell her
stories about the circus. Or he’d just sit with her in silence. After Dum Dum died, her dad confessed that he’d do the same when he was little. He’d run and hide in cars and Dum Dum would find him. It was like he was the Stark whisperer.

She hadn’t had a reason to hide in years. Not really. The last time had been in New Mexico after the Destroyer. There weren’t many places to for her to have a moment for herself. She was still processing everything that had happened with her dad. Afghanistan, Vanko, blood poisoning. He’d known he was dying and he didn’t tell her. Coulson found her in a burned out pick up truck.

“Dum Dum Dugan recruited me for Shield.” He climbed into the passenger seat of the truck. She was in the tiny backseat. “I was 18.”

“That young?”

“I didn’t have much else going for me. It was just me. I trained under Fury. But Dum Dum kept an eye on me. Told me that I reminded him of Sergeant Barnes.”

“That’s a high compliment, from Dum Dum. Second only to saying you reminded him of Captain Rogers.”

“I don’t think anyone reminds that group of Captain Rogers.”

“No. That’s true.”

“I had been under the impression that he did not have any kids…”

“He did. There…he didn’t talk about it.” She watched as Coulson processed that.

“I visited him in 1994, and there was a picture of a little girl on his desk. He told me it was his granddaughter.”

“Was I in the ballerina outfit?”

“You were, actually.”

“That’s not embarrassing. Not at all.” She smiled.

“He clearly adored you.”

“The feeling was entirely mutual. Its funny…Dad went to Aunt Peggy when he found out about me because he knew she’d be the one to fight with my grandfather for me to have normalcy. He didn’t think Dum Dum would. But he was my fiercest defender. I went to the just Commando gatherings and when my grandfather attempted to make me do science instead of play he’d yell ‘Jesus Christ, she’s a child, not a grad student.’” She imitated Dum Dum’s gruff voice, making Coulson laugh. “It’s just Peggy and my grandpa left now.”

“That must be hard for you.”

“I…they were my family.”

“Have you heard from your father?”

“He and Pepper are finally dating, so I don’t have to run away to Vegas again. Like I tried to when I was 11. He and Grandpa are actually talking again and I didn’t have to interfere. So that’s a miracle.”

“I would not want to be you.”
“No. It’s always entertaining, at least.”

“I’m surprised he’s not here.”

“I am very good at blackmail.”

“Ms. Stark has returned and is in her lab.” JARVIS informed Tony and Pepper. The clock showed that it was 11:30.

“Should one of us go or should we get Steve?” Pepper started to say.

“Captain Rogers has also been informed and is currently heading up to her lab from the gym.”

“Let him try.” Tony sighed. “JARVIS, tell her breakfast is mandatory tomorrow, just me, her and Pep.”

“I will Sir. Should I warn her of Captain Roger’s approach?”

“That would be great, I don’t want to force her to see people if she’s not up to it.”

“Yes sir.” Pepper looked at him as they settled into bed.

“How long do you think we have before they start dating?”

“A while, hopefully.”

“Is it because you don’t want your daughter growing up?”

“It’s because he’s still not adjusted to this modern world and got his own shit, and I love my daughter but she’s got issues that she needs to work through too. I think it’s going to happen, and I can’t believe I just said that out loud.”

“I can’t either.” Pepper laughed.

“But they’ve got something. She doesn’t trust people, and she trusted him immediately. Not because he’s an Avenger or because he’s my dad’s war buddy, and he sees her.”

“This is very adult of you.”

“Oh, when it happens I will inform him that I will kill him if he hurts my daughter. So there’s that.” Tony paused. “I’m also going to start a pool. $200 says next Christmas.”

“Steve will do something stupid…that’s when it will happen.”

“You’re on Potts.”

“Miss, Captain Rogers is approaching your lab, should I let him in?” Jarvis asked. She was getting Bruce’s blood sample labeled and placed into her storage fridge. He’d left it for her, unprompted, which was nice of him. She pulled out a needle and a set of vials.

“Let him in Jarvis.” Darcy told the AI as she pulled out a set of gloves, a tie, and her first aid kit as Steve walked in. “Can I get a blood sample?”

“Why?” He began rolling up the left sleeve to the button up shirt he was wearing. She’d take him
shopping tomorrow for some more modern clothes. She put on the gloves.

“One day you’re going to do something stupid, and you’re going to need a pain killer or anesthetic, so, I can make those. It’s…well, I don’t think that’s why Bruce left me a blood sample today but it’s how I’m going to use it.” He sat down on the stool next to her desk and nodded, putting his hand on the table. She quickly tied a tourniquet on his right arm and balled his hand into a fist. Most of the veins in his arm were visible. It was very impressive.

“How’d you learn to take blood?”

“When my dad realized what I was interested in, when he knew I was serious, so about 10…” she swabbed the injection site and waited, prepping the needle. “He asked our doctor to come over and teach me how to take blood from people. He taught me how to get it from mice and rats.” She quickly inserted the needle into his vein. It was easy to find and she quickly filled up three vials while they sat in relative silence.

“Why did you want to do this?” She removed one vial and replaced it with another, letting that fill as well.

“I wanted to help people.” She admitted, grabbing a piece of gauze and holding it over the needle. She gently removed it, disposing of the needle in her medical waste box before turning to Steve and cleaning the injection site. She covered the gauze with a Disney Princess Band-Aid. Steve removed the tourniquet then rolled down his sleeve. “I didn’t want anyone dying because of something I made. Dad and Pep showed me the medical side of SI and explained how we went out into the world and helped with crops and water and curable diseases in third world countries. Pepper took me…whenever we went somewhere my dad had a conference, she’d take me out to the poorest section of town so I could see what it was like. And I wanted to fix it.”

“And how’d you get so efficient at taking blood?”

“I was trained by a doctor and I used my dad as practice. He pretended to be a big baby about it, so I got better.” She labeled the vials before walking over to her sample fridge. Steve noticed she looked smaller today, frailer. It was like the entire week, the entire year had just caught up to her and leveled her. She took off her gloves before slowly walking back to where he was sitting and curled up in her desk chair. “Thanks for the blood.”

“You’re welcome.” Her phone beeped, indicating a message. She looked at it, smiling softly before turning her attention back to him.

“I’m fine Steve. You don’t need to hover or wait for a breakdown. I had that the other night. I’m not that breakable.”

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned in the past what, week? It’s that you’re not that breakable.” He smiled at her. “But you’re also the best friend I’ve got and the person I trust most…”

“You poor bastard. You need to meet more people.”

“It’s not like I said your dad was the only friend I have.”

“He’s not that bad.”

“He grows on you, like a fungus.”

“You may be all super muscley and all, and I’d probably hurt my hand, but I will punch you.”

“Do you even know how to throw a punch?”
“Before you, the only other friend I had...have, I just don’t see him as much, is Gabe’s grandson, Antoine. We grew up together. We were the only grandkids on the west coast, since Morita somehow ended up in South Carolina from Fresno, who knew...any way...he’s a Shield Agent now. He’s 5 years older than I am and did not let me leave for college without knowing how to take down someone. With or without my taser.”

“Does he know?”

“That my dad is Tony? No. Well, he probably does. Or he thinks like some of the other grandkids do and believes that I’m Howard’s bastard daughter and he was too much of a mess after my grandma died to take care of me. Which is feasible, I guess. His mom does, Maggie. Because she and my dad grew up together sort of. I mean, she’s 10 years older than my dad but he always liked her best.”

“Have you talked to him recently?”

“Not really. He’s a roving agent, I guess. I don’t know what you call them. He’s never in one place for a long period of time and as you know it’s not a lot of down time.” She paused. “We text, when we can.”

“Out of all the things that I like about the future, texting is pretty great.”

“It is. I’m glad to know you can text. Grandpa has issues with it.”

“I can text. I’m linearly old, not actually old.” She smiled, taking out her phone.

“Good. I’ll start sending you cat videos to fill your downtime.”

“I cannot wait.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Darcy goes to London, Thor happens.

Chapter Notes

Here it is - the Thor chapter! I hope everyone enjoys it. Some advanced warning: I'm going to attempt to get at least one or two more chapters up before memorial day, because between then and August my updating will be a little slow (if it happens at all). I am starting to study for the bar exam (again, unfortunately. It's a long story but hopefully this will be the last time I ever have to take it) A lot of it is already written ahead but it's in pieces. Nothing is cohesive. So, on to the chapter.

“So, London.” Steve commented, leaning against Darcy’s door. “It’s a good town.”

“I hear it’s a jolly good one, actually.” Darcy threw her make up bag into her bag. “You’re heading back to DC?”

“In the morning.”

“And back to Shield?”

“I have to do something.”

“That’s debatable.” She sat down on her bed, facing Steve. “You can do anything.”

“So can you.”

“No. I can’t.” She laughed. “Thanks for thinking that though. There’s only so much longer I can run.” She motioned to the bench at the foot of her bed.

“Why do you have a bench here?”

“Decorative touch? Somewhere to lay out my clothes in the morning? Place for genetically engineered super soldiers to sit?”

“What am I going to do without your sarcasm in DC?”

“Watch the cat videos I send you? Punch things in adorably vintage gyms? I don’t know. I tend not to think about people’s lives without me in them every day. I imagine it’s a lot less colorful.”

“That’s one word for it.”

“You know, True Blue, if America could see what a shit-stirring ass you could be…”
“I figured I’m going to see how many people I can trick into thinking that I figured out that Star Wars twist on my own.”

“Darth Vader literally means Dark Father. Who doesn’t figure that out?”

“Lots of people, according to Banner.”

“I say you’ll be able to fool, like, 10 people. Then everyone will know what a dick you are.”

“You say such nice things about your friends.”

“You should hear what I mumble about Jane when she’s being difficult.”

“I can come out and help you pack up…”

“Thanks for the offer Steve, but it’s something I need to do by myself.” He watches her for a moment as she resumes packing. She places a silk bag into the bottom of her large blue and green suitcase. Two other bags have already been packed and they’re next to the door. Her flight is first thing tomorrow morning. He’d been asked to keep Darcy entertained while she packed so that Tony and Pepper could put together a nice dinner to surprise her.

“So what will you do in London?”

“Make sure Jane eats and does work…see Erik, possibly? Who knows with him right now. I’ll fix some scientific equipment, compile Jane’s data, maybe take a class at London City College?”

“What kind of class?”

“International political science. Maybe a biomedical engineering course. Jane would find that suspicious though. So most likely political science. I’ll be such a hit. Maybe I’ll pretend to be a conservative.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“I should have never introduced you to Fox News.”

“They lie and they must be stopped. They are horrible people. Horrible.”

“I’m not disagreeing.”

“You’ve got everything you need, right?” Tony asked as they drove to the airport.

“Yeah. I do. And I know you and Pepper are heading out to Los Angeles next week to go over plans to rebuild, so I’ll take into account the 8 hour time difference.”

“You can call whenever. You know that.”

“I do. But you need sleep. And you need to talk to someone, all right? Please.”

“Fine. Because you asked nicely.” Tony looked over at her. “Did I see you installing SnapChat onto Cap’s phone?”

“And Draw Something. And a few drawing apps. I’m going to send him ridiculous SnapChats and I expect really arty one’s in response.”
“Of course you do.”

“I’ll call every other day. I’ll text every day. There’s an 8 hour time difference once you two go to Malibu though and I know you tend to freak out when you forget that it’s not a few hours ahead and when I don’t pick up in the middle of the night.”

“You will call every other day. I don’t sleep much. You don’t sleep much. Pepper will pick up the phone at any time if it’s you. You know this. And I don’t freak out.”

“I know. And that one time you kind of did.”

“And you’re to call your grandfather every few days too. You don’t want him to feel left out when he’s still being stubborn about so many things.”

“I know. You’ll make sure Dr. Banner stays.”

“Yes. And I’ll check in on Cap a few times for you too. I’m going to have to go down to DC anyway. Stern is after the suit again.”

“You don’t have a suit right now.”

“I’m thinking about being distraction free for a bit.”

“Iron Man isn’t the distraction. Obsessively building bigger and better suits instead of sleeping and dealing with your PTSD is the distraction. Get that under control, build more suits. Save the world.”

“I thought you’d be on Pepper’s side.”

“I am. And we’re on yours. You can have both. You’ve just got to deal with the mental health shit first dad.”

“When did you get so smart?”

“I’ve always been smart. I’m your kid.”

She needed to get Jane out of the flat at least for a little bit. She’d been there two weeks and it was clear Jane had gone crazy. She was always a little crazy, Darcy knew all the best scientists always were (see her grandfather, her father, and Bruce, for example). Erik was nowhere to be found, not answering any of the calls Jane had left. And she was tired of only texting Steve sad photos from her life encoding data.

“Listen Jane.” Darcy stood in front of the tiny scientist. “You need a break. We have those calculations running and they need to run for at least 72 hours, you said, without anyone touching them. You know you’ll touch them at the 24 hour mark…”

“I will not…” Jane looked up at Darcy, who was wearing her ‘don’t bullshit me’ expression. “Ok. I probably will. What do you suggest?”

“It’s my birthday tomorrow. I suggest we go to Paris for a few days. I found a great looking place on Air BnB that we can stay in, right in the St. Germain section of Paris. We can be tourists and eat lots of bread and drink all the wine…”

“That does sound nice.”
“I know, right?”

“I’m not paying you…”

“Family money, remember? We’ve had this discussion before.”

“And you’re sure the place is cheap?”

“Yeah. It’s going to count as my birthday present from my aunt, so don’t worry about it.” Darcy lied, only a little. The place would cost nothing because it was hers. Her 16th birthday present from her dad (her grandpa had gotten her a car). She had always loved Paris.

Darcy nearly rolled her eyes as she noticed the SI security team following her and Jane throughout Paris. She knew they were stationed in her building, permanently, so they were always available when she visited. They must have called Pepper, who told her dad, who then demanded they follow her around. She had one of them take their picture at the Eiffel Tower, then she had Jane take one of her jumping with the tower in the background. She quickly sent off the text to Steve. *Finally, not London and Labs.*

“Who are you texting?” Jane asked as Darcy put her phone back in her purse.

“A friend, from back home. Steve.”

“You have a boyfriend?”

“I have a boy, he’s a friend. There is no carnal knowledge implied in that.”

“Do you have a picture?” Darcy rolled her eyes then pulled up the most ridiculous picture she had of Steve on her phone. There weren’t really any pictures of him except for the one he sent ‘I heard everyone is supposed to do duck face?’ Apparently Natasha had to explain a group of girls to him one day and he’d gone home and taken a selfie. But instead of actually doing a duck face he drew a duck face on his own. It had solidified the reason she’d made him download snap chat – he’d enjoy the art and she’d enjoy what he came up with. She had taken a screen shot of that immediately. She handed her phone to Jane. She snorted when she looked at the picture. “Are you serious?”

“Yep. He doesn’t like taking photos.” That was true, it reminded him too much of his showgirl days.

“He’s a good artist.”

“Yeah.”

“How’d you meet?”

“We have mutual friends.” That was sort of true, if her family counted as mutual friends. “Come on, let’s go up.”

“This was a good idea.” Jane said as they sat down at Café De Flore. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. It was selfish, I wanted to get away for my birthday.”

“So this Steve…”
“Oh dear god Jane.” Darcy laughed. “A friend. That is all. I’ve got enough on my plate dealing with you.”

“I’m offended.”

“You get into an insane science thing and or a mopey he-who-must-not-be-named thing…”

“With the Harry Potter references? Again? Really?”

“Hey, give me something else to call him and I’ll do it, but until then, I will just call him you-know-who.”

“And I don’t get mopey.”

“You do. A little bit. It’s ok.”

“It’s been two years. I’m tired of waiting around.”

“Then don’t.”

“It’s that simple?”

“Sure, if you make it that simple.”

“Paris makes you wise.”

“I am wise Janie, just not your kind of wise all the time.”

Darcy picked up the phone when it rang, heading into her bedroom and away from the intern. It seemed like a good idea, having someone else there. She was at class some of the time; someone else could be there for Jane. And someone else could do the heavy lifting, all for free. He had a science background, at least. It was spring now, and she wanted to go outdoors more. It was really pretty selfish on her part, now that she thought about it.

“Spangles.”

“You have the worst nicknames for me.” Steve laughed.

“I have the worst nicknames for everyone, get used to it. Did you run a full marathon this morning or what?”

“Not quite. Twenty Miles? Probably?” Darcy rolled her eyes. “What have you done today?”

“Got Jane up to eat pop tarts, and looked over some data I do not understand while Jane fretted about her date.”

“Jane has a date?”

“A lunch date, with a dude named Richard. She met him on some website, I think. Who knows?”

“What about Thor?”

“It’s been two years dude. She’s mortal. He’s most likely got an expanded lifespan since, you
know, he’s visited before. At least his dad has.”

“I thought you like Thor.”

“I do!” She sat down on her bed, heavily. “If he showed up tomorrow and they worked it all out, I’d be all for it. But they knew each other for 2 days. I like Thor fine. I like Jane more.”

“I see your point.” Steve said.

“What time is it there?”

“Like, 7 maybe?”

“And you’ve already run 20 miles. I hate you.”

“No you don’t. If I didn’t call you every week at least once you’d just call your dad.”

“I call him every day regardless. We have a very good relationship. We’ve stopped hiding things to protect the other.”

“You’re saying we but you really mean him, right?”

“Yeah. What do I hide from people? Other than everything about me.”

“I’m pretty sure you’d outscore Natasha on spy skills.”

“I could not lie to people and get close to them. I could not lie to them, and hide things, and watch idly by when someone is dying.” She said harshly. She could hear Steve thinking on the other line.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“I get that it was Fury’s orders, I really do. And I know you work with her and for what it’s worth Dad trusts her in his way. Pepper too. But…”

“It was your dad.”

“Yeah.” She heard beeping from the other room. “What the…”

“One of these machines is making a weird noise?” The intern announced. Darcy stood up, heading out to the common area.

“Who was that?” Steve asked.

“The intern.” Darcy replied, ignoring the intern’s melancholy My name is Ian. She knew what his name was. She didn’t care.

“You’re the intern though.” She took the piece of equipment offered by the intern and hit it against the table multiple times.

“Yeah, I know. I hired my own.” She looked at it, recognizing the readings. “Shit, I have to go get Jane.”

“She’s on a date.”

“This is science. She’d never forgive me if I don’t tell her. There’s a reason Erik called her out here and then promptly disappeared, other than his being a little nuts.”
“Ok, go interrupt her date. Don’t get sucked into any wormholes.”

“Stop reading science fiction. If there’s a wormhole we’re all screwed. Talk to you later Sparkles.”

“I hate that one too.”

“Too bad.” She hung up. “Come on Intern.”

“It’s Ian.”

Darcy looked at the phone in her hands. She’d sent out a text in the immediate aftermath that simply read don’t worry guys, still alive. Cleaning up, will call later. She’d received a string of angry texts then messages from her father and her grandfather. Pepper had simply said You and I will be having a very long talk when you get home, which was, quite frankly, more terrifying then any of the threats laid out by her dad. Steve hadn’t responded at all, but she figured he was busy with Shield things in the aftermath. Now she was hiding from Jane, Thor, Erik and the Intern (especially the intern – she thought) on the roof of the flat. Thor found her there an hour later. He pulled himself up onto the roof and sat next to her.

“They’re doing science, aren’t they?”

“Yes.” He responded. “I thought it best to leave them and find you, for your counsel. As you are the daughter of Stark, are you not?” She nodded. “Jane and Selvig are unaware of your true parentage then?”

“Yes. May I ask how you know?”

“While in Asgard, I would ask Heimdall to look in on my friends, he told me of your father. You felled me when your father could not.”

“True.” She turned and smiled at Thor. “I do hold that over his head. I’m actually surprised he’s not here right now, trying to carry me back to New York.”

“Why would he carry you back? You have proved yourself admirably, much like he has.”

“I think it’s different. I’m his kid. I also haven’t called since before the Dark Elves invaded. They know I’m fine, but…I know what’s going to happen once I call. Dad’ll say ‘you’re coming home now, we’ve got room in the tower. And it makes sense, especially because Shield didn’t answer a single call when Jane was missing and I have not seen them since. And then I’ll have to tell Jane and Erik and I am terrified that I’m going to lose my best friend.”

“Jane would not do that. You must know she views you as highly as you view her.”

“I know. I just have hidden a lot from them.” She sighed as a text came through. Her dad again. You are so grounded when you get home. “Plus, I don’t want the intern to know.”

“He seems quite besotted by you.”

“He’s nice, I guess? But…”

“You’ve given your heart to another.” Darcy looked at Thor, the shock evident on her face. He grinned at her. “You are often with Jane, and I know of the Captain. Does he know this?”

“No. He deserves more than me.”
“Any man would be lucky to have you.”

“You’re just saying that because I tased you.”

“You should call your father. I imagine he and Lady Pepper are very worried.”

“Would you like to sit out here and listen to me get yelled at instead of returning to the land of science?”

“I think it would be very amusing, yes.” She took a deep breath before dialing Jarvis directly. This way if they weren’t together, he could interface and they could all yell at her together.

“Miss,” Jarvis began as she put the phone on speaker. “You have had us all very worried.”

“I know J. Could you put me through to all of them? Tell them I’m with Thor and they’re on speaker”

“They are all together in the penthouse. A very wise decision. I shall connect you directly”

“DARCY ELIZABETH LEWIS STARK” Tony boomed. She looked at the door to the left of them. No one heard them. “I watch an alien invasion of keebler elves…”

“Dark elves”

“In London, where my daughter is. Jarvis found CCTV footage of you being surrounded by elves with WEAPONS…you are coming home.”

“If I am, I’m bringing Jane, Thor and Erik.”

“Fine. You know we have the room. And I can’t believe I’m about to say this but why didn’t you call Shield?”

“I did! After Jane disappeared with Thor. I called and they didn’t answer. There’s an intern…”

“You’re the intern.”

“I know. I hired an additional one. That’s not important. Of course they’re coming with me. Anyway, we saved the world. It’s nice to know I’m still a part of the family business.”

“That’s not funny and why didn’t you call me.”

“There wasn’t enough time.” She threw her head back in frustration. He didn’t have the suits anymore. He hadn’t felt like rebuilding them yet. He was finally getting the actual help he needed, even if it was just talking to Bruce, but she wasn’t sure he was ready to get back in the suit quiet yet. She did not need this to be the push if he wasn’t 100% ready. “Look, we knew about the convergence, and then Thor and Jane showed up and we knew about the elves and by that point it was ‘let’s come up with a plan to use science’ and here we are. Third generation world saver, right here.”

“Kid, I have heart problems.”

“I know.” Darcy paused. “Grandpa and Pep are quiet.”

“They’re saving it for when you get home. SI’s free of Shield funding and strings, giant budget…we’re going to need to understand their stuff better, in the future. The plane will be waiting for you at the normal airport on Saturday. You will be on it, no matter what.”
“Yes dad.” She agreed. She suddenly wanted so badly to be home, even to be yelled at by her grandpa and Pepper. She missed the crazy people in her life.

“And Thor, if anything happens to my daughter in the meantime I will kill you.”

“Understood Stark!” Thor laughed. “No harm shall come to Lady Darcy. She is a dear friend and brave companion. I look forward to rejoining you all in the city of New York.”

“Here that Dad? I’ll be fine. I love you all.”

“Love you too kiddo.” She hung up.

“Shall we go tell Jane and Erik the news?” Thor asked.

“We need to get rid of the intern first.”

“Leave it to me.” Thor stood up, jumping off the roof and onto the deck, then held out his hand to her. She let him help her up and off the roof. “It shall be fine.”

“I hope so.”

“You are Jane’s true friend, this she knows. That has not changed.”

“Thanks Thor.”

“You are welcome Darcy.”

“Jane, Erik,” Thor announced. “Darcy has helped me get in touch with friends in the city of New York. I wish to speak to you about what I’ve learned. Intern, I would like to speak to my friends in private, if you do not mind.” Darcy smiled as he said it. It wasn’t difficult to imagine Thor growing up in a palace with servants and staff around. He had a princely tone that you could not ignore. She had an AI, she was used to giving it orders. She knew her grandpa was used to giving orders to, well, everyone, but especially the human Jarvis, when he was still alive. It was a learned trait, how to sound authoritative but kind, without giving anyone an ability to say no. She could probably teach a class on it.

“No, no, not at all. I’ll go to the coffee shop down the street.” Darcy watched carefully as Ian bumbled around, making a show out of getting his computer quickly, and his jacket, watching as he juggled it all. She nearly rolled her eyes when she saw him “drop” something before leaving. She waited until he was gone before picking it up. She noticed the listening device, a SI invention, thank goodness, and quickly disconnected it.

“Nice try.” She pulled out her phone and pressed her Jarvis app. “Jarvis…say hello to Jane and Erik.”

“Hello to Jane and Erik.” Jarvis responded. “There is one listening device in use, according to this it is under the kitchen table. I’ve taken over the feed. Do you have any song requests?”

“That really stalkery Sting one. And the feed is Shields, right?”

“Correct. You may speak normally now.”

“Thanks Jarvis.” Darcy looked into the shocked faces of Jane and Erik. Yep, taking out her portable Artificial Intelligence was probably the best way to break it to them that she was not
exactly what she seemed. “Long story short. Tony Stark is my dad. I’ve known my entire life, he’s known my entire life. When my mom died when I was five I moved in with him. He kept me hidden to keep me safe, and so that I could have a normal life, I guess. I entered college at 13. I have a degree from CalTech in biology and in Chemical engineering. Then I went to Culver for the traditional college experience. My dad would like to offer you two positions at SI. They include room, board, an amazing lab; I mean it’s spectacular. I okayed everything before I came out here. Unlimited funds, free to do what you want, no Shield or strings. Or conditions.”

“You can do science.” Jane said, looking at Darcy as Erik sat down heavily on the couch.

“Really, that’s what you got out of this?”

“Why did you need the science credits – you already had a degree.”

“I wanted to be normal. For once in my life I wanted to be like everyone else my age. If I had taken an intro lab or something I would have been so bored. Dr. Ross suggested your internship and I know jackshit about astrophysics. Physics are, much to my father and grandpa’s surprise and displeasure, not my strong suit. I mean, as a whole I get it and understand it but…it’s never been my forte.”

“We watched your dad carry a nuclear bomb into the sky and you didn’t say anything.”

“I couldn’t. I was terrified.” Darcy admitted. “Look, I get that this changes a lot of things but other than not mentioning my dad I’ve never lied. This is me and…” Jane didn’t say anything else, just hugged Darcy. Thor beamed.

“I’m going to make you do math now.” Jane told her as she pulled away.

“Why do you think your machines still work?”

“Not all the time.”

“I do the best I can with the limited resources we have. Wait until we use Stark money.” She turned to Erik. “World still a bit crazy?”

“Just a little.” He responded but he was smiling. She’d take it.

“So what’s next?” Jane asked.

“Saturday there will be a plane at an airfield and we’ll all go to New York. Dad’s got the tower set up for your arrival, has since after…Erik, if you don’t feel comfortable in New York there are tons of SI offices that would have you and we have agreements with tons of schools for lectures and everything. But given that they sent in an agent through me I want to make sure Shield cannot get to any of you. I don’t…I don’t trust them. I only trust a few agents and one…I don’t know what they’re calling him.”

Jane and Erik had begun to encrypt their research using Jarvis’ help as Ian appeared. Darcy was sitting on the couch, texting on her phone, looking bored.

“Pepper Potts is my aunt and legal guardian. I’ve known Tony Stark my whole life. I learned paranoia from the best. Get your stuff and leave.” She knew she had to control her anger. And she was angry. How dare Shield. “Don’t try to leave any additional bugs, Tony’s AI is on my phone and he’s monitoring the place and will continue to do so until we leave.”

“Please tell Shield that we’ve accepted a better offer from SI and they can go to hell.” Jane told
Ian. Thor handed him his briefcase.

“Fine,” Ian said. “But Fury will not be happy.”

“I don’t care about Fury, and thank you for confirming it was him. I’ll be sure to mention it when he inevitably comes down from on high to yell at us. You have your stuff, get the hell out.”

“It was easy, you know, finding the weak link.” Ian began. Darcy put down her phone because if there was one thing a lifetime of Captain America stories taught her it was that bullies were the worst and occasionally you had to throw a few punches to shut them up. She stood up before Thor or Jane could charge. Erik just looked amused, possibly remembering that she tased Thor without a second thought. “I mean, there were the stories from the agents in New Mexico and everyone knew that you had a thing with Coulson.” Darcy didn’t even think, just punched Ian straight in the face, smirking as she heard the bone break. “You bitch, you broke my nose…” He lunged towards her only to be caught by the neck by Thor. Thor easily picked him off up the ground and carried the intern to the door.

“You have overstayed your welcome and dishonored my friend.” They all watched as Thor opened the door and took Ian outside. It was almost comical, watching as Thor flung the intern down the stairs. “Captain, you are just in time. It appears that Shield has been spying on Jane and Darcy…” Darcy startled when she heard Thor call. What the hell was Steve doing in London?

“I think you got this one well in hand Thor. I’d leave son, before someone thinks about breaking something other than your nose.” She heard Ian scramble away, and the sound of Steve’s feet on the stairs. Her hand was suddenly killing her and she was exhausted. Thor greeted Steve merrily outside. Jane looked at her.

“Captain?” Jane asked. Darcy didn’t respond, just headed to the door.

“If Fury sent you, get the hell out.” She announced. “I cannot deal with this shit today.”

“Fury doesn’t even know I’m here.” Steve told her as he entered the apartment. He smiled at her, knowing she didn’t mean to yell at him. “I had a mission, came back to my friends text message that ‘still alive’ and then was briefed on what happened. I have a mandatory 4 day break unless the world nearly ends again. I’m sorry I wanted to check on you.”

“I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

“That kid Shield?”

“He came in through Darcy,” Jane said. “I’m going to have words with Fury.”

“He’s in D.C. I’ll help.” Steve added. “Steve Rogers.”

“Jane Foster. You’re the artist on snap chat.” Darcy watched as it registered with Jane. “Captain America, Darce?”

“Why do you think I don’t have pictures Jane?”

“I am. The artist and Captain America. It’s nice to meet you.” Jane shook his hand then looked at Darcy. Clearly there would be girl talk in their future. “How’s your hand.”

“Sore.” She admitted, heading over to sit back down on the couch. Erik, she noticed, was still working. She wondered if Bruce would be able to help, especially since they knew each other.

“Do you have a first aid kit?” Steve asked as he put down his pack.
“Under the bathroom sink, I’ll get it.” Darcy watched as Jane headed towards the bathroom while Steve headed towards the freezer to grab a bag of peas. He headed over to the couch, sitting next to Darcy and her injured right hand. Her knuckles were already bruising. Steve put the bag of peas on her hand before taking the first aid kit from Jane.

“You ok?”

“I should have seen it.” She told him quietly, though everyone could hear her. “I brought a Shield agent here.”

“He did save your life.” Jane reminded her.

“Don’t remind me. You’re the one who teleported us.” Steve was searching through the first aid kit, grabbing the Neosporin, a band aid and the ace bandage. He removed the peas before starting to tend to her hand.

“By accident. I teleported you by accident. And you’re the one who told us to get those guys.”

“I’d have noticed the car floating.” She paused. “I have spent so much of my life being uncomfortably aware of when I’m being used for something, and I didn’t see it here. I’m mad about that.”

“Do you think it’s because,” Jane began as Steve started wrapping up her hand.

“I didn’t kiss him because I liked him.” She felt Steve stop applying first aid for a second, before he returned to cleaning the split skin of her knuckle. She hadn’t even noticed that. “I did it because apparently I lost my mind. If you noticed, and I’m sure you didn’t, but after it didn’t happen again.”

Darcy turned on her side to talk to Steve, who was on the air mattress next to her on the couch.

“Sorry about the room situation.” She whispered. She was slightly amazed that the air mattress didn’t seem to be sagging beneath his weight. “Just, when we sprung Erik from the nut house I gave him my room.”

“Not a problem. I’ve slept worst.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“How are you doing?”

“I might spam Fury’s inbox with really crappy like…70s porn and link it all back to Agent Boothby’s account, but other than that I’m fine.”

“You are a horrible liar.”

“Which is not a good thing, since my life is a lie.”

“You’re not good at lying to me.” Steve corrected.

“You’re right. We both appreciate the truth and I do try not to lie to my friends.” She paused. “The worst part is that he’s probably told like, 6 agents, that Dr. Foster’s intern is easy. Save her life and you’re in. And I’m not. Easy, that is. Before the agent there’d been a grand total of 1 kiss. Ever.”
“Seriously.” Steve sat up. She took a perverse pleasure in watching him struggle with the air mattress.

“My mom was a stripper. My first look into adult relationships was a mix of drug dealers and men who were clearly using her and she didn’t care. And then I’ve seen my dad and my grandfather treat women like objects and disposable. There was never, until Pepper, any attempt at a relationship. I always had to wait for his one night stands to leave and there were always the girls who didn’t understand it and would come back. And my grandfather taught him that. It’s no secret that he cheated on my grandma. My dad at least, now that he’s in a relationship with someone he loves, will never do that. But I refused to let someone treat me like that.” She confessed. “I want to be someone’s Pepper Potts. I don’t want to be disposable. I’m ok with waiting for the right person.”

“Who was the first then?”

“Antoine. I was 17. It was my CalTech senior week and there was a dance. He was my date. Some kids were mean to me and he’d had enough so he kissed me. We, thankfully, were able to wait until we got outside to laugh hysterically because it was a good kiss but it’s weird when it’s someone you grow up with. And then we went back to his mom’s. My dad and Pepper were out of town until the day before of my actual graduation. And Gabe took one look at us and laughed for about 20 minutes.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Apparently, my dad and his mom thought we’d be perfect for each other. They’d had our wedding planned since we were little. Well, Maggie did. Dad always said he was sending me to a nunnery. But Gabe saw us like Peggy and Howard or Maggie and my dad.”

“Did you ever think about it?” Her nose crinkled in distaste. Steve nearly laughed.

“No. He’s like my brother. Gross.”

Jane bumped into Thor’s back as she was exiting the bedroom. He turned to caution Jane, who noticed what he was looking at. Darcy’s one hand was hanging off the couch and one of Steve’s hands had curled around it. The pair was facing each other, still asleep.

“They do not see it, do they?” Thor asked.

“No.” Jane smiled. “But I bet her dad has a pool going as to when they’ll figure it out.”

“A pool?”

“A bet, a wager.” Jane explained.

“Ah, I would like to be a part of that wager.”

“So would I. We should wake them up.” Jane headed towards the kitchen. Steve shifted the moment he heard movement. “Coffee?” Jane asked.

“Yeah. I’d love some, thanks.”

“Quiet unless coffee.” Darcy mumbled turning around on the couch to face the cushions. “No coffee, no talking.”
“So, we need to pack up the equipment and Thor is going to need non-Asgardian clothes. At least to get him through the next few days.” Darcy said as she cleared up the breakfast dishes.

“I’ll go with Thor, if you want. I’ve been shopping with you. No one should have to suffer like that.” Steve teased.

“Fine. Take this…” She handed him her black American Express Card. Steve took it and put it in his wallet.

“Should I freak your dad and buy really inappropriate things?”

“Pepper gets the bill so no. It’s really cute that you think he actually does his own bills though.”

“I’m going to go pack up my office at the university.” Erik announced. “I should be back in time for dinner.”

“One last Nando’s for all.” Darcy proclaimed.

“Excellent. Let’s start packing.”

It didn’t take long at all to pack up the equipment Jane had in the flat. Darcy had finished packing most of her stuff earlier when Erik had arrived (so as to keep the flat cleanish) and was helping Jane pack her clothes. As expected, with Thor and Steve out of the flat, it was time for girl talk.

“So you and Steve.”

“Are friends. We’ve been through this, before you knew he was star spangled.”

“Really? You’re still going with that. He flew to London because he thought you were in danger.”

“I,” Darcy sat down on Jane’s bed. “I am the only friend he has, his physical age not his actual age. He’s lost a lot of people. He doesn’t want to lose more.”

“That’s bullshit, but continue.” Jane watched as her friend struggled for words. Darcy never had problems expressing herself, even when Jane was exasperated with her and lashing out, Darcy didn’t know how to be quiet. But she was now and Jane fully understood. “You’re in love with him.”

“Yes.” She whispered, like he could hear her if she said it any louder. “I don’t know when or how it happened but I do and it’s…that’s why I kissed Ian. I thought…this guy saved me too, in a different way, maybe it’s just because Steve’s there and he’s…and that’s not why. But I’m a mess. My dad’s fucking Iron Man and my grandfather – well, I love the man but he has all these expectations of what I’m supposed to do and who I’m supposed to be and that is too much of a burden for anyone else.”

“Does he get a say in this?”

“Yes. I’m pretty sure it’s ‘I like her as a friend.’”

“You’re an idiot.”

“My IQ is higher than yours.”
“You’re still an idiot.”

“Thanks for the kind words BFF.”

“Any time.”

“You traveled a great distance to assure yourself of Darcy’s safety.” Thor looked at Steve as he said it, assessing. Steve was a smart, honorable man. The Captain would tell him the truth and he would use this information to place his wager with Stark. Though, he wondered how Darcy had ended up so surprisingly tempered when raised by a showboat of Stark’s nature.

“She’s the only thing that’s real sometimes.” Steve confessed. “I came back and seventy years had passed. My friends were gone or old, in the case of her grandfather and Peggy.”

“Peggy?”

“She was…before I went in the ice we had a date. I admired her. I could have loved her; I just didn’t get the chance.”

“Does she know Darcy then? From what I understand your companions before the ice grew to be the family that raised her with Stark.”

“Peggy’s Darcy’s godmother. Darcy calls her Aunt Peggy”

“She was not waiting to yell at Darcy like Tony, Lady Potts or her grandfather when she called.”

“No. She’s in a nursing home. She’s been losing her memory, it comes and goes. The last time I saw her I was catching her up on everything Darcy told me and during that time she forgot who Darcy was. She’d forgotten I’d come back.”

“And Darcy knows this about her aunt?”

“She does. She noticed it.”

“That must be very difficult for you and for Darcy.”

“I got closure, which helps. Darcy’s had Peggy in her life for 22 years. It’s more difficult for her. I’m lucky I get any time.”

Darcy was not at all surprised when the fleet of Stark Industries Security Services, and their vans appeared outside of their door first thing Saturday morning. She’d been expecting that and had been ready to tell them all where to stick it when Happy got out of the first van. She was outside, down the stairs and hugging Happy before she could even think. She hadn’t even put on her shoes.

“You should still be resting! Why are you here! He didn’t make you come all the way out here, did he? I’ll kill him.”

“Alien invasion, you didn’t call squirt, I volunteered. I’m fine.” He looked down at her feet. “No shoes, really? You’re in London in the early spring, not California.”

“I wasn’t expecting you. I’ll go get them.”
“Get in the car and wait, I’ll go get your stuff and your friends, you are worse than Tony, I swear.”

“That is a lie.” Darcy smiled, doing as Happy said and opening the front door of the SUV so she could sit down. Steve was already carrying her bags and shoes down for her. “Hey Hap, stay and hang out with me, Stars and Stripes will take care of it. He needs a work out.”

“I’ll at least go help. I’m taking people and personal luggage. Everything scientific or larger goes with the other group – easier to get through customs this way. Trust me.” Happy announced loudly.

They pulled up to a giant airfield and a waiting Boeing 727.

“I was not expecting a normal sized plane. A tiny private jet too small for your dad?” Jane asked. Happy just laughed.

“Oh, this isn’t Tony’s plane. Well. He bought it, but he’s not the one who uses it. Occasionally Ms. Potts does but this is Darcy’s Plane. His is a little smaller, but not by much.” Happy explained. Everyone looked at her.

“I’m Tony Stark’s daughter. This is restraint.”

“It really is.” Happy agreed as he put the car in park and everyone started to get out. “She also has two yachts, a private island in the Maldives, an apartment in Paris, a vineyard in the Loire Valley, the farm in Tuscany, a casino in Hong Kong…her grandfather has purchased her a jewelry collection that would make the queen jealous…”

“I think they’ve gotten the point Happy. The plane is explanation enough of ‘she really is Tony Stark’s child.’” Jane’s eyes went wide.

“The apartment we stayed at in Paris. It wasn’t an amazing deal on Air BnB?”

“Nope. Mine.” Erik looked at Darcy.

“Vineyard?” He questioned

“21st birthday present.” She explained. “We’ve got a pretty good Malbec from last year from the vineyard and a really delicious Gamay.”

“That makes sense.” Steve laughed. “What did he get, a distillery?”

“Brewery, actually.” She headed towards the plane’s stairs. “Come on, I really can’t wait for my parents and grandfather to yell at me.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Darcy arrives home, people yell and Steve slowly comes to a realization.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for all the kind words for the last chapter. I’m excited for this chapter, which sort of works as a bridge between Thor: The Dark World and Captain America: The Winter Solider. So enjoy.

(as always, un-betaed. And you can find me on tumblr at mollykakes.tumblr.com)

Tony wrapped Darcy in a hug the moment she stepped off the elevator.

“There are people behind me, much bigger than me, trying to get off the elevator dad.” She laughed as he shuffled them three steps to the right. “Now you know how I feel all the time.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Yeah, well, there are certain things being Tony Stark doesn’t make go away – worrying about your kid is one of them.” Darcy told him.

“I hate human emotion, it’s why I have robots.”

“And a daughter. You’re so screwed old man.” Darcy laughed. “You can let go of me soon.”

“Nope.”

“I’m Pepper Potts,” Pepper said, introducing herself to Jane. “I’m sorry, the last time Darcy was involved in one your visits, Thor, her father was a little distracted with his own superhero shenanigans. This is the first time he’s been on the other end of hers. And Dr. Foster, I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Are you a little offended Pepper hasn’t joined in on the group hug? Because I am.” Tony pouted.

“It’s not a group hug. There are two of us in this hug, and it’s verging on creepy.” Darcy said as she tried to extract herself from her father’s embrace. “You’re also seriously embarrassing.”

“That is not new.” Pepper told the group as Tony looked at them seemingly for the first time.

“Wait, Rogers, why are you here? Weren’t you in DC?” Tony looked at Darcy who just shrugged, successfully breaking his hold on her. Pepper took a moment took a moment before hugging Darcy to brush her hair past her face like she did when she was little. Tony did not corner the market on being terrified about Darcy while she was in London. Unlike Tony, she let go quickly, content to wait.
“The Captain came to London.” Thor announced. “Lady Potts, Stark, it is good to see you both again.”

“We’re happy to see you too big guy.” Tony told him. “It means Darcy’s back.”

“Thank you so much for…” Jane began.

“You’re Darcy’s best friend. And I find your theories to be fascinating. Out there, but completely fascinating. I’m looking forward to modifying your machines.”

“I’m sure you’re all a little jet-lagged and tired, we have snacks in your apartments – Jarvis can direct you. Dinner is at 6…Mario Batali is going to come over and cook dinner for all of us. You’ll meet Howard then.” Darcy groaned as Pepper effortlessly led the group, including Steve, back to the elevator. “I hope you don’t mind but…”

“Not at all.” Jane assured. The Traitor. But she nodded at Steve, who looked like he’d be willing to stick around.

“If you need anything, let Jarvis know. I promise I will be more host like and it will be more embarrassing for Darcy by dinner.”

“I look forward to it Stark.” Thor said. “I shall tell you of how she felled me when you could not.”

“She tells that story all the time.” Tony and Pepper said in unison as the elevator doors closed. Pepper turned to look at Darcy before hugging her again.

“I hope you know your father nearly had me agreeing to never let you leave the tower again.”

“Nearly, right? Your sanity kicked in. Please tell me your sanity kicked in.” Darcy pleaded.

“Had your grandfather not opened his mouth, it might have been a different story.”

“He even had me changing my mind.” Tony told her. “You want a snack? Drink? To tell me why Steve Rogers came to London?”

“He was not satisfied with my text message, I guess.” Darcy confessed, heading over to sit on the couch. “Diet coke? Please?”

“So he flew to London?” Pepper exchanged a quick look with Tony.

“Yeah. I don’t know if you guys know this, but he’s experienced some shit in the past year or so and I’m the only friend his age he has.” Tony rolled his eyes as he headed to get Darcy her soda. He watched Pepper sit next to Darcy, cataloguing every feature of hers, at this moment, at home safe and sound. He trusted Pepper Potts the moment she entered his life, and he’d trusted her with the most important thing in it. He had never occurred to him to keep Pepper as a Peggy like person in Darcy’s life. A mentor, someone to talk to when he wouldn’t (and couldn’t) understand. But much like how he fell in love with Pepper, he let it happen and damn the consequences. Darcy looked at Pepper as her mom. So Pepper was her mom, end of story. They weren’t together for 7 of those years that Pepper was legally her mother, but that didn’t matter. This was what family was supposed to be like. He walked back over to the couch, handing Darcy her soda, and Pepper a glass of wine. He stuck with water.

“Kiddo, time world and town saving heroics for when I’m also doing heroic things.” He chided. “I found gray hairs.”
“Bullshit dad, they were already there.” Darcy quipped.

“What happened?” Pepper asked, before the two Starks could get into an argument about how long Tony had had gray hair (longer than he’d admit)

“Every millennia or so, the universes align. All 9 of them. Dark elves wanted something called the aether, which Jane got dosed with? Thor took her to Asgard, shit happened there – his mom was killed and do not mention it but so was Loki.”

“How?” Tony was skeptical.

“Protecting his brother.” Darcy took a sip of her soda. “They had decades, centuries, as brothers before he went bat shit crazy. Thor’s his brother. That doesn’t go away, no matter how hard you protest. Thor’s sad about it. So don’t be a jerk. Anyway. We saved the day. Jane and Thor, really, but I was there.”

“I’m still surprised Shield hasn’t swarmed you all like they did last time.” Pepper commented.

“Oh, they didn’t need to. I hired an intern, and it turned out he was Shield. Sci-Tech. Told to come in through the weak link. Enter one Darcy Lewis.” She threw her head back in frustration. “I broke his nose, once I found out. He tried to leave a listening device. If I hadn’t noticed…all of Shield would know I’m your daughter. It’s bad enough I let him into our lab but…”

“JARVIS, set up a meeting with Fury…”

“Cancel JARVIS, my dad doesn’t know what he’s saying. Do you want to be the one to give away the secret? To Fury?” She asked. “It wasn’t him. I checked.”

“Do you know who?”

“An Agent Garrett. I assume it’s who took over for Coulson on the Thor front and he had other stuff.”

“What else?” Tony asked.

“We got teleported by Jane. The intern may have picked up a floating car and smashed some elves that nearly hit us. I may have kissed him. I didn’t even like him, not particularly. I mean, he was nice. Until I found out he was Shield. I just feel dumb, that’s all.”

“You’re not.” Tony assured her. “You had no reason to think Shield wanted to watch you or Jane. You had no idea a guy you met at school was one of them. It happened. It sucks. I’ll have words with someone and we’ll reset. I promise. No one here is Shield. Well, except Cap, but I figured you vetted his reasons for being in London.”

“I did.” She smiled. “I think I need a nap.”

Darcy was sitting at the island, watching and chatting away with Mario Batali as he cooked, like it was normal when Jane and Thor arrived for dinner. It took Jane a moment to realize that it was normal for Darcy. That life in a van or in a flat with multiple other people was the aberration in her life. Whereas for Jane, it was incredibly surreal, all of it. She was in Stark Tower, Thor was staying on earth and Darcy was Tony’s daughter. Tony and Erik were talking to a vaguely recognizable man, and Thor immediately led her over to them.

“Ah, Dr. Foster, come meet Dr. Bruce Banner. His lab is across the hall from yours.” Tony announced.
“Banner, it is good to see you. Will Barton and Romanoff be joining us as well?” Thor asked.

“Not today. Barton’s on assignment and Natasha’s in D.C. I checked.” Tony told them. “No food allergies, by the way, right? I should have checked.”

“He’d still give you what you’re allergic to.” Pepper commented.

“Once. It happened once.”

“It’s happened 4 times.” Darcy laughed as Steve walked in with Howard Stark. Her life was officially insane and beyond whatever she had thought it would one day be. But then she looked at Darcy, who took a large sip of her wine before getting up to greet her grandfather.

“I know that look well.” Tony muttered.

“She’ll be fine, right?” Jane asked.

“Yeah. She’s a big girl.”

“Grandpa.” Darcy greeted him.

“Darcy. Glad you’re alive.”

“Me too.”

Mario had left after dinner itself had been served. They were about half way through the meal (which were some of Darcy’s favorites) and Thor’s retelling of their recent adventures when Howard snapped. The room went deathly quiet and Darcy wanted to scream.

“Yes, everything about this just seems like an excellent adventure. But that was my granddaughter in danger, running around like an idiot. You wouldn’t have been there if you had done your duty.” Howard began. “You should have been home, working here or at school in your actual field of study instead of playing around with renegade scientists who’s idea are so out of the box…”

“I’m sorry, but Thor alone is proof of the Einstein Rosen bridge, but please, continue making a spectacle out of this.” Darcy interrupted before taking another sip of her wine.

“You are still a child and you are a Stark.” Darcy snorted then. 18 years of this and she’d reached her breaking point. She was impressed, it took her dad 15.

“I’m sorry for my grandfather, should I get someone to take you to calm down, like you would have Dum Dum or Gabe take me out when I was a child and acted better than you are right now?”

“This isn’t funny.”

“No. It’s not. Lecturing a 23 year old like she’s a wayward child in front of friends is not funny. You could have at least saved it for a private conversation like you have every other time we’ve had this discussion about what you think my duty and my life should be. Since apparently, you think because we share DNA that makes you capable of making my decisions for me. So no, I don’t think this is funny at all. The funny thing, grandpa, is that it’s utter bullshit coming from you. Apparently Uncle Gabe and Uncle Dum Dum had the same idea – I got a letter from Dum Dum before Uncle Gabe got to my apartment on my 18th birthday. Dum Dum wrote it when I was 11.
He didn’t think it was fair, that you were putting all this pressure on me even then. He’d seen what happens, when you do that.

So he told me that how, after dad told you about me, you dragged him to Las Vegas. He’s the one who held me while you attempted to bribe my mother into disappearing with me. You would have left me with a drug addict, with no stable parent because I didn’t fit in with what you wanted. She would have taken it too, except my dad’s a genius. If she had, all the money and full custody would have gone to him. Which is not what you would have wanted at all. He told me how you tried four more times to get her to take me and leave. Once with drugs after rehab. That until you did your own DNA test and you saw how smart I was after my mom died you didn’t want me. I didn’t matter to you until I became useful.

So please, excuse me if I’ve finally reached my breaking point with being constantly lectured by someone who spent the first five years of my life trying to keep me out of his. Not to mention how you would have led me like a lamb to slaughter to Obie, when I thought my father was DEAD, because you didn’t listen. Because you’ve never listened. I am tired of this. I will make my own choices in my life. If you bring up duty or The Stark Legacy again I will never speak to you again.” She pushed her chair back, getting up. She felt lighter, somehow, but so tired. She didn’t even care that she’d had this blow up in front of people, because these people knew her. Her. Not who she pretended to be most of the time. “If you’d excuse me, I’ve lost my appetite.” Jarvis had the elevator open and waiting for her, then closed the door behind her the second she was fully in the elevator.

“The garden, Miss?” Jarvis asked as she wiped the tears from her face. Where did those come from and when did she start crying?

“No, thank you. My apartment please. And unless it’s my dad or Pepper,”

“No do not let anyone else disturb you. Understood.”

“Thank you Jarvis.

Darcy’s exit resulted in silence from the table. Steve noticed that no one looked uncomfortable (well, except Dr. Selvig, but Steve was beginning to think that was his default look), just angry. He wasn’t sure who was going to break first, Tony or Pepper, both of whom had tight grips on their sharp knives. So he was a little surprised when it was Jane.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” She asked.

“Excuse me?” Howard was clearly surprised that the tiny scientist dared speak up to him.

“Darcy doesn’t ask for anything in return for her friendship, for anything. She clearly loves you if she’s ignored the fact that she’s known for five years that you tried to pay off her mother, and it’s taken her 23 years to snap. You think you deserve to be able to tell her how to live her life? I’m sorry, do you not realize your son is Tony Stark?”

“I like you.” Tony laughed. “We’re keeping you.” Then he turned to his father. “I didn’t know she knew, and you know. I’m completely fine with her knowing. But that kid is the best thing to come out of this family, possibly ever. No one will ever be able to say she doesn’t have a heart, she’s got the heart they forgot to give us and then some. I would give up everything if she asked me to, but she never would. And you know that tomorrow or Monday at the latest, she’ll head over to the mansion with your favorite cookies to apologize to you, for her behavior. Guess what dad, that’s not how it’s happening this time. You’ll apologize to her. End of story.” Steve watched
as Howard nodded swiftly, once. It was enough. “Not now. Not tonight. Give her time.”

“How can you just…” Jane sputtered, so angry on Darcy’s behalf.

“Darcy loves her grandfather, despite his numerous and well known faults.” Pepper explained. “That, and this is a minor family blow out for us.” Steve watched as Thor smiled sadly.

“Family gatherings are always boring without a quarrel.” Thor told them.

Pepper smiled softly as Steve began to get off the elevator with her and Tony. Tony didn’t even look back, just headed towards Darcy’s kitchen with the cake in his hands. Howard had left shortly after the blow up; Thor, Jane and Erik went to bed shortly after due to jet lag (though she suspects Thor just went to be with Jane.). Bruce returned to the lab, taking cookies with him. She wouldn’t be surprised if Darcy woke up tomorrow morning with more blood samples or some of his research for her to look into. He’d never admit it but Bruce had a giant (possibly Hulk sized) soft spot for Darcy, just like he had a soft spot for Tony.

“I’m sorry Captain, but Miss was explicit in who is allowed to enter her apartment this evening.” Jarvis intoned. Pepper turned back, watching as his face fell. She was sympathetic; she wanted to make sure she was ok too. But Darcy wouldn’t want him, or anyone else, to see her like this.

“She’s in good hands Steve.” Pepper took pity on him. “Tony would let the world burn before hurting that girl.”

“I know.” He nodded. “Let her know –”

“I will.” Steve stepped back, letting the doors close. Tony already had the cake on the counter and was taking out Darcy’s cake plates and glasses. It was a tradition to have chocolate milk after fights, and they had brought down Darcy’s favorite diner double dark cake from Baked in Brooklyn.

“I’ll cut up the cake, make the chocolate milk, you go get her?” Tony asked. Pepper nodded, heading up to Darcy’s room. She could hear her in the bathroom.

“Sweetie,” she knocked on the door. “Your dad brought the chocolate cake with him.”

“Ok mom, I’ll be down in a few minutes.” Darcy replied softly. Pepper knew it was bad. While she’d been Darcy’s mother figure for most of her life, her adopted mother for over 10 years, she was always Pepper. Momma Pep occasionally, mom when she was upset. She heard the water splash then the tub draining. She turned, heading back downstairs. She was going to kill Howard.

Darcy walked downstairs, her hair in two braids, flannel pants she stole from Steve while packing, one of her dad’s old AC/DC shirts, and Antoine’s Army hoodie, which she stole the last time she saw him. Her dad handed her a large piece of cake and a glass of chocolate milk before she sat down in the oversized brown leather chair.

“They shouldn’t have told you. I should have,” Tony began to say.

“No, because they said what you couldn’t. That he regretted it, that it was up there in life’s big mistakes. That he loves me enough not to push even when he wants to. He could have called a press conference at any point, even when you weren’t here and he didn’t. He hasn’t. They told me he’s stubborn but his heart is in the right place.” She took a bite of the cake. “I should have let it go.”
“No, you shouldn’t have.” Pepper assured her.

“I’ll apologize – “

“Nope. You’re not. Kiddo, it’s his turn. You cannot be the one that holds the world any more. You don’t…you put us all first. Not this time.” Tony told her. She nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. “For the record, I would have found her if she left with you.”

“I know dad. I never doubted that.”

It was 2 am when Steve made another attempt to check in on Darcy. He stepped on the elevator and he was convinced that if the AI could sigh at that moment, Jarvis would sigh.

“Captain.” Jarvis began.

“You said ‘this evening.’ It’s after midnight, technically its morning.” Jarvis was silent for a moment before the elevator began to move. “Thank you Jarvis.” The AI didn’t say anything in response, only let him out in Darcy’s apartment. He was surprised she wasn’t up, watching movies.

He should have turned around when she wasn’t up, watching movies. He knew he shouldn’t’ be sneaking around her apartment in the middle of the night. He didn’t even know why he was there. It was just that he’d seen her deal with Tony and the Mandarin, and his surgery, with Peggy and her having to make the decision to put her in a nursing home, to have to say goodbye, but he hadn’t seen her look so broken, like she did when she was leaving the table. (He refused to think too much on why he went to London. She said she was fine. But she’d been in extreme danger, he’d seen the footage. Before he could even think he was packing and had booked a flight. His neighbor, Kate, had asked him where he was going in such a rush, he still doesn’t remember if he responded or not.) He turned to leave when he heard her.

“Either settle in with the TV and stop roaming around my apartment or come and try to sleep.” Darcy told him, her voice echoing throughout the apartment. He was halfway up the stairs before he even realized it. Darcy was in her bed, facing the window. She reached behind her to pull the covers down on the other side of the bed. “Scandalized?”

“I lived in flop houses and toured the states with 30 chorus girls. Not the first time I’ve shared a bed with someone. Though, usually, the beds were smaller.”

“Just get in.” She yawned. He did as she asked, sliding into the bed (her bed, his mind helpfully supplied)

“You ok?”

“I’m fine. I’d be better if you let me go back to sleep.” She joked.

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine Steve. Night.”

“Night.” Her breathing evened out quickly, before he relaxed completely in her bed. It was a massive bed, even more comfortable than his downstairs (which he didn’t think anything could feel more like a marshmallow then that bed, but this did) and it smelled like Darcy. A mix of
vanilla and lavender and Chanel No. 5. He closed his eyes for a moment, planning to leave once Darcy was sound asleep.

Darcy woke up slowly, wondering why her bed felt super firm and warm. Then she heard the tell-tale sound of a camera click. She opened her eyes quickly, suddenly aware that she was sprawled out on top of Steve (who was still sound asleep), and she was drooling. Her father was standing in her doorway, taking pictures. She slowly moved out of bed as her father retreated. Steve only shifted, grabbing her pillow. *I am so screwed.*

Darcy looked up when the elevator door opened. She had been reviewing all the Stark Industries information Pepper had given her. All annotated, so she knew the personal things too. She made note of the fact that a lot of the female employees who did not work in research or development were not paid the same as some of their male counterparts, even if they had more seniority. Her grandpa stood by the elevator, box of Veniero’s cannoli in her hand.

“I’ll make the coffee.” She told him as she got up.

“I’m sorry I made it a spectacle out of…” Darcy began.

“It was not your fault. I started it. I usually do.” Howard laughed. “I have loved you, since the moment I learned you existed. Those decisions I made were not because I didn’t…I was not my best self after your grandmother died. Not for a long time. And I took that out on your father and you, in ways I’m ashamed of now…”

“I know.” Darcy said quietly, reaching for her grandpa’s hand. “It was not fair of me to use that…”

“I taught you to use whatever information you had to get what you wanted. You wanted me to shut up, it worked.”

“It shut everyone up.” She laughed. “They also told me, in Dum Dum’s letter and Gabe, in person, what you told me. What I have never, for one moment, doubted. That you love me. That you want what’s best for me, you just have a different way of going about it. And I can’t fault you for that. You want more for me than I want to myself.”

“But I shouldn’t push you, to do what you’re not ready to do.”

“No, that’s very true.” She told him. “And I shouldn’t keep everything bottled inside and one day freak out at you at the dinner table.”

“That would be a much more preferable outcome, yes. But I’m pretty sure you learned that from Peggy. She would never say how she really felt and then would shoot at you.”

“Still my favorite bedtime story.”

“You are the best thing that ever happened to this family. And I’m sorry if I’ve ever once made you doubt that.”

“You haven’t. Now shut up, eat your cannoli and I’ll put on a *Philadelphia Story.*”
“Miss, your father is requesting your presence and Mr. Stark’s in the penthouse. Agents Romanoff and Barton are here at the request of Shield, regarding London.” Jarvis cut through, pausing the movie.

“I should have put whiskey in my coffee.” Darcy mumbled, getting up. “Shall we?”

“Don’t be rude to Agent Romanoff.” Howard warned as he got up, offering Darcy his arm. They headed towards the waiting elevator.

“I’m not going to be rude, I know she was just doing her job. It’s Fury who I’ll kill if I ever see him.”

“You are terrifying.”

“Just wait until I take on the board for the first time. I’m thinking it’s going to have to deal with the wage inequality between the sexes in non-R&D departments.”

“It’s bad?”

“We let managers, mainly men, set the salaries and make decisions regarding promotions. Women are more likely to start lower and receive fewer promotions. We need to fix it.” Jarvis closed the doors behind them, immediately moving them up to Tony’s penthouse.

“How much will it cost us to fix the problem?”

“It will be negligible. We set rates across the board in all managerial, R&D, and skilled positions. I mean, even then most of our departments are male dominated but that’s not our fault, that’s a systematic problem with discouraging women in the STEM fields.” The doors opened and Howard escorted her out to the group. “I mean, between Jane and I, I’m relatively sure we have at least 20 horror stories about how we were discouraged, even in college, by male professors and peers. Not to mention, we have a system that doesn’t encourage group think. We do within each of the departments, but not as a whole. And someone in legal or in marketing may be able piece together something someone down in the chemistry department is missing, or someone in the infectious diseases research department may be able to come up with something for marketing.”

“Anthony,” Howard began, “Have you heard her ideas yet?”

“I told you, give her time to warm up to the idea and she’ll do better than either of us ever did or could have hoped to do.” Tony said. “Romanoff, Barton, my father Howard and my daughter, Darcy.”

“Bullshit, she’s Foster’s intern. Pepper’s niece.” Barton said, like he knew the story was a lie.

“Yeah, I was Foster’s intern. I have been adopted by Pepper. But I’m his kid, circus freak. Welcome to the small club of people who know; if Fury finds out I’ll know it was one of you and trust me when I tell you that I can kill you and get away with it.”

“How?” Romanoff asked, intrigued.

“My degrees from Cal Tech are in biology and chemical engineering. I’d poison you.”

“Good to know. It’s nice to meet you.” Darcy smiles, realizing that Natasha’s statement is true. “I don’t know how you survived 23 years with him.”
“I have drugged his coffee.” Darcy smiled. “Also, he’s kind of the best dad. Which is very strange for people to hear.”

Natasha watched Steve interact with Stark’s daughter, which was a revelation she was still trying to process. Nothing in any of his files even remotely suggested that Potts’ niece was anything more than a smart ass buddy. There were no pictures in the house, no sign that a then 20 year old shared a living space with her father, no signs that Stark was anything more than a playboy with daddy issues. But she’d clearly missed something because he was a devoted father who had somehow raised an incredibly smart, normal daughter. Who Steve Rogers was clearly trying to deny he was in love with.

“There’s money on that, right?” She asked Pepper, motioning over to Steve and Darcy.

“It’s already up to like, $50,000, not including Tony’s bet. Which is ridiculous and should not be taken seriously.”

“What is it?”

“He says if he loses the bet he’ll give the winner an island.”

“And if he wins?”

“He’ll happily take everyone’s money and use it to buy them a very patriotic wedding present.”

“He’s ok with this?”

“Pretty sure he’s the only guy he’d be ok with. He nearly had a heart attack when Darcy mentioned kissing someone else. She’s 23, by the way.” Pepper laughed.

To Darcy’s surprise, she did not shriek when Natasha came up behind her after she left to use the restroom.

“I’m sorry.” Darcy looked at the Russian. “I hadn’t known. If I’d had known he had a daughter, I would have told Fury to stop waiting and to tell him. I didn’t have every piece of information when I began.” It was all Darcy needed to hear, that underneath there was a person who understood. Who had actually cared when she was putting her father’s life at risk. And she appreciated Natasha’s honesty, which was rare in a spy. Her dad, her people trusted her, it was time for her to trust her too.

“I understand.” Darcy smiled. “Thank you.”

“So you broke an Agent’s nose. I’m impressed.” They headed back out to the common area.

“I did. I did do that. He called me the weak link.”

“I’ll break his knee caps for you.”

“I’m pretty sure Thor did that when he threw him down the stairs.”

“I can always break it again.”

“I like you. We’re going to be friends.” Darcy proclaimed
“This is going to terrify your father.”

“And Steve. It’s going to be awesome.”

“Darcy,” Thor boomed as she got up from her spot on the couch. “Are you not going to watch Game of Thrones with us?” She’d spent the past six months catching him up with Midgard, its history and its popular culture. He was, along with everyone else in the tower, fond of the fantasy show. He was (unlike her father) even reading the books, though was on the second book while they were now halfway through the fourth season. Thor was finally caught up and could watch the show in real time like everyone else. She wasn’t sure how happy he was going to be to have to wait a week for the next episode. She was relatively sure she and Thor could become championship binge watchers.

“She’s not allowed.” Tony said. “She talks, and spoils the show for those who haven’t read the book. She has to watch it in her room.”

“Which is fine. Because watching sex scenes with your parents is weird anyway.”

She put Steve on speaker the moment he called. She pressed the record button for Game of Thrones before flipping to HGTv. Property Brothers, excellent. Then she picked up her tablet, going through her schedule for the next few weeks. They were slowly building it up so she was a constant fixture in the office. So when they went public within the next six months, the employees at SI wouldn’t be so overwhelmed.

“So, how’d your mission go?”

“So punched a lot of people, threw the shield around. The usual.” He responded.

“So glamorous.” She quipped as her phone beeped, alerting her to a text message. It was from Barton. Since London, there had been a string of rumors regarding Dr. Foster’s Intern. Both Clint and Natasha would text her whenever they heard a new one, though she’s relatively sure they’re making them up themselves. Especially Natasha. It didn’t take long to realize that Natasha didn’t have many girl friends, and much like she had with Jane, Darcy went to work at righting that. It drove her dad crazy, which made it even more fun. No one had more fun fucking with her dad’s mind then Natasha and it was amazing. She snorted as she read the newest rumor. “Apparently I, as Dr. Foster’s Intern, hulked out when I punched the Shield Agent. Like, completely went green. I broke his legs, and then I made out with Thor as Hulk Darcy.” She heard Steve choke on whatever he was eating or drinking in response. “You’re picturing it, aren’t you?”

“I’m just picturing Hulk with longer hair.”

“I wonder if Hulk’s hair grows with Bruce’s and if facial hair…”

“I was going to say you’re nuts to try to attempt this experiment which I know you’re planning but I have a picture of you standing on Hulk’s leg and taking his blood.”

“Hulk’s a sweetheart as long as people aren’t shooting at him. When Bruce chooses to turn, there’s more control. We have good talks.”

“I’m pretty sure Hulk has a crush on you.”
“I’m pretty sure my dad and I are the only two people who treat him like a person.”

“I do.” Darcy raised an eyebrow in response, turning to her tablet. “You’re doing that eyebrow thing, aren’t you?”

“When you’re giving orders. It’s not the same. And yes.” Her phone beeped again. She rolled her eyes when she read the message. “I’m sorry, I hulked out and was pink, not green.”

“What?”

“The rumor is that there’s a giant pink hulk out there in the world, I guess.”

“Considering your disdain for the color pink.”

“I know, right?”

“How’s Barton doing?”

“Good. He’s finally being put back on his own assignments, not being watched all the time, but… it’s weird for him, I guess. So he’s here a lot, when he has the down time. Not a lot of people trusted Barton before New York.”

“But you did.”

“Yeah. Because between him and Coulson if anyone gave Jane or I shit down at the site in New Mexico, they would take care of it. That agent would be packing 20 minutes after whatever incident.”

“Did that many annoy you?”

“No, not really. The sci-tech people were great. The Ops and communications? Not so much. They’d annoy me or treat Jane like an idiot.”

“Did Coulson hate you for wanting to get rid of people?”

“No. I did it three times. The dude who wouldn’t take no for an answer – and I’m pretty sure Coulson had visions of my father coming through and blasting people out of the way so he made that change. There was one who was belittling Jane in the one bar left in town, and one I got bad vibes from. I looked him up. I’m all for second changes, or more, you know? My dad for example. But someone escapes military school, steals a car, drives 100 miles, sets his parents house on fire with his older brother in it, and some how escapes from juvie?”

“He’s a Shiled Agent?”

“So is Barton, and you know his background. Crook before he left. Hell, Rumlow was in a gang and assaulted a 15 year old girl and killed her brother. Claimed self defense, right? He’s on your team. Like I said, second chances are good.”

“But this kid?”

“I don’t know. I trust my instincts when it comes to people. He was nice enough, I was just never sure who he was or trying to be. I feel the same way about Natasha, until she settles into who she wants to be when we have girl talk. Spies and all.”

“What was his name?”

“Agent Grant Ward.”
“I’ve heard his name. He’s on some special team.”

“Like I said, nice enough but,”

“You didn’t trust him. That’s fine. I don’t trust Rumlow.”

“I knew that.” Her phone beeped again. Antoine. “It took six months Steve, but Antoine just got the rumor: ‘In Egypt. What’s this about Foster’s assistant choking a sci-tech agent with her thighs like Widow? P.S. Who taught you that?’” She laughed. “Oh, I’m so glad that’s the one he heard.”

“Why?”

“Once Uncle Gabe, not knowing we were listening, I had to be 8 so Antoine was 13, he mentioned someone choking someone with their thighs. I believe I exclaimed ‘I want to do that’ and gave us away.” Steve laughed. “Still don’t know how.”

“Natasha would be happy to teach you. She says your self-defense shouldn’t be ‘I tased a god, do you think I won’t tase you?’ It should be actual work.”

“Natasha’s no fun sometimes but I’ll look into it.” She paused. “So, did you do anything other then your mission, visit the Smithsonian and visit Peggy this weekend?”

“How’d you know?”

“I know you, Captain No-Fun.”

“Officially the worst nickname.”

“Well, sorry, you spend a lot of time doing nothing. Just existing, really. It’s been over a year. You’ve moved on. It’s time to move forward. What about your neighbor, Kate?”

“What about her?”

“Why don’t you ask her for coffee or something? Or to a bar. She has to have friends, right?”

“What are you then?”

“Right now Steve, someone who’s 230 miles away, who you see once a month and talk to a few times a week. I’m your friend, you know that, but you need more than me.”

He thought she was absolutely crazy sometimes. More than her? It had taken him 6 months to realize it, but there was no one more important to him than Darcy. She wanted him to move on and forward, fine, but he was doing that with her. He didn’t want to go out with new people or make new friends. He wanted to hang out with Darcy at every opportunity he had. It had been Natasha’s attempts to set him up with various women in the office that made him realize why he was so protective of Darcy and why he snuck into her room in the middle of the night just to make sure she was ok. He was sure all the girls were very nice, but they weren’t sarcastic like Darcy was, they weren’t unfailingly kind and patient like she was, they would never have convinced Hulk to let them take blood (they would run away if they were in a room with the Hulk, where as Darcy stays and sits down to talk to him). They didn’t make him happy on bad days and they didn’t send him baked goods because they knew he was having an off week. They saw Captain America, Darcy saw Steve Rogers. Darcy knew about Bucky and was patient, waiting for him to tell her about his friend, Darcy knew the commandos, Darcy got him. End of story.
So right now he’d take her trying to push him out into the world, Natasha could still attempt to set him up with various women at the office, and he’d be happy with his phone calls, texts and emails from Darcy. For now, at least.

“I took your suggestion.” Steve told her as she picked up the phone.

“Finally!” She exclaimed, watching her dad, Barton, Thor and Hulk work together in the tower’s new training room. It was running tons of simulations of attacks and they were working together to see, specifically, Hulk’s reaction to stimuli. They didn’t have much on record and they all volunteered to help her. “What suggestion?”

“The new friend one.”

“I’m so proud. Please tell me it’s a human.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Tony Stark is my father. I grew up with robots. They may become our overlords one day. I, for one, will welcome it.”

“He’s an Air Force Vet.”

“Of course he is.” She watched as Hulk took a swipe towards Barton. She quickly pressed down on the microphone, projecting her voice into the other room. “Hey! No breaking Barton! My company pays his medical bills because no one will insure him any longer. I am not paying for another broken arm and I won’t put up with the whining from a grown ass man. I’ll make you take care of him next time.” She threatened.

“Sorry Darcy, Sorry birdman.” Hulk apologized. Clint brushed it off.

“It’s ok. Just gentle with the all human members of the team.” She turned off the microphone, then turned back to the phone call. “Sorry.”

“What’s going on there?”

“Measuring Hulks baseline for stimuli. Rockets, Mew Mew, arrows, and the like.”

“For science.”

“Sure. Or for shits and giggles, which ever you prefer.”

“I’ve got to go, I’m meeting Sam for dinner. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Sounds good. Have fun on your man date Captain Geezer.”

“Haha, very funny. Bye.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The Winter Soldier happens.

Chapter Notes

Here it is - the Winter Solider chapter. I hope everyone enjoys it! A scene in this chapter was inspired by a few tumblr posts I've seen floating around.

Just a warning - we're now at the beginning of the end of this part of the story. I have one-shot ideas and tentative plans for a sequel but studying for the bar is beginning so I don't know when it will happen quite yet.

updates and sneak peaks can be found at mollykakes.tumblr.com. Also lots of reblogs of Marvel stuff.

JARVIS woke her up at 2:30, alerting her to Agent Barton’s presence in her apartment. She quickly put on her glasses, before rolling out of bed, grabbing her robe on the way out.

“What is it?” She yawned as she noticed him pacing her floor.

“Director Fury has been assassinated. They tried to get in him broad daylight, he escaped but then found him at Rogers –“

“Is Steve ok?”

“Yeah. Went after the shooter. Nat think she knows but…” her phone beeped. A group message to all of them from Steve. Fury dead. Do not leave tower, do not trust anyone beyond this group.

“This is bad.” Clint sat down in Darcy’s chair.

“Miss, everyone is awake.” Jarvis announced.

“Late night pancakes then? Please alert everyone and turn on CNN please.”

“I’m probably out of a job.” Clint said.

“Well, it’s a good thing I run a billion dollar tech company. And my dad was starting to look into security for me. That ok while we set up the initiative?”

“The initiative?”

“The Avengers Initiative. Pepper and I don’t trust the World Security Counsel as far as we can throw them. We always figured there’d be a day they crossed the line, no one here will trust
Fury’s replacement. So you all will answer to no one.”

“How long have you been planning this?”

“Since I told her about the initiative.” Tony told him, entering the apartment. “Have you heard from Steve?”

“Not beyond the text.”

“Antoine?”

“Nothing. It just happened dad, they probably don’t know yet.”

“And Sharon? I know you two have been better as adults.”

“No. She’d still contact Antoine first. They try to keep me out of it since they know how I feel about Shield.”

“Antoine and Sharon?” Barton asked as Bruce, Thor and Jane entered the apartment.

“Antoine Triplett and Sharon Carter. I’ve known them all my life. Commando’s grandkids. Well, grand niece, in Carter’s case.”

“Sir, Miss Potts, a Shield Strike force team is attempting to break into the elevators to the residential portion of the Tower.” Bruce looked at Tony as Thor grabbed his hammer. They were all still waiting and watching for any news.

“Yeah, that’s not happening.” Darcy smiled as the three men got up. Barton didn’t have his bow, and they all knew if he went down it was likely Shield would take him back with them. Tony looked at Pepper. “Pep, my lovely...”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got this.” She said as she picked up her phone, dialing quickly. “The President please, it’s Pepper Potts.” She stood up, walking towards the kitchen. Tony kissed Darcy’s forehead before heading to the elevators. “Mr. President, hello, we’ve got a bit of a situation...”

JARVIS pulled up the security footage as Bruce transformed into Hulk. Both Thor and Hulk looked ready for a fight as the Strike Force Captain began talking. She couldn’t hear well but there was a lot about it being a known address of Cap’s, how he was suspected in Fury’s death. Darcy didn’t believe it for a second, you didn’t send a Strike Force in for questioning, even when it was Captain America.

“Why are they here? Why do they need to get up here?” Jane asked quietly so not to disturb Pepper.

“A strike force of 12, to look?” Clint began. “That’s not a search time. That’s an execution squad.
Whatever is going on is big.”

“Terrifyingly big.” Darcy agreed. “And there is absolutely nothing we can do until we know what it is, is there?”

“Nothing?” Jane asked.

“She’s right. We can’t figure out what to do until we know who we’re fighting.” Clint agreed, running a tired hand over his face as Pepper hung up the phone. “Jarvis, please alert all employees in this building that as of 12 pm, they are to leave the building. All work is to be done at home on their laptops. Paid day off. They will be notified when they can come back in, but currently we’re looking at Monday.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“And broadcast this to the entryway to the residential area. ‘The President of the United Sates, the UN Secretary General and the Security Counsel, as well as the World Security Counsel order the Strike Team to stand down and return to their local Shield office. Should Captain Rogers attempt to return to Manhattan, they will be notified.’” Darcy turned to glare at Pepper, who cut her off with a swift look. “They are to leave now or be removed by the United States Army and taken to Gitmo.” Pepper nodded, which let Jarvis know she was finished before she sat back down next to Darcy. “We’re not telling them where Steve is. But he’s not going to come back when we don’t know what we’re up against. He’s not putting you…us at risk.” Pepper explained.

“Do you want to go over all your data from yesterday, about Hulk and cellular regeneration and things I don’t understand quiet as well as you do?” Jane asked Darcy.

“Yes. Please. I can’t sit here any more and wait. Barton, I’m betting they’re heading to the training room.”

“I’m going to shoot things, yeah. That sounds like a plan.”

“I’ll order enough groceries to last us all at least a week, at this point?” Pepper said. “Possibly clear out the other offices. I don’t know what’s about to hit.”

“I think you really do need to carry a book around with a list of all the things you need to see and catch up on.” Darcy commented, shifting and putting her feet in Steve’s lap as ‘Hook’ began loading. The bowl of popcorn was on the table, the M&Ms already mixed in.

“I’ve got the basics down. Internet is good, no polio is good…”

“Well, no polio until those anti-vaxxers screw it all up.”

“If Polio comes back I’m going on TV and telling everyone how awful it was and how my ma lived in fear that one day I would live in an iron lung.”

“And instead you submitted yourself to an insane science experiment which should have killed a 90 pound asthmatic with heart problems and diabetes but here you are, 70 years later, catching up on popular culture and talking about things like iron lungs.”

“People need to remember iron lungs. They were terrifying.” She pressed play and Jarvis turned down the lights. Steve began rubbing her feet. “So this is a Peter Pan sequel?”
“Sort of. But amazing. It was one of my favorites when I was a kid.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Career focused dad, little girl who just wants his attention, but it turns out he’s a giant child? Pretty much my life story.”

“What was your favorite?”

“A Little Princess. Which, in retrospect, also influenced my life.”

“How so.”

“Sara Crewe goes to a new school, her dad goes to Asia, is presumed dead, turns out he’s really just missing and they’re reunited in a heartbreaking fashion. My grandfather is clearly Miss Minchin in this scenario.”

“Would you like to tell him this or should I?”

“I think we should wait until the time is right. Whoever gets there first.”

“Deal.”

“Do you think if you were to start saying your favorite was Harry Potter you’d become Hermoine?”

“Are you telling me I’m not? Because I will make Thor give you the magic and science lecture again. I’m a fucking wizard.”

“Shut up, I want to watch the movie.”

“Fine.”

Was this how he felt, finding out about London? Was this why he rushed to London because it was bad, when it was her dad on the other end of this, but most of the time it was something she could see. People she could blame. Ten Rings, The Mandarin, Obie, Vanko, Hammer and AIM. This was worst. This was something sinister coming out of the darkness and she felt like she was drowning. It felt like drowning. Camp Lehigh had been bombed. They were saying something about a gas explosion but she knew that base. She remembered the Commandos taking her there before it was decommissioned. All of them saying a silent goodbye to the man that proved himself to be the best of the best there.

Bruce handed her a cup of tea.

“It’s a mild sedative. If the phone rings or one of us needs to wake you up, we’ll be able to, but you need to get some sleep. All of us have napped at some point today. We’ll all sleep, you won’t. I’m saying this as your doctor, a friend, and your science uncle.” Darcy snorted but took a sip.

“You’ll wake me if anything happens.”

“Yes.”

Her phone woke her up at 7am. She didn’t recognize the number, but picked up anyway. Few people had her number.
“Hello?” She yawned.

“Darcy,” she sat up quickly when his voice registered.

“What the hell is going on?”

She was stress baking. There were brownies cooling, cakes baking, cookie dough chilling in the fridge, and she was prepping the pies. She was going to finally perfect the coconut cream pie. It was going to happen. She even had fresh coconut. It was one of Pepper’s favorites, so it was going to be fantastic. Jane had made attempts to get her out of the kitchen, but she’d given up. She was in the lab with her dad, Bruce and Thor. Clint had drawn the short straw and was napping on her couch. Pepper was dealing with work stuff in the penthouse. Stuff that she was not doing because she was going to make coconut cream pie once she finished with the chocolate peanut butter frosting.

JARVIS turned on CNN right as a masked man lunged at Steve on a DC street with a knife. It looked like DC was a warzone. Clint sat up the moment she dropped the stainless steel mixing bowl on her tile floor.

“Aww, icing,” he started to complain, but stopped the moment he noticed what was on the TV and how pale she had gone. “JARVIS.”

“They’re on their way. Miss, you should take a seat…” Clint hopped over the couch and quickly directed her to her chair.

This wasn’t like when her dad went to Afghanistan. She wasn’t left imagining the “what could have happens”. Her mind wouldn’t let her think it could have happened peacefully, not when she was watching it in vivid color. She stood up, pacing as she watched a man with a metal arm try to kill Steve. He grabbed him by the neck and lifted him. He was evenly matched with Steve, so that meant someone else had replicated parts, if not all, of the serum. She sat and watched as a Shield strike team swarmed Steve, Natasha, and a black man she assumed was Sam Wilson. Her dad caught her as her knees buckled. They had a gun to his head, in broad daylight; in the middle of D.C. Clint had been right yesterday. It wasn’t a search team, it was an execution squad. She recognized Rumlow before they loaded all three into an armored car.

She ignored the fact that her apartment was now filled with people and she had 6 concerned faces watching her every move. She wanted to scream. She wanted to run. Wasn’t it two days ago that she was teasing Steve about his man date? And this morning. That hadn’t been her imagination. That had been real. He’d called her to say goodbye. The last thing he’d said to her… she ran up her stairs quickly. She was not falling apart in front of an audience.

“Give her a minute,” Pepper began as Jane got up to follow.

“Captain Rogers called Miss early this morning.” Jarvis told them. Tony felt his heart stop beating. Whatever was going on, Steve was smart enough to know that calling Darcy was a risk. It had to be important.

“Do you know what they spoke about?” he asked the AI.

“Judging from the tone of the conversation on Miss’ end, he was saying goodbye.” Tony didn’t
even hesitate, running up the stairs after her. He knew where he’d find her. She hated crying in
front of people. She thought it was a weakness. Her mother had hated it when she cried, so Darcy
learned to mask it by hiding in the shower. She was two the first time he caught her crying in the
shower after a lab accident. Always fully dressed, but it was a habit she never fully broke. In times
of great distress, Darcy would be hiding in the shower and thought the water would hide her tears.

She was already curled up in the fetal position, her sobs audible even through the pounding water.
She had all five shower heads on. He didn’t even hesitate, just climbed in to sit with her. She
sobbed, loud racking sobs he had never heard from his daughter. Pepper reached in, turning the
water off, then reached in, rubbing Darcy’s feet, both of them waiting.

“He’s gone Daddy.” Her breath hitched and she started hyperventilating. “I didn’t… I yelled at
him. I told him not to but he said it anyway and I didn’t… he told me he loved me and then he
hung up the phone and…” Tony and Pepper looked up when they heard the gasp in the doorway.
Jane stood there with her hand over her mouth. Tony nodded quickly to Bruce, who understood
immediately and left. Thor led Jane and Clint out of the room.

“Don’t count him out yet, ok?” Tony finally said after letting her cry a few moments longer. “I
thought he was dead my entire life but they pulled him out of the ice. He’s smart, and he’s
resourceful. So let’s get up out of the shower and dry off, get into dry clothes, and wait.” She
nodded, slowly moving and getting up. Tony and Pepper followed after her. Tony handed a towel
to Pepper as Darcy walked into her closet.

“Go downstairs. I’ll watch her. Get whatever Bruce gives you.”

“Done.” Tony agreed.

Darcy woke up with a bedroom filled with people. It was early; her alarm said 7:30. Her dad was
sitting up, on his phone next to her. She’d have to tell Steve that her bench was for sleeping
astrophysicists when she noticed Jane passed out on the bench, Thor sitting in front of her. Then
she felt the physical ache in her stomach and her heart when she thought of Steve. The last thing
she remembered was watching the news. They must have drugged her.

“Well,” Tony announced, as if sensing she was awake and needed distraction (and waking
everyone in the process) “Howard just called, apparently someone broke into the Smithsonian and
stole the vintage Captain America suit.” Darcy broke out into a wide smile.

“That son of a bitch, I’m going to kill him when he gets back.” She mumbled, with absolutely no
heat or real meaning behind the words. “You guys didn’t eat all the cake from yesterday, do you?
And by all of you I mean Thor and Clint. Because I would like cake for breakfast. I’m starving.”

“Let’s go get you cake then. And coffee. I need coffee.” Jane said, getting up.

At 9:45 her phone beeped. She was about to ignore it when she noticed it was from Antoine. Last
she’d heard he was trying to catch the Clairvoyant, who was responsible for the death of his
teammates. He wouldn’t text her unless it was important. It was a simple message, just five letters,
but she knew then what they were facing.

HYDRA.

She handed the phone to her dad before trying to get into Shields mainframe. It had been a while
since she last attempted this, but it had never been this hard before. Instead of getting Shield she
got a code. Out of the Darkness, Into the Light. She had Jarvis put it on the screen. Tony handed
the phone to Pepper.
“JARVIS, tell Happy to get my dad, to bring his best guards and they are to bring him here, kicking and screaming if they have to, as soon as possible. Then I want the best on every Commando’s kid and their family. I want it done yesterday.”

“Yes sir.” Jarvis responded as Pepper handed her back her phone.

“Well, when we said it was bad what we really meant was a shit storm of crazy bad.” Darcy commented.

“At least we know what we’re fighting.” Jane told them.

“Yeah.” Clint replied. “I just want to know how much they know, or how deep it goes and how much control…is this a sudden sneak attack from out of no where or is it…they have the Shield mainframe and a level 9 strike force tried to kill Cap. It has to be…I’m not necessarily known for my moral uprightness, you know. There’s a reason few people trusted me before New York. But Nazi’s? I thought I knew whose lies I was selling all these years.”

“Shield was founded in honor of Steve, who gave up his life to defeat Hydra. Two months after he went down, Victory was declared in Europe. Without Hydra,” Darcy began “The axis couldn’t stand. But this isn’t fighting. This isn’t a sneak attack, it couldn’t be, you would have seen it coming. This is war. Shield’ll be the first casualty. Because if Hydra has infected Shield, the very organization founded from its destruction, then,”

“It’s infected the rest of the intelligence community.” Pepper concluded. “Possibly Congress.”

“The tea party, for sure.” Bruce added.

“Fox News then.” Tony commented.

“Should we get ready for battle?” Thor asked, confused as everyone settled in.

“No.” Pepper told him. “This is going to be a much different battle and we will need a very different way to fight it.”

Jarvis alerted them to the mass downloading of every Shield file onto the internet, proclaiming all firewalls were down. Darcy picked up her laptop and Tony picked up his tablet and went to work.

“Everything on Hulk, the hows and whys, anything used…” Tony began.

“Found, protected, and deleted sir.”

“All early super serum – “ Darcy added.

“Also done Miss.”

“Anything regarding Jane and her research. All of it. Anything Selvig did as part of the tesseract project.” Tony continued.

“Done.” The AI concluded.

“Clint?” Darcy asked.

“Let it all go. Same with Nat. She’s out there, with Cap. She knows.” Clint sighed. “I’m sure glad
you idiots like me.”

“Only sometimes, don’t press your luck.” Darcy laughed.

“Jarvis, there’s a ton of information, can you prioritize it?” Pepper inquired.

“Yes ma’am. I believe you will all find this file incredibly important.” Jarvis proclaimed, pulling up a picture and the files of Phil Coulson and his team.

“Son of Coul?” Thor questioned. “He’s alive?”

“That one-eyed son of a bitch.” Tony ground out.

“Guys…” Jane pointed at the TV screen, which was playing live footage from DC. “I think the helicarriers are crashing. Are they supposed to do that?”

“Project Insight.” Jarvis announced, pulling up those files. “Initially planned to be Shield’s deterrent, able to take out individual targets based on their DNA. However, it was re-written by HYDRA to take out anyone they believe will one day be a threat.”

“So, all of us then.” Clint guessed, taking a bite of cookie. Darcy wasn’t even sure where that cookie came from.

“Well, ok. They can fall from the sky then.” Jane leaned back against Thor. “I need coffee.”

“I’ll get it.” Darcy told her, getting up. “I need to more cake. And possibly another whole cake. Basically, I need all the cake.”

Shield had fallen. Its secrets laid bare for everyone to see, right there on the internet. The Triskellion was demolished, all 3 helicarriers were down. Her grandfather was apoplectic. This was his agency, his and Peggy’s. They built it with Colonel Phillips, from the ground up. And Hydra had been there all along. Growing beside and in the agency.

She should have seen this coming. All that time breaking into Shield’s servers for the fun of it, and she missed the most important thing. Hydra. She missed it, all those times. And now she was back in her least favorite position, waiting. Jarvis was screening everyone’s phone calls, only letting important ones through. Pepper, for example, was currently on a conference call with the Joint Chiefs, Rhodey, and the President. Everyone around her was talking about what came next, but she wasn’t paying much attention.

“Miss,” Jarvis announced, breaking her out of her haze. “There is a call from Walter Reed in Bethesda on your phone.” Darcy picked it up quickly, her heart beating out of her chest.

“Steve?”

“No, this is Dr. Jacobs, from Walter Reed, is this Darcy Lewis?”

“It is, how can I help you?”

“You’re listed as Captain Rogers emergency contact, and Ms. Romanoff has informed us that you are the super serum expert. Specifically, you were the only one to trust.”

“Yes. That is true, especially in light of today’s events. How is he?”

“Stable. Looks fine, but he’s got a few bullet wounds. Two, which are already healing and were
clean through, but there’s a stomach would we want to check on. But…”

“You’re not sure how to dose him.”

“Yes.”

“His metabolism is four times after than everyone else’s, but he can handle more. So to be on the safe side I’d give him about five or six times the normal amount to keep him out of it. It won’t hurt him. And for painkillers though, only about three times. He probably won’t take them, fair warning.”

“Thank you. We were all guessing, none of us wanted to kill Captain America.”

“Apparently HYDRA can’t do that so I’m not worried about the medical staff at Walter Reed. Is Natasha still there?”

“She left, shortly after arriving.”

“Is anyone with him?”

“Sam Wilson, Air Force, we served together in Afghanistan.”

“Could I speak to him?”

“He’s being looked over right now, but I’ll have him call you. We’ve also got men protecting Captain Rogers.”

“Thank you. I’ll let you get back to work Dr. Jacobs.”

“I’ll call with updates.”

“Thank you.” Darcy hung up. “So, we’re talking about me going public, once they drag grandpa down to D.C. right? Please know that the first thing I’m doing for multiple reasons is donating a new wing or something to Walter Reed.” She took a deep breath. “Shot in the stomach, also twice elsewhere but those are healing, but he’s stable.”

“Nat?” Clint asked.

“Dropped him off, then disappeared. His new friend Wilson is with him.”

“He’s probably going to need new wings.” Tony said.

“Sam Wilson.” Darcy began as she picked up the phone, in lieu of greeting. “32 years old, retired Air Force pararescue under the Falcon program. SI made you some pretty wings before. Don’t worry, you won’t go without them for long. I’m being incredibly presumptuous and assuming you’re following Steve on his next hair-brained adventure.”

“Who is this?” He asked.

“Darcy Lewis.”

“Oh, Steve’s girl.”
“Yeah, he might want to re-think that soon. So I’m also assuming your car is totaled, so Colonel James Rhodes and Captain Carol Danvers will be by, they’ll show you ID, they’ll have the keys to a Stark Industries car. They’ll also be bringing Steve’s clothes. And shield since he’ll want that first thing, knowing him. They’ll also be by so that you can go home and pack, don’t worry about rent or mortgage payments or whatever, Rhody’ll get all that information from you and we’ll take care of it. I am going to ask you to stay with him until he wakes up though. I know they have guards but the last time he woke up in a hospital alone…”

“It was bad?”

“It was after the ice and to ease him into the future they were pretending that it was still 1945. Only problem was they were playing a Dodgers game from 1941, which Steve had been to, and he knows the Dodgers the way I know Harry Potter trivia. So he took out a wall, a few guards, and ended up in a ridiculously futuristic, to him, Times Square before Fury got to him.”

“So don’t let him freak out at Walter Reed when he comes out of his drug haze, got it.”

“Exactly. Then, when you’re ready and both discharged get to Avengers Tower. Right now you’re both on Hydra’s list and we’re heavily fortified here. You can figure out your next move here.”

“Next move?” She could hear the smirk in his voice.

“Like I’m telling Captain America he can’t go after Hydra. Please. And I’m pretty sure you’re the special kind of stupid that we all seem to be and will be running with him.”

“Captain America asked for my help, what do you think I’ll be doing?”

“Exactly. Welcome to the Avengers Initiative Wilson, we’ve got excellent benefits and now we get to punch Nazi’s, so yay!”

They’d all left her alone for the first time, now that they knew Steve and Natasha were safe and what was going on. She felt like she could breathe again. She’d forgotten, how bad it felt thinking someone you loved was gone. She’d moved past the overwhelming desire to crawl into a ball and stay there when she found out her dad was alive. She’d made up her mind when he became Iron Man that as terrified as she’d be when he went out there, she wasn’t going to let her fear get to her because her dad, he was a hero. This whole thing terrified her and part of her wished she’d thought it through when she started falling in love with Steve because loving Captain America? Not going to be easy. Steve Rogers was a sarcastic punk who took great joy in trolling people into believing that he was the guy in the incredibly horrible (but hilarious) Captain America movies. Sweet, dumb, and innocent. Nothing like the guy who lived in Brooklyn flop houses during the great depression.

She checked her phone again and nearly called Antoine. He’d texted her in the aftermath. Alive, figuring out what’s next. She knew him well enough to know there was a story there, but she’d let him tell her in his own time. He was alive and safe, that was all that mattered.

*The first time he found himself unconsciously drawing Darcy he brushed it off as proximity. She was the girl he saw the most of, therefore it made sense that she was on his mind. But after London, when he got back to the DC and felt like he could breath again, he knew he was screwed. He drew her more often after that, unable to get the mischief in her eyes right, or her*
Natasha started trying to set him up with women shortly after New York. Every time he would say no. He didn’t know what he wanted, if he was even ready to be in a relationship (because anything he had with Darcy would be serious). He was terrified that it would go down in flames and he’d lose his best friend.

He told Sam about the only thing that felt real and how he had to figure it out before making any moves because she deserved more than that.

Then the world went to hell. So he called her. He’d been planning on telling her it was HYDRA, but instead he told her he loved her. That he loved every part of her and every version of her. And then he hung up the phone.

She was going to kill him when he woke up.

Maria was quickly escorted up to Pepper’s office after her initial intake interview. She was left alone there by an assistant, which gave her time to look at the pictures of Tony and Pepper’s niece when Darcy was younger. They were cute pictures, and Maria was frankly a little surprised about them. Then she noticed the pictures of Pepper’s niece with Howard.

She was missing something important, and it hit her in the face the moment Darcy Lewis walked into the office.

“You’re not Pepper’s niece. You’re Stark’s daughter.”

“And this is my office. Have a seat.”

“How did Shield not know?”

“We didn’t want you to. One Shield member knew. Possibly two…but Triplett could also think that I’m a mutant/ someone’s illegitimate grandkid. Or kid. Which is sort of true. But Coulson definitely knows.”

“And he kept it secret.”

“Yes he did. Which, to be honest, is why you’re here. Coulson trusted you, and Steve trusts you. I’m not feeling too friendly towards the Shield officers trying to join our ranks and believe me we’ve had a rash of resignations since the Triskellion fell.”

“They’re growing here too.”

“Yeah, their leader, according to the files we’ve shifted through, was Obie. So…with him gone there’s little power structure. Shield was the main course.”

“So what do you want from me?”

“We want to privatize global security.” Pepper said from the doorway. “And we need you to be the one, with Howard, in DC, putting out all the fires. We have teams of lawyers working on it…but Shield as we knew it is gone. They need someone to blame. They want to blame the good people.”

“And you want to stop it.”

“We want to distract them. While we set up so that Steve and whoever else wants to go can go
after Hydra.” Maria smiled at Darcy, who was clearly running the show. Pepper was support. “I will not let the agency my grandfather and my godmother founded be destroyed by Hydra.”

“I’m in.”

“Few things…Fury’s alive, right?”

“Yes.”

“You tell Romanoff she’s got a place to land here. I want anything you can find on Agents Carter and Triplett.”

“Carter joined the CIA. Triplett was at the Hub, that’s still standing in our hands. His CO was the Clairvoyant. I don’t know if he’s still there or not, that was the last bit of information I received before coming up here.” Darcy nodded, looking at her phone.

“Phil. And his team. We want them.” Pepper told Maria. “It’s non-negotiable. And everything you have on the TAHITI project. That means Fury has to tell us…because if it’s something you’re all worried about after affects – Darcy and Bruce can fix that.”

“I will try. He’ll have a hard time accepting Shield is gone.”

“Then at least let him know Stark will take him.”

“And if he doesn’t take the bait?” Maria asked.

“Well, Fury’ll want someone to rebuild Shield, and who better then Phil Coulson? He’ll hand over the reigns and Phil will hopefully remember that Shield has always needed a Stark. If not I will find him and remind him of that. Plus, he’ll need someone to smooth it over in D.C.” Darcy smirked.

“And that’s me.”

“For right now, yes.” Pepper smiled. “Want to start your paperwork?”

“When can I get out of here?” Steve asked the team of Doctor’s surrounding his bed. He’d been up for 2 hours, he felt fine, he wanted to go. Hydra was still out there and he wanted, needed to see Darcy.

“Tomorrow. Miss Lewis did send us down a chemical compound she says will knock you on your ass for three days, and that if you don’t do as we say we should use it for your health.” Dr. Jacobs said. “You’re recovering from a bullet to the gut. You are lucky you heal so damn fast, because it would have killed anyone else in your position.” Steve looked at Rhodey.

“Don’t look at me. I answer to the tiny boss lady. You do too. Just get comfortable.”

“Fine” Sam took a picture. “What?”

“You were pouting. I figured I’d save it from blackmail purposes later.” Steve gave him the finger.

“Are you going back to New York?” Steve asked Rhodey.

“In an hour or two, for the night. Then Howard, and former assistant director Hill and I will be
back for all the congressional inquiries.”

“They’ve called me.”

“Don’t worry. I thought Pepper took great joy in rooting out Obie’s boys from SI after everything, but between her and Darcy, I’m not sure who’s happier spinning legal circles around Congress and the intelligence community right now.”

“Has anyone heard from Natasha?”

“She and Barton are in touch. She’s been called and will be appearing. She’s also been speaking to Darcy.”

“And has Darcy heard from anyone else.”

“Trip’s been accounted for, as far as she knows he’s with Agent Coulson’s team now.”

“Agent Coulson?”

“Oh, no one’s told you yet. He’s alive.” Rhodey smiled.

“Ok Captain. You can eat solid food tonight, rest some more, and we’ll discharge you in the morning. You try to sneak out and I’ve been told everyone here has the OK to knock you out.”

“By Darcy.” Sam added. “I like this girl of yours, a lot.”

“She’s tased Thor. If she were here she’d definitely punch Steve.” Rhodey added.

Darcy paced back and forth waiting for the elevator to arrive on their floor. She was suddenly so very nervous and so unsure of what was going to happen. He told her he loved her before taking on Hydra and she hadn’t spoken to him since. For all she knew it was a spur of the moment declaration made because he was facing crazy uncertainty. He hadn’t thought it through; it wasn’t true.

Then the elevator door opened and he was there, whole and looking at her like she was the only person in the room. She was in front of him without thinking.

“Doctor gave you the all clear?”

“Didn’t even scar.” He told her before leaning down and kissing her. She was unaware of Pepper’s exclamation and the complaints that betting was rigged behind her. She was unaware of her father making gagging sounds. All she knew was Steve and his lips on hers and his hand on her hip, the other in her hair.

“Hands in 40s appropriate places Cap, or I’ll kill you.” Tony yelled as she pulled away to take a breath.

“4 hour drive, saying you had a plan, and that’s your plan?” Sam asked. “Sam Wilson.”

“Darcy Lewis.” She let Steve pull her into his side. “He’s the man with the plan. There’s a song and everything.”

“I hope you know that when she was a baby, her grandpa and the commandos would sing that song to her.” Tony added.
“Well, that’s disturbing.” Darcy said. “Welcome back, and welcome to the Avengers Initiative.”
“The Avengers Initiative?” Steve asked, grabbing for Darcy’s hand. “And did you open a bakery in here?”

“I stress bake, you know that.” Darcy said. “Sam, get comfortable.”

“This is not how I pictured Tony Stark’s apartment.” He said, taking in the floral pillows and oversized couches.

“It’s not mine. It’s Darcy’s.” Tony said. “My daughter, if you haven’t gotten that part Fly boy.”

“Really? You went with fly boy? Out of all the bird related humor in the world? I’m ashamed of you dad.” Darcy laughed, watching as Sam found his way to the couch. “Oh, wait, introductions. Tony Stark, my dad; Pepper Potts, my adopted mom; Dr. Bruce Banner, the Hulk; Thor Odinson, Prince of Asgard; Dr. Jane Foster, astrophysicist and my BFF; and Clint Barton, Hawkeye. Or bird brain. Don’t worry, we’ve all read your files, no need to introduce yourself.”

“Ok, Avengers Initiative?” Steve asked, still needing clarification.

“You’ve known Pepper and I for months now. Do you really think that she and I didn’t have a back up plan to use when things went to hell?”

“When?” Steve smiled down at her.

“Well, we always thought it would be my dad doing something stupid or the World Security Counsel getting a little too big for its britches…butyeah. When.”

“Would you explain to me what the Avengers Initiative is?”

“You idiots. Saving the World. Free from any governing body and oversight. We’ve gone independent.”
“I thought Stark doesn’t make weapons.”

“Stark Industries still doesn’t. Tony Stark does. What do you think the suit is?” Darcy laughed. “Sit down. You’ve only been out of the hospital a few hours.”

“Fine. But now that we’re independent, what’s next?”

“Why are you looking at me?” She asked.

“You’re better at the bigger picture than I am.”

“Right now the big picture is pizza or chinese?”

They had turned from discussing the Avengers Initiative and what that meant for all of them, to catching up. Darcy made sure Sam was involved and he easily fit into the group. He should have been prepared for Darcy, Sam, and Clint getting along like a house on fire. However, he didn’t quite know why Jane was glaring at him.

He went up for more pizza, Thor following him for more as well.

“Why does Jane look like she wants to kill me?”

“She has, in more recent months, felt that as Darcy has always been the one to take care of her, she needs to be the one to take care of Darcy. Especially because Darcy is the one least likely to fight for herself.”

“So you all know about the call?”

“We were worried about her following her reaction to the battle on the streets of your Capital. We overheard her telling her parents.”

“Was she?” Steve couldn’t even form an entire sentence. Ok? Sad? Stressed?

“Banner sedated her. We took turns looking after her during the day until it was time to sleep, then we all slept in her room. We were heartened to hear you had stolen your old uniform.”

“I figured you’d all know it was me, and it gave everyone at the Triskellion who was Hydra something to shoot at.”

“Fine thinking.”

“I’ll show you to your room Sam,” Clint said as everyone began getting up (around midnight) to head to bed. Tony lingered, watching as Steve didn’t even flinch, staying exactly where he was on Darcy’s couch while everyone else left. Pepper maneuvered Tony into the elevator, leaving the pair alone for the first time since Steve arrived back at the tower 8 hours earlier.

“I love you too.” She said softly. “I would have…if you’d given me enough time before hanging up on me you would have known that before…”

“I’m sorry. I know…”
“Can you just promise not to make it a thing? I know your job is going into terrifying situations and that’s part of the reason I love you but I love Steve Rogers more than Captain America. Captain America has to promise me that he will do everything he can to bring Steve Rogers back to me.” He turned pulling her to him with a swiftness she should have expected, then pressed his forehead against hers.

“I promise.” He paused. “I love you.” He kissed her then, reverently but briefly. “You still want to yell at me, don’t you?”

“A little bit.” She admitted with a laugh. “What is it with you and goodbye calls? It can’t happen again.”

“This time I was only asleep for a day, at most.” Darcy rolled her eyes, but smiled at him. “Your dad is going to try to kill me, isn’t he?”

“Definitely. Don’t try to kill him back. It will make things very weird for me.” She yawned.

“I should…” He gestured towards the door.

“Don’t be stupid.” She told him, climbing off his lap and holding out her hand. “It’s not like we haven’t slept in the same bed before.”

“Those were very different circumstances.”

“Yes, because at no point in any of that did either of us have feelings for the other.” She quipped.

“Good point.” He acquiesced, getting up to grab his bag, which had been left in the entry way all night, before returning to her side. He followed her up the stairs, stopping when she turned around to face him halfway up the steps.

“You know, what I mean is, you’re the right person. For me.”

“And you’re the right partner, for me.” He assured her. “Meeting you, Darce, is the best thing that’s happened to me in my life. That 70 year long ice nap was so I could meet you.”

“Also to save the world, but I’ll take it.” She smiled widely at him before turning back around.

He was surprised to find that most of his things were in her room, including the duffel bags he assumed held most of his wardrobe, packed by Rhodey and Danvers. The surprise must have been evident on his face. “Yeah, they were sort of presumptuous. I found all of this in my room about an hour before you got here today.” She headed towards the bathroom. “I’m going to get changed and ready for bed…”

“Ok.”

“And also, when I get out of the bathroom, you should probably tell me what it is that you and Sam haven’t told us about what happened.” She closed the door behind her.

“How’d you know I was hiding something?”

“I know you Spangles…”

“Now that we’re together maybe you could come up with a different nickname?”

“Nope.” He smiled in spite of himself, putting down his bag on the bench. “Anyway, I know you. And I know that you’ve been in dozens of battles and survived an alien invasion with minimal
bruises…you got shot three times. Either the Winter Soldier was very good or he was made to look like someone that would stop you.” Steve pulled the file out of his bag before quickly changing into his sweats and a t-shirt to sleep in before Darcy came back into the room. He laughed as came back wearing her Ravenclaw pants and a t-shirt that she had stolen from him. He sat on the bed before handing her the file.

“You read Russian, right?”

“Yeah. Why?” She asked as she opened the folder, noticing the picture on the front left page. “Is this…Jesus Christ. Are you sure?”

“I got his mask off, when we were fighting in the streets. It’s him. It was Bucky.”

“Are you ok?”

“He’s alive, that’s…”

“But clearly brainwashed if he shot you, I don’t need this to tell me that. I’m not asking about him. I’m asking about you. Are you ok?” She put the file down on the bedside table closest to them.

“I’m…no.” He admitted as she wrapped her arms around his neck. He pulled her down so she was straddling him. It was strange; this sort of intimacy with someone should panic her, right? She ran from anything resembling this in school but with Steve it felt natural. Like an extension of them. And right now he needed her because apparently his best friend was alive and brainwashed.

“We’ll find him and we’ll fix it. I promise.” Darcy told him quietly but confidently. “But tonight, we can’t do anything about it.”

“I didn’t know.”

“There was no way for you to know. He fell, and you went down less than a week later. You didn’t know Zola even had a viable serum so you had no way of knowing that he was capable of surviving a 200 foot fall from a speeding train, let alone had. There was nothing you could do Steve. Nothing. And he’ll tell you that when we find him.”

“What if Hydra—” He began.

“Gets him first?” Steve nodded before resting his head on her shoulder. “There is no hole small enough for them to hide in now that they’ve been exposed. We will find them and we will extinguish them for good this time. They forget that the Hydra didn’t live forever. Hercules killed it, depending on the legend, but cauterizing the stump and not allowing the head to grow back or by killing it with its own poison. We’ve just got to find their poison.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” She kissed him, letting him guide them so they were lying on the bed. She pulled away with a yawn.

“When did you last sleep?”

“More than an hour or two? When they drugged me…so 4 days ago? Granted, the first day was because the Triskellion fell and I was wired from sleeping for about 18 hours the day before.”

“Go to sleep.”

“Only if you do too.”
“Fine.” He said, turning down the bed, making sure Darcy was under the covers before getting in himself.

“Jarvis, the lights.” She smiled as he pulled her to him, tucking her under his chin, resting his arm around her waist. This felt right. She could get used to this. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

Steve woke up suddenly, aware that someone was in the apartment. He looked over at the clock; it was a little after nine. He was surprised he slept this long. He heard the noise again and shifted, waking up Darcy in the process.

“What?” She mumbled, rubbing her face. It was adorable.

“I heard someone in the apartment.”

“’s prolly my dad, he has no bound’ She yawned “aries. ‘S time?”

“It’s 9:14.”

“Probably should get up. Coffee.” Darcy yawned again. “Mornings suck.”

“Go back to sleep for a little bit.”

“S’ok.” She said yawning again as he got out of bed. He grabbed his shaving kit and boxers, jeans and a t-shirt from his bag before heading into the bathroom.

He hadn’t been in this room before, and he shouldn’t be as overwhelmed with it as he is (she has a two story library in her apartment because Tony wanted to apologize for something) but her master bath was the size of all of the flop houses he lived in before the ice put together. There’s an expansive two sink vanity, a shower that he’s pretty sure could fit 10 people, a tub with a chandelier over it and a fainting couch. It’s beautifully done, soft blues and greens and like everything else in the apartment it looked like Darcy, but it was insane. The toilet was in its own separate room. He heard movement again downstairs and realized that if it were Tony he’d be up annoying them already. He did his business, dressed, shaved and brushed his teeth quickly before heading back into the bedroom. Darcy was sitting up in the bed.

“Coffee?”

“I’ll go make some.” He told her, leaning over to kiss her. She smiled.

“I like this. The kissing thing we’re doing now.”

“And you like kissing me.”

“Me too.” He smiled as he left her bedroom. She waited to hear his footsteps down her stairs before grabbing the file off of the night stand. It took a moment, and a deep breath, but she told herself to open the file again. She took out the photo of Bucky before. That one Steve would want.

She felt sick reading through the basic description of what had been done to him. To a man who spent his life protecting Steve; who wanted, just as much as Steve, to defend the little guy (but for Bucky the little guy was almost always Steve). A cynic where Steve was pure optimism. A realist who took the world as it is, not what he hoped it could be. She understood that. She respected that. Uncle Gabe had once described him as the type of guy who had no issue with kicking
someone’s ass for stepping out of line. Hell, Antoine’s middle name is James, in honor of Barnes. Some racist prick had been bitching about having to share a barracks with Gabe, and James, his superior officer, had stuck up for Gabe at a time where the army didn’t often stick up for its minority members. He was a sarcastic shit, according to Dum-Dum, but the best person any of them knew. Steve had a choice, Bucky never did. And maybe that’s what it would come down to.

He had been made and unmade, wiped like a piece of machinery and put away when not of use. He wasn’t a person; he was a weapon. He wasn’t the only one to be used like that. The Red Room. The KGB’s secret training program. Their leader was sympathetic to Hydra, it was an easy place to hide him, to use him. He was last used by the Red Room in the final days of the Soviet Union, in March of 1991, before being sold to Pierce.

She took a deep breath, putting the file down and heading to the bathroom. There was nothing she could do about it now.

“Natasha.” Steve commented when he noticed the redhead sitting on Darcy’s couch.

“Who won the bet?”

“It sounded like Pepper.” Steve acknowledged. “Tony was arguing about her using insider information.”

“I’ll take some coffee if you’re making it.” He just nodded, heading over to Darcy’s machine and asking it, very nicely, in French, for three coffees. He waited, watching the coffee brew, turning only when he heard Darcy come down the stairs.

“Thanks for coming up.” Darcy said by way of greeting. She was fully dressed for the day, but in comfortable clothes. “Hey Stars and Stripes, would you mind whipping up some breakfast while you’re in there?”

“They’re not going to stop, are they?” Darcy just shook her head, sitting down in her chair across from Natasha. “What do you expect, you’re the idiot dating a Stark.” Natasha teased. “So how long do you think…”

“It will take to blow over so you can leave and do whatever you need to do or how long it will take Coulson to get his head out of his ass?”

“Both.” Natasha responded.

“A month, tops. We need to change the narrative.” Darcy commented as Steve came over, handing her and Natasha their coffees.

“How are you going to do that? And pancakes ok?” Both women nodded and he walked back into Darcy’s kitchen.

“Well, I’m pretty sure Tony Stark announcing he has a 23 year old daughter who he raised and who will be the co-CEO of Stark Industries is going to cause a massive public thing and we’ll use it to announce the Avengers Initiative. I’ll do the talk show rounds…Magazines. We’re thinking Oprah for the initial reveal. It seems appropriate.”

“That’s going to put a giant target on your back.” Natasha said softly.

“I already had one. I’m not so worried. It had to happen eventually.”
“But you don’t want…” Steve started.

“I told you that one day I was going to have to take my place. And I wanted to do it eventually, just on my own terms, not anyone else’s. This, doing it now, when it will best help the people I care about, this is my choice.” She asserted. “You all fight in your own ways. This is mine.” He nodded once, in understanding. “How are you doing?”

“Coulson? You think he’ll take a month?” Natasha changed the subject, which gave Darcy her answer.

“Yeah. Last I heard he was going after the Clairvoyant, but that was before. It’s Coulson, he’s Shield through and through. Fury’ll need someone to rebuild it. Hill for the political connections to protect it, but Coulson to make sure it’s better then before. He’ll need someone though, for supplies and the like a budget.”

“And you think he’ll come.”

“He’s got Antoine with him. So yes. If I have to demand it, but I hope I won’t have to.”

“I’m glad you’re able to plan and plot three steps ahead of everyone.”

“I played a lot of chess growing up.” Darcy laughed. “And Pepper Potts is my mom. I’m pretty sure I’ve always been prepared for every eventuality.” Natasha smiled, looking lighter already. She couldn’t help but see a little girl being lead to the machines, a little girl being wiped, a little girl being made into a weapon. She wanted to hug her but that would give her away.

"Вы посмотрите, как вы собираетесь болеть." (You look like you're going to be sick)

"Они сделали для вас то, что они с ним сделали. Для Зимнего Солдата. Не так ли?" (They did to you what they did to him. To the Winter Soldier. Didn't they?)

"Они сделали." (They did)

"Мне очень жаль." (I'm sorry)

"Вы не знали." (You didn't know)

"То, что это случилось с вами." (That it happened to you)

Natasha left shortly after breakfast, muttering something about kicking Clint’s ass. She assured Darcy she would keep the hordes away from her apartment for the day, knowing what Darcy was going to have to do. What she couldn’t keep from Steve. She did the dishes before heading upstairs. She took a deep breath before grabbing the file.

He was waiting for her on the couch with a soda. She opened it up and curled against Steve.

“No one was sure the serum had worked, since you had rescued him before they tested him and Barnes was not seen, except if you were too close for comfort. They knew when they found him, half dead, that it had.” She read further. “They believe his left arm was torn off in the fall. At first his arm was replaced with a rudimentary metal arm, but as the technology advanced so did the arm. He’d lost his memory in the initial fall, and after…he was originally held by a Hydra Faction, under the KGB, known as the Red Room. They gave him false memories and when that didn’t work they’d wipe his mind. He was indoctrinated. He was, when not of use to them, placed in cryostasis. He has never consented, he has never…he was a weapon. They made him that.
was taken out for important missions – dictators, presidents...any time where the balance of power could be shifted and they needed a ghost, he was there.” She sat up, kneeling, so she could look at Steve. “There would be times when he would have a trigger and would recall something from his life. Usually when he was sent on missions in the US. He’d be found in flop houses or bars, once in Brooklyn. He remembers, deep down, who he is. His last domestic mission, until last week, was in March of 1991. There was a trigger; he remembered the target. He saved the target’s life but couldn’t save his wife.”


“They sold him to Pierce. Like you would sell a weapon. Pierce used him almost exclusively in foreign missions until he needed a boogey man to kill Fury, you and Natasha.”

“Do you think we can save him?”

“Yes.” She didn’t even hesitate. “If there were breaks...the longer he is away from that torture trap they called a machine, then yes. Bits and pieces of his memory may come back naturally. I’ll work on something to stimulate the brain, just in case. But Steve, he may never fully remember. Or if he does...this file? Is terrifying. What they used him to do? The man I grew up hearing stories about? It will not be easy for him to remember what they made him do.”

“So what do I do?”

“Wait. Destroy Hydra. Take down the people who did this to him. When he’s ready he’ll come to you. Or maybe you’ll find him on the way. But...he hasn’t had the ability to choose for 70 years. Let’s give him this.” Steve nodded before leaning to rest his head on Darcy’s shoulder. She immediately wrapped her arms around him, running her hand through his hair to comfort him. “He’s tough. We’ll fix it.” She felt, more than heard, his breath hitch and felt his tears seep through her shirt. “Oh Steve, sweetie.”

“I’m sorry.” He said after a few minutes, moving her so they were both lying down on her couch, her on the inside, bracketed and protected by him, their legs intertwined.

“It’s ok.”

“I liked that one.” He said after a moment.

“What?”

“Sweetie. I liked that one.”

“I’m never going to call you that in public.” He laughed, a watery response. She wiped some of the tears off of his face. “You want to talk about it?”

“I want to find every single Hydra instillation and I want to take them out.”

“We will.” She assured him. “We need to gather intelligence first. Then we’ll get them.”

“I know.”
were living together. It would seem fast to outsiders, but for them it worked. She thinks it’s the
*Stark Way TM*. Pepper moved in with her dad after a few months, her grandparents were married
after two months together.) She was no longer used to having Jarvis wake her up at 7, letting her
know that Mr. Wilson is downstairs. She grabbed her robe, heading downstairs.

“Your coffee machine is weird.”

“How do you take it?”

“Black.”

“Pepe, a black coffee and a coffee with milk. Please.”

“Of course it’s a voice activated coffee maker.” Sam said.

“Keeps my dad from stealing my coffee. Everyone else has to use French. I use the good beans.”

“Like farmed from monkey shit beans?”

“No, I’m not that nuts or spoiled. His is. It’s gross.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Sam said.

“May I ask why you’ve made a secretive trip up to my apartment at 7am when you know Steve is
in the gym?”

“We need to train you. Not just in media shit. If you’re going to lead up this initiative, if you’re
going public, if you’re going to find more people like those nut jobs you call your family, then you
need to learn self defense. Plus, when we leave to fight Hydra I won’t be dealing with a very
anxious super solider who’s leaving his girlfriend behind. Again.” The man had a point. She
appreciated that about Sam. He always told her and everyone else the absolute truth.

“And you’re going to do it?”

“Yeah, I’m one of two wholly normal people on this team.”

“I don’t want to.” She complained.

“I don’t care. We’ll start tomorrow.”

“I have a real job. Which currently involves a lot of media training, which is it’s own form of
torture.”

“I can imagine.” She handed Sam his coffee, motioning to the island stools.

“Did Steve put you up to it?”

“Natasha. And I learn not to disobey her.”

“Good thing to learn.” She paused. “You’re the newbie. How are they all doing with…”

“Everything?” She nodded. “They are a bunch of fuck ups with massive egos who in no way,
shape, or form, should work in the way that they do.”

“Alien invasions really create an unbreakable bond. It’s how Jane and I became best friends.”
Then she smiled. “You’re fitting in well.”
“Well, I’ve always been a bit of an idiot.”

“Join the club.”

Darcy hated media training. It was torture. But it had to be done so next week’s Oprah interview and the next day’s press conference weren’t an incredible mess. She wondered if this was how her grandpa felt while dealing with politicians. She knew Maria felt like speaking to Congress was the worst thing to ever happen. At least Natasha was with her, in a dark wig and glasses, as her assistant. She had to suffer through this crap too. Her phone rang, Maria’s ringtone. Natasha quickly escorted the PR people out of her office.

“Yes Hill?”

“Not Hill.” Fury said. “Miss Stark, I’ve got a favor to ask of you.”

“I’m going to have words with you about how you left my dad in a cave later, but what do you need sir?”

“You’ve got medical in that tower, right?”

“You’ve met my scientists, right? And Barton. You know those 4 exist in this world. Of course we have medical in this tower. And the best doctors. Why?”

“I heard that a mutual friend of ours might need some help to get rid a rat.”

“Coulson and Garrett, go on.”

“Are you sure you’re your father’s daughter? Because he stays away from this stuff.”

“I’m Howard’s granddaughter, and Peggy Carter and Pepper Potts were the women in my life. I plan at least three steps ahead. I’ll have to get some lessons from you though, sir. Eventually.”

“Don’t sir me, I know you call me a one eyed bastard in private.”

“It’s not untrue.” She smiled. “You were on your way to Coulson…”

“I found his scientists. I don’t know exactly what happened, but Fitz was without oxygen for a while…”

“We’ll take him.” Darcy told him. “We’ll have people ready.”

“What’s my next move?”

“Take care of Garrett, tell Phil to rebuild. Don’t tell him where you’re bringing Fitz though.”

“Wouldn’t dream of messing up your hard worked plans.”

“Nor I yours.” Darcy responded.

Darcy and Bruce waited by the elevators when Fury’s people brought in Fitz.

“He was stopped breathing for about 2 minutes.” One of the doctors said. “We’ve got him on life support. Everything you need is in this file.” He handed Darcy a flash drive as they placed Fitz and his bed into the elevator. “You’re good?”
“We’ve got him. The one eyed bastard needs you. Go.” Darcy assured them as Bruce began checking Fitz over and Darcy stepped into the elevator.

“I’ve got pupil response. I’ll run some tests. We may just have to wait it out to see if he comes out of it on his own.” He said as the doors closed.

“The full med-teams up there.”

“He’s just a kid.” Bruce said quietly.

“And someone he trusted did this to him. I know. This sucks.”

“It sucks because it’s not the last time we’re going to see this. This is just the beginning.”

“Then we fight harder to stop it sooner.”

Steve found Darcy, 36 hours before her big interview, in Fitz’s room, reading him *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. The first two books were already next to the table, a sure sign that she’d been there for a while or had convinced others to read them for her. In the past four days there had been no change in the scientist, much to Darcy’s dissatisfaction. He knew she empathized with him. He loved Darcy and understood how incredibly difficult it must have been for her growing up with all that she had in her mind. He’d watch her solve complex equations without blinking, seen her isolate his what, of him, ‘came out of a bottle’ and had read her complete Hulk write up. Tony and Jane were all kinetic energy, but Darcy and Bruce were very quiet in the way their minds worked. But Tony, Jane and Bruce all focused on one subject with unerring accuracy, but Darcy’s always seemed to jump two steps ahead, at least. He picked her up off the chair, sitting down himself and arranging her in his lap.

“No change?”

“His pupils are almost back to normal. So that’s a good sign. It’s what happens when he wakes up that’s the problem.”

“The lack of oxygen.” He said. “I didn’t have it for 70 years so…”

“Yeah, but you’re super serumed…” Darcy paused before kissing Steve. “You and Bucky both survived time in ice due to the serum and that was because of your regenerating cells…I isolated them in your blood so if I…”

“Deep breath.” He told her.

“I think I can use what makes your cells regenerate to jump start his brain so there no issues. So it will rebuild.”

“With no changes? Because that’s something someone should get a say about.”

“Yeah, I have a forcibly extremised mom, so I know. No, I think if I can build it the way Alzheimer’s medications are built, then I can focus it just on the brain.”

“What are you waiting for?”

“Processing it – running things in my head, give me a minute…if it doesn’t work it won’t hurt him. The probability of that is low.”

“Then try. He’s a scientist too. He’d appreciate it.”
“Ok. I’m going to…can you keep reading? I don’t want him to be alone.”

“I will.” Steve took the book as she got off his lap.

“I’ll be back soon.”

“Take your time. I’m good with the book. Thor’ll be down anyway in an hour or so for his shift.”

“Ok.” She rushed out of the room.

“You’ll get used to her. She’s pretty much adopted you, so you’ll have to.” Steve told him. “So where’d she leave off – right ‘Malfoy didn’t reappear in classes until late on Thursday morning, when the Slytherins and Gryffindors were halfway through double Potions.’”
So this is it. The last chapter. There should be some one-shots within this universe being posted between now and August, and in August I will start posting the sequel. Or, possibly sooner, depending on how stressed I get with studying for the stupid bar exam and how badly I need a break.

Thank you so much for reading, it's been an absolute blast writing this and I've loved every single lovely comment I've gotten!

Enjoy!

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Steve looked up as Darcy came back into the tiny room an hour later. Thor was in the seat across from him, regaling Fitz with tales of Asgard. Everyone had read the file Fury had quickly written up and handed over with his medical records, everyone knew that he tried to kill Garrett, and a man he thought was his friend listened to a psychopath and not his conscious and would have killed Fitz and Simmons. Everyone here knew what being betrayed by the people you trusted felt like.

“Darcy, Steve has told me that you believe you can heal poor Fitz.”

“Bruce is looking over it now, but I think so.” She told Thor, sitting back down on Steve’s lap. “And if it works, it might be something good to have already made, just in case.” Steve nodded in understanding as she sat down on his lap.

“What will this potion of yours do?” Thor asked.

“Regenerate his brain cells. When your brain is without oxygen for an unknown period of time, your cells in your brain die.” Darcy explained. “And if your brain cells die, you may lose motor function, memory, and so on…but if we can rebuild, and repair…like I think we can, then he will wake up and be fine. Like he’s been in a very deep, relaxing sleep instead of a coma.”

“It is quite amazing what you can do.” Darcy smiled at Thor as Tony entered the room.

“I hear we’re waking up Coulson’s baby scientist?”

“He’s older than I am.” Darcy corrected. “So not a baby.”

“He looks like a baby.” Tony added. “When I was walking by the gym Natasha was laying into Wilson for failing to get you into the gym for self-defense training.”

“I have a very busy schedule and am very stressed out and want my one extra hour of sleep. It’s not like I’ve left this tower any time recently. I haven’t left this tower since before Steve took on Hydra 3 and a half weeks ago.” She leaned back against Steve, who kissed her shoulder in response. “I’ll get to it.”
“I know you can handle yourself. You know you can. I just think Natasha needs…”

“Some sort of control right now? I know.” Darcy concluded as Bruce returned. “Am I right or am I right?”

“You’re right.” He admitted. “Do you want the honors?”

“Nah, I’m comfortable.”

“Thor, could I get some help, if you could help me turn Fitz on his side so I can get to his spinal column.”

“This is why you’re not doing it.” Steve whispered. She nodded, watching as Bruce injected Fitz with the serum. Thor placed him back on the bed so he was lying on his back. The EEG machine began beeping almost immediately and Fitz’s eyes popped open.

“Simmons.” Darcy leaned forward on Steve’s lap and into Fitz’s view, smiling broadly.

“It’s ok. She’s safe; you saved her life. She’s back with your team already.”

“Ward, he…”

“He’s in custody. We know what he did. Garrett’s dead.”

“How’d, who?” Fitz sat up, using his left arm. He still hadn’t noticed everyone else in the room.

“The beacon you set up, using an old Shield Signal? Smart idea. Former director Fury found it, was able to get to you and Jemma once you reached the surface.”

“But Fury’s dead?”

“He’s letting the world believe that, it’s making our jobs easier. You’re in Stark Tower. I’m Darcy Stark, Tony’s daughter. It’s a long story, I’ll tell you when you’re a little more…not just out of a coma. Dr. Banner and I have been supervising your recovery. We’ve all been taking turns sitting with you…happens to be an audience here when you wake up.” He looked and noticed Bruce, who waved in response.

“This a very strange dream.”

“Not a dream.” Bruce said. “Judging by your EEG readings, and the one’s Jarvis has just printed out for me, I can get you off all these machines. You can thank Darcy later. She’s about the best damn bio-chemical engineer I’ve ever met.” Darcy beamed. “But to do that everyone else needs to leave.”

“I’ll start on dinner. Fitz, what are your favorites?”


“That sounds good.” Fitz replied, suddenly very aware of who was in his room. “I also like pie.” Darcy smiled.

“I can do that. Bruce, when he’s ready, we’ve got the guest room set up. Come on Thor, I’m going to need some help with the apples.” Steve was already out the door with her.

“I’ll give it a day,” Tony began, “but then you’re coming down with me to the lab. That mouse hole thing you made, brilliant. Foster and I have been having problems with a multi-universal
communicator. Maybe you can help with that. We don’t know how long we’ll have you here for yet, and we all want to corrupt you a bit before sending you back to agent zombie.”

“Stark.” Thor warned. “Let us go and help Darcy. I’m sure she’ll allow you coffee from her machine. Or she’ll make you one of her magical margaritas.”

“We’re going to try not to overwhelm you. We’re going to fail. Darcy will also mother hen you. Your mouse hole saved Steve from an certain execution, she’s a big fan of it.”

“How’d the mouse hole save Captain America?”

“Got him out of Hydra’s clutches.” Bruce explained.

Darcy smacked Sam’s hand away from the guacamole as the elevator doors opened, Bruce with Fitz in the wheelchair.

“Stop. You are not the guest here.”

“Yes I am.”

“You have an apartment here. You’re a member of the Initiative. We voted you in. You get paid. You’re not a guest anymore.” Darcy said. “Welcome to my apartment –slash- headquarters for the Avengers Initiative. We’re working on actual offices downstairs.”

“The Avengers Initiative?”

“Privatizing global security. In that we are global security now, since Shield, in its previous, devious, incarnation, no longer exists,” Darcy hit Sam’s hand again before he could dip a chip in the guacamole. “Go out and help with the grilling.”

“But then Steve will hit me and that hurts more.”

“You big baby, you jumped out of a crumbling building and into a helicopter.” She looked at Fitz. “I’m sorry, we’re overwhelming. Do you want a drink? Nibbles?”

“What kind of pies are you making?” Bruce asked.

“Apple, Peanut Butter, Chocolate, and a Lemon meringue pie – I have the curd in the fridge.”

“Why do you have lemon curd in your fridge?” Fitz asked.

“I’m never sure when my grandfather’s going to arrive to give me shit and I always have the ingredients to make his favorite cookies.” She grabbed a bottle of water out of her fridge and walked it over to Fitz. “I’m guessing he told you you’re resting until what, Sunday?”

“Yes he did. How does no one know about you?”

“I went by my mother’s maiden name, Lewis, for most of my life. Home schooled, hidden away. Things like that.”
am so she could go sit through an incredibly intense beautification process. She had thankfully gotten some sleep, and would be able to sneak in a nap if she were lucky. But she heard the TV downstairs and Steve was still sound asleep next to her. It meant Fitz was up after sleeping all day while his brain cells healed themselves after their initial push the night before. At least they’d both get some sleep tomorrow, or was it tonight? She slowly moved out of bed, hesitant to wake up Steve. He’d notice how nervous she was and try to calm her down and she just wanted to focus on something, anything else then the fact that her entire life was going to be public fodder in 100 hours, give or take. He shifted when she left the bed, grabbing on to her pillow but didn’t stir. She grabbed his hoodie from the floor, throwing it on as she headed downstairs.

*Doctor Who* was on. The Doctor and Donna were on the Ood Planet. Fitz was working on his tablet, the show on as background noise.

“Oi, Donna Noble, she’s my favorite.” Darcy commented, startling the engineer. “Sorry.”

“This didn’t wake you…”

“No. I wasn’t able to sleep anymore. I’m totally anxious about this interview later.”

“Oprah.”

“Yep. My entire life, no longer mine. Want something to eat? Or maybe some hot chocolate. That sounds good right about now.”

“Yeah, I’d love some, please.” Darcy nodded, busying herself in the processing of making hot chocolate. She worked in silence for a few minutes, Donna Noble and the 10th Doctor’s banter filling the apartment. “I was just reading your notes on what you used on me – how’d you get the Hulk’s cells?”

“I asked.”

“Dr. Banner?”

“No, Hulk. Well, Bruce first, I had to convince him to transform in the containment cell we have and then I talked to the Hulk and asked. He said yes. He’s a big kid, really. With horrible rage issues, I wouldn’t want to be around him when Bruce isn’t the one to initiate the change, but he knows right and wrong and wants to save people. He wants to be a hero. But he also wants to protect Bruce. Which is why I needed the cells in the first place.”

“Why?”

“Both Bruce, and Steve, because their cells are so altered, need stronger medications. Painkillers, anesthetics, and so on…So I’ve stock piled things for them, in case things go sideways.”

“Did it help Captain Rogers?”

“Once he got back, I made him take one of the painkillers which helped, but after DC he was at Walter Reed. His Doctor called me. Steve was smart and had me listed as both his emergency contact and Natasha was able to tell them that I am the super solider expert.”

“Are you?”

“I read my grandpa’s notes on the subject when I was 3. When I was 8 I was able to recreate the first version of the serum, which turned a rat red and he was a very good rat. He wasn’t a nazi or insane, like Red Skull. But he did turn red. And super buff. He was still alive when the house in Malibu was destroyed, so I assume he’s living happily at the bottom of the ocean. So yeah, I’m the...
expert. At least the expert he trusts. And we don’t really trust many these days.”

“No, I don’t suppose any of us do.” Fitz agreed quietly. “Just…he was our friend.”

“Look, everyone here, we completely get where you’re coming from. Every single one of us knows what it’s like to be betrayed by friends, family, in some cases. The man I called Uncle Obie, the man my dad trusted more than his own father – he’s the reason my dad nearly died in a cave in Afghanistan. He tried to kill him again when he was back. He’d have killed me too if I hadn’t been taken into hiding by my Aunt Peggy and Tripp’s grandfather when he was missing. My reluctance saved my life, because the first thing I would have done if they put me in charge would have been to stop manufacturing weapons. Thor’s brother, who he loved, was Loki and he’d sent a Destroyer to New Mexico to kill Thor before he even considered taking over the Earth; Bruce’s father, to put it lightly, was an asshole; Natasha’s parents voluntarily handed her over to the Red Room. And Clint? Well, his brother wants to kill him sometimes and he and I both have trust issues and we just found out that one of the few people we trusted wasn’t dead, just alive with a new team and we weren’t in the know. Oh, and besides having his entire Strike team betray him by being Hydra, Steve just found out his childhood best friend, who he thought fell to his death intercepting Zola, was actually alive (with the help of Zola’s version of the super serum), brainwashed by Hydra, frozen and used as a weapon when Hydra found it appropriate. And he shot Steve three times after trying to kill him the day before. So…we get it. You don’t have to talk about it now, or even to me, but if you want to, when you’re ready, people are here.” Darcy poured the hot chocolate into two mugs, walking over to the couch and handing one to Fitz.

“Why did he do it, do you think?”

“Truthfully?” Fitz nodded. “He came from a completely messed up family. He thought he deserved more, he didn’t know how to stick up for himself. He didn’t care about anything or anyone but himself and blamed other people from his problems. Garrett found him in juvie, after he tried to burn down his parent’s house with his older brother inside. He was separated from them. He was at military school. And he decided to steal a car and drive 1000 miles to burn down the house. Garrett saved Ward, at least in Ward’s eyes. Ward, who never had a chance. A man like Garrett and a kid that desperate for acceptance, support? Garrett groomed him, made him a weapon. But the worst thing Fitz? He’s always had choices. He’s just never been able to make them.”

“Do you think he can be saved?”

“I don’t know.” She answered. “May fractured his larynx – they went into that final fight thinking you and Simmons had been killed by Ward so there was a little bit of anger to work out…”

“Plus she had been sleeping with him.”

“That too. But when it’s healed, in a few weeks, and he can talk again, we’re going to bring him in to find out what he knows about Hydra. And Quinn. Garrett was relatively high up in the rankings, as far as we know, so Ward may know things. And we want to know everything. But maybe you can talk to him, if you want to.” Fitz nodded. “It sucks. I’m sorry.”

“Sucks might be an understatement.”

“Yeah, but the fact that you care, that you wanted to give him a chance? That you still want to give him a chance? That’s what we have that they’ll never have. What we have that makes us stronger, every time. It’s a guaranteed win.”

“What’s that?”
“Compassion. And that, no matter what any of these idiots I live with will tell you, is the thing that makes you a hero. Not super strength, not weapons, not anything. Compassion.”

“Who told you that?”

“Peggy Carter.”

“Oh look,” Skye began, turning the channel. “Tony Stark is doing an Oprah Interview. They said he was going to discuss Shield.”

“This I have to watch.” May added, sitting down next to Jemma.

“Tonight, for the first time ever, I sit down with Tony Stark, to discuss a secret he has kept for 23 years.”

“Oh my god.” Tripp sat down heavily on the couch. “What the hell are they thinking? Now? With everything going on?”

“You know?” Coulson asked.

“YOU KNOW?” Tripp replied. “I don’t even know for sure! I’ve known her for her entire life!”

“What are you two —“ Jemma began, but was cut off by Oprah.

“That he is a father.”

“What!?!” Skye, May and Jemma all yelled.

“And, he has raised his daughter, Darcy, quietly and away from the public eye. Now, at 23, the youngest Stark, a biological and chemical engineer, is ready to take her place in her family’s legacy. I meet the two at Avengers Tower…” Tripp took out his phone, waiting for the texts from all the commando’s grandkids.

“You two knew?” May asked.

“Commando’s grandkids, west coast chapter. She’s my oldest friend.” Antoine replied

“I took her iPod in New Mexico. I’d just spent time with Stark. They’re eerily similar at times.” Coulson shrugged.

“This is a very big surprise.” Oprah began as she sat down across from Darcy and Tony.

“I know.” Darcy smiled. “He couldn’t keep the fact that he was Iron Man a secret for 10 minutes, and here I am, the biggest secret, and he’s kept it for 23 years.”

“Why now?” Oprah asked.

“My grandfather’s 91, he wants to see me in a leadership position at SI and I’m tired of fighting him on it. I’m far more comfortable with the idea of being out in the public eye. It’s my choice.” Darcy paused. “That’s what’s important.”

“What did you think, Tony? Did she come to you and say it’s time or did you bring it up?”

“She brought it up. Since March, she’s been working with SI, getting comfortable, following Pepper around a lot. But when it came to this, and coming forward, I think I asked her a million times if she was ok with this. I have to say though, as her dad, I’m so excited for the world to see
what she can do, and I’m so excited for her to completely change the world. Her ideas are brilliant. What she’s able to do is brilliant. I have no idea how this hot mess” he gestured to himself “somehow raised a completely capable and spectacular kid.”

“Pepper Potts.” Darcy responded. “And the Howling Commandos. Pepper and World War 2 vets dad, that’s how I’m slightly normal.”

“In the past month, Shield, which both of you have had contact with, which was founded by your father, Tony, and your grandfather Darcy. What was your reaction, when it became known that Shield had been infected by Hydra.” Tony looked at Darcy.

“I, in the immediate…when it was happening, I have friends, good amazing people who are Shield. I was worried for them. Then, watching as the government, congress which has it’s own problems with Hydra if Senator Sterns is any indication, blamed the entire organization and has begun prosecuting and persecuting everyone in Shield. It wasn’t everyone. It isn’t everyone. And treating all Shield employees as Hydra and imprisoning them is only going to give Hydra people to grow their ranks from. Focusing on one organization lets Hydra infest and infect other branches of power. I have a friend who, after leaving with his team rather then surrender to the government, when found by Colonel Talbot who is, quite frankly an idiot, he was told he’d get 2-5 years in federal prison. No trial, no charges, nothing. The US government is saying all of Shield is the enemy, they’re all Hydra, and are hunting agents down, holding them without trial indefinitely. They’re forgetting the sacrifice countless agents made in DC and elsewhere when Shield fell, the countless agents who were killed by Hydra members for fighting them and trying to save the organization they loved. Shield agents who were killed by friends and people they trusted. The government is more focused on one organization then it is on facing the fact that more organizations could be infected and fixing a clear problem. The government is more focused on brandishing Shield as a terrorist organization then it is on actually finding Hydra. The government, when Shield fell, said hey, let’s give Ian Quinn, a known terrorist with billions of dollars, they saw him and his money and thought-oh, let’s look at his ideas again. Which, his ideas, by the way, were to kidnap citizens to force other people to work for him, where he took out people’s eyes and put in computers which also had a kill switch so if they didn’t do his bidding he’d kill them. He’d blow up his hostages. He’s complicit in the death of at least one US military official and in the death of a promising young Shield science tech officer who was killed when Quinn offered money in exchange of inventions. Quinn is free to roam without fear of government reprisal because the US and frankly every other world government refuses to look into its own actions to see where Hydra is growing in its own belly. Hydra isn’t the type of organization that’s ok with hiding in one organization. It wants global domination and we’re ignoring it and that, frankly, terrifies me. Because Hydra’s still out there and we’re not focusing on the problem.”

“Darcy obviously has a lot of feelings about Shield.”

“I do. And they are surprisingly positive.” Darcy laughed. “Senator Stern, for example, is still voting, just through proxy. He’s still a senator. He’s still Hydra. He’s still facing charges for treason. He wanted the Iron Man armor. That doesn’t get people to think? That doesn’t make you second guess everyone in Congress right now, because it sure as hell is making me think about things a little differently.”

“Do you think Stark will let us steal her for PR?” May asked. “I like her. I like her a lot.” Tripps’s phone beeped, indicating a text message. It was, of course, from Darcy.

- Congratulations on all that money you’ve come into. I’m about to call. I’d like to speak to the
He shook his head, handing the phone to Coulson.

“She doesn’t want to talk to you?” He questioned the younger agent.

“I imagine she’s still a little mad at me for just texting ‘alive’ after the Hub. What I want to know is how she knows about Talbot. And all that about Quinn.”

“Hill, probably.” Simmons answered as the phone rang. Coulson walked away from the group before picking up.

“Ms. Stark.”

“Director Stark, actually.” She replied. “Director Coulson.” She was interrupted by a cry of **DRINK!** in the background, her Oprah interview on in the background.

“Are they playing a drinking game with your interview?”

“Yeah. Jane, Thor, Barton, Romanoff, Wilson and Steve. Bruce and –”

“Sam only drank half a shot!” Fitz yelled in the background.

“Is that? He’s ok?”

“Yeah. It is. He’s fine. He’s been here a few days. We’re going to keep him another week or so to monitor him, just in case, but, Fury brought him here.”

“How’d…last we heard he was unresponsive and would never be the same?”

“You’re talking to a genius who isolated the regeneration sequence in the cells of Steve and the Hulk…”

“You mean Dr. Banner.”

“No, I mean the Hulk. There are pictures, I’ll show you when you get to the tower.” Darcy told him. “But then Dr. Banner and I structured those cells similarly to an Alzheimer’s medication and basically we jumpstarted his brain. He knows everything; he’s even read the report. But he’s still a bit weak. Mind is strong though, which is the most important part. So, you’re coming to the tower. You and your team.”

“We are?”

“Yeah. I have a business arrangement I’d like to discuss. I’d prefer to do it in person. You'll stay at least overnight, so bring spare clothes. So, any time before 11 tomorrow or any time after I want to say 1. But if you come early they’ll be donuts.”

“We’ll be there by 9.”

“Good. I’ll have someone waiting for you downstairs. Come in the residential side. Press’ll have surrounded the front of the building by then.”

“Will do. See you then.” She hung up.

“What’s going on?” Skye asked.

“We’re going to Avengers Tower in the morning. Apparently they have Fitz. And he’s awake.”
The entire building was surrounded by media outlets when they pulled up. Happy let them into the residential garage. Coulson was not surprised to see Fitz waiting for them with Captain Rogers.

“Darce’d be down here waiting for you but she’s currently getting ready for the press conference. She did set up breakfast in our place though.” Steve said, causing Antoine to raise his eyebrow. “Steve Rogers. No need for introductions, between Fitz here and our access to files we all know you. Director.”

“Captain. Should I be more worried about Miss Potts or Miss Stark?” He questioned as Simmons ran to Fitz.

“Jane. Howard’s so terrified of her he bought her an observatory and a satellite, she didn’t speak to me for a week after DC. And I’m in a relationship with her best friend. You being dead meant that Garrett was able to get a baby Hydra Agent to spy on them in London, using Darcy. Darcy broke his nose. Tony apparently sent MI-5 after the kid once we learned it was Hydra.”

“So, I’m a dead man.”

“Yes. Good to have you back. We should get Fitz back upstairs before Darcy and Bruce yell at me or kill me.”

“I’m fine.”

“I’ll let the Doctor and the other genius make that call. I value my life.”

“I’m going to buy Fox news and fire everyone and could someone please throw a shoe at the TV for me?” Darcy asked as the team arrived in the apartment. Thor threw a show towards the TV. “Thanks Thor.”

“You are welcome. They are dishonoring you.”

“I know. They’re sending Steve Doocy to the press conference.” Darcy smiled. “And Vanity Fair is sending Christine Everhart. I can’t wait to see what they’re going to ask me.”

“You’re enjoying this.” Coulson commented.

“Of course I am. Who knew that after a lifetime of hiding and not wanting to be in the spotlight the minute it hit me I realize I crave the attention. There’s nothing in my DNA that would explain that. Generally we Starks are a quiet, humble people.”

“And yet, you’re still normal.”

“Relatively. Bop.”

“Bit.” Anotine said in response. “This is a new look.”

“Me looking like a girl, I know.”

“Yeah, you always were surrounded by supplicants.”

“And the chief among them is still a World War 2 vet, so not much else has changed.” Steve gave her the finger. “Lovely.”
“Breakfast is in the kitchen. Agent, Agent’s friends, Namesake.” Tony said by way of greeting.

“Not his namesake.” Darcy and Pepper responded.

“Get comfortable.” Darcy told them all. “And welcome to the Avengers Initiative. Well, we’re building offices but right now we’re running out of here.”

“The Avengers Initiative?” Antoine asked.

“These idiots. Saving the world.”

Bruce turned on NBC as the press conference started.

“Why aren’t you down there with the rest of the Avengers?” Skye asked.

“Hulk is very protective of Darcy…”

“And he hates Fox News, and Steve goads him when it comes to Fox News.” Jane explained.

“No one hates Fox News more than Steve.”

“I can respect that.” Antoine said.

“It’s starting.”

“Good morning. You’re all here for an announcement from Stark Industries, but I imagine there are quite a few questions stemming from last night’s interview.” Darcy said from the podium.

“I’ll take a few questions and then we’ll get to why we’re all here.” Everyone’s hands went up, but Darcy didn’t even hesitate. “Yes Ms. Everhart?”

“Given Mr. Stark’s playboy past, why should we believe that he raised and hide a child for 23 years?”

“Oh, I’m so glad that you’re the one who asked me this Ms. Everhart. I don’t really actually care about who you sleep with or the fact that you slept with my dad, but I specifically remember the morning he left for Afghanistan when, after he went down to our workshop, you attempted to sneak around our house in one of his dress shirts. You were about to key in the code that would have let you into my area of the house when Pepper arrived with your dry cleaned clothes. I was mad because I couldn’t go make pancakes like I wanted to with you still in the house and then my dad and I got in a horrible fight about bringing snoopy reporters into the house. I’d like to remind you that my dad was 21 years old when he learned about me, and at no point in my life did my dad ever leave me without supervision. I don’t think you’re saying that once you’re a parent your social life is to revolve around your child, but if you are I’m pretty sure there are millions of parents who would object to that. My dad is the best dude I know, is an amazing dad and my best friend. You do not get to judge my family because of what you’ve read in tabloids. Or what you thought you saw at our house.” She pointed to Steve Doocy.

“What qualifications do you have to run a multi-national corporation?”

“1. No one asked my dad this when he took over SI at 20, so I don’t appreciate your sexism. 2. Given that I am a Stark and have grown up watching my father and going to work with him, I have been learning SI business since I was a baby, and 3. Because I’ve already been doing it for
3 months and this quarter’s profits were some of the best we’ve ever had. So, if anyone else here has other sexist questions, like Douchey over here, please keep them to yourself. You have now a press release, copies of family photos, a statement from my grandfather…yes, Ms. Curry.”

“What will be your first official action as Stark Industries CEO?”

“It will be the reason we’re all here today. Since the fall of Shield, SI has been working hard to set up a private global and universal security force. We are independent, we do not answer to any government and we will never answer to any government. When it comes to protecting the world, we need to count on the people who have a proven history of protecting it, without thought of themselves. We will monitor global threats and defend this world with our lives.”

“I’m sorry, are we to believe that you’ll be able to defend this country? With Iron Man and who…” Steve Doocy interrupted

“Captain America, the Hulk, Thor, Black Widow and Hawkeye, to begin with. And Yes,” Darcy said. “I do believe we can and we will. Because they have and they will. Given that the US government and well, every other government in the world, right now is so concerned with finding Shield that it’s ignoring the fact that Hydra is still the threat, I’m going to make this clear. Hydra, we are unconcerned with remaining in power, we don’t care where you are or how you’re hiding. We will find you, and we will destroy you. That’s a guarantee.”

Antoine headed into the kitchen where Darcy was putting together all the sides for dinner. She’d been in interviews almost all day after the press conference, but now she was done for the day and back in her apartment. She’d even changed into her regular clothes. Everyone was catching up and chatting. May and Romanoff were talking to Pepper; Simmons, Skye, Tony and Banner were discussing the probability of Skynet actually occurring, while everyone else was on the Balcony. It amazed Antoine to see people flock to Darcy like this group had.

“Is that what I think it is?”

“It’s a family rule. Never make burgers and hot dogs without Grannie Jones’ potato salad.” She told him as she finished mixing up the salt, apple cider vinegar, sugar, old bay seasoning. She placed a small amount of the liquid into another bowl and added the onions before adding oil to the larger bowl and stirring. “Could you drain the potatoes?”

“Not a problem.” He picked up the pot, dumping the potatoes into the large colander in the sink. “Want to give me a knife, I’ll start peeling and cutting these? I remember this being your least favorite job.”

“It really was. Yeah. Please. I’ll get started on the tomato salad.”

“What other kind of salads are you making?”

“None. We have 24 ears of corn the Circus Freak says he’s going to grill. Lots of grilled veggies…basically we have three grills and a three man team out there. Steve made the patties for the hamburgers this morning.”

“So you live together.”

“We do. Yes.” She responded. “Don’t you start.”

“I’m just saying it’s a little soon. You’ve never really had a real…”
“And I’m just saying that you don’t get a say. I’m not 17 anymore. I’m not that little girl who followed you around when she was little. And you sure as hell don’t know me anymore. So please, you do not get to have a say in this. And don’t pretend like you’re going to care when you’re not here.”

“Short stuff,” Sam started, coming into the kitchen. “I’m reasonably sure Cap, Barton and Thor are about to get into an argument over the grills and your new BFF and your old BFF are egging them on.”

“Jane and Fitz are not allowed to be unsupervised, that leads to explosions. Finish the tomato salad for me. Antoine, you know how to finish the potato salad.”

“Not a problem.” She walked away from the kitchen, heading outside to her balcony where the grills were located. Steve, who was brandishing a spatula while speaking to Barton immediately wrapped an arm around Darcy when she stood next to him. Sam could see all the tension in her melt away the minute he touched her. “I’ve learned a lot of things in the past month, since getting here…and one is not to underestimate that girl. She’s not an idiot.”

“I never said she was.”

“But you were judging her relationship. Rather loudly, by the way. You should be happy Steve was outside because he’d deck you. So just a little advice, don’t judge until you actually see them together.” Fitz entered the kitchen.

“I’m not allowed near the grill anymore.”

“You did blow up something in her lab yesterday and she doesn’t have anything that can explode in there.” Sam laughed

“So he doesn’t like me.” Steve commented as he placed the chicken on the grill.

“I don’t know if he likes me so much anymore either, so there’s that.” Darcy commented. Thor, Jane and Clint were acting like they weren’t listening in on their conversation. “I am not the little girl who would patiently wait for any sort of attention, you know?”

“Yeah.” He kissed her temple. “I can punch him.”

“Please don’t.”

“I can do it.” Jane piped in.

“You haven’t even hit Coulson yet.” Clint complained. “I don’t believe you’ll punch anyone.”

“She did slap Thor, twice, when he landed in London.” Darcy told him.

“And she punched Loki, for New York.” Thor added quietly.

“New York thanks you. But I don’t believe it until I see it.”

Darcy watched as Jane, after dinner was over but before dessert, walked up to Coulson and slapped him across the face. The entire room went silent before Clint handed her $100, and Tony handed Bruce $100. Steve rolled his eyes at Sam, who held out his hand.
“I thought for sure Darcy would have hit him first.” He told them all as he handed Sam his $100.

“My dad is Tony Stark. I have way more self control then any of you idiots in this room, including terrifying Russians.” Natasha smirked and nodded in acknowledgment.

"I deserved that." Coulson agreed.

Coulson met Darcy down in her office for a breakfast meeting. He had to admit the office was beautiful and she seemed to be thriving in this group of superheroes. He noticed the picture of her and Dum-Dum on her desk.

“Coffee?” She asked.

“I’d love one.”

“Still take it the same way or did coming back from the dead change that?”

“Still two sugars, little milk. Thanks.” He watched as she methodically prepared the coffees. “This is a little different then finding you in cars in New Mexico.”

“Yeah, well, times have changed.” She handed him his coffee, gesturing for him to sit as she took her seat behind the large desk. For a 23 year old, she cut a rather imposing figure. “I want to start by saying I’m glad you’re alive. Though, I still don’t know how and I figure you won’t tell us until you have to, which is fine. But…let’s talk actual business. Shield is still, well, fucked.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“My grandpa testifies before Congress tomorrow, which should be very interesting but he and Hill have been making contacts and schmoozing.”

“I’m sure Hill loves that.”

“Hill doesn’t get much of a say. She’s got about another two weeks of it before Pepper and I make a day trip. But we’re finding allies and they will be yours. I don’t want your Shield to overlap with the Avengers. It’s not going to be like it was before. However…”

“We’re low on supplies, weapons…”

“And you need political capital. You were Dum-Dum’s recruit. One of his last. You have a Jones with you. There’s only so much Commando’s spy gear can do. So you’ll need a Stark. Fitz has volunteered to stay with us for a bit, until he’s ready to go back to the field, but to help us assess what you need and build it. And you’re going to need medical and I’m sure the Playground is nice but…Billy might need some air.”

“How’d you know…”

“Hill.” Darcy supplied. “This isn’t a partnership, you won’t be beholden to us…think of it as having mutual benefits. There’s going to be shit you come across and you might need help. And there might be shit we come across that we might need your help on. It’s a new day. But we have the same intentions. Protection. So what do you say Director Coulson?”

“I say you have a deal Director Stark.”
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