

Stumbling Into Something New

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Stumbling Into Something New

by [Triangulum](#)

Summary

“You’re Bucky Barnes!” Darcy blurts out, feeling dumb for just now figuring it out. James looks a bit tense at that, and Steve frowns, starting to move toward them. “Do you know how many memes I’ve shared about your hair?!”

He relaxes at that, actually smirking a bit. “And you still didn’t recognize me until now? I’m wounded,” James says.

“To be fair, you’re wearing a *lot* of eyeliner,” Darcy says. “And I’ve just been through a very traumatizing situation, so.” She says it with a heavy dose of haughty sarcasm so he knows she’s not overly serious.

“Uh huh,” James says, but he’s smirking. Steve still looks a bit wary as he sits down next to James, but not like he’s going to step in. Good, she’d hate to be lectured by the symbol of American freedom. “These better be complimentary memes.”

Notes

This Fandom Trumps Hate auction fic took much longer than anticipated, because 2020 in a hellscape! Thank you so much to Noelle for bidding on me and for donating to Fair Vote, which is especially important considering...well, everything. I hope you enjoy this!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Darcy meets James Buchanan Barnes on what started as a very average Tuesday. She and Jane are in another desert, in Nevada this time, with a SHIELD guard that Jane's finally starting to accept. Their lab is in an old schoolhouse which, while a little smaller than the car dealership in New Mexico, still gets the job done. They're in a rare lull, tossing a stress ball shaped like a brain back and forth while Jane tries to unblock her real brain, when the alarm overhead goes off. There's a moment where they both freeze, the brain ball dropping from Jane's fingers, before they jump into action.

"Grab the hard drive!" Darcy shouts.

"Got it! Grab the notebooks!" Jane shouts back, stuffing the external harddrive into her bag.

"Got them!" Darcy shouts. The notebooks get tossed into her open backpack. "Grab Dr. Roberts!"

"Got her!" Jane yells. She drops the Barbie, her star chart, and her telescope into her bag. A second later, two members of their SHIELD guard, Agents Potter and Graham burst through the doors.

"We're bugging out!" Potter says, one hand on the gun on her hip. Graham stays at the door, looking out into the hall. "We have a credible threat. The quinjet will be here in less than five minutes. Leave the equipment, we'll -"

"We're ready," Jane interrupts, hauling her bag over her shoulder. Potter blinks, glancing over at Darcy, who already has her backpack on, before looking back at Jane, who just shrugs.

"We've got our emergency response down. Are we going?"

"Yes," Potter says, shaking herself out of it. "Yeah, come on. Stay between me and Graham."

Jane and Darcy follow Agent Graham down the hall toward the back of the schoolhouse, watching as he peers out the back. Darcy likes to think she's used to these emergencies after having been through quite a few by now, but her heart is still hammering, her hands trembling just a little bit. After a moment, they hear the engines of the quinjet, and a bit of her anxiety eases. They wait until Graham gives the signal before following him out of the schoolhouse.

They've made it about five feet before the back of the quinjet opens, Thor bursting forth quick enough that Darcy and Jane jump. He runs to them, clapping Graham on the shoulder before wrapping an arm around Jane, talking to her in a low voice as they walk. Darcy looks behind Thor to the two men dressed in dark clothes striding toward them. Darcy squints, trying to make out their features, before she gasps.

"What?" Potter asks, looking around.

"Nothing, it's - *is that Captain America?*" Darcy asks out of the corner of her mouth.

Potter looks up and sees the two men approaching. "Uh...yes," she says.

Captain America and the other man with him drop into a position on either side of them, adding to their guard as they're ushered into the quinjet. Darcy turns to Jane to ask if she saw, but then Thor is wrapping his other arm around her, pulling her in tightly, like he can keep them safer the closer they are.

Thor's apologizing to her for only talking to Jane so far, which she waves off, and promising her that she and Jane will be safe, and well, she knows he'll try his best, but she's getting a little jaded about the whole being safe thing. Oh, we'll be safe in London, nope, we'll be safe in Canada, nope, we'll be safe in the damn desert, nope, another bug out. She doesn't know how much safety there'll be unless she leaves Jane, not likely, or Jane decides to retire to breed alpacas, even less likely.

Captain America and his friend briefly talk to Agents Potter and Graham before they're closing the back of the quinjet, nodding to her and Jane, murmuring "Ma'am," in greeting to both of them before they head to the cockpit.

"Uh...why do we get such an escort?" Darcy asks, nodding after them. She has the nagging feeling she's seen the man with Captain America before, but she can't for the life of her remember where. The smudged black around his eyes probably doesn't help.

"They said they wanted to assist, but I think they may be a bit bored," Thor says, his booming voice not quite as quiet as he thinks. "They've been cleaning up HYDRA remnants but they're waiting for new information, and they're not very good at being idle."

"Oh my god!" Jane shrieks from the other side of Thor. Darcy and Thor jump, while Captain America and his friend come running back in, looking around with their serious battle faces on.

"What?" Darcy asks.

"I just had an idea...I need to...Darcy, that notebook..." Jane says, but Darcy is already opening the backpack between her feet, digging out the notebook with the moon on it that Jane's been using most recently. She hands it over and Jane immediately pulls the pen out of her bun, hunching over the notebook like that rest of them aren't even there.

"Uh, sorry," Darcy says, shrugging. Captain America and his friend had been staring at Jane, then slid their incredulous gazes to her and Thor. "She gets like that when she has a brain wave. Geniuses, ya know?"

Captain America's stance relaxes and he actually cracks a smile. "I do, actually. Knowing Tony Stark will get you used to all kinds of eccentricities," he says.

"Darcy! Did you bring the -" But Darcy is already passing her the pink and yellow highlighters. "Oh...thank you." Then she's bending back down over the notebook.

"Darcy, I take it?" Captain America asks.

"That's me, uh, Captain? Mr. Rogers?" Darcy asks.

His friend's lips twitch and he looks down, like he's trying not to smile.

"Steve is fine," Steve says, reaching out to shake her hand. "It's nice to meet you, we've heard good things from Thor."

"Oh yeah?" Darcy says, nudging Thor with her elbow.

"I've never met a man so happy to be tasered. James," Steve's friend says, holding out his hand.

She takes it, smiling delightedly. "Nice to meet you. Did he tell you about Jane slapping Loki? That's always a good one," Darcy says.

It's a nice, normal conversation, letting her blood pressure finally level out after the sirens went off fifteen minutes ago. She only jumps a little bit when the engines suddenly get louder, the quinjet slowly moving into the air. Steve and James pretend not to notice. Jane definitely doesn't notice. Something on Steve starts beeping and he pulls something out of his pocket (is that a flip phone?!) and excuses himself. James takes a seat across from her, Thor, and Jane.

"So, who are we running from?" Darcy asks. "All Agent Potter said was 'credible threat'."

"The working theory is AIM," James says. "SHIELD intercepted some chatter but it was incomplete."

"We wanted to be as safe as possible and move you both," Thor says.

"Much appreciated," Darcy says. "We'd like to stay alive for a while if possible."

"We're going to Stark's tower in New York until we can find a safer lab site. Or until he can convince Jane to stay and work with him," James says, a wry grin pulling at his lips. It's then that it hits Darcy so hard that she almost smacks herself in the forehead.

"You're Bucky Barnes!" she blurts out, feeling dumb for just now figuring it out. He looks a bit tense at that, and Steve frowns, starting to move toward them. "Do you know how many memes I've shared about your hair?!"

He relaxes at that, actually smirking a bit. "And you still didn't recognize me until now? I'm wounded," he says.

"To be fair, you're wearing a *lot* of eyeliner," Darcy says. "And I've just been through a very traumatizing situation, so." She says it with a heavy dose of haughty sarcasm so he knows she's not overly serious.

"Uh huh," James says, but he's smirking. Steve still looks a bit wary as he sits down next to James, but not like he's going to step in. Good, she'd hate to be lectured by the symbol of American freedom. "These better be complimentary memes."

"Oh, very positive," Darcy says. "The general theme is that you and Thor manage to maintain gorgeous hair in the battlefield while the rest of us look like we've stuck our fingers into a

power socket.”

James looks at her hair and says, “In your defense, it’s the middle of the night, and you’ve just been through a very traumatizing situation,” he says.

Darcy laughs, hard enough that she snorts a little bit. “I like you. We’re friends now,” Darcy says decisively.

“We are,” James agrees. Steve glances at Thor, like he isn’t entirely sure what just happens, but Thor is used to her by now and just shrugs.

Jane turns to Thor and starts talking in an excited, extremely fast voice, asking him about some Asgard tech thing she saw when she was there, and he immediately focuses on her. Steve and James look at Darcy and she just shrugs.

“She’s got just the biggest brain,” Darcy says. “And sometimes that big ol’ brain just gets smashed in the face with an idea.” She reaches into the bag at her feet and hands Jane a green pen before she can even ask for it.

“Buck likes science,” Steve says, nudging James with his elbow.

“I like science, that doesn’t mean I understand astrophysics,” James says.

“That’s okay, I mostly don’t either,” Darcy says. “I remember the fun stuff, like where the constellations are, or that there might be a diamond planet.”

“A diamond planet?” James asks, looking intrigued.

“Hell yeah,” Darcy says. “You should drop by the lab sometime, I’m sure Jane would be thrilled to give a little mini-lecture.”

“I will,” James says, a grin tugging at his lips. “Tony gets exasperated when I’m in the lab because I keep pestering him about the flying car his dad promised us.”

“We went to a science fair where he presented,” Steve says. “It was something else.”

“Well, I can’t promise a flying car, but maybe a portal to another continent in the next couple years,” Darcy says.

“It’s not a portal,” Jane says, distractedly.

“It’s a portal,” Darcy stage whispers.

James and Steve say their farewells when they land, heading off to debrief with SHIELD, and Thor leads Jane and Darcy to his “quarters”, which is actually just an apartment on a residential level of the tower.

“JARVIS assured me the second bedroom would be ready for you, Darcy,” Thor says as they walk into the apartment.

“JARVIS? Tony’s awesome AI JARVIS?” Darcy says. “That is so cool.”

“I’m sure you will meet him when you’re settling into your lab,” Thor says.

“If Jane doesn’t scream at Tony until we’re banned,” Darcy says.

“I promised I’d hear him out, and I will,” Jane says, then yawns, leaning against Thor. When she crashes, it tends to be hard.

“Okay, bed sounds nice,” Darcy says.

The bedroom Thor had set up for her is a lot bigger than anything she’s had since working with Jane, though it’s a bit empty with just a standard bed, nightstand, and chair in the corner. Well, she can do something about that...in the morning after she’s slept.

In general, Darcy is a complete night owl. She generally gets tired around 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, but it’s past 3:00 a.m. now and it’s been a weird night of adrenaline. She doesn’t have the energy to do anything but kick off her shoes, crawl under the ridiculously soft sheets, and immediately fall asleep.

The next day, Thor has to go to an emergency call with the Avengers, so Jane and Darcy are shown to their temporary lab by Bruce Banner’s lab assistant, who apologizes for not getting all their equipment set up since it just arrived a couple hours ago. Jane nearly cries seeing that all of their equipment actually made it in one piece. Darcy assures the alarmed man that this is a good shriek.

They spend most of the morning arranging and rearranging equipment around into what Jane calls an “optimum organization formation” until she’s satisfied. It would have been monstrously easier with Thor who could lift it all with like his thumb, but she supposes saving a bunch of people in New Jersey is more important. By the end of the day, Darcy and Jane are more than a bit sweaty, pretty hungry, and very satisfied about their new lab.

“I really wanted to hate it,” Jane confides, looking around. Jane’s machines sort of look out of place against the new furniture and fancy lights and high-tech security. Darcy likes it. It’s eclectic and fun. Dr. Roberts will fit in perfectly here. “I *really* wanted to hate it because Tony Stark was such a dick at - “

“At the conference in Los Angeles, yeah, I know,” Darcy says.

“Yeah, but Thor keeps saying he’s different now and had trauma and changed,” Jane says. “But he was *so* condescending, as if he were the astrophysicist!”

“Jane it’s been like ten years,” Darcy says. “Odds are he *is* different. But if you do decide to hold onto your grudge, we should definitely keep this lab anyway. Taking his bribe and still hating him anyway, that’d really stick it to him.”

Jane snorts, bumps her shoulder against Darcy’s as they survey the lab, set up just to their specifications. Darcy and Jane’s desks are pushed up against the windows, giving them a

great view of the city. Dr. Roberts sits on a shelf between the two desks with her star chart and telescope.

"I'm tired of SHIELD," Jane says, which isn't a shock. They've been with SHIELD for about a year and it's constant threats and moving around and vague intimidation from higher ups, and less vague intimidation from the highest. "*Look* at this lab! There's better equipment, better security, we'd be near Thor, and can probably get a *much* better budget from Stark."

"Most likely," Darcy says. "And how often would we have to deal with him anyway? I doubt he'd be in here all the time."

"Yeah, he's all busy being an Avenger," Jane says. "And with a billion-dollar company."

"Don't let on that we're into it. Make him work for it," Darcy says.

"Your secret is safe with me," comes a cool, slightly amused voice. Jane and Darcy jump, looking around for whoever spoke. "Apologies. I am JARVIS, the AI that runs this tower."

"No way," Darcy says, grinning. "I'm totally appalled at the being spied on thing, but stoked to meet you."

"I can forward you information on my morality programming in relation to spying, if that would quell your concerns," JARVIS says. "And I am pleased to meet you both as well. As a matter of interest, I thought you may like to know that Mr. Stark just arrived and is on his way to your lab."

"Oh shit," Darcy says. "Thanks, JARVIS, you're a real one."

"My pleasure."

"Okay, Jane, remember, playing hardball," Darcy says.

"Yes. We want raises, access to newer equipment, and security that doesn't involve SHIELD," Jane says decisively. "As much as I like Potter and Graham, moving every few months after threats is too exhausting."

"Agreed," Darcy says. "Okay, game face on?"

"Game face on," Jane says. They fix stern expressions on their faces, and nearly immediately end up choking on their own laughter, before managing to actually look serious. And Jane is *good* at being intimidating, which people don't expect for someone that small, and it's always a thrill to watch.

A few moments later, the lab door opens and in walks Tony Stark in ripped jeans and an AC/DC shirt, which is exactly what Darcy had expected, honestly, though the grease-covered hands are a bit surprising.

"Hi, Dr. Foster. I'd shake your hand but, you know," Tony says, holding up his dirty hands before looking at Darcy. "Ms. Lewis, right? Nice to meet both of you. Sorry I didn't

introduce myself earlier, there was a whole Dr. Doom thing and the Fantastic Four are on vacation or something, I don't know."

Darcy and Jane glance at each other. He's talking *very* quickly and Darcy is betting he's had at least five cups of coffee.

"Nice to meet you, too," Jane says, a little uncertainly.

"I'm not going to lie, I'm trying to snatch you away from SHIELD," he says, which is definitely more direct than Darcy had expected. "You'll have access to whatever equipment you need and a truly astonishing budget. I can offer you residence in the tower if you want it. Plus, Thor is always here, so, no more long distance. I can guarantee security is better here than in the middle of nowhere Nevada. And I can double whatever they're paying you."

"Yeah, considering you're a billionaire I'd expect you to beat \$7.25 an hour," Darcy says.

"They - they pay you *minimum wage*?" Tony asks, looking shocked.

"Yeah. I mean not her, obviously," Darcy says, pointing her thumb over at Jane. "They've classified enough of my life that I can't easily get a job anywhere, especially since they classified my internship with Jane so I still need my science credits to graduate and Culver is being a dick about not letting me finish without a letter of explanation for why my time with Jane doesn't count. Which SHIELD won't let me write."

Tony looks like his head is about to actually explode. "Okay, look, if you both accept, I'll talk to Culver, you'll officially be my intern, okay? And your intern duties are to help Jane."

Jane and Darcy glance at each other.

"Would I still own my research? Not just put your name on it instead of SHIELD's?" Jane asks.

"*What is SHIELD doing?* Yes, absolutely, your own research. I'll talk to Fury with a couple of obnoxiously competent lawyers, your contract with them won't mean anything," he says.

"We'll need an expense account for Dr. Roberts," Darcy says.

"Sure, whatever, bring them on," Tony says.

"She's kidding. That's Dr. Roberts," Jane says, pointing to the Barbie between their desks.

Tony stares at Dr. Roberts for a long moment before turning back. "She gets \$10 an hour. I don't need an answer right now, take some time to think on it. You'll still be welcome here until SHIELD whooshes you off somewhere else," Tony says. "JARVIS can send you my way if you need anything. Welcome again and uh, have fun redefining the field of astrophysics."

With that, he turns and leaves the lab, leaving Darcy and Jane looking at each other in confusion.

“Was he like that when you first met him?” Darcy asks.

“Manic, yes,” Jane says. “But not quite like that...”

“When are you going to accept?” Darcy asks.

“I’ll probably let him sweat it for a couple days,” Jane says. “See if I can get him to buy a popcorn machine.”

“People underestimate you, Janey-bug,” Darcy says, grinning.

Jane tells Thor later that night that they’re probably going to accept the offer, which elates him enough that he swings a laughing Jane over his shoulder and takes her to their room. On the one hand, Darcy thinks it’s sweet how much Thor loves Jane. On the other, even her headphones at max volume can’t drown out the noise they’re making, so she flees the apartment.

“Jesus,” she mutters once she’s in the hallway. She can hear a very light thumping noise but nothing else. “Hey, uh, JARVIS? Are you there?”

“At your service,” comes his voice from nowhere, and really, that’s just too cool.

“Is there anywhere around here I’m allowed to go that’s not super top secret? Somewhere I won’t hear sex noises?”

“There’s a shared living space down the hall and to the left,” JARVIS says.

“Thank you,” she says, still not entirely sure where to look when she’s talking to him.

Darcy follows his instructions and turns into what looks like the nicest breakroom in the world. There are two sectionals against the walls, a couple tables and chairs, and five barstools at the peninsula of a kitchen much nicer than she’s been in for like five years. She’s almost scared to touch it after years of RVs and old schoolhouses and former auto dealership kitchens.

It’s been a long enough few days that crashing in front of the ridiculously large mounted TV sounds perfect. She kicks off her shoes and settles into the corner of one of the sectionals, and holy mother of breadsticks, she wonders if she can get Tony to pay for a mattress made out of whatever this couch is. *And* the cable package has more channels than she even knew existed. She pulls up YouTube (of course Tony Stark put in a smart TV) and puts on an old episode of BuzzFeed Unsolved. She doesn’t want anything she hasn’t seen before that she has to pay attention to.

She’s into her second episode, wrapped in a soft, grey throw blanket, when she hears from the doorway, “I’m here for the cult stuff.”

“Jesus!” she yells, jumping about a foot in the air. She whirls around and sees James leaning against the doorframe, an apple in his hand and a slight grin on his face. “You’re silent as a cat, what the hell?”

James shrugs. “Wouldn’t be very good at my job if I weren’t,” he says.

“Yeah, yeah, super spy, sure,” she says, waiting for her heart rate to come back to normal, when what he said registers. “Wait. Did you just quote BuzzFeed Unsolved?”

“I don’t know,” James says, tossing the apple between his hands. “Did I?”

“You! James Buchanan Barnes, you’re a troll!” Darcy says, delighted.

James just grins. “You’d be surprised how many people don’t catch onto that,” he says, taking a seat on the other end of the sectional.

“Do they just hear you make a reference and assume it’s an accident?” Darcy says.

“Yeah,” James says. “There’s no possible way for me to know what Harry Potter is or how a cell phone works, so they just figure oh, he’s just figuring things out.”

“That’s diabolical. I love it,” Darcy says.

“I thought you might,” James says. “Have you met Sam yet?”

“We’ve met Tony, you and Steve, and some lab staff,” Darcy says. “I’m not *fantastic* with names, but I don’t remember a Sam.”

“Sam Wilson is Falcon,” James says. He pulls out an old flip phone, and Darcy is thrown back to high school when everyone wanted the pink Motorola Razr in his hand. “This is the phone I take out a lot around him, then reference Candy Crush and Instagram, just to watch his expression as he tries to figure out how that works.”

Darcy snorts, shaking her head. “Thor did say there’s more to you than meets the eye,” she says.

“Yeah, I assume he has some idea what he’s doing. Sometimes people treat him the same way, like he couldn’t possibly understand Earth tech,” James says. “That’s actually what gave me the idea. Tony couldn’t believe it when Thor used a toaster for a Pop Tart the first time.”

“That’s definitely our fault. We were astonishingly poor when he first crashed and that’s really all we had to feed him with,” Darcy says. “Not like now, when we can afford the finest canned ravioli.”

James frowns a bit at that. “Did Stark not offer you more money?”

“Oh he did,” Darcy says. “Jane’s letting him stew for a few days before she accepts.”

“And you call *me* a troll?”

“Well people expect it from us eventually,” Darcy says. “Enough SHIELD agents have complained about us amongst themselves that there’s no surprising anyone anymore.”

“Except us,” James finishes for her. She just grins. “You keep my secret, I keep yours?”

“Deal,” Darcy says. “I gotta ask though, *who* taught you about BuzzFeed Unsolved?”

“I stumbled on it actually. I was in Wakanda for a bit...recovering,” James says.

“You’ve been to Wakanda?” Darcy asks, jaw dropping. It’s only been a year since Wakanda revealed the truth about just how technologically advanced the country is and Darcy has been aching to see it. And crossing her fingers that they’re somehow interested in astrophysicists.

“I am so, so envious right now.”

James grins a bit at that. “I love that place,” he says. “So Shuri caught me up on a lot of what’s happened, and taught me about Wakanda tech.”

“Princess Shuri, the genius?” Darcy says. “I realize I’m surrounded by geniuses at the moment but still!”

“Yeah, she’s a great kid,” James says.

“So you’re not just caught up, you’re like lightyears ahead,” Darcy says. James just grins. “And here I am with an astrophysicist who can’t even change her cell phone ringtone.”

James snorts. “Steve can’t either, though I think that’s mostly due to stubbornness,” James says.

“Uh huh, and I’m sure *you* aren’t stubborn at all?” Darcy says.

“No comment,” he says, tossing his apple core into the trash can across the room.

“Show off.”

“Sue me,” James says. “Gonna hit play, or what?”

“Oh, sure,” Darcy says, remembering she’s in the middle of an episode. She’s a bit surprised he wants to watch it, especially at midnight, but she’s not going to complain. She hits play, continuing the goatman’s bridge episode. James makes himself comfortable, feet up on the coffee table, as he settles in to watch.

It’s been a long couple of days so she’s a bit tired, but she’s trying to stay awake at least until it’s safe to return to Thor’s apartment without being scarred for life. Despite that, she feels herself listing a bit to the side, her eyelids heavy. Her blinks are getting slower and longer and it’s not long before she’s fallen asleep.

She has an odd dream where her aunt showed up in a wedding dress, except her aunt was a hammerhead shark and was disappointed Darcy still hasn’t graduated. She’d shown up to yell at her in front of all the Stark employees and Avengers. She wakes up right when her shark aunt bites Captain America. The TV is off, the lights are dimmed, there’s a throw blanket spread over her, and James is no longer at the end of the couch.

Darcy groans, sitting up and grabbing her phone from the coffee table, the little light blinking to let her know she has unread texts. The time is 2:36 and she has a bunch of texts from Jane.

Where are you?

Are you okay?

Oh god you could hear us, couldn't you?

Darcy doesn't bother to text back. She's going to be back at Thor's place in a minute anyway and either Jane will see her then or when their alarms go off in like three hours. She shuffles back up the hallway, into Thor's apartment (lights off, Jane and Thor thankfully silent), and to her bed. She flops down and in minutes is asleep.

Jane and Darcy spend a couple days settling into their new lab, getting a good groove going, before Tony Stark shows up again, this time with Thor and James.

"Dr. Foster, Ms. Lewis," Tony says in greeting. "We ran into a little alien mess the other day and it gave Thor an idea about harnessing and storing enough energy for you Einstein-Rosen bridge."

"Oh!" Jane says, hopping off Darcy's desk, where she'd been sitting, and pulling Thor and Tony over to the whiteboard near the corner where the brainstorming on energy harnessing is. James instead walks over to Darcy, sitting in Jane's desk chair and turning to face her.

"Not interested in Einstein-Rosen bridges?" Darcy asks.

"Really interested, actually," James says. "But that's all a little over my head."

"Yeah, me too, honestly," Darcy says.

James tilts his head to the side. "But you're her assistant," he says.

"Yeah, I assist with the less science-y bits," Darcy says. "Data collecting, recording, dealing with all the people constantly trying to get her to speak at some conference or something, that's mostly what I deal with. I get the overall deal with it, but I don't do the calculations or big brainstorming sessions."

"Oh," James says. "Do you...want to do that?"

"I mean, for now, yeah," she says. "I like working with Jane but I know I can't do that forever."

She hesitates for a moment because this is really something she's only talked to Jane about, then opens her browser and leans back so James can see her screen. He pushes off from the ground, rolling Jane's chair closer until it actually bumps Darcy's a few inches to the side. She snorts and shakes her head.

He looks at her screen, showing the webpage for NYU, along with other colleges in other tabs. He reads for a few moments then leans back, giving her room but still staying close.

"Graduate school for political science," he says, grinning. "That's great. When are you applying?"

Darcy glances over at where Thor, Jane, and Tony are still deep in conversation before answering. “Well, when Jane accepts, Tony basically said he’ll get my internship sorted so I can get my BA, and once I have that I can actually apply for the fall term.”

“You’ll be great,” James says. “They’d be stupid not to take you.”

“You have no idea if I’m good at political science or not,” Darcy points out.

“You’re quick and clever, and obviously smart enough to keep up with a world class astrophysicist,” James says. He kicks at the wheels of her chair, making her roll a little. “Don’t sell yourself short.”

Darcy can’t help smiling. It’s one thing to have Jane’s support; it’s fantastic, but Jane will always have her back. She hasn’t talked to her parents about it yet because she doesn’t want to hear the usual remarks. *Why are you still missing your degree at 28? When are you graduating? When are you getting a real job?* will switch to *Are you sure you can manage that? Grad school is hard, are you sure you can handle that? Do you really think that’s a good idea for you?*

“Thank you,” she says. “I hope the NYU department heads agree with you.”

“YES!” Tony shouts, making Darcy and James jump. They turn just in time to see Tony yank Jane into a quick, tight hug before saying, “Yes!” again and start talking to JARVIS. “JARVIS, let Pepper and HR know Dr. Foster and Ms. Lewis accepted the offer. Add a popcorn machine, mini fridge, and macaroni and cheese allowance.” He’s still talking as he walks out of the lab.

Darcy turns and points to Jane, who points right back to her. “Popcorn machine *and* macaroni and cheese allowance?” Darcy asks.

“I got your back!” Jane says.

“You’re the best!” Darcy says. James is looking highly amused, which she supposes is fair. “We wanted to make it worth it.”

“I respect it,” he says.

A man from HR is up by the end of the day with contracts for them to read over and sign once the lawyers deal with SHIELD. James has been hanging out for the last few hours, helping Jane move a large piece of equipment she and Darcy weren’t able to budge, then getting a crash course on astrophysics from Jane, who looked thrilled to talk about her field. He looked just as thrilled to learn. James shamelessly reads over Darcy’s shoulder as she flips through her contract. She’s surprised to see her salary is higher than she’d expected, but like hell is she going to complain. She’s not sure exactly how Tony’s planning on getting her and Jane out from under SHIELD’s thumb, but luckily she doesn’t have to be there for that.

“I’m really glad I don’t have to be with Fury when he finds out we’ve been poached,” she says.

“Why?” Jane asks. “You give him so much shit.”

“I give him shit because he is *terrifying* and I panic and am a smartass!” Darcy says. “It’s a character fault!”

“You tell me to yell at him all the time!” Jane says, laughing.

“Well you’re irreplaceable! They’re not gonna disappear *you*, the genius astrophysicist they need, *and* Thor’s girlfriend!” Darcy says. “I am so disappear-able. Anyone could be your assistant!”

“Oh no they can’t!” Jane says indignantly. “I would portal Fury to Johtheim if he tried!”

Darcy sighs, accepting Jane’s hug. “You’re a good one, Janey-bug,” she says. “So, it *is* a portal?”

“Shut up,” Jane says sweetly, patting her on the back.

James has an odd, contemplative look on his face but it clears once he notices Darcy looking at him, sending her a smile. “I have a training with Steve,” he says, vacating Jane’s chair and presenting it to her with a flourish. “How do you two feel about pizza?”

“Overwhelmingly positively,” Darcy says.

“As long as it’s not with peas and mayo,” Jane says.

“...Have you had peas and mayo pizza?” James asked.

“We refused to eat it, but yes, when we were in the UK,” Darcy says.

“Okay, I’m bringing pizza for lunch tomorrow, and I promise to never feed you pizza with peas and mayonnaise,” James says, speaking as he walks backwards toward the lab door.

“You’re an officer and a gentleman!” Darcy calls after him. James grins and gives a mock salute before leaving.

“I gotta say, much better than eating McDonald’s in the middle of the desert every night,” Jane says.

“God, right? We have a super soldier bringing us pizza *and* we have working air conditioning,” Darcy says. “We’re really coming up in the world.”

The next day is moving day, at least for Darcy. Jane decided to stay with Thor in his quarters, much to his delight, but Darcy, having spent much of the last few years in very cramped quarters, had taken up Tony’s offer of an apartment in the tower. And unlike all the moves they’ve made in the last few years, she’s actually going to have help. SHIELD had finally shipped the personal belongings they’d left behind in the schoolhouse when they evacuated, plus a few boxes from her parents’ house, and the furniture she’d ordered (she can *order furniture!*) arrived as well, so having Thor and James both willing to do some of the heavy lifting is really saving her back and her sweat glands.

Thor manages to pick up the navy blue chair and a half she'd bought, balanced with six boxes from Nevada stacked on top. James picks up the furniture boxes containing her bed frame like it's nothing, even though it would have taken her a dolly and like four trips if she'd done it herself. Darcy's grateful for the freight elevator because otherwise there'd be no way in hell James and Thor carrying her new eggplant purple couch, with more boxes stacked on top, would have made it into the building. Jane is happy to help, but she and Darcy feel a little silly carrying up one or two boxes at a time.

"Does being a super soldier and Asgardian god mean you don't sweat?" Darcy asks when they're all in her new living room, taking a water break. She and Jane both are wiping sweat off their faces, while James and Thor look fresh as a daisy.

"Yes," James says solemnly before winking.

"It just means we need to exert ourselves more to work up a sweat," Thor says. "If you see us in battle you know we're rarely without sweat."

"How about you two start unpacking and we'll get the rest of the lifting?" James suggests.

"God, yes, thank you," Darcy says.

She and Jane start with the bedroom, because she thinks after over three years with her clothes living in boxes and suitcases, they deserve to be in a real closet. But it turns out she doesn't really have that many clothes that fit and aren't falling apart. Maybe that's a trip for the next paycheck. They move onto the kitchen next because she doesn't want to eat just breakfast bars until she's unpacked like three days later. Plus, she has paper plates somewhere in there and the pizza is coming soon.

"Do you not have any dishes?" Jane asks, looking in the box labeled KITCHEN!!!! that came from Darcy's parents.

"Nope, I only had like one plate in college since I ate at the dining hall most of the time," Darcy says. "But Halloween is soon so I'm going to wait to see if Homegoods has any spooky dish sets this year."

"Okay, but why is all the kitchen stuff from your parents just baking sheets, random utensils, and a *bunch* of hand towels?" Jane asks.

"Because festive hand towels are important. Obviously," Darcy says.

"I don't know how to respond to that," Jane says. "But I found the paper plates."

"You don't have to respond because pizza is waiting in the lobby," Darcy says, reading off her phone. "Be right back."

Darcy runs down to the reception desk in the lobby where the receptionist is looking a bit confused at the stack of eight large pizzas. Darcy just thanks him and heads back upstairs. Feeding Thor is one thing, but Thor and a super soldier is going to need a lot. James and Thor are back in her apartment when she gets back.

“I only have paper plates and no kitchen table, so we’re going to have a weird picnic,” Darcy says.

“I’ve eaten in stranger places than the floor,” Thor says, happy to sit down right where he is with six pieces of pizza stacked on his plate.

“So have I,” James says, sitting down against the wall, legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankles. He also has a stack of slices on his plate.

Darcy and Jane don’t want to unstack all the boxes on the couch so they just sit on the floor across from Thor and James so they make a circle on the ground. There’s a warmth filling her that she’d first felt with Jane and Selvig, and later Thor. Finding people that really resonate with you and you become so intimately close so quickly. Her blood family is...fine, but none of them really feel like they knew each other, almost like three separate worlds living in one house. James slots right in with them so easily with her little unit. Sometimes she really does feel very lucky. She also really needs to call Erik.

Jane finishes eating before the rest of them, throwing her plate away and heading back to work on Darcy’s closet. James finishes next and heads down to see if her mattress has arrived. Thor eats two more slices before getting up and washing his hands.

“I do enjoy your color choices,” Thor says, looking at the blue chair and a half and purple couch. “And I’m very glad you’ll be so near Sergeant Barnes.”

“I am?” she asks, looking to where James is walking into the apartment with more boxes.

“I live across the hall,” James says. “We wanted you to be somewhere safe, so I said to put you here. Thor will be with Jane if anything happens and I’ll be close.”

Unexpected warmth bubbles in her and she can’t help but grin. “Thank you,” she says.

James smiles back at her, looking a little pink at the ears. “Mattress should be here in a few,” he says before leaving again to make another trip.

When she turns back to Thor, he has a very knowing look on his face. “What?” she asks.

“I’m glad you’ve made friends with Sergeant Barnes,” he says simply. She gives him a suspicious look, which makes him laugh. “I am serious,” he says. “He is an uncommonly good and honorable man. There are worse people you could befriend.”

Thor gently claps her on the shoulder (he’d learned to be gentler after her knees buckled the first time he’d done it) and leaves as well, probably to help James with the mattress.

The day kind of flies by after that. Thor hilariously struggles not to bend the tiny allen wrench when putting her new kitchen table together. His hands are just *big*. James has marginally more success, though there is a fair bit of swearing that Jane and Darcy can hear from the bedroom where they’re putting together the bed frame. They’re having significantly more success thanks to the constant breaking down and putting back together of their shit whenever they move lab locations. They have a system and it works.

“Didn’t Tony offer you a furnished apartment?” Jane asks as they work on nightstands next to each other.

“He did, but it was all super modern and boring,” Darcy says. “I wanted to pick stuff with character.”

“Fair. I might try to replace Thor’s coffee table if he’s fine with it,” Jane says. “It’s just all glass. That’s an accident begging to happen.”

Thor and James get a call to assemble that night. Thor kisses Jane quickly but thoroughly before running out. James tugs Darcy into a hug, which surprises her for a moment, but not enough to keep her from hugging back. There’s that warmth again.

“Be careful,” she says and he walks out after Thor.

“Always,” he says with a smile, then he’s gone.

Darcy turns back to the kitchen stool she was putting the last screw in. There’s a bit of an unsettled feeling in the pit of her stomach and it takes her until she’s on the next barstool to figure out that it’s worry. She always worries a bit when Thor leaves but she knows he’s nearly indestructible, but James isn’t an immortal god, he’s very much a squishy human. A squishy human that’s much harder to kill than the average Joe, but still.

She and Jane give up on organizing a couple hours later. They have the majority of the furniture set up and they’re calling that a success. Jane stays and they have leftover pizza for dinner since she’s not really wanting to go back to her apartment alone until she knows Thor’s okay. Darcy doesn’t blame her at all, just throws her blanket over both of their legs as they watch Netflix on Darcy’s laptop (she doesn’t feel like setting up the TV right now).

After a few hours, when JARVIS informs them that the team is on their way back and uninjured, Jane lets out a relieved sigh. She hugs Darcy and heads back to her and Thor’s apartment. Darcy shouts her thanks after her down the hall, and Jane shouts that she’s welcome right back.

Darcy hesitates for a moment before saying fuck it. She digs in the box labeled STATIONARY AND PRETTY PAPER THINGS!!! and pulls out her cactus-shaped sticky notes and one of her colorful pens. In green ink, she writes *Glad you’re alive and not shot. Call if you need anything! Signed, You Annoying New Neighbor PS. Thanks for all your help!* She adds her phone number to the note and walks across the hall to stick it on his door.

Satisfied that her friends are alive, she finally feels comfortable enough to go to bed. Her new mattress is just heavenly. She’s surrounded by her favorite pillows and on her favorite spooky sheets and she feels...settled, for the first time in a long time. She’s been happy, happier with Jane than almost any other time in her life, but she’s been a bit tense the whole time. There was always the thought that they would be swept away by SHIELD in the dead of night, or a kidnapping attempt would actually work.

Right now though, she knows she won’t have to move in the morning. She has a space that’s her own that she can decorate and be comfy in and she won’t have to leave it anytime soon.

And she's in one of the most secure buildings, across the hall from one of the most dangerous people in the world. She feels wonderfully safe and settled for the first time in a long time.

She's almost asleep when her phone buzzes. After years of late night brain wave texts from Jane, it's automatic to roll over and peer at it. It's a text from a number she doesn't recognize, but figures out it's James pretty quickly.

Still alive, not shot, and didn't even lose any more limbs. - Your exhausted neighbor

Darcy grins and plugs her phone back in, and rolls over to sleep.

Darcy takes the weekend to get her new place just how she wants it. She'd actually called Homegoods, who said their big Halloween shipment was coming this week, so she's planning on a trip the next weekend to hopefully get dishes and silverware. When she gets to the lab Monday morning, she's as organized and clean as she's ever lived. She's sure it'll be destroyed soon but she'll enjoy the perfectly organized home until then.

Towards the end of the day, she and Jane get a visit from Tony Stark. He walks in with two folders in his hands. Darcy kicks Jane's chair to get her attention since she hadn't noticed his entrance.

"So," Tony says, handing each of them a folder. "My lawyers just finished up with SHIELD. Once you sign these, you're legally completely out of SHIELD's grip. There wasn't any way to get your work back from them - "

"Oh we have most of it," Darcy says.

"Yeah, we started keeping plenty of backup copies after the first SHIELD encounter," Jane says. "We're golden there."

"Oh," Tony says, looking pleasantly surprised. "Brilliant, we're set then."

"We really don't owe them anything?" Darcy asks, reading the document he'd handed her. Peeking at Jane's lets her see they're basically the same other than their personal details.

"Not a thing. You're officially Stark Industries employees, Ms. Lewis is officially my intern for Culver's sake though you're obviously still Dr. Foster's assistant," Tony says.

"You can call us by our first names," Jane says, surprising Darcy. She hadn't realized her respect for New Tony had reached that far.

"Oh," Tony says, once again surprised. Maybe he remembers being an ass to Jane too. "Well, Jane and Darcy, it's a pleasure to have you here."

"Thank you," Jane says. "We're pleased to be here."

"Super pleased," Darcy says. "I thought dealing with SHIELD would take a lot longer, honestly."

“So did I,” Tony admits. “I don’t know what Barnes said to Fury but my lawyers had a much easier time than they thought they would.”

Darcy frowns. “What do you mean, what he said to Fury?”

“He didn’t tell you?” Tony asks.

“No?” Darcy says, looking at Jane. Jane looks just as confused and shrugs. She turns back to Tony. “Uh, got any details?”

“Nope,” Tony says. “I just know they spoke and that Barnes wasn’t thrilled with him.”

“Huh…”

“Yeah, odd guy,” Tony says. Darcy wants to snap that he’s not odd, but she also knows James is carefully tailoring a persona to fuck with people as much as possible, so she keeps her mouth shut. “Anyway, come down to legal on the 8th floor to sign and get those notarized whenever you’re ready. Glad to have you both here.”

Tony’s nearly out the door before he turns around, grinning tugging at his lips, and says, “Your popcorn maker should be here Friday.”

“Yes! Thank you!” Darcy shouts after him.

“You’re welcome!” Tony shouts back.

About an hour later, Jane hits a brainwave, and the popcorn machine is completely pushed from her mind until Friday, when James comes in with a huge box carried easily in his arms. Darcy jumps up and pushes their rolling white board out of the way so he can set it down.

“Thank you,” Darcy says before turning to Jane. “Did you order anything?”

“No,” Jane says, looking puzzled. “Do you know where the box opener is?”

“Nope,” Darcy says.

“I can do it,” James says, pulling out a pocketknife and flipping it open. A few quick slices at the packaging tape and the flaps are open, an instruction booklet falling out. Darcy picks it up and gasps.

“It’s the popcorn machine!” Darcy says. “I thought it would be like a Whirley Pop thing that goes on the counter.”

They pull the machine out and James screws the wheels on. When it’s all said and done, the vintage-style popcorn machine is five feet tall, with red and white stripes and two big, rolling wheels. Darcy is fighting the urge to clap her hands and squeal in glee.

“This is the best job we’ve taken,” Darcy says.

“And we haven’t even gotten the minifridge yet,” Jane says. “Just for you, I ordered one in pink.”

“You’re truly the best,” Darcy says.

“I was sent with this,” James says, taking a bag of popcorn kernels from his back pocket. “If you want to test it out.”

“YES, we can 100% take a popcorn break,” Darcy says. Jane looks uncertainly at the whiteboard. “We’re in a lull, Janey, you won’t miss anything!”

“Okay,” Jane says reluctantly, though that fades after about ten minutes after the machine is set up. She oohs when she finds out the bottom of the cart has a little cupboard for supplies to be stored.

“That is only for popcorn kernels, salts, and popcorn accessories,” Darcy says firmly. “No mixing science and food.”

“Ma’am, yes ma’am,” Jane says with a mock salute, making James snort. “No offense…”

“None taken,” he says.

“I learned my lesson in Norway,” Jane says.

“What happened in Norway?” James asks. Darcy giggles.

“I may, *may*, have accidentally poisoned a few SHIELD agents’ coffee,” Jane says very quickly.

“By ‘may have’ she means ‘definitely’ and ‘a few’ means ‘a dozen’,” Darcy says. “We’ve learned not to cannibalize food machinery and definitely not to leave it lying around where innocent people might try to use it.”

James laughs, shaking his head. “Did it teach them to stay away from your coffee machine though?”

“Yes, it did!” Jane says triumphantly. “Thank you!”

“Don’t encourage her,” Darcy says, joking. “Oh, do you want to come to Homegoods this weekend?”

“Is that a store?” James asks.

“Yep! Thor got me a driver so I can actually get what I want without having to drag it all on the subway,” Darcy says. “We can buy spooky dishes and get lunch?”

“Sure,” James says. “I like the sound of that a lot more than Steve’s offer to go running with him and Sam.”

“Eugh, I agree,” Darcy says. “We can drive by them and throw candy bars at their healthy asses.”

“Staring at asses, are we?” James asks, raising his eyebrows.

“No! I mean, sometimes but not theirs!” Darcy says, making him grin. Jane laughs. “Oh my god, never mind. 10:00 on Saturday? Avoid some traffic?”

“Sure, ass-starer,” James says. Darcy flips him off.

Darcy has never been a morning person, especially on weekends, but she’s up as soon as her alarm clock goes off. She’s *always* ready for Halloween decor. She speeds through showering, getting dressed, and putting on her makeup. When she still has a half-hour before she needs to go knock on James’ door, she reluctantly eats breakfast, dreaming about having real dishes and silverware.

At exactly 10:00, she wrenches her door open and crosses the hall to knock on James’. He opens it with an amused look.

“10:00 on the dot?”

“I’ve been ready for like thirty minutes,” she says, bouncing on the balls of her feet. His amusement only grows.

“You could have knocked early. Or texted,” James says.

Darcy pauses, and frowns. “Huh. Okay, I guess I’ve just got fall on the mind.”

James laughs and shakes his head, but steps out and closes his apartment door behind him. “Lead on,” he says.

The driver is waiting for them in front of the tower, not looking the least bit perturbed at being their shopping chauffeur. Darcy thanks him excitedly and slides across the back seat, letting James in after her. She tells the driver where their destination is and turns back to James. She’s not expecting for him to look quite so...serious.

“Is everything okay?” she asks.

“Yeah,” he says, though he doesn’t look at her, just keeps staring intently out the window. It’s then that she notices he’s not just staring at one thing, but his eyes are sweeping along the sidewalk, up the block. His fingers are moving over all the parts of the door, then his gaze switches to in front of the car, then in back, and then past her head. When he glances at her, he actually looks a little sheepish. “I can’t really turn it off.”

“What do you mean?” she asks.

He hesitates, like he’s not sure he should say anything. She tries to look as open and understanding as possible, and not immensely curious.

“I’m always looking for potential sources of danger,” he says, then frowns and shakes his head. “No, it’s...I’m always seeing ways that I would take out a target.” He looks ashamed and stares down at his hands instead of her.

She swallows hard, heart aching for him. She reaches out slowly, so he sees her coming, and curls her fingers around his clenching hand. He stills under her touch but still doesn’t look up.

“You have been through a *lot*,” she says. “Understatement of the year.” He snorts at that. “Even people who haven’t been through trauma get intrusive thoughts, so it makes complete sense that things like that would hold over.”

He looks up at her then, smiling weakly. “You sound like my therapist,” he says.

“Well, I go to therapy,” she says easily. “That dark elves thing fucked me up a bit.”

“I read about that,” James says. “I’m sorry you went through that.”

“I’m sorry you went through what you did,” Darcy counters. His smile at that is less weak. He turns his hand under hers, wrapping his fingers around her. “Even if that’s something you do, I know you’d never actually hurt someone just because. And I know you’ve used it to save people. So yeah it definitely sucks, but it also definitely shows that you’re a good person.”

“I’m not the man I used to be,” he tells her, looking serious, like she might kick him out of the car.

“Maybe not,” she says. “But I happen to like the man you are now. You’re a *good man*.”

“I’m not so sure about that, doll,” he says.

“Well I am,” Darcy says, smirking. “And we know how much I’m always right.”

James shakes his head, but she sees the smile threatening to grow. “You’re something, all right,” he says.

“You sound just like my high school teachers,” Darcy says with a dramatic sigh. The SUV slows down as it pulls up in front of Homegoods. Darcy glances out the window then back to him. “Did you want to go back?”

“No,” he says firmly. “I want to do this.”

James gets out of the car first, looking all around them before giving her the okay to get out. She thanks their driver, who tells her to text when they’re ready to be picked up. James walks very close to her until they’re inside. He looks much more comfortable inside instead of on the open street. She doesn’t say anything as he scans the inside of the store. She merely grabs a shopping cart and lets him adjust while she heads to the seasonal section.

It takes about five minutes for him to relax, though he looks less embarrassed about it than earlier. Good. She meant what she said.

“Ooooh my god,” Darcy says, squatting down to see the lowest shelf. There on the bottom, pushed back behind a stuffed witch, is a halloween dish set. There’s a black lace pattern around the outside with black cats, bats, and witch hats woven in with it. “Yessss, yes, yes, yes.”

She manages to pull the set out and nearly squeals when there’s a second set behind it. Since each set only has four of each item, two is perfect. She puts them in the cart, grinning widely. James raises his eyebrows, looking between the dishes and her.

“Those are year-round dishes?” he asks, looking amused.

“Halloween is a state of mind, not a date on a calendar,” she says.

“Halloween is definitely a day on the calendar,” he says, grinning.

“Fine, it’s not *only* a day on the calendar,” Darcy says. “Come on, fingers crossed for spooky silverware.”

There isn’t spooky silverware, but there is a silverware set with mermaid tails at the end, and that’s just perfect. She does find a Halloween Snoopy mug and a ghost cookie jar, both of which she snatches and puts in the cart. James doesn’t say anything, just continues to look highly amused.

“Were you a witch in another life?” James asks as she puts bat and witch cookie cutters into her cart.

“God, I hope so,” she says, making him laugh.

Darcy honestly didn’t expect him to want to come, and when he said yes, she didn’t expect him to like it. And he doesn’t take to it with Thor’s glee of all the knickknacks humans produce, but he does seem interested. He actually picks out a lamp and says the one that was provided in his bedroom is just a bit too boring. Darcy likes the bright red and orange swirly one he chooses.

“I know I don’t really need office supplies but I like to do a cruise through the section anyway in case there’s something really bitchin’ for the lab,” Darcy says. “Like Dr. Roberts from the department store when we were in Nevada - oh my *god!*”

Darcy snatches up the paperweight and shows it to James, who bursts into the loudest laughter she’s heard from him yet. It’s a cube paperweight that also doubles as a sort of glittery snow globe, with a small, chibi-looking Captain America inside hugging an also chibi bald eagle. James laughs again when he looks at it up close and sees the sheer happiness on the little Captain America’s face.

“I’m buying this,” he says, putting it in her cart. “It’s going on my mantle and he’s not allowed to move it. I’ll superglue it on if I have to.”

“Good!” Darcy says. She turns back to the shelf. No more Captain Americas, but there is a Thor hugging his hammer and an Iron Man hugging...himself. Darcy picks up both, putting

the Thor one in the cart because he will absolutely adore it. She hums, holding up the Iron Man snow globe. She doesn't really know him that well...She turns to James, holding it up. "Will he find this funny or offensive? I don't really know him that well, so..."

"He will find it hilarious," James says. "He'll probably stick it on his desk."

"Perfect," Darcy says. "I'll send it to him with a thank-you-for-the-job-and-home card," Darcy says.

"It's too bad the others aren't on here," James says, peering down the shelf. "Clint would love it. Sam would act offended even if he isn't. Natasha would pretend to hate it but kill you if you tried to take it away."

"Well that's...terrifying," Darcy says.

"Have you met her?" James asks.

"Nope. Still haven't met Sam or Clint either," she says.

"You'll love Clint. He's got the sense of humor of a child but he's actually a very smart person. He just acts like an idiot," James says. "Natasha is only terrifying if you're her enemy, which you definitely aren't."

"And Sam?" Darcy asks.

James shrugs. "He's fine." Darcy bursts into laughter, startling the woman in the next aisle enough that they hear her package of hand towels drop. James grins. "No, Sam's a good man, you'll like him. You'll like him more if you make bird jokes."

"Uh huh," Darcy says, grinning. "Well if we find funny Sam merch, we'll send it his way."

"Where *is* Thor?" James asks, looking down at his snow globe.

"He and Jane are having a date day," Darcy says. "They're crazy about zoos and it usually takes a whole day since a lot of people tend to notice him and want pictures."

"What's his favorite animal?" James asks, grinning.

"That man is all about the penguins," Darcy says. "Which honestly, fair."

In the bedding section, Darcy snatches up a set on flannel Halloween sheets with a Linus and the pumpkin patch pattern. She almost manages to talk James into a set of his own, but she thinks his waffling was probably just for her benefit.

It's the art section that really makes her think. She has a bunch of blank walls and a landlord that doesn't give a shit if she puts little holes in them to hang stuff up. Her parents did send a lot of the art she had lying around but there's still so much room for more.

"I'm having a crisis," Darcy says, staring at the rows of pictures.

“Yeah?” James asks, quirking his head to the side as he looks at a large painting of a hedgehog in a top hat.

“I need a theme.”

“A theme?”

“A theme!” Darcy says. “I can’t just pick random pictures!”

“Why not?” James asks.

“It won’t look cohesive!” she says. “I at least need to pick some colors to stick with!”

“Pick something you really like and base everything on that?” he suggests.

“That’s good,” Darcy says, pointing at him without looking away from the ridiculously large painting that’s covered in huge rainbow splotches of paint. A bit too big for her space. She glances over and sees James edging closer to her, looking a bit uncomfortable. “You okay?” she asks quietly.

“Yeah,” he says, nodding his head back toward where a woman in the main aisle is looking at him. “I just make people nervous.”

Darcy doesn’t give a shit about subtlety, especially if it’s due to someone hurting one of her people, so she very obviously cranes her head around him to look at the woman with raised eyebrows. She flushes red and hurries away.

“Yeah, she wasn’t scared of you,” Darcy says, not sure why she has a sudden distaste for the woman. “She was checking you out.”

James gives her a flat look. “Sure.”

“You think I’m lying?” she asks, surprised.

“I think you don’t want to hurt my feelings.”

“Oh my god,” she says. “Her eyes were right on your ass, my dude. She was checking out your broad-ass back, and shoulders, and probably your hair, it looks soft as fuck.” He looks...stunned? She’s really not sure why. “What?”

“Nothing,” he says, shaking his head. “I just didn’t expect that?”

“You’re hot, Mr. Barnes,” she says primly, turning back to the art in front of her in case he’s embarrassed. She picks up a picture of a hippo in a bathtub for her bathroom wall and puts it in the cart. “I promise if she was looking at you in fear, it’s just fear of herself fainting.”

She lets him ruminate on that as she turns the corner into the next aisle. He’s quiet for a few minutes while she looks at the cute little benches. She’s always wanted one of those round rooms with a bench at the window. Well, she has a big window. Putting a bench and some pillows under it sounds good. She turns to James, biting her lip.

“What?” he asks.

“How do you feel about carrying a bench?” she asks.

“Fine with it,” James says. “As long as you’re fine with me throwing it if we run into bad guys.”

“That’s fine, I’ll bill them for it if it breaks,” Darcy says, stepping back so he can pick up the gold bench with pink cushioning on top. It doesn’t look especially heavy but it looks awkward, but he manages easily. “Of course you have perfect balance.”

She almost manages to leave anything else, but a Halloween snow globe, cute fabric bat garland, and a big witch soap dispenser make it into her cart on the way to the front. James doesn’t say anything, which is smart of him.

She’d texted their driver when they got in line, so he’s ready when they’re leaving the store. Darcy has three big bags that are carefully loaded in the trunk. James is next with the bench, stumbling over the curb and making her squeak, hands out in front of her like she somehow could have caught him from ten feet away. Then he’s winking, balance completely fine as he slides the bench into the trunk.

“Oh my god, you asshole!” Darcy says.

“That’s Sergeant Asshole, to you,” James says, following her into the SUV. He leans forward to address the driver, giving him directions to a sushi restaurant he wants her to try.

“I’m going to call you Sergeant Asshole now,” Darcy warns as the SUV starts moving.

“Please do. Definitely in front of Steve,” James says.

“Are you kidding me? He’ll sit me on top of his shield and launch me into space!” Darcy says, making him laugh. “You can laugh but we both know it’s true.”

“Sure,” he says, shaking his head. “Looks like we’re here.”

The SUV has pulled to the side for them to get out. They thank him and quickly get out to avoid angry honks. Darcy hasn’t been here before, which makes sense, they’ve been here like three weeks, but James says the salmon is to die for, and she really has been craving unagi lately. The nice thing about dining with James is that she doesn’t have to debate what to order. They’re going to be ordering like seven dishes minimum, so she can just pick her favorites from what they get. And they share a lot of the same tastes so really she’s set.

They’re halfway through their food when Darcy remembers something. She quickly swallows her bite and takes a quick drink before looking pointedly at James.

“I hear you talked to Fury?” Darcy says.

“Yeah, we’ve spoken a few times,” he says innocently. Darcy gives him a *look*.

“Recently? Related to Jane and me?” she asks.

The corner of his lips twitch. “Perhaps.”

“Can I ask why?” she says, reaching over to pluck up a couple pieces of the dragon roll with her chopsticks.

James chewed, face turning thoughtful, like he’s considering his answer. She stays quiet and waits until he’s ready. “I didn’t like the thought of you being worried about disappearing,” he says. “I know you weren’t saying he’d said that to you, but knowing the type of man he is, I know you’re right in thinking he’s capable. I wanted to make sure he knew how unwise that would be of him.”

Darcy completely misses her mouth and drops the roll onto the table. Her mouth is hanging open for long enough that he actually eats a seared salmon nigiri waiting for her to say something.

“Did you threaten the tippy top spy?” she manages to ask.

“I’d been meaning to speak with him for a while anyway,” James says with a shrug. “Gave me a good reason to get to it.”

“I gotta tell you, it’s not often that I don’t know what to say,” she says.

“Eat some tuna then,” James says, putting another piece on her plate. She just snorts.

James seems more relaxed here. The servers know him, making her think he may have brought her to one of his frequent haunts, bringing him his ‘usual drink’, a little old woman actually coming out of the kitchen to give him a big hug. She starts talking to him in very rapid Japanese, which he answers easily. Darcy can barely remember how to ask to use the bathroom from her high school French class. She gestures rapidly at Darcy, who just smiles, uncertain. James smiles and winks as he speaks to the woman, who hugs him again, before shocking Darcy by tugging her into a hug too before hustling back to the kitchen.

“Someone’s a James Barnes fan,” Darcy says.

James shrugs, but he looks pleased. “Mai’s a sweetheart. She notices her regulars, that’s all,” he says.

“Uh huh, the James Buchanan Barnes charm has nothing to do with that?” she teases.

“Charm’s a little rusty these days,” he says, then smiles when he hears Mai yell something from the kitchen. “But maybe.”

Darcy eats so, *so* much sushi that she considers asking James to carry her to the SUV, but she manages on her own. He seems much more relaxed on the ride back, though he’s definitely alert the whole time. Once they’re inside the tower’s underground garage, he’s much more comfortable. He carries the bench on his shoulder, a bag held in his other hand. Darcy takes the other two, waving off the driver’s offer of help, instead thanking him profusely for driving them around. They manage to get everything into her apartment and all the dishes

unboxed, ready for washing, when James' phone starts buzzing. He sighs, reading the message.

"Always on my day off," James mutters. "Sorry, doll. Looks like Steve's got his hands full and needs some backup."

"How dare he interrupt our decor day," Darcy says, though there's a tight feeling growing in her chest.

"He does take a lot of looking after," James says. "I'm sorry to cut it short, but I have to go."

"I know," Darcy says. "Just...be careful, yeah?"

The smile he gives her is soft.

"Promise."

Darcy stands there for a few moments after he leaves before physically shaking herself out of it. She puts on her playlist titled *Get in loser we're going to fight god* and jumps back into it. She loads all the new dishes and silverware in her dishwasher and starts it before putting the new sheets in the washer. Next is dragging the bench under one of the windows, then under another because she didn't like the way the light was hitting it, then to the last one because it bumped up against the wall and that'd be nice for a back rest. The pale pink of the cushion really is pretty, especially with the mustard throw pillows she puts on it.

Darcy's digging through the bag, separating out Halloween decorations, when she pulls out the snow globes they'd purchased. James had put his sheets and lamp in his room when they'd returned but he'd forgotten the little Captain America hugging his shield. She smiles slightly. She'll bring them over whenever he gets back.

She's mostly unpacked by now, but there are still a couple boxes that need to be dealt with. She hangs and re-hangs her string lights three times before she's happy with how they look. She sinks into her couch, feet up on the coffee table and sighs happily. She feels very...cozy. Very content. She snuggles into her couch with a new book, a throw over her legs, and her lights twinkling.

She tends to get lost while reading so she doesn't realize it's been hours until she hears movement in the hall. Assuming it's James, so quickly sets her book down and grabs the snow globe. She doesn't bother putting on her shoes, just runs to the door, hoping to catch him before he gets inside his apartment.

"Hey, Sergeant Ass-ooooh that's Captain America, shit," Darcy says. Her socks slide on the floor as she tries to stop, nearly propelling her smack dab into Steve who's standing outside James' door. "Ooookay, uh, hi, how was your heroing?"

Steve, luckily, looks amused rather than offended that she just called his best friend an ass. "Heroing was good, saved the day with only a bit of property damage," he says. He looks down at her hand. "What's that?"

Darcy shoves the snow globe behind her back. “Nothing! Uh, I’ll be there if you need anything,” she says, pointing over her shoulder with her thumb. “Great, uh, nice to see you, bye.”

She retreats into her apartment very quickly, closing the door behind her, getting one last glance at Steve’s confused but very amused face. She hits her forehead against the door a few times for good measure before setting the snow globe back on the counter. She picks up her phone and shoots off a text to James.

Welp, Captain America just heard me call you Sergeant Asshole and nearly saw your snow globe of him. I’m going to go die of embarrassment now.

When her phone buzzes a few minutes later, she expects it to be him, but it’s actually from Jane. They’re on the way back from the zoo and Jane’s sending a bunch of pictures. They’d apparently gone into the petting zoo part and there’s a great picture of Thor sitting on the ground with a lamb in his lap and another eating a strand of his hair. She immediately changes it to her phone wallpaper. God bless Thor. Odin bless Thor? Whatever.

James texts her back later that night when she’s getting ready for bed, saying, *Don’t worry, he thought it was hilarious. Call him Captain Tight Pants next time. I just finished the debrief and am about to sleep for a year. Can I pick up the snowglobe tomorrow?*

Sure, she texts back. *Glad you’re alive and in one piece.* And thrilled that he referenced Firefly. What a guy.

Darcy brings the Thor snow globe over to Thor and Jane’s apartment the next day when they do brunch and, predictably, Thor is ecstatic. He picks her up in a big hug before putting the snow globe on his nightstand. Jane shakes her head, smiling as Thor takes a picture of it on his phone.

“How was Homegoods?” Jane asks. “Did you find your dishes?”

“Yep, and silverware, and Halloween decor, and a bench...I’m pretending my credit card bill doesn’t exist at the moment,” Darcy says, making Jane laugh. “We have sushi for lunch and oh my god, the entire staff knew him. He got handshakes and hugs, and this little old lady talked with him in Japanese for like five minutes.”

“Impressive,” Jane says. “All you can say in French is asking where the toilets are.”

“I know!”

James does pick up the snow globe that night when she’s in the middle of macaroni and cheese and Harry Potter. She pauses it to get the door and lets him in. He glances at the TV and grins.

“Prisoner of Azkaban is the best one,” he says.

“I know!” she says. “Thank you! Did you want any mac and cheese?”

“I actually can’t stay,” he says, looking apologetic. “Steve, Natasha, and I are about to leave.”

“Leave? Leave where?” Darcy asks, heart beating a little faster.

“We have a confidential mission,” he says. “I’d tell you if I could, but I’m guessing it’ll be around two weeks.”

“Oh,” she says, hoping her disappointment isn’t showing. Or the pit in the bottom of her stomach.

“We’ll be fine,” he assures her. “It’ll just take some time.”

“Okay,” she says. “Just...be careful. Not to be your mom or anything.”

“I will be. Can’t leave you alone on the 30th floor, you’d be bored,” James says with a small smile.

“So bored,” Darcy says. “Can you imagine the shenanigans I’d get up to?”

“Don’t let Clint talk you into any shenanigans until I get back,” he says, pointing a stern finger at her.

“I haven’t even met Clint,” she says.

“You will, he’s around,” James says. “You and Jane stay out of trouble. At least out of trouble that can’t be fixed by Thor.”

“No promises,” Darcy says.

“That’s not reassuring,” he says. “I’ll try to let you know when we’re on the way back.”

“Thanks,” she says. “Have fun, go save the day.”

“Ma’am, yes ma’am,” he says. He seems to hesitate for a second, before pulling her into a quick but tight hug. Then he’s out the door.

Darcy feels a little off-kilter the next day at work, though she tries to ignore it. She has off days sometimes, when either anxiety or depression poke at her. This doesn’t feel like that, though, so she treats herself and Jane to Italian food for lunch. Jane, who by now is familiar with Darcy’s routine, knows that Italian food means funky mood, so she lets her play her music as loud as she wants and surprises her with a little penguin bobblehead she and Thor had picked up for her at the zoo. She really loves Jane.

Her mood is better by the next day, and gets a lift when she gets an email from Tony with the subject line of !!!!!. The email just says THIS IS INCREDIBLE above a picture of the snow globe of Iron Man hugging himself that she’d had sent to his lab. It looks like James was right and Tony had set it on his desk. Darcy shows it to Jane, who gives a big snort laugh.

“I really thought I’d hate him more,” she says.

“I did, too,” Darcy says. “Guess some people hit emotional maturity a bit late in life.”

James, Steve, and Natasha have been gone for a week when there's a loud crash outside their lab. Jane jumps to her feet, grabbing the baseball bat she'd brought in a week ago, just in case. Darcy yanks her taser out of her desk drawer, pointing it at the lab door. But instead of a bad guy coming in, they just hear a groan and a quiet, "Fuuuuck me."

Glancing at each other, they creep up to the lab's clear glass door. Jane raises her bat while Darcy peers out the door and...

"Oh my god," Darcy says, lowering her taser and yanking the door open. "Clint Barton? Did Hawkeye just die outside our lab?"

"Not dead," he groans, face-down on the floor. "Not yet at least."

Jane follows her out the door to where Hawkeye is lying on the ground amidst a bunch of plaster and dust. He rolls over onto his back with a groan, peeking an eye open to see them staring down at him. "If you're going to beat me to death, please do it quickly," he says.

Jane looks down at her bat. "This is only for anyone that comes after my research, which doesn't seem like you. Do you need us to call medical?" she says.

"Nope, just need to wallow for a moment," he says.

"Why were you in the ceiling?" Darcy asks, looking up at the man-sized hole above him.

"Why weren't *you* in the ceiling?" he says.

"What?" Darcy asks.

"What?" he says, then slowly pushes himself up until he's sitting. He shakes his head, dust flying out of his hair. "I appreciate you not using your taser, though I guess that'd be pretty cool if you've tased two Avengers."

"I'm aiming for Tony next," Darcy says.

Clint snorts. "Barnes said you were funny," he says. He pushes himself to his feet, extending his hand to her. "Clint Barton, much more agile usually."

"Darcy Lewis, much less agile usually," she says, shaking his hand.

"Jane Foster," Jane says, shaking the hand he offers her. "I tripped over my chair this morning."

"Glad to be in good company," he says, grinning.

"Okay Mr. Ceiling Cat, you're bleeding," Darcy says, looking at the long cut on his arm. "Into the lab, bird brain."

Clint groans, letting Jane drag him in by the wrist. "Did Barnes tell you to call me that?" he asks.

“No, but he did tell me you’d be around,” she says while Jane retrieves the first aid kit. Darcy looks at him suspiciously. “Did he tell you to look in on us?”

“No,” Clint says. “That’d be weird. Wow that’s a big first aid kit.”

“We upgraded to an industrial. Seemed prudent,” Jane says. “Did he tell you to look after *Darcy*?” Jane asks.

“Nooo,” Clint says, glancing between them. “That would also be weird.”

“Uh huh,” Jane says, grinning. “All right super spy, get ready for the hydrogen peroxide.”

Clint is still while Jane cleans his cut and sticks a giant bandage on it.

“Seriously though, why were you in the ceiling?” Darcy asks. They’re sitting around one of the lab tables eating leftover Thai food.

“Would you believe for security purposes?” he asks.

“I would have if you didn’t ask if I’d believe it,” Darcy says. “So, try again.”

Clint sighs dramatically. “Fine. Dr. Franz’s lab is on the other side of the floor,” he says.

“Okay?”

“Dr. Franz owes me \$50,” Clint says. “He’s trying to stiff me on a bet from the World Series.”

“So you were going to try to steal it...from his lab?” Jane says.

“Of course not,” Clint says. “I was going to superglue all his furniture upside down on the floor.”

“Okay, I see now why James said not to let you talk me into any shenanigans,” Darcy says.

“Rude,” Clint says. “He’s usually the one dragging *me* into shit. Did he tell you about the dogs that chased us? Or the old lady who almost broke my nose?”

“No?” Darcy says.

“Ask him,” Clint says. “The troll.”

Clint hangs around for the rest of the day, then invites them to a pizza movie night and really, when does she ever say no to a pizza movie night? They end up with Thor and Clint in a lounge area just like the one Darcy’d fallen asleep in a couple weeks ago. They watch the first Lord of the Rings movie, both because Jane and Darcy haven’t seen it in years and Thor hasn’t seen it ever. He finds the elves to be hysterical.

By the end of the night, Thor and Jane have both fallen asleep on the couch, Clint is sitting on the floor poking at his bandage, and Darcy is painting Thor’s toenails a sparkly pink. Clint

looks over at her blowing on the drying polish as the credits run.

“It always sucks when they leave,” he says quietly to avoid waking the others.

“What?”

“I always hate it when Nat leaves,” Clint says. “It doesn’t matter that I know she can more than handle herself, I still worry.”

“Are you and Natasha...?”

“Together? Yes,” Clint says. “We don’t broadcast it though for safety’s sake, so keep it under your hat.”

“My lips are sealed,” Darcy says, then frowns. “I’m not - James and I, we aren’t...we’re not together.”

Clint smiles gently. “He’s never asked me to check in on anyone before,” Clint says.

“Okay...” she says slowly.

“My point was I get it,” Clint says. “There’s a lot of worry and a lot of fear and a lot of attempted distraction.”

“Like supergluing Dr. Franz’s lab?” she says. Clint just grins. “He’s really the first friend I’ve made since Jane. Jane and I get worried when Thor goes. It really messes with her and he’s nearly indestructible. I know James isn’t exactly a weak squishy human, no offense...”

“None taken,” Clint says cheerily.

“But still, he’s vulnerable to decapitation like anyone else,” Darcy says.

“I know it won’t help much, but I’ve been with him in the field,” Clint says. “And he really knows what he’s doing. It’s not like Steve who takes a bunch of risks whether they’re necessary or not. Barnes is very careful, very calculated, and very capable.” Clint frowns a bit. “Alliteration not intended.”

Darcy giggles, moving Thor’s foot off her lap. He shifts in his sleep, accidentally elbowing Jane, who doesn’t stir. That woman sleeps like a rock.

“I’m sure they’ll be fine,” Darcy says, pulling her knees to her chest and resting her chin on them. “I’m just a gold medal worrier.”

“I get it,” Clint says. “But hey! I can be the second friend you’ve met since Jane.”

Darcy laughs at his enthusiasm. “Yes, you can. You make a good second friend since Jane.”

“It’s the hair,” he says seriously. “It makes me seem trustworthy.”

Darcy does add Clint to her mental list of friends at the tower. He pops in on her and Jane a couple times that week, once with Thor and macarons from some bakery near his apartment.

"I live off-site," he tells them through a mouthful of pistachio. "I have a place here if I need to crash but I have a building in Bed-Stuy."

"You have a whole building?" Jane says. She's cut a raspberry macaron and a vanilla macaron in half and stuck them together, the monster.

"Yeah, I figured being an Avenger didn't keep me busy enough so I thought I'd add the thrilling job title of landlord," he says, making them laugh. "It's a long story, but yes, I have a small apartment building, so I try to stay there when I can, make sure the tenants are okay."

"Barton is very noble in this regard," Thor says wisely. "This city's cost of living is truly appalling, and Barton makes sure he's charging what his tenants can actually afford."

Clint turns a bit red at that and shrugs, mumbling something about knowing how they feel.

As nice as it is to have met him, she's still grinning ear-to-ear when her phone buzzes a week and a half after James, Steve, and Natasha left with a text from James, saying they're on their way back.

We probably won't land until after one a.m., but I wanted to give you a heads up we'll be back soon.

Darcy grins, completely abandoning the notes she'd been transcribing to text back. *Glad to hear it! You all okay?*

The reply comes quickly. *A little bruised but we're all good. I'm going to try to get some sleep on the flight back, but I wanted to let you know.*

Warmth bubbles up in her stomach and she texts back, *No loud parties at my place tonight, got it.* She gets a smiley face back.

She feels lighter for the rest of the day. She also uses the lab printer to print a picture of Clint covered in dust after falling out of the ceiling. It's of him sitting on the lab table while Jane cleans his cut, Clint pouting into the camera. She tapes it to James' door that night when she gets home, 'Welcome back!' scribbled underneath it. When she falls asleep that night, it's happier and more content than she's felt in the last week and a half.

Darcy doesn't hear from James until the next afternoon, when he texts *Please help.* She's ready to shout for JARVIS when the picture comes through and her blood pressure drops back down. It's of what she's assuming is James' bed with two suits laid out on top of it. One's a basic black and one's a deep grey with some kind of embroidered pattern on the lapels. Next to them are three different dress shirts, one white, one red, one blue.

Help...dress you? she asks.

If I'd known we'd be dragged into a benefit tonight I'd have let Steve push out the mission an extra day.

Darcy laughs and zooms in on the picture he'd sent. She hums, debating, before texting him, *I'm a fan of the grey. Any of the shirts will look nice but I'd say white.*

Thank you. Once I met sweatpants, I never wanted to wear a suit again.

Darcy snorts. *Why do you think I'm always wearing leggings?? Jeans are for suckers.*

It's then that Jane gets her attention and she's pulled back into work. She has time to shoot off a text saying that she and Jane got roped into the fundraiser that night too, but then Jane has her full attention until they leave for the night, hustling to get ready and get to the fancy hotel where it's being hosted.

Jane usually hates, *hates* these fundraising dinners. She doesn't mind talking shop with other scientists, but she hates the boys club attitude of so many, she hates small talk, and she hates "being treated like an amusing pet scientist". Darcy isn't 100% sure what she means, but she personally loves these events. She thrives on getting all dressed up and messing with rich people. The only reason they're here tonight is the benefit is for girls getting into STEM, and Stark Industries are matching every donation.

So here they are, Jane looking lovely and grumpy in a black sequined dress, next to a smiling Thor in that red jacket of his. Darcy's wearing a deep green velvet dress that's long enough that she can wear flats instead of heels, her hair back in an elegant knot. A handful of the Avengers are here too. Darcy's spotted Steve and James, both looking fine as hell in tailored suits (she's gratified that he went with her color suggestions), Tony with Pepper, and she *thinks* she glimpsed Natasha.

Normally Jane finds the crowds of Thor's adoring fans to be annoying, but she's grateful for it right now since she's not the one that has to talk to anyone. She and Darcy are standing a bit to the side, watching the hobnobbing and elbow rubbing, making their own guesses at what's being said.

"Look, old pervert at one o'clock," Jane says.

"White hair, hitting on the woman forty years younger than him?" Darcy asks.

"That's the one."

"Oh hello, my name is Walter Moneybags and I'm powered by Viagra, the children working in my coal mine, and a lack of morals," Darcy says, putting on a wheezy old man voice.

"I have to pay women for their time because I have the personality of a sheet of sandpaper," Jane adds, sounding remarkably like Mr. Burns from the Simpsons.

Darcy snorts, then says, "Oh, over by the buffet, lady in the red dress just double dipped in the salad dressing."

"Eurgh, why would they even put the dressing in a bowl?" Jane says, wrinkling her nose.

"Note to self: stay away from the ranch."

"That's just good advice anytime," Darcy says.

“You bite your tongue!” Jane says. Darcy grins. “Oh, there’s your boy.”

“My what?” Darcy asks in confusion, looking around.

“Over by the bar,” Jane says. Darcy looks and sees James talking to a senator, and while his face is very neutral, Darcy knows him by now and knows that that’s the face he uses when he’s uncomfortable.

Darcy frowns, watching as the senator steps just a bit too close, the expression on his face just a bit too aggressive.

“Hold my dignity, I’ve got some sketchy shit to do,” Darcy says.

“How sketchy?” Jane asks.

“We won’t be tried for treason,” Darcy says as she walks away.

“That leaves a *lot* of avenues open!” Jane calls after her.

Darcy just waves a dismissive hand over her shoulder and starts to weave through the crowds to where James is stuck. He notices her coming and she doesn’t think she imagines the flash of relief on his face. She makes it to his side, accepting the hug he gives her, before turning to the senator, who still has a bit of a sour look on his face.

“Senator Miller,” Darcy says, smiling pleasantly. “Remember me?”

“I’m sorry?” he says rudely, apparently irritated at her interruption. “Have we met?”

“We have. You made quite a few promises to me at Senator Hollis’ party,” she says, smile turning sharper. The senator’s eyes widen just enough to know she said the right thing.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Miller says. “I have to go.” With one last panicked look at her, he turns and leaves, forgetting all about James. They watch him go, Darcy feeling very accomplished.

“Do I want to know?” James asks.

“Senator Hollis was removed from office,” Darcy says. “Something about sex parties and a *bunch* of cocaine.”

His eyebrows raise. “And people say politics is boring,” James says. “And Miller was there?”

“Sure looks like it, doesn’t it?” Darcy says.

“You didn’t know?”

“Nope,” Darcy says with a grin. “There were a couple rumors, and I knew they were close. It was the first thing I could think of to get him to go away.”

He just looks at her for a long moment, and she wonders if she's managed to actually surprise him. Then he offers his hand with a small smile.

"Dance with me?" he asks.

Darcy hasn't danced publicly since her aunt's wedding, and that was the macarena. It's been even longer since she's danced with someone else. But she's not at all worried about James laughing at her if she steps on his toes or whatever, so she happily takes his hand and lets him lead her to the dance floor.

"You're so lucky I'm wearing flats right now," Darcy says as he pulls her close, one hand holding hers, the other splayed across her back.

"Why?" James asks as they start to sway with the music. The band is truly excellent, Darcy is impressed.

"I mean, stepping on your toes in stiletto heels would probably suck," she says.

"Super soldier toes," James says seriously. "They wouldn't do any damage at all."

"What?" Darcy says, looking up at him and trying to decide if he's serious. Then the corner of lips twitches and she kicks his foot, laughing. "You're ridiculous."

James grins and shrugs, completely unrepentant. Darcy has never been much of a dancer, but James is a great leader. He moves confidently, bringing her with him in such a way that she actually feels graceful instead of like she's a step away from falling and dragging him down with her. They dance quietly, occasionally spotting people they know in the crowd. Natasha is standing by Steve, who looks awkward as hell trying to schmooze with potential donors. Jane is giving a woman talking to Thor a very unfriendly look and when Darcy looks she sees it's a professor she'd had that consistently graded her badly for no reason. Across the room, nursing a large drink at the bar, is Senator Miller.

"Thank you," James says out of nowhere.

Darcy looks up at him in surprise. "For what?"

James nods toward Senator Miller. "For getting me out of that."

"What did he want?" Darcy asks.

"To lecture about why Steve and I should be encouraging everyone to vote Republican because no one else cares about the troops," James says with an eye roll.

"He *what*?" Darcy says, turning to go give Senator Miller a rather loud piece of her mind, but James tightens his grip on her and pulls her back in. "That motherfu-"

"I told him no," James says, clearly amused. "But it seems like I should let you field all those requests in the future."

“Politicians are fucking monsters,” Darcy grumbles, but doesn’t fight to go yell at Senator Miller. She’ll save that for a non-fundraising venue.

“You won’t get any disagreement from me,” James says. “You look beautiful tonight.”

She is well aware of the purposeful topic change, but she doesn’t call him on it. “Thank you,” she says, running a thumb over the lapel of his suit jacket. This close she can see the elaborate grey embroidering on it. “So do you,” she tells him, glad that it makes him smile. She loves that about him, that he isn’t the type of man to get irritated and prefer being called handsome.

And really, he looks very, *very* pretty. His thick hair is pulled back into a bun at the base of his skull, a few strands loose and framing his face and those striking blue eyes. It’s really unfair. And he smells fantastic. And he’s smiling as he looks at her, the discomfort from earlier melted away, and oh Jesus, she wants to kiss the hell out of him.

Some of her sudden panic must show on her face, his brows furrowing a bit. “Are you okay?” he asks.

“Fine,” she says, clearing her throat when it comes out as a squeak. “I’m fine, I was just thinking about a grad school application I think I messed up.”

His expression clears and he smiles again. “You decided to apply? That’s great!”

“Yeah,” she says, forcing a smile. “Yeah, Jane is super encouraging and Tony said I’d be eligible for tuition assistance through Stark Industries. Though I suppose yelling at senators isn’t necessarily great for a hopeful political science grad student.”

“I think it’s perfect for a definite political science grad student,” James says, and even though she’s panicking because yep, she definitely has a huge crush on one of her close friends, she still has to smile because he’s one of the most supportive, kind people she’s met. It’s no wonder he gets along so well with Thor. Two kind peas in their kind little peapod. “We’ll celebrate when you get in.”

“If I get in you’ll be the first to know after Jane,” she promises.

“I suppose that’s fair,” he says with a fake sigh before winking at her.

“Hey, you’re already above my parents,” she says.

His eyebrows raise at that. “Why?” he asks.

She shrugs, kind of wishing she hadn’t brought it up, but she also knows it’s not like he’s going to judge her for it. It’s just a kneejerk reaction to an awkward topic.

“They’re...not thrilled that political science is the direction I chose to go,” Darcy says. “My dad’s a doctor, my mom’s a lawyer, my brother is a lawyer, and those are really the only ‘respectable careers’ in their eyes.”

“You work at Stark Industries, for a world-class astrophysicist, and helped save the world,” James says. She shrugs again. “Is that not enough?”

“They don’t know about it,” Darcy says. “Lots of it’s classified by SHIELD. So they know I work for someone classified and that it’s at Stark Industries, that’s it.”

“They should still be proud,” James says.

“Yeah, well,” she says, looking over his shoulder. Miller is on his second drink.

James doesn’t say anything but she can nearly feel the disapproval wafting off him. That’s fine, Jane already hates her parents. She doesn’t say it, but Darcy knows she’s just itching to portal her mom and dad somewhere frigid and awful.

“Anyway,” she says, regretting bringing the mood down. “How was your little trip? I see no bruises.”

“It was fine,” James says, easily going along with the subject change. The song changes for the third time, and Darcy’s glad he didn’t take the opportunity to stop dancing. “Did what we needed to do, Natasha got some of her frustrations out on the faces of some bad guys,” he says, smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

“Remind me to never piss off Natasha,” Darcy says.

“Have you met yet?” James asks.

“Not yet.”

“Want to?”

She does, kind of, but - “Can we just dance a bit longer?” she asks.

His smile is soft. “Absolutely.”

They make it through another song in comfortable silence, James tugging her just a bit closer, before the band announces they’re taking a break. They move off the dancefloor, his hand still on her back, to where Natasha and Steve are standing with their drinks, apparently having shaken their gaggle of admirers.

“Hey, Darcy,” Steve greets, acting like he’s going in for a hug, then reconsiders and sticks out his hand. Darcy snorts and gives him a hug.

“Hey, Steve,” she says.

“Natasha, this is Darcy Lewis. Darcy, Natasha,” James says.

Natasha is just...gorgeous. She has that elegance that even a couple years ago would have made Darcy feel ugly and childish, but saving the world and some therapy have given her a better view of herself. She returns the smile Natasha gives her and shakes the hand she offers.

“Nice to meet you,” Darcy says.

“Nice to meet you, too,” Natasha says. “I’ve heard great things about you.”

“Really?” Darcy says, eyebrows raised. Okay, maybe therapy is a work in progress.

“James has been most effusive in his praise,” she says, sliding eyes over to James. “And Clint of course was happy to say he made a friend.” She’s grinning as she says it, and yeah, Darcy can see them together.

“Well that’s good to know,” Darcy says, glancing at James. “Is Clint here?”

“No,” Natasha says, smirking a bit. “We try to keep him away from these things. He’s not good at hiding his disdain.”

“Wasn’t he a spy?”

“Sure was,” she says. “But in non-life-or-death situations, it’s like he forgets how to walk and talk at the same time. As you’ve seen.”

“Yeah, that sure was a big hole in the ceiling,” Darcy says, returning Natasha’s grin.

“Thank you, *so* much for that picture. James sent it to me and I will be framing it,” Natasha says.

“That’s what happens if you screw up around our lab,” Darcy says. “Gotta be on your toes. We had a wall of shame for the SHIELD agents they shuffled us around with before they confiscated it.”

“Like what?” Steve asks.

“Agent Brown got gum in his partner’s hair and ended up just smushing it around,” Darcy says. “Pretty sure Agents Green and Mason were banging since they came in once with each other’s shirt on.”

Natasha’s grin turns wicked. “I’ll make some calls. I need to see that,” she says.

Just then Darcy catches sight of Jane making her way toward them, people jumping out of her path with one glance at the look on her face.

“Uh oh,” Darcy says, catching their attention. Jane disappears behind a large group to their right and a second later reappears at Darcy’s side.

“Hi,” Jane says, waving briefly to Steve and Natasha before turning to Darcy. “Are you ready to leave? If one more person who shit all over my thesis and published papers hits on Thor, I’m going to lose my shit.” Jane is speaking through a gritted-teeth smile, and Darcy can tell she’s one more comment away from a wee meltdown.

“Totally good to go,” Darcy says. She briefly turns back to Steve and Natasha and says, “We’d better go before there’s an incident.” An ‘incident’ is the wording Fury always used

when there was some mess they were somehow involved in.

“I’ll walk you out,” James says when she turns to him, offering his arm.

“Thank you,” Darcy says, threading her arm through his, taking Jane’s hand with her free one. “Let’s wrangle Thor and get outta dodge.”

Thor’s easy to spot, talking in a group on the edge of the dancefloor. Darcy recognizes a lot of them from conferences she’s gone to with Jane and yeah, some of them are definitely major assholes.

“Hey Thor!” Darcy calls when they’re close enough for him to hear. “Time for tacos!”

Tacos is a codeword she, Jane, and Thor use when they’re in public and need an out. It gets used depressingly often. Thor nods, immediately extracting himself from the group and joins them, wrapping an arm around an irritated Jane, who leads them out. She has a shockingly quick gait for someone so small.

“Thanks for walking us out,” Darcy says when they’re outside, waiting for the valet to come back with their car. Jane and Thor are standing a bit away, Thor wrapped around her, telling her stories for his childhood on Asgard, a favorite when she’s upset. Darcy is standing very close to James, a bit cold without a jacket in her dress.

“It’s no problem,” James says, wrapping an arm around her and rubbing his hand against her bare arm in an attempt to warm her up. “She going to be okay?” He nods toward Jane.

“She’ll be fine. This isn’t the first bit of patronizing scientists we’ve run into,” Darcy says. “She and Thor will have some spectacular sex later and he’ll remind her what a genius she is and how bitter the haters are.”

“Preach,” Thor says, making her burst into giggles and James snort.

“He loves human slang,” Darcy says. “And we love him loving it.”

“I should work that into conversation with Sam sometime,” James says. “I think ‘preach’ would make him lose his damn mind.”

“Have you referenced Netflix and chill?” Darcy asks.

James’ face breaks into a grin. “Not yet, I haven’t,” he says. “Should I wait until you’re there?”

“Absolutely,” Darcy says. “You can tell him I invited you to Netflix and chill and watch his brain explode.”

James snorts, shaking his head, but she can tell he’s totally going to do it. He looks up when their car rolls up, running eyes carefully over every inch. She doesn’t say anything, just lets him. Thor leads Jane to the car, taking the keys from the attendant and thanking him. Thor just adores driving, even in traffic. He calls it charming.

“Thanks for the dance, doll,” James says. He kisses the back of her hand, eyes intent on her. “Text me when you get home all right.”

“Okay,” Darcy says, fighting down the stupid grin threatening to take over her face and gets into the seat behind Thor’s. James watches them go until they turn the corner. Darcy makes a strangled noise and thunks her head forward against the back of Thor’s seat. “Oh god oh god oh god...”

“What?” Jane asks, turning to look at her. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh god,” Darcy moans. “I’m so screwed, so screeeeewed!”

“Why?” Jane asks, poking her in the knees (the closest part she could reach).

“I believe Darcy has realized her crush on Sergeant Barnes,” Thor says, sounding amused.

“Oh,” Jane says, and Darcy can hear the damn smirk in her voice. “Was it the sight of him in a tux?”

“I hate you so much,” Darcy says, sitting back up. “You had love literally fall out of the sky, you don’t remember what it’s like for the rest of us.”

“Sure,” Jane says, still grinning. “Did you squeeze his bicep? Did it make you faint?”

Darcy kicks out at Jane’s seat making her laugh. “Some best friend you are,” Darcy says. “Shit, what do I do?”

“You ask him out!” Jane says.

“I can’t, he’s my friend!” Darcy says. “I’d rather have him as a friend than make him uncomfortable and not see him anymore!”

“Right, ignoring the fact that he looks at you with hearts in his eyes?” Jane says.

“He does *not*, oh my god,” Darcy says.

“He does look most happy when he’s around you,” Thor says. “Much happier than I see him most of the time, unless he’s around Rogers.”

“Great,” she says with a sigh.

Thor thankfully changes the subject so Darcy can do a silent freakout alone in the backseat. The thing is, it shouldn’t be too shocking. Physically, James is completely the tall, dark, and handsome man of her fantasies. Personality-wise, he’s the snarky, shit-stirring, perfectly kind man of her fantasies too. Christ.

She leaves Jane and Thor in the elevator, wishing them great sex, and gets off on her and James’ floor. She kicks her flats off as soon as she gets inside, locking the door behind her. She tosses the tiny clutch with her phone and ID onto her bed, letting out another long groan.

She takes off the extravagant 1920s necklace (an inherited item from her grandmother) and sets it on her dresser next to the sparkling comb she'd removed from her hair.

She's pretty tired but a hot bath is just calling her. She debates for a moment before saying fuck it, if she's late tomorrow, she's late. She turns the hot water on, dumps some vanilla salts into the tub, and grabs her phone. She texts James that she's back in one piece while she waits for the tub to fill then takes off her dress, carefully hanging it back up. She hadn't been expecting a text back for a while, but her phone buzzes right before she gets into the tub.

Glad to hear it. Then, a moment later, *You were definitely the best part of tonight.* The second text has a picture attached, she's assuming taken by Steve since Natasha's shoulder and part of the back of her head is in the corner. It's a picture of James and her dancing, awfully close, their faces tilted toward each other as they laugh. The look on his face, like all his attention is on her, the way his hands look large and tight on her body, makes her ache just a bit between the thighs. She saves it immediately.

She bites her lip as she texts back, saying, *So were you. And damn, we look nice* before setting the phone to the side and sliding into the hot bubble bath. She sighs happily, the water lapping at the back of her neck, right under where her hair is still pulled back. She doesn't feel at all like going to bed with wet hair. The hot water seeps into all the little aches in her body. There are surprisingly few, since she and Jane actually have people to help them move heavy shit now instead of them just making it happen.

She's calmer, more relaxed, some of the alarm having faded from her earlier realization. Her mind keeps floating back to their dance, having his strong arms around her, pressed against his firm body, the way his hand felt searing against her back. She sneaks a hand under the cover of the bubbles, drifting between her legs. She's already a little slick and warm, her clit hardening. She rubs gentle, lazy circles around it, letting soft pleasure build inside her. Her other hand runs over her breasts, fingers brushing over her nipples.

It's James' hands she's thinking of as she dips two fingers into herself, whimpering as she presses up against her g-spot. She's not always great at reaching it, but the tub angles her just right. She pumps the two fingers in and out, thumb pressing against the side of her hard little clit. She pinches at her nipples, little gasps and moans echoing through the bathroom. It's when she's imagining James' mouth between her legs that she comes, gasping as her orgasm rolls through her, leaving her breathless and trembling.

She doesn't feel weird thinking about him while masturbating. She's done that with a bunch of people. Her friend Joey from college, Thor, even Jane once or twice. No, she just feels the bone-deep satisfaction of a good orgasm and a slightly racing heart thinking of what he might look like when he comes. Lord, she's in deep.

She only gets out of the tub when the water's starting to cool and her fingers are pruny. She takes the time to brush her teeth and pluck the pins from her hair, but nothing else. She likes falling asleep when she's still a little loose from orgasming so it takes barely any time until she's out like a light.

The next week carries its fair share of threats. There's another Dr. Doom situation that the Avengers assist with, Tony swearing colorfully about Reed Richards (Darcy had met him

once and she's gotta say she agrees with Tony), an AIM attempt to turn everyone in Central Park into duck people (what the fuck), and a small uprising of 'tracksuit mafia bros' near Clint's building (she'd had to ask him to repeat that before she was sure she'd heard right), and that's just through Wednesday. Thor and James are gone quite a bit, putting out figurative and literal fires at times. They pop in occasionally if they can, like Thursday when they both show up with wet hair.

"Freshly showered?" Jane asks, pushing Thor's hair back as he kisses her in greeting.

"You wouldn't want us here if we hadn't," James says, shuddering. He'd taken a seat on Darcy's desk, thigh pressed against her arm. She raises her eyebrows and looks up at him.

"Should I not be touching you?" she asks.

"Nothing radioactive," he says. "Just a minor...goo incident."

"Sergeant Barnes was most brave and slayed the monster," Thor says, clapping James on the shoulder. "He saved at least a hundred lives tonight."

Like usual when he's praised, James' ears turn red, which Darcy thinks is *adorable*. Darcy offers them some of the pizza they had delivered earlier, but then both their phones ring with the assemble alert, making James and Thor both sigh.

"Perhaps another night," Thor says, pressing a quick kiss to Jane's lips before heading toward the door.

"Be good," James says, kissing the top of her head before jumping off the desk.

"Never," Darcy shoots back, face heating slightly. He just smiles over his shoulder as he follows Thor out.

"You are so smitten," Jane says, grinning.

"Okay, tiny mad scientist, back to the stars for you," Darcy says, making Jane laugh. The nerve, honestly.

Things seemed to have calmed down by Saturday. Thor had taken Jane and Darcy back to the zoo since it's colder now and less likely to be packed. They still have to deal with plenty of Thor fans, but Jane minds much less when she has someone to talk to, especially near the flamingos. "They can sense my fear!" Jane says when she jumps back from one approaching their end of the enclosure. Darcy doesn't point out that there's a barrier between them, just pats Jane on the back.

It was a good day, better than one she's had in a while. It had all the fun of when he'd first crashed down to Earth and they'd been filled with high energy and excitement, but it feels a bit more...settled somehow. Jane and Thor are connected now by actual feelings instead of mutual interest and attraction. There are real roots now. Thor calls Darcy his Earth sister. It feels good to have a day that feels like classic them.

It's later that night, Darcy just having left their apartment after dinner and a couple movies. Her makeup is off, her pajamas are on, and she's just finished brushing her teeth when her phone buzzes. She glances down to read the text from James.

You free? I need a friend and a drink.

Darcy frowns and types quickly. *Yeah of course. Your place or mine?*

Mine. The response comes immediately.

Well, all right then. Darcy debates changing but it's not like her flannel pants and baggy t-shirt are particularly revealing and he seemed to be a bit urgent, so she just puts her slippers on and walks across the hall to knock on the door. James opens it with a grateful look and lets her in.

"Hey," she says, patting him on the shoulder as she walks by. He seems to like the friendly touches, and she noticed not many people touch him, so she's been trying to do so more often now.

"Hey," he replies, closing and locking the door behind her. "Thanks for coming over."

"Of course," she says, following him into the living room.

His apartment seems to have the same layout as hers. His isn't full of quite as much stuff as hers, though he has a definite style going with lots of earth tones, greens, and blues. She takes a seat on the gray leather couch, turning sideways to sit criss-cross as he settles on the other side. There's a bottle of whiskey on the coffee table. Not her favorite, but she can make it work.

"Want a drink?" he asks.

"Sure," she says. She's not a big whiskey fan but that's not really her concern right now. No, her concern is the way James is avoiding eye contact, how his hand shakes a bit when he pours whiskey into their tumblers. She reaches out, steadying his hand with a squeeze before taking the drink. "What's wrong?" she asks quietly.

James exhales harshly, taking a gulp of whiskey, before telling her, "I had a sister named Rebecca." Darcy actually knows that. She went to the Smithsonian exhibit. He takes another sip, looking down at his hands. "She died. Two years before I got away from Hydra."

Darcy scoots closer. She reaches out, hesitating for a second, before resting her hand on his. He swallows hard and doesn't pull away from her.

"I'm sorry," Darcy says quietly.

James nods. "Thanks. She, uh, had a daughter, Amelia. I went to see her today," he says.

"Oh wow," Darcy says, and immediately feels like an idiot. *Oh wow?* "How'd it go."

“Okay. She believed me, at least,” James says. “Rebecca had a lot of pictures of me and apparently talked about me, so she knew I was me.” He takes another sip. “She has a daughter. Marissa. I have a great-niece.”

“That’s wonderful, isn’t it?” Darcy asks. He smiles down at his hands, twisting his until their fingers are laced together.

“It is,” he says. “It was just...a lot. I don’t want them to have expectations I can’t fulfill.”

“Impossible,” Darcy says, scooting even closer, until her knees meet the side of his thigh. He tightens his grip on her hand. “They’re probably just thrilled that you’ll be in their lives. Knowing you’re alive and safe is probably more than they’d ever imagined.” He nods.

“I’m going to Rebecca’s grave tomorrow,” he says, looking down at their hands. “I wanted to ask if you’d come.”

Darcy tries not to look surprised, and she doesn’t ask why her and not Stev. She’s not really wanting to push right now. “Of course I will,” she says.

“Thank you,” he says. “Thank you for coming over.”

“Any time,” she says.

James lets go of her hand, only to wrap his arm around her shoulders, tugging her in for a tight hug. She wraps her arms around him immediately, holding him tightly. It’s an awkward angle, both of their bodies a bit twisted, but neither let go for a long time and when James finally does let her go, he keeps one arm wrapped around her shoulder, keeping her at his side. She shifts her legs a bit so she’s sitting normally next to him, tucked against him. He lets out a deep sigh, looking down at the whiskey tumbler he’d set back on the coffee table before hugging her.

“I can’t discuss some things with Steve,” James says. “He gets worried and sad, and I end up comforting him and feeling worse.”

“I get that,” Darcy says, resting a hand on his knee.

He sighs, leaning a bit more heavily against her. They sit in silence for a long time, Darcy’s eyes resting either on her hand on his leg or on the stack of books on his coffee table. That makes her smile a bit. She’d wondered at first if all he did was the gym with Steve, but the stack of books on everything from Cleopatra to submarines makes her happy.

Eventually, James sighs, tightening his arm around her briefly before pulling back. “I should get some sleep. *You* should get some sleep, you look exhausted.”

“Gee, Barnes, you sure know how to give the nicest compliments,” she says with a wink. He snorts, shaking his head with a slight twitch at the corner of his lips. “What time tomorrow?”

“Is eight too early?” he asks.

Absolutely. “Nope,” she says.

He raises an eyebrow at her. "I know you, remember..."

"I'm capable of early mornings," she says, kicking his calf as she stands, making him laugh. "Especially since I assume you want privacy."

The looks he gives her is soft. "Yeah," he says, voice quiet.

She nods, like that settles it. "Good. Bang on my door whenever you're ready," she says.

James stands and walks her to the door, even though it's barely fifteen steps. Before he opens it he tugs her into a quick but very tight hug. She feels guilty for the way her heart races at the contact because damn it, it's about him right now, not her dumb *feelings*.

Before she goes to bed, she asks JARVIS to place a flower order to be delivered tomorrow morning before they go. She figures James would like to have something to put on his sister's grave.

James knocks on her door a couple minutes before 8:00, dressed in dark jeans and a black peacoat, with a black glove on his metal hand. He smiles slightly when he sees her, seeming less unmoored than last night. They make their way down to the lobby, where Darcy breaks off to check with the receptionist if the flowers had been delivered. She'd been a bit doubtful since it was such late notice and so early in the morning, but the big box is there.

"What's that?" James asks as they head down to the garage.

"Flowers," Darcy says, shrugging a little sheepishly. "I didn't know if you'd want to lay any or not."

James is silent in the elevator for a moment before swallowing hard and nodding. "Thanks."

They take an SUV without a driver, James behind the wheel. Darcy has a feeling he doesn't want anyone with them for this, which she definitely understands. The cemetery is a forty minute drive from the tower in the Saturday morning traffic. When they get there, they sit in the car in silence for a few minutes before James sighs and nods. They both get out, Darcy carrying the box of flowers. There's only one other car here and the occupants are gathered in the back corner of the cemetery, while she and James head in another direction.

James stops abruptly when he finds the headstone reading Rebecca Barnes. Darcy silently opens the box of flowers and sets them in front of the headstone. The only ones she recognizes are the lilies, but the bouquet looks lovely. James stares down at her headstone in silence long enough that Darcy asks if he'd like to have some privacy.

"No," he says, reaching out and taking her hand, like he's scared she'll walk away anyway. She just squeezes his hand back. They stand in silence for a while longer, their breath barely visible in the crisp, fall air. Another group walks past them, nodding respectfully on their way to another plot farther down.

"She'd have loved you. She worked hard but was all about loving life," James says eventually. He smiles slightly. "Amelia said Rebecca didn't change her last name when she

got married because ‘I’ve got a last name, what’d I need a new one for?’”

“Sounds like my kind of woman,” Darcy says.

James squeezes her hand before letting go, slowly lowering himself to his knees. She can’t hear the words he’s murmuring, but she can hear the struggle. She puts a hand on his shoulder, squeezing to let him know she’s here. He stays on the ground long after he’s stopped talking, while the air slowly warms and more people drift in and out of the cemetery. Eventually he stands, kissing his fingers then touching her headstone.

“Brunch?” he says, offering his arm. She slips her arm through the crook of his elbow.

“I’m always ready for brunch,” she says.

He smiles down at her, expression clearer than it’s been since before last night. “I know a place.”

The place he knows turns out to be a little hole in the wall that she never would have noticed if he didn’t point it out. It’s a small restaurant with only a half-dozen tables, but it’s nearly full. They just happen to get there when a lot of people are leaving and they’re able to get a small table near the back.

“I’ve never been here,” Darcy says, looking around. The walls are covered with framed pictures, either of celebrities that have visited, New York landmarks, a very large photo of the Brooklyn Dodgers, along with assorted random art (Darcy’s favorite is the wiener dog dressed like a clown).

“This place has been here since Steve and I were kids,” James says. She looks up in surprise. He grins. “French toast tastes exactly the same.”

“Well, French toast it is,” Darcy says, setting her menu back down. “Did you guys used to terrorize Brooklyn?”

“No,” James says with a grin. “Steve would try, but he was shorter than you and like a hundred pounds, so I ended up pulling his dumb ass out of fights a lot.”

“That...really tracks, actually,” Darcy says. “Were you just stressed 24/7?”

“Yes,” James says. “Absolutely. He was a menace.”

“Was? His behavior seems pretty unchanged,” Darcy says.

“Yeah but if he gets hit by a bus now he’ll just bounce right off,” James says. “If a strong breeze came back then, he’d be lifted off his feet like a kite.”

Darcy laughs, imagining an alarmed James chasing after Steve billowing around like a leaf. The waitress pops up then, who of course recognizes James. Adorable. He’s right, the French toast is amazing. She wonders if she can have it delivered in bulk. She takes two extra orders to go, because Jane would just love this, and Thor never says no to good Earth food.

Darcy and James both have different things to do with the rest of their days, so they part at the hallway between their doors. James hugs her tightly before he goes. She holds him just as tightly. She's so fucked.

Darcy sees James a few more times that week. He drops in on the lab with lunch one day, with Steve another, and a few more times when Jane asks him and Thor for help rearranging (again). It's not exactly a routine, but it's nice to have the found family she's always read about.

At the end of the next week, Darcy jerks awake to a blaring alarm after 3:00 a.m. She's confused and disoriented for a minute, wondering briefly if it's her phone's alarm, then JARVIS's voice reaches her through her sleepy haze.

"We are experiencing an assault on the tower," he says in his calm voice, which of course only makes her heart race even faster. "Please stay calm and proceed to your lockdown station."

"My *what*?" Darcy asks frantically. She leaps out of bed and puts on her glasses, looking around wildly like some kind of secret room was going to suddenly open up. *Why* hadn't she bugged Tony for a taser upgrade?

"Please remain calm, Ms. Lewis," JARVIS says. "Sergeant Barnes will escort you - "

The rest of his words are drowned out by a loud banging at her front door, making her let out an involuntary shriek.

"Darcy!" And oh thank god, she recognizes that voice. She nearly trips over herself running out of her bedroom and yanks open her front door in the middle of James pounding on it. Thankfully he manages to avoid hitting her in the face.

"What's going on?" Darcy asks.

James takes her hand and yanks her with him, pulling her down the hall at a run. "The first line of tower defense has been breached," he says while they run. "They're on a lower level now trying to get access higher up."

"Jane! Is she - "

"Thor has her," James says. They round the corner and he stops at a door with a keypad instead of a door handle. He punches one in very quickly, the door slides open, and he ushers her inside. "Stay here, I'll be back."

"What?" Darcy asks, alarmed at the thought of being alone.

James steps closer, hands framing her face. It's then that she realizes she's shaking. "I promise I'll be back," he says. "I will, but I need to go help."

Darcy nods quickly, swallowing hard. "Okay."

“You’ll be safe here,” he says, stepping out. “This door won’t open unless someone with the correct access code enters it.” She just nods. James stares at her for a long moment. “I’ll come get you.” Then he closes the door and she’s alone.

Darcy takes a few deep breaths, eyes closed, before turning to look at the room. It’s not huge, maybe the size of her dorm room in college, but it has a couple of fold-up cots against one wall, some chairs and shelves lining one wall with non-perishables. As if someone could stay in here for a long time if they wanted to. She pokes at a little button next to the shelves and a small door slides open to reveal an airplane-style bathroom. Okay, good, that takes care of one worry.

There’s a screen next to the door that has security camera feeds on it, but it looks like it’s just showing her floor so she doesn’t mess with it yet. Maybe if she’s in here for a while she will, but this probably isn’t the time to fuck around with a system she doesn’t know. So she paces. She wishes she’d brought her phone, she’d be able to text Jane, make sure Thor did get her somewhere safe. She stops and looks up at the ceiling, a default for her whenever she talks to JARVIS.

“Uh, are you there JARVIS? Or are you too busy right now?” Darcy asks.

“I have availability in a lower capacity than usual,” he says.

“Okay, are you able to tell me if Jane is somewhere safe?” Darcy asks.

There’s a brief pause, then, “Dr. Foster is in a panic room two floors above us.”

Relief floods through her and she collapses into one of the chairs. “Okay, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

She’s achingly curious about what’s going on and if everyone else is okay, but if JARVIS is busy with the intruders, she doesn’t really want to keep asking for information. So she sits quietly, tapping her feet anxiously. Then she starts pacing again. She’s exhausted from being woken up at 3:00, but simultaneously way too wired to pull out a cot and try to sleep.

Maybe she should see if Jane or Tony or someone else in the brain trust has any kind of communication device she can wear as a watch or a pin or something. Then she can call Jane whenever something like this happens, which is honestly all too often. Though this is the first emergency they’ve had in the months they’ve been here, which is a better track record for anywhere else they’ve been in the last few years.

Darcy has always had a vivid imagination. It’s something her teachers encouraged, her parents tolerated, and her grandparents loved. Unfortunately, that’s keeping a reel of all the terrible things that could be happening right now running through her mind. James dead (unlikely, she knows), Thor dead (even more unlikely), Tony dead (frighteningly plausible compared to the other two). She needs a distraction. There’s a deck of cards on the food shelves. She plays a few games of solitaire, which isn’t quite good enough. She ends up trying to build a little house of cards like her aunt Marie showed her when she was younger.

She'd lost track of time, somewhat deliberately, so she jumps when she hears the keypad outside the door beeping. She's frozen in place, waiting to be sure it's someone she knows. When James appears, a bit ragged but in one piece, she jumps up off the ground, knocking over the delicate house of cards, and flings herself at him. He catches her with a flinch, which makes her immediately jump back.

"Oh god, I'm sorry, did I hurt you?" Darcy asks, looking him up and down. His clothes had rips in them and one hole looked a whole lot like a bullet went through it.

"Ribs are sore, I'm fine," he says, and pulls her back against him, a bit more gingerly than she had. She shudders in his arms, pressing her face against his neck.

"What happened?" she finally asks.

James pulls back, taking her hand and gently tugging her from the panic room. Good, she definitely is done being in there. She keeps her hand tight around his.

"AIM was trying to make a run for something locked in Tony's lab," James says as they walk. "I think they had inside help."

"What?" Darcy says, alarmed.

"It was too easy for them to get in. They're scientists...technically, but they knew how to get in easily. Much too easily," James says.

"So they had help," Darcy finishes.

James nods. "I think so. Tony, Maria Hill, and I are going through employee records tomorrow, see what we can find," he says.

"Good," Darcy says, nodding. "Good."

"Until then, we're locking down labs. No one in or out who isn't strictly vetted. You and Jane are set, and Thor will be with you both 100% of the time until we figure out who they are," James says.

"Okay," Darcy says, not sure what else to say. She likes the sound of that.

When they get back to their apartment doors, James steers her into his place instead of hers. That is just fine with her, she's still a bit shaky and has no interest in being alone. She'd probably be barring the door with all her furniture. James sits her on the couch and heads to the kitchen. Thank god for open floor plans, because she can still see him moving around while she curls up in the corner of the couch, sitting against the arm rest so she can see him.

"Chamomile or mint tea?" James asks.

"Chamomile," Darcy says. He's back a couple minutes later with a steaming mug, handing it to her before sitting down. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," he says, studying her carefully. "How are you doing?"

“Okay,” Darcy says, shrugging. “Not the first event like this.”

“That doesn’t make it easier,” James says. “There’s no shame in being shaken up.”

“It’s dumb!” Darcy says, making him raise his eyebrows. “We’ve had people come after us so often! Jane and I have a system down for evacuating! We’re usually good at this!”

“This is different,” James says, reaching out and covering her shaking hands with his. The tea in her mug was about to jump right out of it. “You’ve been here for months. Your guard has been down. You’ve felt safe. It makes sense if you’re a bit rocked.”

“It’s dumb,” Darcy says again, though what he’s saying makes sense. She takes a sip of her tea, sighing with satisfaction. She’s getting tired again, the adrenaline finally fading a bit. When her eyelids get heavy, James takes her tea from her hands and sets it on the coffee table.

“I’m going to shower, is that okay?” he says softly. She hums in response, keeping her eyes closed. He drapes a blanket over her before his soft footsteps leave the room.

Darcy starts dozing, sinking into a slightly stressful sleep, coming out of it often, as if she’s expecting to hear another siren soon. She lies down, curled up on two cushions under the soft green throw. Then the couch dips next to her and James’ hand starts running through her hair. She sighs, letting the movements soothe her to sleep.

Darcy has no idea what time it is when she wakes up, but bright sunlight is shining in through a gap in James’ drapes. She closes her eyes again nuzzling into her pillow. Then her eyes pop open again because that is *not* a pillow, instead her head is cushioned on James’ thigh, her forehead pressed against his torso, his hand resting on the back of her head. She...doesn’t know the protocol here. She’s fallen asleep on Jane and Thor and vice versa a lot, but she’s known them for a long time. And she doesn’t want to jump either of their bones.

Then James’ hand moves from the back of her head, lightly scritchng at her scalp, and she feels herself relaxing against him.

“You don’t have to wake up yet,” James says, his voice a low rumble. “It’s only eight.”

“I should call Jane,” Darcy mumbles, making absolutely no move to get up. “See how she’s doing.”

“I told Thor you’d be at my place,” James says. “He said they’d call when they woke up.”

“Mm, okay,” she says. James’ fingers keep running through her hair.

When she wakes up again, it’s to the smell of bacon. She’s alone on the couch this time, her head on a throw pillow. She pulls herself up, grabbing her glasses from the coffee table. She’s glad she keeps a hair tie on her wrist, pulling back the fluffy, bedhead mass.

“Morning,” James says when she sits on the stool at his kitchen island, watching him. He has a pan of bacon and another for pancakes.

“Is it?” Darcy asks, craning her neck to see the clock on the stove.

“Well, technically, noon,” James says.

“Any time is a good time for breakfast food,” Darcy says.

James smiles. “Jane called about an hour ago. I told her you were asleep,” he says.

“Is she all right?” Darcy asks.

“Yeah, she said she’s fine. She said you’re both taking Monday off while they add extra security to the lab levels,” James says.

“Good,” Darcy says. “Never going to complain about a day off.”

James’ pancakes are actually really good. Darcy tells him so, which makes him just look pleased as punch. When he asks how she’s feeling, she’s surprised to be able to truthfully answer that she’s much better. He waves away her thanks.

“I probably shouldn’t have pounded on your door while shouting,” he says with a grimace.

“It was effective,” she says with a shrug.

“I heard you scream,” he says.

“I was just startled. JARVIS said you were coming and I recognized your voice,” Darcy says, reaching across the island to grab his hand. “I recognized you, and nearly tripped over myself to get to the door because I know you’re safe.”

James snorts in a very self-deprecating manner. “Don’t think that’s quite true, doll.”

“Well it’s true, fight me on it,” she says defiantly.

That shocks a laugh out of him, making him shake his head. “I’m not good at this anymore,” James admits.

“Good at what?” Darcy asks.

“Talking to women,” James says. “Taking care of the people I care about.”

She tightens her grip on his hand when she thinks he might pull away. “I respectfully disagree,” she says softly. “Fight me on it.”

He swallows hard, studying her face with something strangely close to awe.

“I want to kiss you,” he confesses.

“You should,” she says.

James doesn’t waste time, circling the island quickly. She turns on the stool, not even having time to get down before he’s stepping into her space. She tugs him closer in the space

between her knees, hands on his waist. He takes that for the invitation it is, one hand wrapping around her waist, the other brushing her hair from her eyes and cradling her face. He stares down at her, face open in a way she's only seen a few times.

"Kiss me, James Barnes," she murmurs.

He does, just as soft and gentle as she'd imagined. He kisses her like she's something precious, something he's been coveting and wants to make it count. He's being careful with her, testing her boundaries. Sweet, but unnecessary. She opens her mouth, inviting more, and he doesn't hesitate, licking into her mouth in a way that takes her breath away. She completely understands the stories of women just melting into his touch.

They break the kiss, James' forehead pressed against hers. She's breathing hard, even though his super soldier lungs seem just fine. His lips curve into a smile and she can't help but return it.

"I'm doing this out of order," he says, thumb brushing over her cheekbone.

"I'm a big fan of this order," she says, pressing another kiss to his lips, tightening her grip on his hips, like he's going to disappear.

"I'm not going anywhere," he murmurs against her lips. "I'm...just entirely yours."

She presses him back just far enough for her to slip off the stool, because this really seems like something she should be standing for. She takes his hands in hers, standing as close as possible without being pressed up against him. She has to crane her neck to look up at him, but that's fine.

"I am completely crazy about you," she says. "Like, head over heels, beyond gone."

The smile he gives her is dazzling. "Reach for the stars, over the fence, World Series kind of stuff?"

Darcy stares at him, delighted. "Did you just quote *It Takes Two*?" she says.

"Maybe," he says, before his face turns somber. "There are days when I'm not great. I'm full of PTSD and trauma."

"I don't care," she says, then scrunches up her nose. "I don't mean it like that."

"I know what you meant," he says, tugging one of his hands from hers and trailing fingers from her cheek down to her throat. "I want you to know what you'd be getting into."

It takes *so* much restraint to not make a joke about him getting *in* to her, and by the look on his face, he definitely knows it.

"Okay, consider me aware and more than willing," she says, going onto tiptoes to kiss him again, and this time it's definitely less chaste. James groans against her mouth, bending down enough that he can lift her by her thighs, holding her tightly.

“How married are you to the idea of going slow?” she asks, lips brushing against his.

“Not remotely,” he answers, pressing his hips forward enough that she can feel the bulge in the front of his jeans. She can’t help the whimper, wrapping her arms tighter around his shoulders.

Darcy would be more than fine with doing this on the couch, but James apparently disagrees, keeping his arms tight around her as he walks down the hall to his room. She’s mouthing at his neck, grinning at his pleased hiss when her teeth scrape over his throat. Then he’s tossing her onto the bed, making her laugh, and crawling up right after her, hands running up her thighs.

She has a brief moment to be grateful she’d taken a shower before bed last night, then he’s hooking his thumbs in the waistband of her pajama pants, looking up at her in question. She nods quickly, biting her lip in anticipation. She’s been thinking about this, has come more than once on her fingers or vibrator imagining his mouth between her legs. He pulls her pants off, running calloused hands up her legs, thumb brushing over the center of her panties, already wet thanks to him.

“It’s been a while, doll,” he murmurs, brushing his thumb over her hard clit, making her whimper. “You’ll have to tell me what you like.”

“Okay,” she says, not even embarrassed at how breathless she already is.

Then he’s pulling down her panties, exposing her wet cunt. He curses under his breath, fingers trailing up her wet, swollen labia. She’d been embarrassed when previous partners did this, especially because Ian had a habit of unhelpful criticism, but James just looks blown away at his luck, and damn, that feels good.

James licks up her slit, tongue fluttering against her clit, and she doesn’t bother to try to stifle her gasp, having a feeling James likes the noise. He rumbles against her, slipping two thick fingers inside her. She shoves her shirt up over her breasts, one hand rolling at her nipple, the other tangling in his hair. He looks up at her, eyes dark as he moves against her, fingers finding her g-spot easily. Her legs start to tremble on either side of his face. He speeds up his tongue, presses harder with the fingers inside her. She pinches her nipple harder, hand tightening in his hair, and when he hums against her, she flies apart, her orgasm cresting over her.

James doesn’t stop, keeping his fingers inside her and mouth on her cunt as she ripples around him, crying out as pleasure shoots through her. She doesn’t think she’s ever come this quickly with a partner, has never had someone figure out her body this easily before. When he pulls back, his face wet from her, he looks exceedingly pleased with himself.

“Yeah, your skills haven’t faded at all, Sergeant,” she says, still breathless.

James grins, sitting back on his knees so he can pull his shirt over his head, and she can’t help the low whistle she lets out. He raises an eyebrow.

“Look, I’m a simple woman and you’re hot as hell, what do you want from me?” Darcy says, watching avidly as he stands up, sliding down his jeans, then boxers.

“I don’t think I’d ever call you simple,” James says, crawling up the bed until his powerful body is over hers, thighs forcing her legs open.

“I can’t decide if that’s an insult or not,” Darcy says, breath catching. She has a *thing*, okay? Well, lots of things, but this one specifically is about liking to feel small under someone bigger than her. Something about it feels safe. And with James...well, everything about him makes her feel safe and cared for.

James lowers his head, dragging his teeth up her throat while he palms her breast. She moans, arms wrapping around his back. “I don’t have a single insulting thing to say about you,” he says, lips brushing against her ear.

His hips shift, the blunt head of his cock pressing against her soaked opening, giving her the opportunity to say no. She has absolutely no intention of doing that. She drops a hand between their bodies, fingers wrapping around his thick cock. James lets out a hiss, gripping her hip as she strokes him a few times before guiding him to her entrance, rolling her hips to take him inside her.

“Fuck,” she moans. She hasn’t had sex in a while, and James is definitely bigger than any of the toys she uses, but damn the stretch is good.

“Are you okay?” James asks, bitten out through gritted teeth.

“Yes, god,” she says. She rolls her hips, making both of them moan.

That’s apparently what he was waiting for. He grips her hips and pulls back just enough to slam back into her, and god, yes, this is even better than she’d imagined. She rolls into each of his thrusts, letting out guttural noises she hadn’t even known she could make. James is loud above her, which so, *so* does it for her.

She gets lost in the drag of his cock moving in and out of her wet cunt, his hands moving over her body, pinching at her sensitive nipples, ghosting down her belly to play with her aching clit. Nothing exists except them, their roaming hands, their gasps of each other’s name, this little bubble that includes just them. She trusts him implicitly, with everything she is, and he pours that back into her, not even flinching when her hands roam his shoulders, fingers on his rough scars where his arm meets his body. She’s seen how he’s tensed when people have bumped him there, or touched him accidentally, and he doesn’t now, and it makes something unnamable and good rise up inside her.

His finger presses rhythmically against the side of her hard little clit, quickly finding the right pressure and speed to make her tighten around him, her moans turning into high pitched whimpers as she gets closer. His other hand tightens on her hip as he leans in, teeth grazing her ear.

“Let go, sweetheart,” James says in her ear, and oh, she’s definitely going to need him to dirty talk to her next time. “Let me feel you come.”

She can't hold back and doesn't want to. With a mewl she comes on his cock, cunt clenching around him as he fucks her through it, hissing at the way she feels. He gasps her name, thrusts coming quicker and more erratically, then he's stilling, cock jerking as he comes inside her. His face is buried in her throat, body tensing as he comes apart. She wraps her arms around him, holding him closer, trembling in his arms. They're both breathing harshly, wrapped around each other tightly, her fingers running through his hair.

Eventually James shifts, pulling back enough that he can see her face. He smiles down at her, cradling her face and leaning down to kiss her before gently withdrawing, softening cock slipping from her body.

"I'm going to grab something to clean up," he says, pressing a kiss to the inside of her knee. "Don't go anywhere."

"What if I have to pee?" she says, not at all hypothetically.

"Go pee, then don't go anywhere," he says.

"Solid compromise, I like it," she says, accepting the hand he offers her. He pulls her up, framing her face once she's standing, their nude bodies pressed together, to kiss her again, like he can't get enough of it.

She's quick in the bathroom, just making sure to pee and avoid the UTI she always gets if she doesn't use the restroom quickly after sex, and wash her hands. When she gets out of his ensuite, James is already back in bed, having cleaned off in the other bathroom, the blankets up to his waist. She grins, taking a few running steps before leaping into the bed next to him, making them both bounce. She's giddy, so sue her.

She ends up under the sheets, bare body pressed against his. She's halfway on his chest, her head tucked under his. One of his arms is wrapped tightly around her waist, the other trailing up and down the arm she has on his chest. She sighs happily, not able to imagine a single thing that would get her out of bed right now.

"This isn't really how I planned to do this," he says, his voice rumbling through her.

"Mm? What was your plan?" she asks, fingers tracing little circles on his chest. He catches her fingers, bringing them up to kiss them before setting them back on his chest. She grins, resuming her movements.

"I was going to ask you to the Game of Thrones exhibit," he says. "Dinner after, maybe dancing if I could convince you you wouldn't step on my feet."

"I would totally step on your feet," Darcy says. "I've already stepped on your feet!"

"I'm happy to have you step on my feet," he says.

"Well, wish granted, we have plenty of time," she says, smiling when he presses a kiss to the crown of her head. It's like he can't stop touching her like this now that he knows he can. "We can definitely do that, it sounds fun as hell, but I'm glad this happened this way."

“Mm, why’s that?” he asks.

“Because I’m impatient,” she says, making him laugh. “And you’re really, *really* good in bed.”

James laughs again, chest moving beneath her with the sound. “I think that title goes to you,” he says.

“Damn, and you haven’t even seen my blowjob skills yet,” Darcy says, making him snort. “Okay, we can share it.”

“I’m sure we could get Tony to make a big trophy,” James says.

“If you’re betting some kind of modesty will keep me from doing that, you’re in for a real shock, buddy,” she says.

“Speaking of shocks,” James says. “Is Thor going to electrocute me for sleeping with you?”

“Nah,” she says. “I think he and Jane know I’ve been into you for a while. They probably made bets on when it would happen.”

“Damn, we should have gotten in on that,” James says. “It probably could have paid for that Game of Thrones exhibit.”

Darcy laughs. “Well, we could lie, cheat them out of their money,” she says.

He hums consideringly, then pulls her completely on top of him, hands trailing up her torso from her waist. His thumbs roll her nipples, making her gasp, a jolt of heat going through her.

“Tempting,” he says, pressing a thigh up between her legs, earning a whimper. “But I don’t think I can go back to not touching you however I can, whenever I have the chance.”

Her breath stutters out of her as she looks down at him, at the desire and longing and care in his eyes (she can’t say love, not quite yet), and knows her expression is very similar. “Can’t argue that,” she says, not even embarrassed at how breathless she is.

End Notes

[This](#) is the moon notebook I mentioned, which I have and love.

[This](#) is the astrophysicist Barbie that I really wish I had lol.

[Here](#) are the cactus sticky notes.

Come talk to me on [tumblr](#).

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