To Which Fate Binds You

by LadyWinterlight, NerdyKat

Summary

“Accept the things to which fate binds you, and love the people with whom fate brings you together, but do so with all your heart.”
— Marcus Aurelius, Meditations

Notes

LunaraSkye left the following comment on Soulmates One-Shots:
“Could you do a chapter with Natasha/Wanda/Maria/Skye? For some reason I’ve gotten it into my head that they’d be perfect for each other.”

At first I thought, "Sure, I can do that!" But when discussing the idea with my beta, NerdyKat, she made a "what if?" suggestion... and I loved it, but much like FWOAN, it was too big a project for a single writer.

Then she offered to collab with me. And, well, the rest is history?
See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

SHIELD was still working on cleanup in New York City after the Chitauri invasion when the fans started to show up in costumes. Mostly dressed as the flashier heroes, there were a riot of Thor, Iron Man, Cap and Hulk costumes arrayed outside the Tower. They weren’t actually hurting anything, though; just clamoring for an autograph or picture should they catch a glimpse of the heroes themselves.

Maria Hill sighed but agreed when Pepper Potts asked for her assistance in clearing a path through the cosplayers one afternoon. She and Tony were hosting a charity benefit to help with the repairs to the city, and they needed clearance for their guests to reach the Tower. Fortunately, the main ballroom was on a low enough floor to have been largely untouched by the invasion.

As she organized security to hustle the cosplayers off the sidewalk in front of the Tower, one in particular caught her eye. It was the first Black Widow cosplayer she’d seen, and she hid a smile that Nat was finally getting some recognition for her part in the defense of New York.

She looked the slim young woman up and down, taking in how well the fitted black jumpsuit looked on her; she didn’t have Nat’s figure, she was softer and curvier, but she was still slim enough to pull it off. “The Black Widow?” she asked. “Really?”

“What, she’s hot!” the young woman replied immediately. Then she paused, as if thinking through what Maria had said. Maria, in turn, was startled to hear the words of one of her soulmarks. Could
The girl in question gained a thoughtful look on her face then looked around to check and see if anyone was listening in before saying in nearly a whisper, “Wait… did I… holy no way.”

Maria grabbed the girl by the shoulders, nodding to the security guards who had fluidly taken over getting the other cosplayers off the sidewalk, while she led the girl inside. “You did,” Maria confirmed quietly. “And I assume I did, too?” The girl nodded. “I’m Maria.”

“Sk ye, ” the girl named herself. “It’s really great to finally meet one of you. Oh, wait… you have more than one, right?”

“I do,” Maria said carefully. “One of our soulmates is upstairs because she’s attending the event. With you we just have one more unaccounted for.”

Skye nodded sadly. “It’s good of Stark to do this,” Skye admitted. “I grew up not too far from here. I know a lot of people who lost their homes because of the attack.”

Maria looked at her, slightly alarmed. “Were you anywhere near here when the attack happened?”

Skye nodded. “I was parked up on 51st street. One of those Space Whales nearly crushed my van.”

Maria raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t think maybe you should go home? Buildings are historically more structurally sound than automotives.”

Skye looked down, unable to meet Maria’s eyes, clearly afraid of… something. “My van is my home,” she said quietly. Maria stood, staring at Skye, stunned. She wasn’t entirely sure how to respond to the admission. “It’s by choice,” Skye amended, looking up. She seemed to be covering her fear with defiance and bravery. Maria tried not to smile. Natasha had been that way in the early days. She still was, particularly after she had a nightmare about the Red Room.

“We’ve all been in situations where we had to make something out of nothing,” Maria said. “You’ll get no judgement from me or Nat for living out of your van. You are, however, free to come live with us in Washington when you’re comfortable with doing so.”

Skye paled and took a step back, one hand going up to the red wig on top of her head and taking it off. Dark brown tresses spilled out. “Natasha?” she said faintly. “My soulmate’s an Avenger?”

“The Avenger thing happened by accident,” Maria said softly. “A dear friend of hers was killed just before the Battle and… well let’s just say that Nat has vengeful tendencies.”

“I… I guess I can understand that,” Skye said after a moment’s hesitation. “But really, I shouldn’t meet her like this… well…” she gestured to the costume and watched Maria smirk.

“I dunno, I kind of like it. I think she’ll be flattered,” Maria answered with a chuckle. “I’d really like to take you up to meet her. Please?”

“Alright,” Skye answered softly. “If you’re sure it’ll be okay…”

“Pretty sure. Besides…” It was Maria’s turn to hesitate, but she braced herself and pushed on, “there are some things you need to know. About me. About us.”

“I’m pretty sure soulmates happen for a reason,” Skye said with a shrug. “I’m adaptable.”

Maria laughed. “Good. With us, you’ll need to be.” She held her hand out to Skye, who took it, and
led the way to the elevator. “JARVIS, can you take us to our floor?”

“Yes, Agent Hill,” came a voice.

Skye started. “What the hell was that?” she asked.

“JARVIS,” Maria said, amused at her soulmate. “Stark’s AI.”

All fear was replaced by curiosity across Skye’s face. “Seriously?” she asked. Maria couldn’t help but laugh again. “That’s so cool! I wanna see how it works!”

“You can always talk to him. I don’t know how much of his programming JARVIS is aware of, but he’s basically everywhere in the tower.”

Skye’s dark eyes were still dancing with excitement and interest when the elevator doors opened. Natasha stood in the hall, and her lips quirked slightly with amusement as her gaze took in both Maria and Skye. Maria wasn’t sure if Nat was more amused by Skye’s obvious excitement or the fact that she was still fully dressed in her Black Widow costume, sans wig.

When dark eyes met green, Skye blushed and suddenly felt shy again. “Hi,” she said softly. “It’s really nice to meet you, finally.”

Natasha smiled, a genuine expression of happiness that few ever got to see. “It’s good to finally have found you, too. It has been a long time of looking.”

“Hey, at least we’re together now. And only one more to go,” Maria said lightly. “Nat, this is Skye.”

“I see I have a fan,” Natasha said, giving Skye an appreciative once-over. Skye blushed.

“You’re gorgeous and you’re badass, and none of those people out there give you any sort of recognition,” Skye said, pushing through her embarrassment. “So I thought I would.”

“I’m a spy,” Natasha said. “If you want someone who wants recognition, you should go talk to Stark. That said, I’m glad I meet my soulmate’s approval.”

Skye nodded. “I know something of what that’s like,” she admitted. “I tend to stay on the D.L. myself. I meant more… all the commentators will talk about is what you look like when, if reports are accurate, you’re the one who closed the thing and saved everyone.”

“I’m happy to leave it a team effort,” Natasha said quietly. “But thank you for the thought. Anyway, come on in and have a seat. No need to stand by the elevators all day.”

Skye followed them into the living area. Natasha and Maria glanced at each other and, by mutual agreement, did not both sit on the couch. Maria took the armchair instead, and Skye tentatively settled on the couch with Natasha, with a large gap of space between them. “How long have you two been together?”

“Basically since Barton brought her into SHIELD,” Maria said. “That was… 2007? 2006?”


“Right, right,” Maria agreed. Skye just listened, a hint of a smile on her face.

“And really, she’s lucky that soulbonds are strong. I had… instructions… to bring in my soulmate, should I ever meet him or her,” Natasha said in a low voice. “Fortunately, it appears that the methods used to impart those instructions didn’t take.”
“You’d have had a hard time going through with them anyway,” Maria smirked.

“2007. That’s a while,” Skye commented idly when they paused. “But I suppose you’re both older than I am. Actually, I don’t know if you all are or not...”

Maria nodded. “I’m the oldest of us; I was two when I got Nat’s mark, and six when I got yours. Our missing fourth is about ten months younger than you; February 1989.”

“What? Okay; I just knew that I couldn’t remember not having three marks. And that I spent most of my childhood being told how strange it was.”

“Your parents didn’t like the idea?” Maria asked.

Skye just shrugged. “Dunno. I grew up in an orphanage. Not all that far from here, actually. Catholic nuns still aren’t used to the idea that multiple soulmates are perfectly acceptable.”

“Catholic nuns, huh?” Maria asked rhetorically. “I have to confess, I never had much experience with them growing up. I grew up on a military base. Mom took off when I was 10 when she got tired of the life, so all I had was my dad. After High School I spent six years in the Army, then joined SHIELD.”

“I know a nun or two that could have been mistaken for a drill sergeant,” Skye said, cracking a smile. Natasha gave Skye a searching look, and Skye got the distinct impression that Natasha was looking for what Skye wasn’t saying. “I, uh, do you,” Skye began hesitantly feeling uncomfortable and needing a change of subject. “Do you happen remember when you got my mark?”

“Of course,” Maria answered. “I wasn’t that young. And my parents wrote down the dates I got yours and Natasha’s. Why?”

“Oh!” Natasha’s eyes went wide. “You don’t know when your birthday is?” she asked gently.

“No… when I was left at the orphanage, I had nothing. No name, no anything.”

“July 2, 1988,” Maria told her.

“July 2nd... wow. I... thank you,” Skye breathed out.

“I’m glad we could help,” Natasha said honestly.

“Nat, do you think you have a dress in her size?” Maria asked, changing the subject abruptly as she let Skye process. “We have to get her ready for the party, quick.”

“What?” Skye objected. “No! I can’t go to that thing. I wouldn’t know how to act!”

“Tony Stark is hosting this thing,” Maria snorted. “Acting like a normal human being is how you fit in.”

“There’s gonna be food at this thing, right?” Skye asked, panicked. “I wouldn’t know which fork to use or anything like that.”

“Relax, Skye; it’s a buffet. Appetizers, finger foods, not a formal banquet or anything. You’ll be fine,” Natasha said soothingly. “Evening event, not a dinner party.”

“Right,” Skye said slowly. “I remember that... but I assumed we were keeping the three of us on the down low? I mean, unless you want to...”
“No, it’s a good idea, at least for now,” Natasha confirmed. “We don’t know who’s going to be gunning for us after New York and that isn’t something we want to expose you to. We haven’t even evaluated where your baseline self-defense skills are.”

“Who should we pair you with?” Maria asked the room. “I’ll be busy all evening and someone other than Clint hanging around Natasha all evening is going to cause attention.”

“Bruce or Steve, I think,” Natasha noted. Skye paled, the reality of the situation sinking in. The Hulk and Captain America were going to be at this event. So was Hawkeye. Earth’s Mightiest Heroes and she was a soulmate to one of them.

“Bruce might be better.” Maria noted. “Steve just got defrosted and doesn’t have that many friends who aren’t ninety. Bruce, on the other hand, has travelled the world and knows people from all different countries. The press won’t notice that he has some unidentified woman talking to him. Plus they’re a little afraid of his alter ego.”

Natasha studied Skye’s appearance for a moment. “We could work with the foreign angle. You look part Chinese; we could probably make you up so that you look fully so. Do you speak Mandarin by chance?”

“Um, well, I studied it for a bit in school. I don’t remember a ton, but maybe enough to get by?” Skye managed to answer, still wide-eyed at the idea that she was really going to be doing this.

“That’s fine, Bruce isn’t fluent anyway, as far as I know,” Natasha dismissed the language issue readily. “Though I am, so if you want to practice sometime…” she smiled as she made the offer.

“I… I think I’d like that, if you want to,” Skye managed to answer.

“Good. Now, I think the straight, black wig would work well if we used one of my red floor-length gowns that I have. You’re a bit taller than me, but I also tend to wear three inch heels, so if you wear flats, we might just be able to pull it off.”

The next hour was a flurry of activity as Natasha expertly did her makeup, taught her the ins and outs of wearing a wig - better than the costume wig she’d worn for her Widow outfit - and somehow found the time to dress herself. Natasha herself was wearing a little black dress that hugged her so tightly that Skye almost felt like her soulmate was begging to be touched.

“Like what you see?” Maria asked, amused, as she fastened ruby earrings that matched her evening dress. Skye went red. “Hey, there’s no shame in ogling your soulmate, especially one as beautiful as Natasha. It does bring to mind a conversation we need to have later though.”

“Conversation?” Skye asked, then felt stupid. “I mean, I’m sure we have a lot to talk about, really…”

“You’re right, but there are some specific things you need to know,” Maria said quietly. “We don’t have time now, I’m afraid, but I thought I’d bring it up so hopefully one of us will remember.”

“It’s fine,” Skye answered. “I just hope you still want to talk to me when the evening’s over,” she joked, though Maria caught a brief hint of real uncertainty in Skye’s gaze.

“Trust me,” Maria said, carefully tucking a strand of hair away from Skye’s eyes. “There isn’t anything you can do tonight that would change our minds about wanting you here.” She smiled. “Half the reason you’re coming along is because we’re not ready to let you out of our sight yet.”

“There’s not a whole lot you can do in general that would change our minds,” Natasha said with a warm smile. “I’ve got more red in my ledger than you do, that I promise you, and Maria still loves
me. Hopefully, you will too.”

Skye saw vulnerability in Natasha’s eyes. Maybe their lives hadn’t been so different. Rejected, used, criminals. Skye touched Natasha’s cheek briefly. “I’m sure…” She started, voice shaking with nerves. She hadn’t allowed herself to be this vulnerable since the Brodys’. “I’m sure I will.”

“Come on,” Maria said. “We’ve got work to do. Skye, I’ll introduce you to Bruce. Natasha?”

“I’ll read Clint in. We’ll both keep an eye on you,” Natasha said, reaching out and giving Skye’s hand a squeeze.

“Just keep him away from the air ducts,” Maria huffed. “I do not need another Reddit thread incident.”

“People started posting images of places Clint likes to surveil from,” Natasha said. “It was hilarious.”

“It was a security nightmare,” Maria groused. Natasha just laughed. “Get going. We’ll see you soon.”

Skye followed Maria to the elevators. “Bruce’s floor, please, JARVIS.”

“Of course, Agent Hill.” The elevator moved smoothly and in a moment, they had arrived. “Dr. Banner says you may enter.”

“Thank you,” Skye said as she followed Maria into the living room.

“What can I do for you, Maria?” Dr. Banner asked politely as he emerged from his room, looking uncomfortable in the expensive tux that Stark undoubtedly had supplied him with.

“Dr. Bruce Banner, I’d like you to meet Skye,” Maria introduced them. “We need to ask you to do us a favor.”

“Pleased to meet you, Skye,” Bruce said, extending his hand. “That’s a very unique name; I think I’ve only heard it once before.”

“Introduction to Applied Nuclear Physics at Culver,” Skye supplied taking the hand and shaking it. “Fall 2007.”

Surprise and recognition came across Bruce’s face while Maria looked downright surprised. “You… know Bruce?” Maria asked.

Skye shrugged. “I audited a course of his at Culver; it was interesting and I enjoyed it.”

“Her final paper had some very interesting insights into the applications of gamma radiation on our everyday lives,” Bruce explained to Maria. “Particularly in the specific applications of concentrating the gamma radiation waves to treat cancer more efficiently. I encouraged her to pursue a degree on the subject, but I never heard from her again.”

“Skye’s coming to the event tonight and we were hoping you would keep her company,” Maria said.

“Sure. Anything in particular I should be watching out for?” Bruce asked, concern for his former student bleeding into his voice.

“She’s our soulmate,” Maria said tenderly, cupping Skye’s cheek. Skye turned her face into Maria’s touch, smiling back.
Bruce’s expression changed to one of joy. “Oh, Maria. Congratulations! I know you’ve been looking for her for a long time. You’ve just got the one more, right?”

“That’s right. Hopefully soon,” Maria agreed. “I’m glad you two will have plenty to talk about tonight, though…” She slanted a glance at Skye, wondering why she hadn’t mentioned knowing Bruce, but then dismissed the thought. They hadn’t exactly had time to share life stories.

“We’ll be fine, Maria,” Bruce assured her. “Go do whatever you need to finish before the event. I’ll take care of your soulmate for you.”

“By the way, her cover for the evening is that she’s a Chinese-American named Melinda Wen,” Maria added. Then her voice turned wry. “Though I suppose we can explain that she’s with you because she’s working on a nuclear physics degree of her own.”

“It’ll do for tonight,” Skye said, laughing softly. “I’ll see you at the party, right?” she asked, looking shy again for a moment.

“Of course you will.” Maria pulled Skye in for a gentle hug, then stepped away to head back to the elevator. “See you soon!” she called as the elevator doors closed again.

“I take it this is all very new?” Bruce asked gently as Skye’s eyes followed Maria until she was gone.

“I just met them today,” Skye admitted. “Just a couple hours ago, I was downstairs…none the wiser.”

“You’re handling all this a lot better than a lot of people I know would,” Bruce said, tugging uncomfortably at his tie. “Of course, if I remember you always were the type to take things head on, no matter what the circumstances.”

Skye shrugged. “I come from a world where what you have, you earned,” she said.

“And you’re wondering what you did to earn Maria and Natasha?” Bruce asked curiously. After a long pause, Skye nodded. “Skye, the universe doesn’t work like that. You don’t need to earn Maria or Natasha any more than they need to earn you. You four are parts of a soul - pieces of a puzzle. You’re 25% of the solution.”

Skye rolled her eyes. “I come from a world where what you have, you earned,” she said.

“Dangerous in the wrong hands, but an interesting concept to be… how did you phrase it? 1% of the solution?” Bruce said. “The scientific community could have used someone like you. They’re so concentrated on ‘publish or perish’ and collaborating with a few individuals that they forget that more brain power can create more efficient outcomes.”

“I had other endeavors that I needed to pursue,” Skye said honestly. “But people coming together to solve a problem… there’s kinda something beautiful in that, you know?”

“In many respects, I believe you’re correct,” he replied with a smile. “Though I often hear more discourse in that vein from people in the softer sciences rather than advanced physics of any variety.”

Skye chuckled. “I took your class because I was interested, Dr. Banner. But I was never in any of the physics programs at Culver.”

“So I discovered,” he said ruefully. “And it’s just Bruce, please. When I didn’t see you in any of the second tier classes, I looked into it and discovered that you weren’t a full time student at all. I wished
you had been, though; if you ever decide to go back, I’ll happily write you a recommendation.”

“Thank you,” Skye responded, blushing again. “I don’t see it happening, but I’ll let you know if that changes."

“May I ask why you never enrolled full time?”

Skye studied him for a long moment. “I suppose, but you have to promise to keep it to yourself.”

“Of course, you have my word,” Bruce answered seriously, taken aback by her sudden change in demeanor.

“I was only able to audit the courses because I hacked the school’s student database,” she admitted. “I barely have my GED, let alone qualifications for college.”

Bruce blinked, shocked speechless for a moment. “But that can’t be right! Your papers showed real promise, Skye. You clearly have the intelligence for the work, and the dedication to stick with it.”

Skye just shrugged. “It is what it is. I haven’t had the… advantages other people grow up with, I suppose.”

“I understand,” Bruce said after a moment. “I’ve known a lot of people like that in my travels around the world. But who knows; maybe your luck is changing. And I stand by my offer; if you decide to enroll in a program, anywhere, I’ll help as much as I can to make it work for you.”

“I appreciate it,” Skye said with a smile. “Really.”

“Dr. Banner, Miss Skye, the event is beginning presently,” JARVIS spoke up. “If you do not wish to be late, you should depart.”

“Thank you, JARVIS,” Bruce said with a rueful smile. “Can’t be late to the Avengers’ event, I suppose.”

“No, I don’t suppose you can. I’m not an Avenger.”

“No, but you’re soul-bonded to one,” he answered. “And she won’t forgive us if you vanish on her.”

Bruce held out his arm to Skye. “Shall we, Miss Wen?”

“I believe we shall. If only to protect us from Natasha’s wrath if we don’t!” Skye joked.

Bruce chuckled as he escorted her into the elevator and down to the charity gala.
Chapter 2

Thanks to everyone for the lovely feedback! We love to hear from people.

We forgot to note that this story will update on Mondays and Thursdays. Please look for us to post regularly on those days. :)

Skye had a hard time believing her eyes when she looked at the ornate ballroom that the doors opened to reveal. Not too many people were there, since they had arrived on time and for most parties in New York, on time was early.

“Tony doesn’t do things half-measured,” Bruce said, laughing at her awe. “Though personally, I think there’s a little bit of guilt in here that we couldn’t stop arguing long enough to stop Loki from attacking New York.” Bruce looked uncomfortable.

“You guys saved a lot of people,” Skye said easily. “Buildings can be rebuilt. The insurance companies won’t be happy, but I’m pretty sure no one anticipated aliens attacking New York.”

“74 people are dead,” Bruce said. “That’s not nothing.”
“74 out of 1.6 million,” Skye argued. “Not to sound callous, but if you hadn’t been there, it would have been a lot worse. SHIELD would have nuked the invasion and 8 million New Yorkers would have died. Including me.”

“You were here when it happened?” Bruce asked.

Skye nodded. “Yeah, I was. Just between you and me, it was part insane and part terrifying.”

“I don’t think anyone would question that assessment,” Bruce answered with a small smile. “You would have to be pretty insane not to find it terrifying, I think.”

“What does that make you guys?” Skye asked with a smirk.

“Oh, we’re definitely all crazy,” Bruce chuckled. “But we were all afraid on some level. We just don’t let it stop us from doing what we need to do.”

“I get that,” Skye agreed. “I guess that makes us lucky to have the Avengers in the first place.”

While it was quiet, mostly the Avengers themselves and a few close friends present for the start of the event, Natasha and Clint came over to join them. The four exchanged smiles and Bruce, taking a moment to be sure he remembered their cover, turned to make introductions. “Natasha Romanoff, Clint Barton, I’d like you to meet Melinda Wen. Melinda, Natasha and Clint.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Skye said politely, holding her hand out to shake. Natasha beat Clint to it by half a second, taking her hand and shaking it for perhaps a few heartbeats longer than strictly necessary. Skye just smiled and didn’t comment on it.

Clint took his turn next, smiling. “It’s nice to see Bruce with a pretty lady,” he said. “And it’s good to meet you, Miss Wen.” Skye caught the appraising look in his eyes, then saw the way he smiled at Natasha; he definitely knew who she was.

“What’s going on over here,” came a voice that caused Natasha and Clint to freeze. A pair of hands clapped Bruce on the back. “Brucie, my boy. You need a grown up drink after saving my life. Who’s your friend, Brucie?”

Skye’s eyes went wide as she realized that Tony Stark had come over to talk to them. On one hand, he was a genius, and had done more with computers in the last five years than most other people could do in a lifetime. On the other hand, he was a notorious loudmouth and Skye was suddenly very aware of why Natasha and Maria wanted to keep their soulmate status quiet.

Skye delicately extended her hand. Melinda Wen Melinda Wen Melinda Wen, she reminded herself before daring to speak. “Melinda Wen,” Skye said with an easy smile.

“Tony Stark,” Tony said. “But you already knew that.”

Skye raised an eyebrow. “Did I?” she asked curiously, taking on an uninterested tone. She could see approval in Natasha’s eyes and Clint looked like he was about to explode from not laughing.

Tony’s jaw dropped. “But… you had to have heard of me, I’m Iron Man.”

“I’ve spent the last two years buried in my thesis. The four years before that I was in undergrad at Peking University and before that I was in High School,” Skye said. “Why would I know that?”

Tony looked crushed. “But… superheroes are cool,” he argued.
Skye shrugged. “Maybe to some, but I’ve never had much interest in comic books.”

“Brucie, I can’t really compliment you on your guest,” Tony said loudly. “No accounting for taste, this one.”

“She’s a Nuclear Biology Ph.D. candidate,” Bruce said.

“Gonna take another whack at making a supersoldier?” Tony asked.

Skye shook her head. “Nope, I’m going to cure cancer,” Skye said proudly.

“Sounds… boring,” Tony said. “But maybe SI should hire you. Pepper, get over here!” he said as he turned and called for his company’s CEO.

Pepper Potts made her way over to them. “You bellowed?” she asked.

“Pepper, this woman wants to cure cancer,” Tony said. “You should hire her.”

“Hi,” Pepper said warmly, extending her hand. “I’m Pepper Potts. Please excuse him. Lord knows the rest of us have to.”

“Melinda Wen,” Skye gushed as she took Pepper’s hand and shook it. “I’ve heard so much about you since you took over Stark Industries. It’s amazing, what you’ve done for women in Corporate America…”

“Hey! How come you’ve heard of her?” Tony objected.

“She’s grown Stark Industries biotech division by over 500% since she was appointed CEO. Research in biotech benefits a lot more than just cancer research,” Skye said. “Plus she’s one of the first female CEOs of a Fortune 500 Company, she’s the first female CEO of a Fortune 500 Company who wasn’t a some frumpy, older woman, and she donates a portion of SI philanthropy funds towards STEM programming. Of course I’m paying attention. She’s done more for my generation than almost anyone.”

Pepper blushed. “I don’t really think of it as donating funds so much as investing in Stark Industries’ future. In ten years, those girls could be top scientists at SI. If you’d like a job, we could discuss it.”

“I’ve got another four years on my thesis,” Skye said with a smile. “But I appreciate the gesture.”

“So how did you meet Brucie here?” Tony asked curiously.

“Semester abroad at Culver,” Skye said. Natasha gave her impressed look. They hadn’t covered that, but Skye hadn’t lied to Maria - she was adaptable. “I took Professor Banner’s class on the Introduction to Applied Nuclear Physics.”

“She was one of my best students. I was sorry to see her go.”


“We should go mingle, Tony,” Pepper said. More guests had begun arriving while they spoke. “It was nice to meet you, Melinda.”

Clint and Natasha wandered off a few minutes later, off to keep an eye on everyone in the room as a whole. Bruce and Skye meandered towards the buffet, back to chatting about physics classes of the past. They acquired a selection of food to nibble and then just kind of drifted around the room for a bit. Skye’s eyes occasionally sought out Maria or Natasha, but she caught herself before she could
Instead, Skye listened attentively as Bruce shifted a bit into lecture mode; he’d gotten over her head, but she was still quite interested so she just listened and asked the occasional question. Skye didn’t even realize much time was passing until a polite voice spoke into a pause in discussion. “May I join you for a while?”

Bruce paused and looked up to see Steve Rogers, also with a plate in hand, standing a few steps away. “Of course, Steve. Please do.”

“Thank you,” Steve said with a relieved expression. “You two have had this corner to yourselves for a while, and I need a break from the…”

“To-polite socialites?” Skye offered with a cheeky grin.

“Yes. Them,” Steve said. Then he blushed. “I’m sorry, I don’t believe we’ve met. Steve Rogers.”

Skye took his outstretched hand with a smile. “It’s quite alright, Mr. Rogers. I’m Melinda Wen.”

“It’s a pleasure, Miss Wen.”

“Melinda, please,” she said sweetly.

“Then please call me Steve,” he replied. “What brings you here?” he asked before realizing that wasn’t the most intelligent question he could have asked.

Nevertheless, she simply smiled again. “How could I pass up the opportunity to spend an evening talking physics with one of my favorite professors?” she asked rhetorically. “We haven’t had a chance to catch up in quite some time.”

“I’m sorry if I interrupted…”

“Not at all,” Bruce said with a shake of his head. “I don’t need to monopolize Melinda’s attention all evening. There are plenty of wonderful people here for her to get to know.”

“And we’re certainly happy to give you an excuse to avoid the attention of some of the other guests for a while,” Skye added with a smile. “How are you adapting to… your change of circumstances?” she asked delicately.

“It hasn’t been easy,” Steve admitted in a low voice. “It’s almost too much to take in at once.”

Skye made a sympathetic sound. “I’m sure people are shoving modern culture at you based on their favorites. If you want my honest opinion, I would suggest a more sequential approach.”

“Now I know you’re a scientist,” Steve said with a smile. “Very methodical. Please, continue.”

“Seriously, we have music and movies going all the way back to things you’d be familiar with. Start there. As you make your way forward in time, things will make more sense,” she explained. “So much of culture is built on what came before. You won’t understand the significance of things without knowing what they’re based on. 30s swing was based on 20s big band music. Modern rock wouldn’t exist if we hadn’t had the classic rock era. So even though it will take a while, you should work your way up through time rather than trying to jump into the deep end all at once.”

Realizing she’d almost taken on a lecturing tone herself, Skye stopped, blushing. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ramble on at you.”
“Actually, ma’am, what you’ve said makes far more sense to me than some of the things Tony has suggested. I may have to give it a try,” Steve said with another smile for her.

“I can help you put together a list, if you’d like, Steve. Maybe Melinda here can help, too,” Bruce offered. “You have dozens of options for movies and hundreds for music. Maybe we can give you some of the more iconic highlights, and you can branch out from there?”

“That would be great. Thank you,” Steve said, accepting gracefully.

Skye looked at Steve, then glanced at Bruce. “We should set him up with an iTunes account. It’s pretty simple to use if we load him up movies and playlists.” She looked back at Steve. “Please, feel free to ask if you have questions you think we can answer…”

“Do you think…” Steve began, then paused. Her expression of earnest interest encouraged him to continue, though. “Would it be possible to track down my old friends? Or, maybe their families?”

“Of course,” Skye answered softly. “Most of your Howling Commandos are pretty well known to history.”

“Really?” Steve smiled, looking proud. “Can you tell me more about them?”

When Skye hesitated and glanced at Bruce, he just smiled and waved her onwards. So Skye pulled out her phone and started bringing up references to augment the stories she remembered, both from school and from television shows and the History Channel. Steve just listened raptly, his expression both pleased and wistful.

“Thank you, Melinda,” Steve said in a soft, heartfelt tone, after she’d covered the basics and promised to send him more detailed information that he could read for himself.

“It’s not a problem, Steve,” she answered gently. “I know what it’s like to have unanswered questions.”

“I still appreciate it,” he said.

“You’re welcome, then.”

“I can’t believe we didn’t think of that,” Bruce noted. “Sorry Steve, we should have thought of that.”

“To be fair, I never asked,” Steve said with a shrug. He turned to Skye. “So I know you’re a scientist, what kind of scientist are you?”

“Nuclear physicist,” Skye said. “I work with gamma radiation.”


Skye shook her head. “Not at all, my concentration has always been primarily in cancer treatments.”


Skye nodded. “Radiation therapy is used in cancer treatments a lot these days.”

“How’d you get into all this?” Steve asked.

“I had a lot of time to read as a kid and a New York City library card,” Skye said.

The rest of the evening passed quickly. Bruce, Steve, and Skye managed to remain mostly unnoticed.
in the corner. Once enough people had left, they went back up to the common floor where Skye located Maria and Natasha. After only finding them that afternoon and having been mostly separated from her soulmates all evening, Skye was somewhat hesitant to approach them.

Though Skye hesitated, it was clear that her soulmates had no such concerns. Bruce’s hand on her back kept her in place as first Natasha and then Maria beelined for her; a moment later she was bracketed between her soulmates, and Skye began to relax slightly. “Hi,” she whispered. Bruce smiled at the trio and headed away to join Tony and Pepper, further into the room.

“Hi yourself,” Natasha said softly. With a quick glance at Skye for permission, Natasha began to carefully remove the wig Skye wore. Deep brown tresses were freed from their pins and Skye ran her hands through her hair gratefully once it was free.

“Thank you. It wasn’t uncomfortable, but it still felt weird,” Skye said.

“You’ll get used to it,” Maria said lightly.

“If I must,” Skye said wryly, and her soulmates laughed. “Did you have a good evening?”

“I’m not a fan of society functions, but I survive,” Maria said undoing the pins in her own hair and running her fingers through it.

“Why is she here?” Tony asked bluntly. “And why was she wearing a wig?”

“This isn’t Melinda Wen,” Natasha said. “There’s no such person as Melinda Wen.”

“Who is she?” Tony demanded.

“I go by Skye, but you probably know me as Skyenet,” Skye said.

Tony took a step back, his eyes wide. “You’re Skyenet? You’re a child.”

“I’m twenty-four,” Skye said full of defensive pride. “Just because I made your personal firewall my bitch doesn’t mean you should cry about it. Fix it.”

“I’ll give you credit though,” Tony said, losing some of the fire in his tone, “That was an impressive hack that you did.”

Skye rolled her eyes and grinned. “Thanks. It was fun.”

“Fun?” Tony sputtered. “You hacked my system for fun?”

“Technically it was a drunken bet…” Skye said slowly. “I was about four beers and two tequila shots in.”

“Are my systems that bad or are you that good?” Tony asked.

“I’m that good,” Skye said with a shrug.

“So the nuclear physics thing was a lie?” Tony asked.

“Eh,” Skye hedged. “I’m not a Ph.D. candidate, and I never officially went to college, but I did audit a class of Doctor Banner’s.”

“And she really was one of my best students,” Bruce said.
“So what the hell is she doing in my tower?”

“She’s my second soulmate, Stark,” Natasha had, her tone leaving no room for argument.

“Woah, ok.” Tony said, putting his hands up in defeat. “Calm down. It’s fine. No need to piss on her, she’s your territory, I get it.”

Pepper smacked him in the back of the head, hard. “Ow! Pepper, what the hell?”

“Stop being an idiot,” Pepper said. “And apologize to Skye.”

“Sorry,” Tony muttered, taking another gulp of whiskey. Pepper sighed.

“It’s fine,” Skye said softly.

“You know, it’s getting kind of late,” Maria said calmly. “Maybe we should all go to bed and take the chance to cool down.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Steve said.

Skye stood, unsure of where she stood with her soulmates. “I should get going then,” she said slowly. Natasha’s expression froze and Maria seemed surprised for a moment before the cool mask of an agent slipped into place.

Realizing that they didn’t need an audience to work things out, Pepper and Steve started ushering everyone else out of the room. In only moments, the trio was left alone. Skye bit her lower lip, realizing that she’d said something that caused this, but completely unsure of what she should do next.

Natasha’s expression softened again as she took in Skye’s quiet panic. “You don’t have to go,” she said softly.

“We’d rather you didn’t, honestly,” Maria added in a low tone.

“I just… you clearly live here, and I…”

“You are welcome wherever we’re living, wherever we’re staying,” Natasha told her.

Maria sighed. “Listen, Skye, we understand if it’s too soon for you to want, well, anything. We just want you nearby, we want a chance to get to know you. All of you. And truth be told, I hate the idea of you going back to sleep in your van…”

“Van?” Natasha asked, startled.

“I live in a van,” Skye said softly. “It’s by choice. I- I wasn’t sure if you…” her lip trembled and she took a deep breath before composing herself. The pull of two soulmates was making it hard for her to keep her walls up.

“Can you stay for a little while? Come down to our floor and have a drink?” Maria asked. “I think it’s time we had that conversation we talked about having.”

“Okay,” Skye said. “One more drink.”

They went down to Maria and Natasha’s floor and Natasha poured them each a glass. “So you’re a hacker,” Natasha said as she passed the glasses around.

Maria sat back and exhaled slowly. “Any particular reason why?”

Skye took a shaky breath then took a very long sip of alcohol. “I… my childhood… this isn’t the night for this. My childhood really sucked. I’m an orphan, and was dropped off at an orphanage not far from here in Hell’s Kitchen. The only thing that was left with me was a redacted memo.”

“SHIELD? Maria asked, stunned. Natasha looked rather devastated by the news.

Skye nodded. “I’d been to over twenty different foster homes in sixteen years when I removed myself from the system and bought a van. So I went looking for them… and I found a level eight redacted document, so I taught myself how to hack.”

“Wow,” Maria said, taking a long drink of her wine. “This is so not the conversation I was anticipating having to have.”

“Anyway, it probably doesn’t count for much, but I only was after my file. I wasn’t after anything other than that. I got into SHIELD, but couldn’t get at the unredacted version.”

Natasha immediately move so she was sitting next to Skye, slipping a hand into Skye’s trembling one. With her other hand, she gently grabbed Skye’s chin and moved her head so Skye and Natasha were face to face. Natasha saw the pain, fear, and rejection in Skye’s eyes. “We don’t love you any less for wanting to know the answers to the questions of your past,”

Maria had been staring at Skye then seemed to come back to herself, finally seeing the fear in Skye’s eyes. Fear of rejection, fear of the truth, even fear of her own imagination. “Of course, we won’t,” Maria reassured. “My question is, if you’re as smart as I think you are and you have skills to hack SHIELD, why didn’t we recruit you?”

“That file is 24 years old; I was just a baby, then,” Skye said with a shrug. “Without knowing what’s in the file, I have no idea if SHIELD has been watching me since then or not. If not, then I’m just a nobody with no past outside of the orphanage. Why would SHIELD even think to recruit me?”

“How about because you’re a genius?” Maria suggested. “How about hacking SHIELD is about as easy as threading a needle with mittens on? How about you’ve got undercover skills that took me years to master? There are a lot of reasons why SHIELD would want to recruit you.”

Skye scoffed. “I’m no genius. I barely got my GED.”

“Maria,” Natasha said softly, now practically wrapped around Skye though Skye remained tense in her arms. It was a testament to how much distress Skye was feeling that Maria could actually feel it through the bond so soon after meeting.

Maria went and sat on Skye’s other side. “I’ll make you a deal. If I accept you, will you accept me?”

Skye nodded. “What’s up?”

Maria braced herself before answering. Natasha reached across and rubbed Maria’s arm. “Maria, she’s your soulmate. She’s our soulmate. She’ll accept you.”

“Guys? I’m getting worried here…” Skye said slowly, looking back and forth between them.

“I’m Ace,” Maria said finally. “Asexual. I’m romantic, I like being close, but … sexy times isn’t my thing.”
Skye put her head on Maria’s shoulder. “That’s fine,” Skye said. “If… if this works out, if we bond… our lives are more than just … ‘sexy times’.”

“I told you,” Natasha said. “She’s fine with it.”

“I mean, I’m kinda touchy-feely when I can be,” Skye admitted. “But if it bothers you, I don’t have to be.”

“No, it’s not like that,” Maria explained, relaxing now that the worst was over. “I don’t mind touch. I’m good with hugs, we can curl up together and sleep or watch movies. I just…”

“You don’t do ‘sexy times,’” Skye finished with a small smile. “I can live with that. Are you both..?”

Natasha shook her head. “No, I’m not ace. And you and I can have all the sexy times we want; Maria won’t mind that we do, just that she’s not interested for herself.” Maria nodded her agreement when Skye glanced at her, so Skye just nodded.

Knowing that Skye was admittedly touchy, Maria moved in closer as well, so their bodies just touched lightly and she could wrap an arm across Skye’s shoulders to reach Nat as well. Nat was still more or less wound around Skye, and Skye just relaxed into the multiple embrace with a smile.

“This is… nice,” Skye said softly after a moment. “Comfy. So was that the conversation you thought we should have?”

Maria nodded. “I’m glad it’s a non-issue. Thank you for understanding.”

“What’s to understand? I’m bisexual. I’ve dated guys and girls in the past,” she admitted quietly. “I know I probably should’ve waited for you guys, but…”

“No, it’s fine that you didn’t,” Natasha said soothingly. “I don’t mind, and Maria assuredly doesn’t.” She gave Skye a smirk. “I’m not sure I’d know what to do with a virgin anyways,” she joked. She turned serious though. “I will be teaching you how to defend yourself. Regardless if you decide to join SHIELD or not.”

“Join SHIELD?” Skye asked shocked at the suggestion.

“We’ve brought in people in the past,” Maria said slowly. “Hell, half the reason why Fury trusted Natasha when we first brought her in was because she was my soulmate.”

“What would you want me to do with SHIELD? It’s kind of a big brother organization, isn’t it?” Skye asked cautiously.

“In some ways it is, yes. But the fundamental principle of SHIELD is pretty simple. Protection. Whether from an alien invasion or a new war or even just strange, unexplained occurrences,” Maria told her with a smile. “I think you could do pretty well, actually. We have a lot of computer people, a science division, and field agents like Nat is.”

“Isn’t there some kind of school that people have to go through?” Skye asked.

“Most people go to an Academy,” Maria said, nodding. “but the exceptions are always there when the skills are present. We could negotiate training, no matter what you decide, but I agree with Natasha. We’d feel better if we knew you could defend yourself.”

“I think I can live with that,” Skye agreed. “I’ll think about what you said, joining SHIELD. But… I just don’t know. I don’t like secrets very much…”
“Half our lives are built around secrets,” Natasha said with a wry smile. “But we’ll see what we can do. In any case, we can’t deal with it tonight.”

Before Skye could say anything about leaving again, though, Maria tightened her hold. “Stay with us tonight? Please? We can all just sleep, it won’t need to be anything else. But…”

“But we’d really like to have you close. Please?” Natasha added her plea.

“I… if that’s what you really want. Then… sure,” Skye gave in finally. It wasn’t so much that she wanted to leave, more than she wasn’t quite sure she belonged just yet.

“Come on. You can borrow one of Maria’s nightshirts to sleep in,” Nat said, beginning to untangle herself from the pile on the couch. “I know we have spare toothbrushes, and…”

Skye began to laugh, listening to Nat contingency planning. “It’s fine. I don’t need much. Just relax.” Natasha smiled sheepishly, but continued chivvying them off the couch and towards the largest of the bedrooms. The one Stark had teased them about just because they had multiple soulmarks.

Knowing they had a bed big enough for all of them made the teasing worth it, though.
Wow, guys... over a thousand hits on just the first two chapters? We had no idea this would end up interesting so many people! Thanks for all the comments and kudos, and please do keep letting us know what you think!

It didn’t take Maria long to bring up SHIELD again with Skye. In the morning, she approached with a laptop and a hesitant smile.

“What’s up, Maria?” Skye asked lightly.

“I thought you might want to take a look at these,” she said, handing over the computer. “It’s loaded with all the tests required for entry to the SHIELD Academies. They all have their own requirements, of course, but I thought if you had a chance to take the tests and see what we’re asking for, it might help you to decide.”

“I… alright,” Skye said, accepting the computer. “You want me to do these now?”
“It will take some time, but it doesn’t have to be done today by any means. I just thought you might like something to do while Nat and I have some work to do,” she offered.

“Do you need me to go?” Skye asked. “I don’t have to be far, you know, and you can always call me when you’re back…”

“No, no, nothing like that. And actually, we could bring your van here if you wanted. It might be safer that way.”

“Probably,” Skye said. “Maybe this evening, after the insane crush dies down a bit…”

“Nat will probably want to go with you.”

Skye smiled. “It’s fine. Go do whatever you have to do; I’ll be alright here for a while.”

“Okay. Thank you,” Maria said gently. She stroked Skye’s cheek for a moment, smiling as Skye turned into the touch. “Good luck with the tests.”

Skye stared at the laptop for a good hour, debating internally whether she should take the tests. She hated secrets, having grown up with her entire origin story being one that she, for some reason, wasn’t allowed to know. But at the same time, her soulmates were offering her a place to belong - something that she had had wanted for so long. She had fallen asleep the night before sandwiched between Natasha and Maria as if they were terrified that she’d disappear before their very eyes. No one had ever looked at her like that before - like she mattered.

Very slowly, Skye edged herself closer to the laptop and opened it. Taking the tests, she decided, didn’t mean that she’d join SHIELD. Their standards were probably so high that she wouldn’t qualify anyway. She tapped away, losing track of the hours. The Comms test took no time at all, the practice hack they had set up within the test was laughable and the dummy SHIELD system was extremely easy to navigate. At the very least Skye had notes for Maria of ways to improve the system.

The Science test, which included an IQ test, was significantly harder. Some of the subjects, like Chemistry and Astronomy were topics that she hadn’t studied in a while. She wasn’t exactly guessing on some of the topics, but she wasn’t 100% sure she was right either. She did speed through the Computer Science section of the test, and was sure she aced it. She knew she didn’t qualify for the SciTech academy - Maria had noted that the school required at least one Ph.D. to qualify.

The Ops test proved to be the most challenging, emotionally. As a hacker, she knew a good deal about the subjects that the written test covered: International Law, ethics, and the history of SHIELD. It was the shortest test, but it reminded her of what she was potentially joining. These were the very people who hid her parents from her. The Ops test also included physical fitness which Skye wasn’t particularly looking forward to. One of the benefits of leaving school at 16 was that she never had to take physical fitness again.

She was just finishing the test when Natasha came in. “Skye?” Natasha asked. “Is everything okay?”

Skye looked up. “Huh? Why wouldn’t it be?” she asked curiously, finishing the last question on the Ops test.

“We agreed to meet for dinner at 7,” Natasha said. “Everyone’s upstairs. JARVIS confirmed you were still down here when we were worried that you had taken off alone.”

Skye blushed at Natasha’s apparent worry. “Sorry. Guess I lost track of the time,” she said.
Natasha came around and took a look at the laptop screen. “Have you been working on this all day?” 

“Not all day,” Skye said softly, shutting the laptop. “There was like an hour in there where I was deciding whether or not I even wanted to take the tests. I guess I have a tendency to work on a project until it’s done.”

“Skye, don’t tell me that you finished all the tests in one day. That had to have taken you hours. Did you even stop for lunch?”

“I might have forgotten,” Skye admitted.

“It happens,” Natasha said with a shrug. “But let’s get some food in you and we can do something fun this evening. Maybe a movie?”

“After we get my van? Sure,” Skye agreed.

Natasha led her back up to the communal floor where everyone was sitting around a big table that separated the kitchen area from the living room. Maria looked up as they entered the room. “Hey!”

Maria said cheerfully. “We picked up some Thai food on the way home.”

Skye sat between her two of them and the threesome used little touches to greet each other, driven by their bond. Pepper, Bruce, and Tony looked on in interest while Steve refused to make eye contact with them while they did this (possibly a holdover from growing up in the 1920s), and Clint noticed it, but didn’t stare.

“How was your day?” Skye asked curiously. “Still working on clean-up after the Battle?”

“We’re going to be working on it for months,” Maria said, groaning. “Fury’s got several teams retasked to New York for the time being, but we need to make sure all alien tech gets locked down. We already have reports of two people running around robbing shops with a Chitauri weapon.”

“I’m headed off to Washington for SHIELD training in a couple of days,” Steve noted as Natasha served Skye a huge bowl of Pad Thai, adding two egg rolls. “Fury wanted me updated on the Ops procedures before sending me out on missions.”

“You don’t have to work, you know,” Tony said. “I could support all of us for fifty lifetimes.”

Steve shrugged. “I like the work,” he admitted. “And it seems there’s always another battle that needs to be fought.”

“What about you?” Maria asked Skye. “What did you do all day?”

“Just the tests that you gave me?” Skye said, now realizing how hungry she actually was now that she could smell the food.

“How far’d you get?” Maria said, eating some fried tofu.

“I’m done,” Skye said digging into her food vigorously.

“You’re done?” Maria asked, flabbergasted. “But… but those tests each take like… six hours.”

Skye shrugged as she chewed before she swallowed to respond. “The Comms test took me like… two hours. Ops I assume takes more time on the practical end because the written test is only like, 150 questions. The SciTech test did take me a while, maybe like six hours, but that was mostly because I hadn’t read anything on Chemistry or Astronomy since I was a teenager.”
“I’ll be interested to see the results of the IQ test in the SciTech exam,” Natasha said, eating a serving of sweet and sour chicken. “You’re good at subterfuge,” she said to Skye. “You don’t pass yourself off as a genius like a lot of the SciTech kids your age do.”

“I told you,” Skye said, blushing. “I’m no genius. I just… I hated school and I love to read. So I cut class and went to the library instead. I spent hours there, just reading whatever looked interesting.” Natasha looked like she wanted to say something, but she opted not to.

“I can get access to the test results tomorrow,” Maria said easily. “Then we’ll see, I suppose. But the numbers don’t lie, Skye. I hope if you see it for yourself, you’ll believe it.”

Skye sighed, then shrugged. “Okay, I’ll try. But I don’t qualify for SciTech anyway. It says you have to have at least one Ph.D. before applying. And I absolutely don’t.”

“If you’d been able to seriously go to college, you probably could by now, Skye,” Bruce said lightly, smiling a bit.

“And if the test results are good enough, that requirement can possibly be waived,” Clint said, unknowingly repeating what Maria had said the night before.

“I probably won’t pass the Operations physical, either,” Skye mumbled, stuffing another bite of food into her mouth rather than arguing about SciTech. “I hated gym class,” she added after swallowing.

“You would pass by the time I’m done with you,” Natasha said firmly. “Even if you don’t join SHIELD, I’m serious about teaching you. It’s important to know that you can defend yourself; you’re associated with the Avengers now and eventually that will be known. We can avoid it as long as possible, but…”

“With as high profile as you guys are, I expect nothing can stay a secret forever,” Skye admitted. “I know, I already agreed to let you teach me.”

“Maybe we can start on that tomorrow?” Natasha asked quietly.

“Yes, if you like.”

“Good.” Natasha swirled the last piece of chicken in the sweet and sour sauce and ate it lazily. “Whenever you’re done, we can go get your van. Maria can pick us out a movie while we’re gone.”

“Movie?” Maria asked curiously.

“Yes. Nat thought a movie would be good, since I spent most of the day taking tests.”

“That works for me. Anything in particular you like?”

Skye shrugged. “I’m guessing you guys get your share of sci-fi and action, that those may not be your favorite movies. Um… comedy?”

“I think I can work with that,” Maria replied, chuckling.

“Cool. I’m not picky, though I’m not a huge fan of tragic endings,” Skye said.

“Not much fear of that in a comedy,” Natasha commented dryly.

Skye refocused on her food, mostly tuning out as other conversations sprang up around the table again. It was definitely going to take some getting used to, being with so many people all the time again. She almost missed the silence of her van. Almost.
After they finished, chatting about innocuous things, they cleared the table, loaded dishwasher, and parted ways. “How far away did you park?” Natasha asked as they took the elevator down.

“51st and 2nd,” Skye said. “I know the guy who owns the Enterprise there and they usually have a couple spaces free. For the price of me troubleshooting their office systems, he lets me stay there when there’s a spot free.”

Natasha, who was dressed in a hoodie and jeans pulled up her hood before they left the building. They called a cab and took it to the rental car lot. Skye silently led Natasha to the top floor and to the corner spot of the lot, furthest away from the doors. Natasha noticed that the van wasn’t in the path of any security cameras. She was extremely grateful that they hadn’t allowed Skye to return to her van the night before. Natasha had slept in some pretty rough places, but the back of a van in a place like this wasn’t something she had ever thought any of her soulmates would have had to experience.

Skye, however, was smiling. “The tower is nice, but it’s good to be home,” she said.

Natasha opened the side panel door and looked inside. There was a laptop with two large monitors crammed behind the driver’s seat, and a futon mattress that was rolled up and ready to be rolled out. “How long have you lived here?” Natasha asked curiously.

Skye shrugged. “Not long. I move around a lot. Some shrink they made me go see when I was fifteen noted that I was never taught to make roots anywhere so I just kind of… meander. If you’re asking how long I’ve lived in the van, almost six years, apart from the times that I crashed with boyfriends or girlfriends.”

Natasha just nodded. “I have safe houses and secure hideaways all over the place, but until recently the only place that was really ‘home’ was Maria’s apartment,” she said in a low voice. “Even if I’m not there as much as we’d like. But she understands; Maria coordinates a lot of my missions, anyway.”

“Sounds a little crazy,” Skye commented, but her tone was entirely uncritical. “But we don’t actually sound all that different, sometimes.”

“Soulmates tend not to be too dissimilar. Things in common helps with stability.”

“Well, pile in,” Skye said in a chipper tone as she let herself into the driver’s seat. “It’ll take us a bit to get back; even if rush hour is over, this city never really slows down much.”

Natasha closed the side door and climbed into the passenger seat instead. “I hate New York traffic. It’s one of the few times when I can appreciate why Tony and Pepper have drivers.”

Skye just laughed as she started the engine and the van groaned to life. “Tony’s going to want to take a look at that,” Natasha noted.

“There’s nothing wrong with my engine,” Skye noted.

“I’m not saying that.” Natasha said. “But Stark’s a mechanical engineer. He likes to fix things, even if they aren’t broken.”

Skye made fairly quick work of the New York traffic, relatively speaking. She had driven in pretty much every kind of traffic imaginable in the last six years and while it took a certain amount of raw guts to drive in New York rush hour, there was really no real trick to it other than not hesitating.

It wasn’t long before Skye was pulling into the garage and parking in a spot. She turned and looked at Natasha, realizing that Nat had been studying her in the quiet during the drive. “What is it?” she
asked quietly.

“Nothing,” Natasha responded automatically, then she stopped herself. “I guess… I’m worried.”

“About me?” Skye blinked, startled.

“A bit, yeah. I’m worried that maybe we’re pushing you too hard. That maybe you don’t really want to be here, that you’re not ready for… all of this.”

Skye bit her lip and studied Natasha back for a moment. “It’s… hard to accept it all,” she said finally. “I want to be here, I can feel the bond pulling us all together. But it’s kind of a lot all at once, you know? The SHIELD tests, the physical training… I’ve taken care of myself for a long time, Natasha. And I get that you want me to be safe, I do. But I’m not…”

“Not used to it. I understand that. God, do I understand,” Natasha said, understanding written in her eyes. “For a long time, there was only me and my training and my missions. Maria changed that, and it took me a while. It’s okay if it takes you time too.”

“Are you sure?” Skye looked uncertain, but Natasha nodded decisively.

“Of course. You know… I’m not like the other Avengers. Do you know how I got into SHIELD?” Skye shook her head. “I was working as a merc. I was dangerous, a killer. Clint was working for SHIELD at the time and got the order to kill me.”

“Clint was supposed to kill you?” Skye asked, shocked.

Natasha nodded. “He made a different call and brought me into SHIELD. I met Maria when she came in to interrogate me.”

“That must have been… weird,” Skye noticed.

“You have no idea. When I was a young child, I was recruited into something called the Red Room. They taught me that love was for children and programmed me to recruit or murder my own soulmate if I ever met her. Thankfully, the programming doesn’t stand up to soulbonds. It took me a long time before I allowed myself to rely on other people. Let alone allow other people to take care of me.”

“Why are you … you don’t have to tell me all this, you know?” Skye said.

“You’re my soulmate,” Natasha said quietly. “The four of us… we’re going to all fit together in different ways. I think this is going to be how you and I fit together… this feeling of never belonging anywhere.”

Skye considered that concept and slowly nodded. “I never… never got to stay in a foster home for long. Never a good fit. No one ever wanted me to stay. It’s sort of… the pattern of my life, you know?”

Natasha scooted closer and rubbed Skye’s shoulder gently. “I know. But we’re going to change that. For me… and for you. We want you to stay. Always.”

“Because of the soulbond,” Skye said, trying to convince herself that was good enough. It didn’t specifically have to be because of her.

“Because of the soulbond, in part, yes.” Natasha’s fingers tightened briefly on her arm, not enough to hurt but enough to hold firm. “But also because you’re ours. Our soulmate. Meant for us, not for
just anyone. And that makes you perfect for us, just because you’re you. Because you’re Skye.”

Skye sniffled a little, not trying to pretend that Natasha’s words didn’t affect her. “Really?”

“Really. I promise. And I know Maria agrees.”

“You two have a fairly tight bond?” Skye asked curiously, attention diverted from the more emotional stuff.

“We do. It’s… interesting. But it takes time to form; I have no doubt that eventually you’ll be bonded just as closely with us.”

“Most people don’t stick around for long enough for things to take hold,” Skye said.

“We will, Skye. I promise that we will… hold on.” Natasha got out and walked around to Skye’s door. Skye turned to face Natasha curiously. Natasha started running her hands through Skye’s hair. Skye couldn’t help but lean into the touch. “I don’t do short term. I’m in personal relationships with people for life. The Avengers, that’s a work thing. But Clint? Maria? You? Whether or not we work out in a romantic relationship, I’m here for you.”

Skye froze, her chin quivering again. “No one… no one’s ever said that to me before,” she admitted softly, tears welling up in her eyes.

Natasha hugged Skye. “Hey. I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry you had to grow up like that.”


Natasha laughed. “Yeah, that’s another thing you and I have in common. We both are survivors. But you know, you deserve to more than just survive. Accept a little help from us? Maybe it’s time for you to thrive, not just survive. I know what it’s like. I know it’s a risk. And you don’t have to rush into it, but we’re here. Now, let’s get back up to Maria and watch that comedy. We can unpack your van tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Skye said wiping tears from her eyes.

-------

Maria got the top-sheet results of Skye’s tests during breakfast the next morning, via email. About two seconds into opening the attachment, Maria’s eyebrows went to her hairline. She whistled low.

“That bad?” Skye asked.

“That good,” Maria said. “She broke the curve on the Comms test. Highest score we’ve ever had.”

“Hey, good job,” Bruce said with a smile.

“I thought so,” Natasha said with a knowing smile. “What’s her IQ?”

Maria scanned about halfway down the page. “172,” she read. “172… that’s…”

“That’s what I expected,” Bruce said.

“Really?” Skye asked.

“I’ve had colleagues with less natural intuition on the subject of Nuclear Physics than you showed in my Intro class,” Bruce said.
“I… but…” Skye floundered, completely taken aback.

“Here. Look for yourself,” Natasha said gently, taking the device from Maria and putting it in Skye’s hands. “There… see?” Right in print for Skye to read: IQ Test Results - 172. Natasha reached over Skye’s shoulder to show her the rest of the results. “Here, there’s your Comms score. Maria’s right; there’s never been a higher score. And then here, you did pass the SciTech test. About average results, but that’s still really good considering that you don’t have any advanced degrees, let alone several. You know a lot more than you think you do.”

Skye nodded numbly, scrolling down to the Operations results. Average there, too, though the score noted that the practical assessment was still outstanding. “So… basically this is saying that if I do decide to join SHIELD, I can basically do whatever I want?”

“That’s the brief version, yes,” Maria said warmly. “Which is about what I expected, honestly. Congratulations, Skye. You have several options, should you decide that you’re interested.”

“Can… can I ask what the average score is on the Comms test?” Skye ventured. “I was actually considering telling you ways to make it harder…”

Maria chuckled. “No need. Here.” She took the tablet back and pulled up historical averages for the test in question. All much lower than Skye’s, by several degrees. Skye just blinked at the numbers.

“I’m 24, I have a GED because I dropped out when I was 16, and I’ve got a 172 IQ?” Skye asked, flabbergasted.

“It’s not all that uncommon, from what I understand,” Clint said. “SHIELD counselors talked to me about it when my IQ test came back.”

“Really?” Bruce asked.

Clint nodded. “163,” he said simply with a shrug.

“Genius level kids often have problems in school until someone figures out that the work is too easy rather than too hard,” Pepper pointed out logically. “It makes sense that kids of… less stable… home situations wouldn’t necessarily ever find out. Tony had a hard time with school, even in his advanced levels.”

“It’s just… weird to think about,” Skye said, staring at her test results. “I always thought that I was out of some loop that everyone else was a part of. So many teachers gave up trying to teach me anything. That’s why I cut classes. I could learn more from the library than I could from my teachers.”

“That’s pretty common too,” Pepper said. “Especially in public schools with huge class sizes. Teachers have to teach one way to reach as many kids as possible. Unfortunately that means the kids who are too smart or aren’t smart enough get left behind. Either end of the spectrum, there are those determined to learn the way that works for them.”

“I could be a SHIELD agent…” Skye said distantly, chewing over the words.

“With these scores, you could work for SI too, if you wanted,” Pepper said, checking Skye’s scores. “Seriously?” Skye questioned.

“Yeah,” Pepper scoffed, nodding. “You’ve got to be one of the best hackers in the world. You’ve got the science expertise, certainly the technology experience.”
“Scores like that could also get you into one of several universities, if you want to pursue a degree of some kind,” Bruce added with an encouraging smile. “You could study anything you want, whether it’s computers or physics or languages or anything else. You’re plenty smart enough, Skye; you could do anything you set your mind to.”

“I think… I think I need some time to think about it,” Skye said after a moment. “I just… it’s kinda overwhelming.”

“Take your time,” Pepper said gently. “I doubt any of these options are going to suddenly disappear. Just think about it and let us know what you decide.” Pepper glanced at her watch and stood, picking up her dishes. “I’d best get going; meetings today. Have a good day, everyone.”

“You too, Pepper,” Maria responded.

“You and I should get going too,” Natasha said to Skye. “To teach you how to defend yourself we have to get you going with cardio and strength training.”

“Yeah, I figured this was coming,” Skye said. “No use fighting the inevitable. No pun intended.”

“Have fun,” Maria said. It had been decided the night before that Skye didn’t need both soulmates around during training, and Natasha would give Skye her best chance. “I should go, too. Back to cleaning up alien junk off the streets of New York.”

“Which means I’m off to R&D,” Bruce said. “Clint, come on. Come with me and let me test out that genius brain of yours.”

Clint scoffed, but followed Bruce to the elevator. “Unless it involves flight vectors and wind resistance, I’m probably not your guy,” he grumbled good naturedly.

Skye sighed. “I need to go down to my van. I’m not working out without a sports bra.”

Natasha just grinned. “Not a problem. Come on, we’ll go together. I have to change too, so we can get your clothes and go back to our floor.”

Our floor. She made it sound so simple. Skye knew it wasn’t, but it would really be nice if just this once… maybe things would work out that easily. Rather than say anything, though, she just followed Natasha. It surprised her a little when her soulmate led her to the stairs rather than the elevators. “Um, Nat?”

Natasha winked. “Beginning cardio. Don’t worry, we don’t have to go fast. Just a warm up.” Skye followed with a groan.

Two weeks later, Skye decided that cardio seriously sucked. She was no closer to deciding on whether or not she wanted to join SHIELD, but Natasha didn’t seem to care whether or not she was joining SHIELD. She had Cardio in the morning, and Natasha was teaching her ballet every night before dinner. As someone who wasn’t particularly flexible, Skye was having a hard time with it, but apparently Natasha didn’t teach other people how to dance often. According to Maria, she had danced for the Russian Imperial Ballet while undercover for the Red Room, but never talked about it. Every night after dinner, the three of them did something together. They watched movies, played video games (Natasha was surprisingly skilled at Skyrim), and watched sports games (Maria loved baseball - Steve often joined them to watch those). Skye kept in touch with her hacker friends, but wasn’t online 100% of the time.

She had programs that would send an alert to her phone if anything critical happened, anyway.
The downtime she had between training sessions, Skye often spent with Bruce or Clint or sometimes Steve. She did make good on her promise to set Steve up with an iTunes account and created a series of playlists by musical era for him to listen to as time allowed. When Tony found out what she’d done, he gave Steve a StarkPod, and Steve started to take his music with him on his morning runs.

Bruce had taken it upon himself to expand Skye’s general knowledge of the various sciences. He filled her in on his own experiments, but also helped bring her knowledge up to par in biology, geology and chemistry. She’d always found Bruce to be an engaging teacher, and they had some good times with fun experiments, so the ‘lessons’ went better than she’d expected they would.

Tony had been shocked that Skye had a 172 IQ and only a GED. He pestered Skye for a little while about going back to school, challenging her to beat his firewall with all kinds of superfluous tricks and traps within it. He finally backed off when Maria and Natasha threatened him bodily and Pepper made him sleep. Pepper also had a long discussion with Tony. No one knew what was said between the two of them, but Tony had apologized to Skye afterwards and seemed to accept that Skye’s decisions were going to be her own.

Skye was finally settling into her new life when Maria came home from work one day looking serious. Skye and Natasha were preparing for dance when she came home and they stopped changing. “What’s up?” Natasha asked.

Maria bit her lip. “I’ve been spending my lunches in archives for the last two weeks,” she said slowly. “Looking from July 2, 1988 onwards for Level 8 redacted documents. I found one about a baby girl found in China and dropped off at St. Agnes’ Orphanage. I didn’t read it, but I got Fury’s permission to share it with you… if you want to read it.”

“You found my file?” Skye asked softly.

“The dates match up,” Maria said. “I figured we could order in tonight. I could discreetly let Pepper know not to expect us.” Natasha came over to Skye and hugged her. “You know we love you no matter what it says,” Maria said.

Skye froze, her eyes furrowed. “You love me?”

“Yeah,” Natasha said with a soft smile. “You don’t have to say it just because we did. Our point is that we’re here with you.”

“Okay,” Skye said. Maria called Pepper briefly while Natasha placed an order for food for the three of them. Then they sat on the couch and opened the file.

The story of the baby 0-8-4 who was found in the remains of the slaughtered village in a dead SHIELD agent’s arms had both Maria and Natasha scared. A tear slid down Skye’s cheek.

“So an entire village died because of me,” Skye said softly. “And the document I’ve spent over five years trying to get into says that I have some mystical power that may have killed them.”

“We don’t know that,” Natasha argued. “It could have been someone else. Someone who was after someone else in the village and you happened to escape the carnage. It could have been a number of things.”

“Regardless, they saved me.” Skye said softly. “The SHIELD team...they saved me.” She was quiet for a moment.

“Skye, this doesn’t mean that your story ends here,” Maria reassured her. “We’ll figure something out. Both of us have contacts in that part of the world.”
“No…” Skye said. “No… my story starts with SHIELD, it starts with this document. Whatever was after me back then, SHIELD protected me from it… I was in protective custody. I just didn’t know it.” Skye nodded decidedly. “I’m gonna do it.”

“Huh?” Natasha asked.

“Once we’re done… once you think I’m ready… I’m gonna join SHIELD.”

“That’s great!” Maria said with a smile.

“What department do you want to join?” Natasha said.

“Well, frankly, the SHIELD systems are a mess.” Skye said. “I’d like a crack at tightening them up. I know I’m smart, but I know a lot of smart hackers. But I don’t want to be tied down to just one department just yet… I spent my whole life being told that I would never be anything and now… I just need some time working out what I want to be now that I know that I have options.”

“I’ll talk to Fury about both of those, but I think that’s fair.” Maria said. “Be advised, I might pass your name off to SciTech in case their physicists need a second pair of eyes on projects. Your hacking skills have given you troubleshooting skills a lot of our young scientists don’t have and if you’re a good enough physicist for Bruce, you’re good enough for SHIELD.”

“Would I go to an academy or…” Skye started to say, but stopped when Natasha shook her head.

“Certain Agents who join SHIELD require anonymity,” Natasha said. “There are agents who aren’t even known by their first name, just a number. Some agents are privately trained. It all depends on what kind of security they require. Given my enemies in particular, we would want to ensure your safety as much as possible.”

“It’ll be a conversation we’ll need to have with Fury when the time comes,” Maria said.

Skye nodded. “I don’t mind helping with science projects if they need me. It could be interesting. Maybe I could get some of the IT credentials too? Legally, I mean. In case I need a backup for some reason.”

“We can arrange that through SHIELD,” Maria said. “The Comms division of the Academy has the right connections to set that up; it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Cool.” She said. She was about to say more when JARVIS spoke up.

“Excuse me, ladies, but your food order has arrived. Shall I have it sent up?” the AI inquired politely.

“Yes, thank you, JARVIS,” Skye responded. She was only a little surprised when the elevator let out a security guard with their bag of food rather than the delivery person, but she simply watched Natasha collect the food while Maria went for plates.

“So,” Skye began, looking over the file again as they began to eat. “What’s an 0-8-4?”

Maria gave her the explanation of the designation, and Skye frowned. “How can a person be of unknown origin? I mean, you don’t think I’m an alien or anything, do you?”

Natasha frowned. “It’s definitely strange, but not impossible. We could ask Bruce to do a study of your blood and DNA, though, if you’re worried.”

Skye laughed. “He’ll probably make me help.”
“Is that a bad thing?” Maria inquired, raising an eyebrow.

“No, not really.” Skye shook her head, still laughing a little. “It could be interesting, though I have like zero background in any kind of actual medical science. Theories of radiation treatments for cancer aside.”

“Bruce may have left Culver, but he’s still a professor at heart,” Maria said with a smile. “I wish he’d let us talk him into doing some lectures at SciTech Academy, but he keeps saying it’s a bad idea. Maybe you can talk to him Skye.”

“I can certainly try, but I don’t know if he’ll listen.” Skye said with a shrug. “We have to respect his wishes, especially when he just wants to keep everyone safe.”

“I know,” Maria said. “And I understand that. It’s just. We don’t get that many professors at SciTech who are so passionate as Dr. Banner.”

“Plus it would help his self-esteem to get back into working again rather than researching things alone,” Natasha pointed out.

“I’ll ask,” Skye said. “But it’ll be his decision, in the end.”

“Fair enough,” Maria agreed. The trio ate quietly for a while, before Maria spoke again. “Well, since we’ve disrupted your dance routine for the evening… what should we do tonight?”

“Netflix, junk food and snuggles?” Skye suggested flippantly, though her expression told her soulmates that she would enjoy it despite the suggestion being somewhat less than seriously given.

“I was actually thinking maybe board games?” Natasha suggested. “We can have fun, but we can also get some indicators of your strategic thinking, Skye.”

Skye sighed dramatically, but she was smiling. “Okay, but I’m just gonna play and have fun. We can work on tactical board gaming strategy another day.”

“Actually, that works out for the best,” Maria laughed. “We get to see how you do when you’re not focused on why you need to be tactical.”

“I’m so not gonna win, am I?” Skye asked, a resigned expression on her face. “Oh, well. Let’s give it a shot anyway.”

Maria, if Battleship was any indicator, was a tactical genius (which was probably why she was the Assistant Director of SHIELD). Somehow she’d been able to locate all of Skye’s ships within three turns, then proceeded to force Skye to try and work out where Maria’s ships were, fully knowing that Maria knew where Skye’s ships were. Next, Natasha trounced Skye and Maria at poker (the woman’s poker face was no joke).

It was chess where Skye actually held her own. It was a long game - one of the longest that Skye had ever played. She didn’t beat Maria, but it made her feel a little better about herself, that she’d been able to keep the game going as long as she had. She sighed softly as she helped put the pieces away, but Natasha bumped her shoulder.


“I guess so,” Skye said with a shrug. “I should download the electronic version of Carcassonne or something, see if you guys can beat me at a less traditional game. Though knowing you, you probably can.”
“I don’t think I’m familiar with that one,” Maria replied. “But Skye, we’ve been doing this for years. Don’t feel too badly. We’ll teach you, I promise.”

“I know you will. I guess I just have a long way to go.”

“Come here,” Maria urged, opening her arms to Skye. Skye moved to sit beside Maria, leaning into the hug offered. “You’ll get better. As horrible as your childhood was, and as much as I wish I could have changed it, it gave you a good base for this kind of work. Your manipulation skills and survival tactics… that’s stuff that most agents truly struggle with when they first get to SHIELD. You’re already past that.”

“In some ways the party the night we met was more telling than any test we could give you. We didn’t have time to give you much of a background, and every time someone asked a question about something we hadn’t gone over, you covered flawlessly.”

“I thought everyone could do that,” Skye said slowly. “I mean I learned after…”

“After when?” Maria asked curiously. Skye had been evasive about her childhood in the last three weeks. “You don’t have to answer. We’re just curious.”

“There was a house when I was younger.” Skye said. “They didn’t withhold food, exactly, but you could only eat at mealtimes and they kept careful watch on how much we ate. We learned to hide food and drinks, sometimes pooled any money we came by to get snacks we could stash, in case we were home late or whatever. We learned to lie to cover for each other. I guess I just got really good at telling half-truths or only the information that someone needed to hear. I knew not everyone had that experience, I guess I just thought everyone had… something.”

“Most agents have something,” Maria hedged. “But most agents didn’t experience those issues so early in their lives. It’s easier to learn any skill when you’re a kid. Agents who learn it later on, they have to think about it. For you, it’s automatic.”

“What we really want you to take from all this is that your experiences have given you skills naturally that other agents have to spend time and effort to learn,” Natasha said. “Don’t worry about the tactics, or the logistical planning. That will come. Just believe that right now, without any other training, you have skills that make you valuable, Skye. To SHIELD, and to us. And even if you walked away from the agency, we’d be happy knowing that you have skills that will keep you safe.”

“Okay,” Skye said after a moment, realizing that she was picking up hints of their approval and understanding through the bond. “I believe you.”

“Good.”

“And on that cheerful note,” Maria said, only half joking. “I think it’s snuggles time.”

As they all curled up together in the big bed, Skye still caught in the middle between her soulmates - at their insistence, not her own - she reflected that these moments of perfect contentment were worth it. Worth all the confusion, all the struggle to fit in, all the uncertain worry about her place in the bigger picture.

Having her soulmates so close was worth almost anything. She just hoped their missing fourth was holding his or her own, too.
Chapter 4

“New plan for today,” Natasha said to Skye after their warm-up a few weeks later.

“Uh-oh,” Skye said. “What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing. It’s what you’ve done right,” Natasha said with a grin. “We’re going to spar today. You can show me how well you’ve absorbed the moves and if you can start to apply them.”

“Shit,” Skye swore. “Okay, but… can you go easy on me to start with? We already know I’m not on your level yet.”

“A bit, yes,” Natasha agreed readily. “My intention is to make sure you’re learning, not to beat you into the mat. For now.”

“Alright, I’ll do my best.”

“That’s all I’m asking for today,” Natasha agreed.

 Thankfully, they did indeed start out slow. Natasha stuck with moves that Skye ought to be able to counter, and when she caught Skye by surprise, she backed up and walked her through move and countermove until Skye could respond appropriately.

Natasha caught Skye into a hold and it took a couple tries for Skye to escape; the bond was distracting her, as was Natasha’s body against hers. Skye shook her head to try to clear it and Natasha tried to counter, but Skye dodged it. Natasha used Skye’s momentum to trip her. Skye
brought with Natasha with her, pinning her. Natasha forced Skye off of her, both of them getting up, far enough apart that they were reset, breathless. Skye smiled a little as she regained her breath and they circled each other.

Skye saw an opening, launched herself at Natasha and got a couple good shots in. Natasha grabbed at her and Skye’s bun fell loose, her hair falling everywhere. “You’re learning,” Natasha said with a smile.

“Thanks,” Skye said.

Natasha faked her out then grabbed her around her middle and slammed her against the mat. With the wind knocked out of her, Natasha was able to pin Skye fairly easily. Skye sighed, but just stayed flat on the mat while she caught her breath. “Sorry. That was dumb,” she said quietly after a moment. She opened her mouth to say something more but stopped as she looked up and got lost in Natasha’s eyes. All at once she realized the intimacy of the situation, Natasha’s body stretched full length atop hers, one of Nat’s thighs between hers and pressed in tight to pin her hips to the mat.

Natasha seemed oblivious to their relative positions until Skye’s expression made her stop and really consider it. It was highly unlike her to think about a body in contact with hers while she was amped up for a fight, but the pull of the bond distracted her, changing her focus. And once aware, she was only too aware of just how intimately they were pressed together.

Neither was sure who moved first, but suddenly their lips met in a deep, passionate kiss. It wasn’t their first kiss, but it was the first time either of them had allowed passion to sweep them away. Skye moaned into the kiss, wrapping her arms around Natasha to pull her closer. Nat obliged, letting her weight slowly come to rest on Skye as the kiss deepened further. Skye forgot where she was, what she had been doing. The bond was taking up all her thoughts. Nat pulled her upright. Skye kissed down Nat’s collarbone as her soulmate picked her up. Skye automatically wrapped her legs around Nat’s waist. Skye sucked on Nat’s temple as Nat groaned. “Our floor, JARVIS,” Nat ground out, leaning back against the wall of the elevator for support.

It was the work of a moment before they arrived on their floor. They made it to their huge custom bed and collapsed onto it. Skye giggled and returned her attention to Natasha’s lips. They kissed again, long and deep, and after a few moments Skye felt Nat’s fingers slip under her shirt to stroke upwards along her ribs.

Another moment later and clothing became entirely unnecessary.

Curl up together in the afterglow, they took up less than half the bed, but that was okay too. Natasha was entirely content to just have Skye in her arms, her head resting on Skye’s shoulder as light fingers traced idle caresses over soft skin.

“Gotta say,” Skye remarked after a while, “that wasn’t how I thought today’s workout would go. Not complaining, though; I like this much better than throwing awkward punches.”

Natasha chuckled, even as her arm tightened around Skye. “They won’t be awkward for long. And no, I didn’t plan this. Surprised me too; I don’t usually react like that during a spar.”

“It’s the soulbond, I think,” Skye replied softly. “Just… doing its thing.”

“Now that we have a baseline, we should start you sparring with people of different body types anyway so you don’t get set in your ways. I’ve been talking to Clint and Steve about setting up some time.”
“You want me to fight Steve?” Skye asked. “As in Captain America?”

“You have the skills to do it,” Natasha said.

“No it’s not that,” Skye said. “If I can fight you I can at least learn something from fighting Steve. It’s just… sometimes I remember how surreal my life is. I mean, I read every book on Steve Rogers that the New York public library had when I was, like, twelve.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Natasha said. “You wouldn’t believe the rumors that went around SHIELD when they found him. Which reminds me, there’s going to be quite the buzz about you at SHIELD when you officially come in. You’ve even managed to impress Fury. And he doesn’t impress so easily.”

Skye stretched, content. Upon learning that Maria and Natasha were in a quad, Tony had made them a huge bed that was the width of two Queen-sized beds shoved together. The bed was soft and deep and comfortable. “Can we just take the rest of the day off and stay here?”

“We have to spar, and dance this afternoon, and you have that thing with Bruce,” Natasha said, stretching herself and getting out of the bed.

“This bed is too comfortable,” Skye said with groan, getting up too.

“Look on the bright side,” Natasha said with a grin. “We got our cardio in.”

“Can we do it again tomorrow?” Skye asked cheekily.

Skye quietly followed Maria and Natasha through the Triskelion and up to Fury’s office. The past couple of months had been hard but worth it. She was a fully qualified Agent, now, and they were due to meet with Fury to go over what her status would be - officially and unofficially. They were meeting late at night and Fury had ordered the security cameras turned off (Skye thought this was excessive, but it had been at Maria’s insistence).

“So this is the Triskelion?” Skye asked. “It looks like a bank.”

“Yeah, we have to keep it more professional here. We have different bases designed for different reasons. We receive politicians, foreign dignitaries, and other law enforcement officers here.”

They got to the elevator bay and Maria put her pass up next to the reader to call the elevator. Skye shifted from one foot to the other. “You okay?”

“I guess I’m a little nervous,” Skye said. “Not that long ago, I was hacking this place for my file. Now suddenly I’m becoming an Agent, and I want to… trust me, I want to… but I don’t regret hacking SHIELD.”

“We get that,” Maria said. “Don’t worry, we won’t leave you alone in there.”

“I know, and I know he’s not a bad guy.” Skye said with a shrug. “It just feels like I’m at the edge of the Hellmouth or something.”

“You’re ready for this, Skye,” Natasha soothed. “I wouldn’t have okayed this if I didn’t think you were ready. You wouldn’t have passed the tests if you weren’t capable. You can do this.”

Skye smiled her thanks. She squared her shoulders as the elevator arrived at their destination and followed Maria down the hall. She knocked briskly on the door, then opened it and went inside. Skye followed, with Natasha at her six.
A tall, dark man with a patch over one eye and a long leather coat stood, waiting for them. He watched Skye coolly with his single eye, and she felt that he probably saw more with one eye than most people did with two. His expression was hard-edged, and she suspected that many people were afraid of this man. Probably with good reason.

“Sir, this is Agent Skye, our latest recruit. And our soulmate. Skye, this is Director Fury,” Maria introduced them.

“Nice to meet you, sir,” Skye responded politely. She held out her hand to him, unsure if he would shake it or just glare at her. She was a little surprised when he took it, but she did her best to keep her reaction internal.

“Agent Skye,” he greeted her as they shook. “I’ve heard a lot about you. Have a seat, all of you.”

They all sat rather nervously, and Fury sat behind his desk and opened a thick file. “Your test results are impressive. We have few recruits who enter SHIELD with such a wide array of skills. I suppose I should expect nothing less, considering your soulmates… If you were any other Agent, you’d be assigned to an Academy, but considering the concern that Agents Romanov and Hill have, we’re developing another plan.”

“Yeah,” Skye said softly. “Maria and Natasha said something about that. They said that they wanted my name to be anonymous?”

“On rare occasions, we suppress an agent’s name and assign them a number,” Fury explained.

“I have enough enemies from my time at SHIELD for us to consider that method,” Maria said. “Nat solidifies it.”

Skye shrugged. “I picked Skye as my name when I was sixteen,” she said with a shrug. “I mean, I like it, but I don’t mind if my file has a number on it.”

“The real question is, which department we’ll place you in,” Fury said. “You broke my Comms test, you’ve hacked SHIELD, Stark Industries, as well as releasing the financial information for several dozen CEOs. It seems the obvious choice to place you there, but you did fairly well on the SciTech test and Dr. Banner says that if you had been able to continue a traditional educational group you’d have had at least one Ph.D. by your age. And Barton’s been looking over your Operations training and he says you have some real promise.”

“Clint’s been watching us?” Skye asked Natasha.

“He likes those air ducts,” Natasha said. “But I’d agreed. She has natural talent, particularly for undercover work.”

Skye blushed red. “Given that she has talent for all three divisions,” Fury continued. “I propose something we’ve never done before. Skye isn’t going to belong to any one division.”

Skye looked from Natasha to Maria, shocked. “What? But I thought…”

“It will be classified Level 10, but you’ll be assigned to what I’m calling ‘Special Projects’. Long-term, you’ll be assigned to where we need you. Short term, you’ll have an SO for Comms and SciTech who will train you in being an Agent. Once you’re qualified in Ops, your SO there will be Barton. If you show a proficiency to one over the others once training’s over, we’ll reassess.”

Skye stared. “I was… okay, we need to stop shocking me with news,” Skye said. “Keep in mind I thought I basically failed out of High School. I’m still trying to wrap my brain around the fact that I
qualify for one SHIELD school, let alone three.”

“Maybe you just need to concede to what the rest of us know,” Maria said. “That you’re smart and talented. You can be more than just a hacker.”

“Your test results show that you have the same IQ as Tony Stark. Except he’s a manchild in his mid-40s who seems determined to give me a daily migraine, and you have potential to actually do some good in the world. So rather than constraining you, I want to keep my options open. But first, I have a question for you. You have ties to the Rising Tide?”

Skye nodded. She had discussed her affiliation with her soulmates. “Sometimes I’d exchange information with them, but I didn’t work for them full-time or anything. I used to sleep with a guy that works for them, and he’s been trying to get me to join up.” she said, unashamed of her past. “I was actually planning on going to Austin to meet up with him when aliens started raining from the sky. Plans change.”

Fury sighed heavily. “Agent Hill tells me that you hacked into SHIELD to obtain a personal file,” he said. Skye stiffened and Maria slipped her hand into Skye’s. “You’re not the first person to hack SHIELD that we’ve recruited. Do you think you can understand that we need to keep certain secrets from the public?”

Skye glanced at Natasha, then Maria. “I’m beginning to,” she said softly. Both Maria and Natasha smiled.

“Your soulmates are vouching for you,” Fury said, the warning in the undercurrent in his voice. “Can you trust the system?”

Skye smiled. “I can trust them,” she said. “And if they trust the system, then I will do my best.”

Fury stared at her for a moment. Even with just one eye, Skye felt once again like her soul was being searched. She was starting to wonder if SHIELD taught a class. “I suppose, given your history, that’s the best that I can expect for now,” Fury said. “But Romanov, you’re responsible for her. I don’t want to get complaints from her SOs that she’s accessing files that she shouldn’t.”

“Understood, sir,” Natasha said.

“You ready to meet your SOs?” Fury asked.

Skye chewed her lips, then nodded. “I’m going to go then,” Natasha said softly. “We can explain why Maria would be here, but my presence would draw attention. Especially considering my new status.”

“Okay,” Skye said, understanding why Natasha was stepping out, even though it still made her nervous. Natasha kissed Skye goodbye, and Skye smiled at the love that she felt through the bond that they shared.

After Natasha went out one door, Fury pressed a button, “You can come in now,” he said. The only way Skye could describe the man who entered was ‘eager’. That was definitely her first impression, that he was impressed and rather excited about something. She saw Maria hide a smile and decided that either this man was always this way, or else it was a front; considering that he was an agent, it really could be either.

“Reporting as ordered, Director Fury,” the man said crisply, his voice calm even if his demeanor wasn’t.
“Agent Koenig, I’d like you to meet Agent 42,” Fury said, all business. Following suit, Skye stepped forward and held out her hand, which the man shook.

“Billy Koenig; pleased to meet you, Agent,” he greeted her genially. “Fury tells me you broke the curve on the Comms test.”

“That’s what they say,” Skye said. “I look forward to what more you can teach me,” Skye said honestly.

Billy gave her a look of disbelief. “You think I can teach you something?”

“We all have something to teach each other,” Skye said softly. “No one has the whole solution. No one can teach themselves everything. We all have something to contribute.”

“Well, I can certainly teach you emergency protocols for our systems and how to reinforce level security within the servers.” Billy said. “Unfortunately, I’ve been tasked by Fury to an undisclosed location so I’ll be connecting to you daily via video chat for your training.”

“I’ll be off-base anyway,” Skye said, assuming that she’d be working from the tower.

“We can set you up with a SHIELD-issued firewall for your laptop so you can connect to the system,” Billy said.

“Not that you need help with that,” Fury said, clearly a little bitter.

“I’ll work with Agent Koenig to close those access points, so no one else will be able to follow me in,” Skye offered quietly.

“Hmph. See that you do,” Fury said, though Skye thought she caught a glimmer of appreciation in his eye. She suspected it would have been included in their orders, but the fact that she offered maybe counted for something.

“Good deal,” Billy chimed in. “I’ll issue the orders to have a laptop available to you before you leave. Your first drill, as it were, will be to get it set up and secured on time for our call tomorrow.”

Skye nodded. “Shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll see you then.”

Billy nodded, then nodded at Fury and Maria. “Director, Director.”

“Thank you agent,” Maria said in a detached, professional tone as he let himself out of the office. It was a little weird to hear it; Skye was used to Maria’s warm personal tones.

As Billy left, Fury’s intercom chimed. “Yes?” he said as he answered it.

“Sir, Agent Weaver is waiting for you,” the voice of the secretary came over the line.

“Thank you; patch her through.” A moment later, a screen off to the side of the desk brightened. Skye turned as Maria did, taking in the face of a lovely, dark-skinned woman with bright eyes.

“Agent Weaver,” Fury greeted.

“Director Fury, Director Hill,” Weaver replied with a smile. She nodded in Skye’s direction, not knowing how to address the unfamiliar young woman.

“This is Agent 42,” Fury introduced.

Weaver’s eyes went wide. “The prospective agent file that you sent last week,” she said in
recognition. “Your credentials are quite impressive, Agent 42. If not for the security, there are two
Agents who are just about to graduate from SciTech Academy that I’d want to introduce you to.”

Skye blushed. “It’s just a GED and a high IQ,” Skye said. “I’m sure you’ve seen more impressive.”

Agent Weaver studied Skye for a moment, quietly, and Skye tried hard not to fidget. “I have seen
agents with greater numbers of credentials, that is certainly true. But very few have the sheer raw
potential your test results showed me. Whether you continue to impress me, well, that’s up to you.”

Skye felt a hint of approval through the soulbond, from Maria. Skye understood that this was one of
the people her soulmates trusted and nodded slowly. “I will do my best, ma’am,” Skye replied in a
low voice.

Agent Weaver smiled. “Excellent. In that case, I’m sure you’ll do quite well.”

“We need two things from you regarding Agent 42,” Fury said, addressing Weaver again. “First is
that, as she will not be attending the Academies for security reasons, she may need some
supplemental training. As the head of SciTech, you have access to all of the materials she may need.
And secondly, we have determined that though she is not a scientist on the level you generally deal
with, she has the skills to be a troubleshooter when our agents run into problems or hurdles they
hadn’t anticipated. When she is involved with the SciTech division, and for those projects, I intend
for you to be her SO.”

Weaver just nodded. “I understand, sir. I believe she will be a valuable asset to us in general. I
presume most of her consulting will be done remotely?”

“Yes,” Maria answered. “Arrangements can be be made should a project require direct, hands-on
interaction. That should only happen rarely, though.”

“Of course,” Weaver answered. “Agent, I will have all my contact details forwarded to you. You
should come up with a name you wish to use among the scientists you may meet in person. The
Sciences division has basically two levels; entirely informal and entirely formal. We have a few
touchy egos, particularly among the consultants.”

Skye smiled. “I appreciate the warning. I’m sure we can come up with something appropriate before
it’s needed.”

“Good. I’ll be in touch, then. And Agent,” Weaver added, pausing a moment to be sure she had
Skye’s attention. When she did, she smiled. “Feel free to contact me whenever you need to. I’m here
to help.”

“I will,” Skye said, genuinely touched. She could see that the older agent meant every word, and
Skye rather hoped that Natasha and Maria’s trust wasn’t misplaced. It was hard to trust so many of
these people, but in this case… Skye was surprised to find that she really kind of wanted to.

“Will there be anything else, sir?” Weaver asked Fury.

“Not right now, Agent Weaver. Thank you,” Fury said in as close to a courteous tone as Skye had
yet heard him use. Weaver just smiled again and signed off.

“So,” Fury said, turning back to Skye, “now that you’ve met them, those two agents will be your
primary points of contact officially. Unofficially, you also have Romanov and Hill. You can consult
with Banner if you feel it’s justified, but under no circumstances do I want you taking any kind of
orders from Stark.” Fury’s tone was firm, and Skye just nodded.
“We have you set up for a continued training period. Working out with Romanov and Barton will do for maintaining your physical condition for field ops, should they be required at some point, but for now we’re still mostly focusing on defensive skills,” Maria went on to say, her tone still professional. But Skye could feel the warmth underlying her words through the soulbond and so maintained her professional demeanor as much as she could.

Fury pinned Skye with a hard look. “Think of this as an initial assessment phase. You convinced three of my best agents that you’re worth the extra measures necessary to allow you to work with SHIELD and not just to keep the soulmate of high level agents safe. But now you have a harder job: to convince your SOs, and to convince me.”

Skye straightened, a little stung but trying not to show it. “I will, sir.”

“Good,” Fury accepted with a nod. “Dismissed; go find Romanov. I need to speak with Hill about some other things.”

“Yes, sir,” Skye replied. Maria sent her a touch of reassurance through the soulbond as Skye left the office. Fortunately, she didn’t have to go far to find Natasha; she was just a few doors down from Fury’s office in an empty conference room, just waiting. “Hey,” Skye said from the doorway.

Natasha tugged Skye into the room and kicked the door closed, wrapping her soulmate in a gentle hug for just a moment. Skye looked a little taken aback but returned the hug. “Cameras in here are only on when there’s a meeting scheduled. I checked; we’re safe for the moment. So you, good?”

“I think so. I need to pick up a laptop, though; Agent Koenig said he’d order one left for me, and I’m supposed to get it back to the tower, setup and secured before our scheduled call tomorrow.”

Natasha nodded. “We need to go pick up your badge, IDs - official public and official classified - and a few other things anyway. And we need to go shopping again; you need suits, so you fit in around places like this.”

Skye made a face at the idea of suits, but nodded anyway. “Whatever it takes,” she said with a resigned smile. “Agent Weaver suggested that I should create an identity for use if I have to meet with the scientists in person. Said they have some touchy egos, and if Tony’s anything to go by that means that just introducing myself as Agent 42 is going to send them searching for who I really am.”

“True. We can work on that, too. Get you a SciTech ID and credentials set up.” Natasha didn’t even blink at the idea of a false identity or credentials, and Skye was again reminded that there was very little her soulmates hadn’t seen or done before. She wasn’t sure if that made things better or worse, but at least she had help adjusting.
Wow, guys. 2000+ hits on the first four chapters? And nearly 100 comments? (Yes, we know a bunch of those are our replies. But still!)

You all rock! Thank you so much for taking the time to leave comments, kudos, to bookmark or to rec/reblog on Tumblr. We're so grateful for the response, and we want to make sure you know it too.

Poor Maria. I wouldn't have wanted to find out this way, either!

Chapter 5

Skye knew that the simplest solution to her SciTech ID was to use her cover from the party. She had been established as a PhD candidate in Nuclear Physics. To further establish her cover, they added a PhD in BioTech. Bruce promised that he could teach her enough about it to augment her tech skills so that the cover would stand up under pressure. They might have to do some research into specifics, but that was okay.

Skye’s days were now packed, between Natasha’s training, which Clint joined in on, and Comms and SciTech training. Agent Koenig, or Billy as he preferred, ran her through emergency systems drills, patching the many holes in the SHIELD system that Skye located, and running coding speed drills. Agent Weaver ran her through atomistic attribute drills, reciting mathematical theorems, reciting the periodic table, testing how to use common lab equipment and more. She had homework
for the first time since she was 16, and for the first time in her life she actually felt challenged by it.

Skye was feeling her body change as well. Her stomach was beginning to tighten, arms starting to firm, and legs growing lean and muscled. She looked in the mirror once and barely recognized herself.

Despite everything, Maria and Nat refused to allow her to work all the time. Every night, they’d do something fun at their insistence. Sometimes they’d watch movies, other times eat takeout by themselves, other times Skye would cook for her soulmates, having learned at the orphanage. Nat had gotten Skye into yoga, since flexibility was such an important part of the fighting style that Skye was being taught.

Three weeks passed before Maria came home looking pale. “Maria?” Skye asked, stepping out of the shower and spotting her. Natasha followed Skye from the bathroom. “What’s wrong?”

Maria sat on their bed, still looking stunned and pale. “Coulson… Fury… I can’t believe…”

“Maria?” Natasha said, quickly dressing and rushing towards her. “Can you hear me?”

Maria put her head in her hands and rubbed her eyes. “Yeah, Nat.”

“What’s wrong?” she demanded.

“I don’t even know how to explain it,” Maria said.

“Try starting the beginning,” Skye suggested.

“The beginning?” Maria laughed dryly. “The beginning… Coulson died, that’s the beginning.” Skye and Nat sat on either side of Maria, waiting for her to continue. “Fury… Fury decided to play God and brought Coulson back to life.”

Natasha inhaled sharply. “What?”

“Coulson’s alive,” Maria said. “He doesn’t look so great, and the… the machines, the doctors…” Maria took a deep breath, needing it to calm herself.

“Maria, Coulson was stabbed through the heart by Loki. There’s no surgeon in the world who could have repaired that while there was still time to revive him…” Natasha protested. Skye pressed closer to both of them, looking a little bewildered but ready to provide what she could in the way of support.

Maria took another deep breath and nodded. “I know, Nat. I know, trust me. And I don’t have all the details yet, but… There’s a drug that Fury has access to. It’s not a SHIELD development, as far as I know, but he said… Fury said he couldn’t lose his one good eye…”

“So they brought him back to life, somehow?” Skye asked softly. “Shouldn’t that be a good thing?”

“Normally, yes, but I… I question the methods they’re using,” Maria admitted. “What little I saw looked highly questionable, ethically. And they’re doing some sort of memory overwriting, so he doesn’t remember the procedures…”

“Why?” Skye asked when Natasha seemed speechless. “What’s the point in reviving someone if you’re just going to erase their memory?”

“They won’t… they can’t erase everything. Just the procedure, and what happened immediately
after. Apparently, he’s going to think he spent the whole time in Tahiti. The whole thing’s classified Level 10. You have to be Level 8 to know that Coulson’s even alive.”

“Fury wasn’t going to tell us,” Natasha said quietly. “He was going to keep us in the dark.”

“He tried to force me to not tell you,” Maria said. “I told him to go to hell.”

Skye was staggered by the rage and grief and disgust that was practically rolling off her soulmates.

“We have to tell the others,” Natasha said.

“Nat, we can’t,” Maria said softly. “I mean, think about it. We tell Stark and the entire world will know he’s alive. You know how it is. This is SHIELD. We have to respect that some secrets have to remain secrets.”

Natasha stared at Maria. “We tell Clint,” Natasha countered. “Just Clint. I can’t not tell my partner. I’m not going to lie to him.”

“Fair,” Maria said. “But after that we have to respect that Fury might have a play that we can’t see. One that includes no one knowing.”

“And Fury has been right before. Alright, I get it,” Natasha agreed reluctantly. “Clint and I won’t tell the others… for now, at least.”

Skye also nodded reluctantly. “I suppose I understand, at least for now. But Fury had better lock that information up real well, because even if I don’t go looking for it… you know there are people that will.”

“We know that, and I’m sure we’ll keep the information as secure as possible,” Maria said, regaining her calm now that she’d talked through her initial reaction. As Maria relaxed, though, Skye noted that Natasha had only gotten more tense.

“I’m… going to go find Clint,” Natasha said abruptly. She pulled away from her soulmates gently, but firmly and left the room without looking back.

“She’s not okay, is she?” Skye asked quietly.

“No,” Maria answered. She sighed and snuggled into Skye’s embrace, not quite ready to give up the comfort yet. “Coulson was… special to them. He was their handler for a long time; he backed Clint’s decision to bring Nat in rather than take her out, even before they knew she was one of my soulmates. They took his death hard, and this isn’t really going to be any better.”

“I’m sorry.” Skye pulled Maria close, stroking her hair lightly much the way Natasha so often did. “It’s going to be hard on all of you, dealing with this. I’m sorry you’re caught in the middle between them and Fury, too.”

Maria smiled wryly. “I usually am; that’s nothing new. But thank you.”

“I didn’t know him, but if you want to talk… I’ll listen.”

“I appreciate the offer. I think… that I’m not sure what I think right now. But if I come to any conclusions, I’ll let you know.”

“Okay,” Skye answered with a small smile. “Just more snuggles, then?”

“At least until Nat’s ready to come back, sure,” Maria agreed. Skye tumbled them back onto the bed,
settling comfortably. Maria rested her head on Skye’s chest, grateful that at least one of them wasn’t currently emotionally compromised by Fury’s revelation.

“Not to be all weird about this or anything… but SHIELD doesn’t normally bring people back from the dead… right?”

“No…” Maria said softly, “we can’t bring people back from the dead. As far as I know this is something new. I didn’t want to tell Natasha, but reports say that he was begging to die while they brought him back.”

“You know you have to tell her eventually,” Skye said, horrified by the idea of forcing someone to go through something like that.

Maria sighed. “I will, when things calm down a little and we all have had a lot of vodka.”

“Should we wait for Nat for dinner or should we order for ourselves?” Skye asked.

“Clint will make sure that she eats. What do you want for dinner?” Maria asked.

“How about burgers from that place up on 54th and 5th Avenue?”

“Ooo, the one with the blue cheese burger?” Maria asked.

“We should get one for Nat. Think she wants the one with the fried egg or the mushroom and swiss?”

“Mushroom and swiss,” Maria agreed.

“JARVIS? You got all that?” Skye asked.

“Indeed, Skye,” JARVIS responded. “Would you like your usual order of fries and drinks with that?”

“Yes please,” Skye said with a smile. Then she paused, thoughtfully. “If there’s an opportune moment, would you please tell Nat we’re ordering dinner and see if Clint would like something? They’re welcome to either join us or to keep to themselves if they prefer.”

“I will relay the message, Skye.”

“You amaze me most days, you know that, right?” Maria said, snuggling Skye close.

“How?” Skye asked. “I mean, I know I’m smart, but…”

“This isn’t about how smart you are, Skye. This is about how kind you are.”

“Why… why would I not be kind?” Skye asked.

“You’ve seen the worst of the world, Skye. The worst humanity has to offer, and you still look after everyone. You still look after Natasha when everyone around her assumes that she can handle herself.”

“I know she can,” Skye answered softly. “But I also know that sometimes it’s nice to not have to. I think Nat feels the same way, even if she would usually rather not admit it.”

“But that’s just what I mean. You think about things like that, when most other people wouldn’t.”
Skye just shrugged a little, running her fingers through Maria’s hair softly again. “I guess I just do. At least, when it comes to people I care about. And Nat cares about Clint a lot, so I don’t mind extending that to him as well. It was just a thought; they might tell JARVIS they don’t want anything.”

“JARVIS?” Maria raised her voice questioningly.

“Mr. Barton has indeed placed an order. They have asked to be notified when it arrives and they will decide at that point if they wish company,” the AI replied complacently.

“You see?” Maria asked. She felt Skye chuckle.

“So I’m thoughtful of other people, when I give a damn. It happens. I guess I always thought that was part of caring about someone.”

“For some people, it isn’t. But I’m glad you are the way you are.”

“Maybe that’s the point,” Skye mused. “Of the soulbonds, I mean. Maybe we’re meant to find things in each other to appreciate. It makes for a better relationship when we all have some things in common and some things that the others lack…”

“Save it for the lab,” Maria said, teasing Skye. “I’m sure someone there would be interested in studying the biological dynamics of soulbonds.”

“Yeah, I kinda wish I could tell the others that I had marks for things like this, but marks are rare and three marks…”

“Yeah, you should have seen Fury’s face when he found out that I had three marks,” Maria said.

“When did you first tell him?” Skye asked.

“About five minutes after Natasha said my words,” Maria said.

Skye laughed. “Really?”

Maria nodded. “It was 2007 and I had just made Level 6,” she said. “My SO and Fury reamed my ass out until the truth came out.” She could feel that she had Skye’s attention, so she continued on. “I thought my SO was going to flip, but I think in the end she was really just disappointed that I hadn’t trusted her more. In any case, I had to admit that I had three marks. They weren’t sure if I would be able to handle a high level position if I wound up with multiple partners also in SHIELD… well, Fury wasn’t, anyway. My SO, Agent May, was a little more forgiving. But Fury was convinced when I admitted that I’m also Ace. UST in the workplace isn’t a thing when you never have those tensions in the first place.”

“Sometimes I think I might envy that, just a little,” Skye said softly. “But it doesn’t really solve the emotional side, so…”

Maria shrugged. “Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to actually want someone. I feel what you and Nat feel, when you’re together, but though it makes me happy to know you’re happy… that’s all there is to it. It’s just a warm, content feeling…”

“It’s alright, Maria,” Skye soothed. “I don’t mind, really. We’re all different, and we love you just as you are.” She felt Maria relax and just smiled. “Tell me more about your old SO? Mine seem… so different.”
Maria nodded. “Yeah. Operations is different than either SciTech or Communications. And specialists are even stricter; they’re the ones usually on the front line missions, stuff like Nat and Clint do. My SO was great, though. She’s an amazing physical fighter, tends to just grab a weapon if she needs one, rather than taking equipment. Real mobile. But she has a good heart, too.”

“What’s she doing now?”

“She… had a bad experience, a few years ago. She retired from field work and took a post in Admin,” Maria admitted in a low tone full of regret.

“Does that happen a lot?” Skye asked curiously.

“Not usually, no. But sometimes people have experiences that they just can’t get past,” Maria explained. “We have therapists and counselors on staff, but you can only do so much for some traumas.”

Skye was quiet for a moment. “Well, I hope I get to meet her someday. Even if she is semi-retired.”

“I hope so too. I have a feeling that she’d like you,” Maria said. “Be warned though, she’s hard to get to know. She’s one of those people who take a minute.”

“Don’t worry, I’m stubborn,” Skye said, smiling. “Can you tell me what Coulson’s like?”

Maria shrugged. “He’s a bit of a jack of all trades. To some he’s a hardass, to others he’s like a big brother, others he’s their dad. I mean, on an emotional level, I kind of understand why Fury did what he did - Coulson’s the best of us, but…”

“The ends don’t usually justify the means?” Skye asked.

“Yeah,” Maria said. “And now I have to keep something from someone I’ve seen as a close friend for years. Okay, new topic. I need to talk about something happier. I got this week’s progress reports from everyone on you this week. Koenig is still a little scared of your skillset and Weaver keeps bemoaning the fact that we have to keep you generally a secret. She says she already has a project she wants you to work on.”

“Yeah, I made a comment about how the comms units that are issued to Ops teams are really out of date. Weaver said that it would be a good project for me to start working on, maybe do some collaboration.”

“Yeah, I’m not so sure about the collaboration part. I’m trying to convince Fury to let Bruce and Tony to help out,” Maria said.

“You know you can’t lock me away in this ivory tower forever, right?” Skye asked sitting up. “You know that all this training will someday amount to me going out into the field. Maybe not the front lines, but I never wanted to sit behind a desk my whole life.”

“I know, I do, but… understand that we’ve been looking for you since 2007. Five years is a long time. Now that we have you, we don’t want you away from our safety net so soon.”

“I get it, I do,” Skye said. “I just don’t want you guys to get some idea that I’m helpless. Someone to protect.”

“You know, those two things aren’t opposites,” Maria said.

“Excuse me, Miss Hill, but the food has arrived,” JARVIS interjected. “Would you like me to send
the delivery up with security?"

“Yes please, JARVIS,” Maria said. “Please let Natasha and Clint know.”

“They have been informed and have indicated that they will join you for dinner.”

Skye couldn’t help but grin. She loved her soulmates and loved getting to spend time alone with them, but apart from Natasha, Clint was quickly becoming Skye’s favorite Avenger. Their shared background of foster care followed by less-than-legal activities allowed them to relate to each other on a level that very few people outside of her soulbond had ever understood.

“Thank you, JARVIS,” Maria said, sitting up herself and pulling Skye into her lap. “Thank you for listening,” Maria said.

“Any time,” Skye said. “Especially since you’re going to feed me.”

“Always,” Maria said.

When Clint and Natasha joined them, both looked calm but a little grim. Maria continued setting out food, but Skye ran over and hugged Natasha tightly. Nat clung to her for a moment, and Skye just let her; offering silent support in whatever way she needed. When Nat finally let go, Skye gave Clint a similar hug.

“Hey, Skye,” Clint greeted her.

“Hey yourself. Come on and eat before it gets cold,” Skye said, drawing them over to the table.

“How’s training going?” Clint asked as they settled in to eat.

“Good, I think,” Skye answered between bites. “According to Maria, I’m scaring one of my SOs.” She smirked. “The other wishes I weren’t secret so she could put me on all kinds of other projects with other people.”

“You scaring Koenig or Weaver?” Clint asked.

“Koenig,” Skye said, dunking some fries in ketchup. “He keeps saying he doesn’t have anything to teach me. We spend a lot of time on the History of SHIELD, which he seems very… passionate… about.”

Clint chuckled. “Yeah, he’s kind of a history buff. Very strict with SHIELD protocols, too, if I remember right.”

“A bit,” Skye agreed. “Though I think he understands that sometimes, some things need to be done outside of by-the-book methods, he still wants me to know the protocols. On the other hand, since half the holes in the system are exploits of certain protocols, I think I’ve made my point. We’ve got a lot of them fixed at this point, but there might still be more.”

Listening to Skye and Clint chatter helped Natasha to finally begin to relax. She doubted that Clint was getting over the news about Coulson so quickly, but perhaps a distraction was what they all needed. And Skye was clearly happy to provide one.

Natasha slanted a glance at Maria, and Maria smiled. Clint was asking questions about Skye’s work with the SHIELD systems, and Skye was explaining excitedly. It was clear that Clint was only following part of what she said, even though Skye was good at using layman’s terms and minimizing her use of jargon; the inner workings of computer systems were just something Clint had never cared
to learn much about. But as a distraction, it was working quite well.

Skye ordinarily would have felt bad about dominating the conversation, but the sense she got from Maria and Natasha through the bond was that they were happy enough not needing to talk. So she answered Clint’s questions about her work, so far; she shouldn’t be breaking any rules by talking about what she was doing. She was protecting files, not reading them, so she couldn’t be sharing confidential information.

And she was reasonably sure Clint couldn’t get into the systems the way she could, so she wasn’t worried about telling him anyway.

“So,” Skye finally began, finishing her food. Everyone else was done already, but she’d been a little slower because she was talking. “What are we working on tomorrow in physical training?”

“After our usual morning routine, we’re changing things up a bit,” Natasha said, finally speaking up. Skye’s eyes lit with curiosity and Clint smiled at her.

“Nat’s letting me start you on marksmanship,” he said happily. “We’ll be going down to the range to start on safety.”

Skye made a face but nodded. “Not so fond of guns. But I know I need to learn it, as an agent. Safety sounds like a good place to start.”

“You’ll be fine, Skye,” Maria encouraged her. “We don’t expect you to need it anytime soon, but better to start early so that when you do need it, it’s automatic.”

“I understand,” Skye answered agreeably. “So, it’s after dinner. Movie?”

“Sure,” Clint agreed after a glance at Nat and Maria. “Nothing with deep emotions, though?”

“Brainless comedy it is,” Skye answered, getting up and heading towards the living room.

It was a testament to the brainlessness of the film that Skye’s mind began to wander. It amazed her how quickly she had fit into life with Maria and Nat. They slept together, most nights, except on the nights that she and Natasha had sexy times. Maria had her own bedroom for those nights, though Skye and Nat had a tendency to make it an Afternoon or Evening Delight to prevent Maria from being forced to sleep alone too many nights. Skye had her spot on the couch, in their bed, and at their table and she actually liked those things. They exchanged ‘I love yous’ easily now, and were discussing when they would need to move from the Tower to D.C., since the aftermath of New York had been finally wrapped up and both Natasha and Maria needed to return to work.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Natasha whispered curiously.

“Just thinking about how lucky I am to have you two,” Skye whispered back.

“We’re lucky to have you, too,” Natasha whispered with a small smile; Skye felt quite accomplished, though. It was the first real smile from Natasha since Maria’s disturbing news.

“You know I’m here for you if you need anything,” Skye said softly. “To talk or drink or spar or screw… to prank Tony…” That earned her another small smile.

“I have a video conference with Fury tomorrow about my next mission with Steve. I might need an outlet after to keep myself from yelling at him.”

“I’ll pencil you in,” Skye said lightly. “Koenig isn’t really giving me that much to do these days apart
from protocol drills and studying for my History of SHIELD exam next week. I’ve been in and out of all the systems so many times I could do it blindfolded. He says the Comms department isn’t getting nearly so many complaints about the network being slowed down every time they ran diagnostics. The only things that really take up my day is the Ops stuff you assign me and what Weaver tells me to do.”

“Shhh,” Maria reminded them lightly, not taking her eyes off the screen.

They settled back into silence and allowed the film to finish. As the credits rolled, Skye stood up and stretched, working the knots out of her back. “We really should talk about when we want to move back to D.C.,” Maria said. The Avengers were slowly starting to part ways. Steve had moved two weeks before, and Tony and Pepper had moved back to Malibu to get work done the month before that. Clint was finally back to work at SHIELD, after taking a month of leave somewhere, though Skye didn’t know where and Maria and Nat asked her to leave it alone. Even Bruce was making noises about moving to California to work at SI.

Natasha shifted herself. “I mean, we certainly have more freedom in D.C. We might actually be able to go out on a date if we were down there.” As the Avengers were mostly gone, the mob of fans had died down almost entirely, but the few paparazzi who hung around the tower were relentless at trying to get a shot of them.

“I haven’t ever been there, is there much to do?” Skye asked.

“Well there’s loads of historical stuff,” Maria said. “Jazz in the Park in the summer, though it’s a little late in the year for that. Nick and I get invited to the White House Christmas Party every year and that’s coming up. That’s very… political. And there’s lots of cameras, so I’m not too sure we should… There’s ice skating, your basic winter activities… the Mall can be fun…”

“That’s the place with all the museums, right?”

“You’ve traveled all over the country,” Natasha complained. “How is it that you’ve never been to D.C.?”

“I’ve never been big on history,” Skye said shortly with a shrug of her shoulders. “At least not then. Now that I know that SHIELD was my history… it’s actually kinda cool to hear about SHIELD history from Agent Koenig. Just don’t tell him that.”

Maria chuckled. “Your secret’s safe with us.”

Natasha nodded her agreement. “Promise. I know it’s early, but I’m kinda beat. You think we can call it a night?”

“Yeah, we can do that,” Skye agreed when Maria nodded. “I’m not sure if I’m ready to sleep yet, but I won’t turn down snuggles.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Maria said, throwing an arm over Skye’s shoulders.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Wow, you guys are amazing. We totally feel the love! Thank you for all the lovely comments, questions and kudos.

Chapter 6

Maria’s apartment in DC was a cozy two-bedroom. The main bedroom had a massive bed that went
Skye got out her Melinda Wen credentials and put on the straight, black wig that she had been originally given the day she met her soulmates. She then put the hair of the wig into a professional-looking bun and put on a suit, knowing that if she put on the suit, she’d blend in a lot more than she would with her usual wardrobe. There was a knock at the door and Skye checked it before opening
“Woah,” Clint said. “You look…”

“Like Melinda Wen, SHIELD Agent?” Skye asked.

“Yeah,” Clint said, raising his eyebrows. “It’s different.”

“Good different or bad different?” Skye asked nervously, tugging on her wig.

“Weird different,” Clint said. “You don’t look like you.”

“That’s the point,” Skye said with a calm smile.

“Yeah,” Clint agreed. “Sorry; it’s weird seeing Nat in disguise, too, but it happens more often so I’ve had some time to wrap my head around it. You ready to go?”

“Yes,” Skye agreed. She drew herself up, taking on a somewhat more confident air as suited a woman holding one Ph.D. and working on another. She smiled at Clint and ushered him out of the apartment so she could lock up. “Shall we?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Clint responded with a grin and a wink.

The ride to the Triskelion was uneventful, if time consuming. Traffic in D.C. was nearly as bad as New York City. Skye and Clint chatted in the car, though Skye carefully kept to her cover ID.

Her badge let her into the Triskelion readily, and Clint escorted her as far as the Director’s office. When Fury came out to meet her, he dismissed Clint with a look. “Thank you, Agent Barton,” Skye said politely.

“My pleasure, ma’am,” Clint replied before leaving the office; back to the archery range, Skye suspected.

Fury studied Skye, both as she interacted with Clint and after, as she settled into his office. “Not bad for a newbie,” he commented after a moment.

Skye smiled. “Thank you, sir. What can I do for you today?”

“I have a mission for you. Unfortunately, you’re the best situated in both skills and circumstances, so even though you’re relatively new to SHIELD… you’re my best option.” Fury handed over a folder and watched her as she read through the initial details.

“You… want me to infiltrate the Rising Tide,” she said after a moment. “Between my hacking skills and the fact that they’ve tried to recruit me before… I could get in.”

“That was our thought, yes,” Fury agreed. “What you’re doing to safeguard our systems can be done from anywhere as long as you have the relative privacy to do it. You don’t have to stop, just make sure they don’t catch you at it.”

Skye shrugged. “That shouldn’t be too hard, in itself, as long as I’m living alone. But… the work the Rising Tide will likely want me doing could put me on SHIELD’s radar pretty quickly. How do we keep my cover through that?”

“We keep it as long as possible,” Fury said. “If you get brought in for hacking SHIELD, as long as your cover hasn’t been blown in the meantime, we handle things internally. Agent Koenig and I will monitor the situation and anything to do with a hacker named Skye will flag our attention.”
“Hmm. I’ll have to go as myself, so I’ll need my van,” Skye mused thoughtfully. “I would really like to make arrangements to discretely access my SHIELD accounts, though, if possible.”

“We can probably arrange for that, but can I ask why?” Fury said.

Skye made a face. “Because living with Maria and Natasha, I’ve gotten used to eating regularly. I could probably cope, but I’d rather not have to.”

Fury was quiet for a moment. “We’ll arrange for a regular account in your name that we can make transfers to as needed,” he decided. “And once you know where you’re going to be, long-term, we can probably set up a running tab for you at a store or restaurant so you don’t have to worry about eating properly.”

“Thank you,” Skye replied with a smile. “When do I need to leave?”

“We need maybe a day to make sure everything is in place for you. Make contact with your people; how you handle your mission is up to you. Your regular contact will be with Koenig. Your SciTech projects are on hold for the time being.”

“I ought to be able to set up a fully encrypted connection back to SHIELD, so if someone really needs me for something…”

“We’ll keep it in mind.”

“I can always give you guys one of my hacking email addresses,” Skye offered. “It would appear less suspicious initially if requests were coming in through them.” Fury nodded his acceptance. “Alright, then. I guess I’d better go get things moving. Does Maria know about this?”

“No, but she will before the end of the day.”

“As long as I’m not the one who has to break the news to her,” Skye replied with a cheeky grin. Nat was away on a mission, so Fury or Maria would have to tell her when she got back. Skye would miss her, and Maria, of course. But this was the job. She’d agreed to it going in.

Besides, maybe this would convince her soulmates that she was capable of handling herself.

While she was at the Triskelion, Skye took advantage of being on base and spent some time on the gun range. She still wasn’t a great shot, but she could at least hit the target. Most of her hacking contacts operated later in the day and into the night rather than early in the morning, so she had a few hours to kill before getting that moving.

Clint caught up with her at the door when she checked out of the Triskelion, and Skye just smiled wryly at her erstwhile escort. They made the drive back to the apartment, still in character. As long as she looked like Melinda Wen, she was going to act the part. It was good practice, and a good habit to be in.

That said, as soon as they were safely in the apartment, Skye ditched the wig and went back to being herself. Clint seemed relieved by the switch back to normal as well, and he hung out to chat with her while she dug out her old clothes to pack. She took a few of the newer ones as well, but only the casual stuff.

Clint loaned her a small lock box for her SHIELD credentials; she wouldn’t need them out in the field, but she felt better knowing she would have them in an emergency. She hid the key to the box on the large ring of keys she carried; she only knew what about three of them were for, but she had always liked the idea of confusing and frustrating anyone who attempted to pickpocket her.
Not that she thought most people could get away with that; she still had a few skills she kept close to her chest.

Late in the afternoon, Skye pulled out her old laptop and connected to her old sources. She’d kept tabs on a few of them over the months, though not every day. It would have caused several problems if she’d just dropped off the radar entirely, after all.

It didn’t take her too long to get back in touch with some of her old contacts, though. She made it sound like she’d been down on her luck lately and was looking for work. Several of her contacts would likely jump on that, and she may end up with a few odd jobs on the side, but that didn’t bother her. It would just help cover her access to her paycheck from SHIELD, in the end.

“Tell me it isn’t true,” came Maria’s voice, making her jump. “Tell me Fury isn’t sending you into the field already. You haven’t been an Agent for even six months.”

Skye sighed and logged off of IRC channel she was logged into, stating that something IRL (in real life) needed her attention. “Fury needs me to infiltrate the Rising Tide and collect intel. We need to make sure they haven’t figured out any other holes in the SHIELD system and in addition to that, it’d be good to know membership.”

Maria sighed. “I just, I’m going to miss you,”

“I’ll have a secure smartphone,” Skye said standing up. “I promise we’ll Skype or talk every day.” Maria hadn’t moved and Skye looked away. “If you want me to, I won’t go,” she said softly. “If you ask me to, I’ll stay.”

Maria sighed. “Of course I won’t… I just. I guess I’ve gotten used to the idea of you being here when I get home every day. I’m really going to miss having you around. Nat’s gonna be pissed that she didn’t get to say goodbye.”

Skye shrugged. “We’re SHIELD Agents. I don’t know how long this mission will take me, but I’ll be under cover at least a couple of months. I’m going to drive to Austin and meet up with Miles - he’s been asking me to for a few months. I know he’s higher up in the Rising Tide and I’m hoping I can get him to get me a face-to-face or video chat with some of the leaders so we can start working on mapping the hierarchy.”

“And then round them all up,” Maria said, nodding, “Fury explained that to me. But why do you have to live out of your van again?”

“The Rising Tide is all about granting the public access to what they feel people should have access to. Before New York, the NSA and CIA were bigger targets than SHIELD because the government has been all about having access to all kinds of personal information without warning the public about potential biological attacks, bombings, terrorist threats. Their argument is that information can’t go one way. After New York, SHIELD became their newest focus.”

“You sound like you agree with them,” Maria said. “Getting into character?”

Skye shrugged. “SHIELD hid my origins from me for the first 24 years of my life,” Skye said simply. “I get why, now that I’ve read the file, but… I was far too young when I knew that the worst thing you could discover about your parents wasn’t the awful things they may have done, but that they didn’t want you. I’ve met people who were who were in the system and were left beside highways, in dumpsters, in hospitals and fire stations… everything in our society teaches us that our parents are supposed to love us unconditionally. To have parents who make the choice not to fulfill that role… it’s the worst feeling ever. The unredacted SHIELD file… learning my birthday… I
learned that my parents took care of me for nine months. It gave me hope that they did love me. That they either died or couldn’t take care of me any more. No matter what they did… I like to think that they loved me for those nine months.” Skye sniffed and shoved down the tears that were welling up in her eyes. She could feel the sorrow rolling off Maria.

“I’m not saying that the Rising Tide has the right solution,” Skye continued. “Not all information can be a part of the two-way street. Assets and agent identities need to be protected regardless of the agency, certain members of the public need to be prevented from accessing stuff like the tech that was left behind in the invasion, but sometimes…”

“Sometimes there’s no easy answer,” Maria said, nodding in understanding. “I get that. It’s complicated. It’s stuff like this that Nick and I wrestle with every day. Deciding who has access to what information, what to keep secret, what do we do with the technology and items that we acquire. There’s no easy answer, a lot of the time.”

“I’m gonna call every day,” Skye said, though it seemed like she was assuring herself this time more than Maria.

“You okay?” Maria asked.

Skye nodded. “I’m good,” she said. “I want to do this. It’s just going to be hard.”

“When do you need to leave?” Maria asked.

“I go to New York tomorrow night and pick up the van. The day after I leave for Austin and after I touch base with Miles, I’m going to find a secure location.”

“Make sure it’s somewhere close to a SHIELD base or somewhere we can get to you quickly in case you need help. And don’t you dare take off your GPS or leave behind your panic button.”

“I won’t,” Skye said. “I promise.”

Maria looked long into Skye’s eyes before speaking. “Do you want to watch a movie tonight or…”

“I don’t know…,” Skye admitted. “I can’t shake the feeling that it’s going to be a while before we’re going to be able to cuddle again.”

“Cuddling could certainly be part of the plan,” Maria said with a smile. “How about this, we order sushi from that place we love and just veg… see where the evening takes us?”

“I like this plan,” Skye said as they both migrated to the couch and Skye opened the Grubhub app. They took a while to order, debating with each other and talking about how their days had gone. Maria was amused when Skye described Clint’s reaction to her appearance as Melinda Wen; Maria told her about times when it had taken him more than a few minutes to adjust to Natasha’s change in appearance, too. Skye carefully avoided talking about her preparations for the mission for a while.

They’d wound up ordering a bunch of sushi to share, and half the time they fed each other pieces rather than themselves. Skye was a huge fan of tako (octopus) but thought Maria’s favorite, amebi (sweet shrimp), was a weird flavor. They shared a love for unagi (eel) and sake (salmon) sushi and since they were prone to eating off each other’s plates anyway, they didn’t bother sorting out which container was whose.

They snuggled together to watch their movie, Skye leaning on Maria and Maria’s arms wrapped around her. Maria’s fingers idly rubbed Skye’s shoulder and Skye’s hand rested on Maria’s thigh. Skye idly reflected on how much her definitions of comfort and intimacy had changed since finding
her soulmates. She finally understood how ‘intimate’ and ‘sexual’ were two different things. Sex was intimate, but there was much more to it than that.

Damn, was she going to miss this.

Skye sighed and burrowed closer to Maria. Maria’s arms tightened around her in response, both of them just trying to make the best of the situation. It had been tough, Maria recalled, the first time that Natasha was sent out on a mission after she’d finished her SHIELD qualification. Natasha’s skills had been undeniable, though, and Maria couldn’t keep her soulmate from the chance to balance some of the bad things she’d done with good things.

Skye’s history was just as checkered, though not quite as violent. But Maria couldn’t keep Skye from doing what she thought was right, either, any more than she could have with Nat. They’d pressured Skye to become a SHIELD Agent; she could hardly complain now about the job Skye had chosen to embrace. Very slowly, they both fell asleep in each other’s arms.

The next morning was a flurry of activity for Maria and Skye. Skye received final instructions from Billy Koenig and a huge packet of work from Anne Weaver that she could do if she was able to without getting caught. None of the work was marked as SHIELD documents or looked like SHIELD files - they were merely exercises for Skye to continue her SciTech training with. Maria had asked for the day off, addressing only the most vital information via her tablet, and helping Skye pack. Maria couldn’t help but frown at the sight of the single knapsack and box that Skye was taking with her.

Most of the SHIELD and Rising Tide info was on Skye’s laptop, which, while initially won in a bet, had been souped up by Tony shortly after Skye’s arrival. The SHIELD stuff had been hidden on a ghost partition to hide the data from anyone but the very best hackers, and only if the hacker knew what to look for. While Skye went over her mission parameters, Maria searched for any lightweight tools that Skye could use. Around noon, Maria located one such tool that she hadn’t used since her own field agent days. “Aha!” Maria cried, triumphant.

“Maria, really, I’ll be fine,” Skye said, having accepted several little knick knacks. Maria held out the hula girl. “It’s a bug sweeper,” she says. “Great little tool when you’re located in an office or a van, in your case. Sends you a text alert if it picks anything up within 50 meters.”

Skye smiled softly, taking the hula girl and putting her in the box. “I can’t have too much stuff. Miles knows me as a nomad, never tied down any place for long. I still have to sell him that that’s still me.”

“Sorry,” Maria said. “I’m just nervous, I guess.”

“They’re hackers, Maria, not crazed gunmen. What’s the worst that could happen”

Maria shrugged her concession to Skye’s point. “I suppose you have a point.”

Skye looked over her gear and checked her phone. “I have access to steady finances, so I can eat, and I should be good to go. My pickup’s in about a half-hour.”

Maria hesitated. “Did we push you into this? I mean, do you really want this?”

Skye considered the question. “You did… but I needed the push. I was wrapped up in my own desire to find the truth about my history that I didn’t think much about how the rest of the world needs to operate. I want this. Trust me.”

“I just wanted to make sure that we weren’t pressuring you into being someone you weren’t. We love you for who you are and that’s enough. SHIELD or no.”
Skye smiled and hugged Maria tightly. “I love you guys too. And I know that you love me with or without my SHIELD status. This is something I want to do for me.”

“Okay,” Maria said. Some very small part of her felt disappointed, but it was the same part that wanted to lock Skye away and make sure nothing bad ever happened to her.

Finally a knock came at the door and Skye opened it to see Clint standing there grinning. “Someone call for an escort service?” he quipped. “I charge extra for parties.”

Skye nodded and turned to Maria with a watery smile. “Call me,” Maria requested.

“Every day,” Skye said. Then she picked up her bag and box and walked out of their apartment with Clint, walking away from home and with each step forcing herself back into the skin that she had worn before she had met her soulmates.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Skye gets picked up by SHIELD.

Chapter Notes

Still loving all the support. Thank you so much!

At the moment, LadyWinterlight is still making our photos. If you'd like to share one with us, we'll happily include it with a chapter (and credit the creator, of course)!

Chapter 7

It was easier than Skye expected to get into the Rising Tide, officially. Mostly due to Miles, who really, really wanted her... both in the organization and in his bed. The latter she managed to avoid with a partial truth; that she had found her soulmate but they were taking everything really slowly, getting to know each other, but Skye wasn’t willing to jeopardize that new relationship for anything.

Miles grumbled, but Skye had made a point to tell him that in the computer repair shop, with other Rising Tide members present. Later, one of the other girls confided in Skye that Miles hadn’t waited around for her, either, so she shouldn’t feel bad about turning him down. Skye assured the girl that the possibility of dealing with Miles hadn’t factored in to her decision to join the group.
She even got Maria in on it, once in a while; sending cute pictures to her “public” phone with silly I-like-you-but-this-is-new messages that she could share with some of her associates.

Slowly, over time, Skye proved herself to the group with the quality of her hacks and the type of information she was able to uncover. SHIELD was definitely on their radar after New York, as well as the theory that the government was hiding more super-powered folk, wanting to keep those people working for them instead of for the people.

Skye didn’t always disagree with their sentiments, but she knew they weren’t entirely on the right track, either.

Keeping to her past habits, Skye kept herself mostly mobile. She did take some odd jobs on the side, the kind of stuff she used to do: fake IDs, data retrieval, rescuing lost information from busted hard drives. It was enough that no one questioned her ability to eat regularly. And Skye still got up at 5am daily for a run and did yoga in a convenient park, enjoying the quiet of the early morning. She’d go back to her van and nap around mid-morning, knowing that hacking and just dealing with the other hackers would keep her up half the night.

When Skye stumbled upon Centipede, though, she quickly realized she was on to something much bigger. She spent every night for most of a week doing a very thorough check into them, just to make sure it wasn’t something SHIELD was already involved with.

It wasn’t.

She sent everything she had, via heavily encrypted transfer, to Billy and subsequently received orders to keep tabs on as much as she could but to keep herself out of their way. They thought Centipede might in itself be tied to something else, much bigger, that was already on SHIELD’s radar.

Still, Skye couldn’t help herself. She made her way, slowly and with stops here and there for a few days at a time, towards California, where the Centipede base she had picked up on was located. She did her work for the Rising Tide and her work for SHIELD, generally keeping herself busy.

Locating the building, She set up passive surveillance on the building, finding a diner with free wireless internet a few blocks away. She forwarded information daily to Billy until she caught the video of the guy not just surviving but walking away from a stories-tall leap to save a woman from a burning building, leaving a small crater in the road.

Sending the video she had captured and the info to Billy, she was surprised to get a direct, if encrypted, message from Maria stating that she should post the video online and geotag it.

She did so without asking too many questions, figuring that all would be explained in good time. She continued doing her cover work for the Rising Tide, waiting for further instructions. When two SHIELD agents had shown up, restrained her, and forced a black bag over her head, she knew she could play this one of two ways. She could either maintain her cover until someone told her otherwise or she could blow her own cover. It was the perfect situation where all she had to do was ask: what would Natasha do?

When at last the agents removed the bag, she knew from their faces that they had no idea who she was. “You guys are making a big mistake,” she told them.

Then she took a closer look; one of the agents was Agent Coulson! She recognized him from some photos Nat and Clint had shared with her. But she still kept to her cover; she didn’t know a thing about this other guy, or where they were or anything.
She bantered with the two agents for a few minutes before realizing that though they were tracking Centipede without actually knowing what Centipede was. Were they not privy to the information she’d already sent in?

It seemed not.

And then Coulson left her alone with Ward, under the effects of truth serum.

She was definitely going to have to check with her sources about the actual existence of QNB-T16. But that was for another time. She had to play the part, asking Ward all kinds of nosy questions, with a few scattered in to give her a better idea of the current situation.

And then she left him to sleep off the drug.

“Did Agent Ward give you anything?” Coulson asked when she emerged from the room they’d held her in.

“He told me he's been to Paris, but he's never really seen it and that he wishes you had stayed in Tahiti,” she quipped at Coulson.

“It's a magical place,” he replied, almost as if by rote. How odd. But from what Maria had told her, that was the cover memory they gave him instead of what actually happened during his recovery.

“Ward doesn’t like your style,” Skye continued, keeping to her part. “Kind of think I do.” Which was true. She certainly hadn’t expected Coulson to be on her side, knowing as little about her as he actually did. Unless he was actually aware of her identity; she’d have to have Maria check for her, during their next call.

“What about his ?” Coulson asked her, indicating the news report about Mike Peterson. Skye bit her lip, then reluctantly agreed to share what she knew. At least, as much as her cover identity would have figured out.

While Skye was out of the plane, she managed to send off a quick, encrypted message to Maria. Maria had been the one relaying instructions about the geotagged post, so she hoped she was getting the results HQ wanted.

The message she got back simply said, “Good. Stick with them if you can.”

That was enough for Skye. She’d ask her questions later, when she could ensure some privacy. So after the events of Union Station, when Coulson asked her to join his team as a consultant… Skye agreed.

She knew that Ward and May were trying to convince Coulson not to let her onboard. One glance at Ward’s hate-face told her that much, but she tried not to let it bother her as she said goodbye to her van again. Maria or Natasha would make sure it made it’s way back to the Tower. She actually enjoyed FitzSimmons’ double-speak. Weaver had spoken of the Level 5 agents more than once and it was nice to see that they lived up to their reputation.

She tried not to outwardly wince when Coulson referred to her as a ‘like an 0-8-4’. Coulson didn’t know how close he was on that one. Being in the field with a SHIELD team was a lot of fun. Technically, if you didn’t count the long-term UC status of her mission, Skye had never been on a SHIELD mission before. When gunfire had broken out, it had been a little hard to move against muscle memory, but Natasha had trained her for that too.

As Coulson yelled at the others on their qualifications, Skye tried to not let it get to her that she was
passed over by him regarding her qualifications. She was meant to come in under the radar, to be the underdog, but with a 172 IQ and having broken the Comms test, not to mention being a friend to the Avengers and impressing Agent Weaver and (though he wouldn’t admit it) Nick Fury, it was hard to be passed over.

She saw something weird when she gave Ward her 1% of the solution speech. She had given it to a lot of people over the years, and seen a lot of reactions, but she had never seen disgust as a micro-expression as a reaction to it. She filed it away for later. She thought about getting out of the choke hold the Peruvian asshole had her in, but it wasn’t a life or death situation and she wasn’t about to blow her cover for anything less.

It wasn’t until they had blown a hole in the plane and the others had gone to the Sandbox commissary that she was able to call Maria. “Hello?” her soulmate asked in her ‘busy’ tone.

“Agent 42 checking in,” Skye said.

“Skye,” Maria said and Skye couldn’t help but grin at the happy feeling that came through the bond, despite Skye’s own frustration. “I’m sorry for all the cloak and dagger, hon. You okay?” Pet names were rare between the three of them, though they all enjoyed it when it happened naturally.

“I get it. Things got a little hairy there for a minute, but I’m okay.”

“Fury’s going to send you a full debrief, but we want you to keep an eye on Coulson and his team for a while. May’s keeping an eye on Coulson, looking for signs of deterioration, but we want you to watch the team she’s put together.”

“Yeah, I mean, I’ve heard of FitzSimmons and they’re okay… green… but Ward rubbed me wrong.”

Maria laughed. “Ward rubs everyone wrong,” she said. Skye chewed on her lip and Maria went serious as she sensed the hesitation. “You got something more?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I read disgust off of him when I gave him my 1% of the solution speech,” Skye explained softly. “I’ve seen pity, anger, rage, and disagreement, but never disgust. I don’t know if it means, but I just know that I saw it.”

“I believe you,” Maria said, her tone conveying her trust in Skye. “Keep an eye on him, and if anything else seems strange… keep me posted.”

“I will. I promise,” Skye answered. “I suppose I should go.”

“Don’t be a stranger, okay?”

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to keep up with daily, while I’m living on the Bus,” Skye said hesitantly. “But I’ll do the best I can, okay?”

“I understand. At least we’ll know you’re someplace safe and generally where the team is,” Maria responded.

“Is Nat home yet?”

“Yeah, yesterday. She’s not happy that you were sent out while she was gone, but she knows how it works. Maybe call her, if you get a chance.”

“I’ll do my best. Promise.”
“Take care, Skye.”

“You two take care of each other.”

“Promise,” Maria said. Skye disconnected the call and put her phone away, moving to curl up on the Bus’ couch with her laptop. It seemed the best place to be found when everyone else got back.

Skye spent a few seconds regretting that her cover went back to days when she didn’t believe in her own intelligence, and that she couldn’t even reveal that she’d taken classes with Bruce. Fitz and Simmons started talking about the Lagrange point and coronal mass ejections. She really wished she could make common ground with Agent Weaver’s two favorite scientists, but she knew she’d have to find another way.

She couldn’t reveal that she understood most of the technobabble.

As she stood at the back of the group, watching the rocket launch, she messaged Natasha on her secured smartphone. Watchdog in place, she texted her soulmate.

Copy. Keep your eyes sharp. She got back a moment later. As always, She and Natasha could speak to each other without words. Skye had told her soulmate that she was willing to keep their secret and was willing to watch out for Coulson, because her soulmates loved Coulson. Natasha had responded with a combination of ‘I love you’, ‘watch out for yourself first’, and an ‘I miss you’. Maria teased them a lot about how they could speak with just a look or a gesture. It wasn’t that they communicated better than Natasha and Maria or Skye and Maria did, it was just more instinctive.

The team had a little bit of downtime, while repairs were being made to the plane. Director Fury made an appearance during the damage assessment, but he ignored Skye entirely and she, for her part, played the naive consultant boggling at the Director’s presence and attitude.

She “started training” with Ward, grumbling the whole time about pull-ups and punching a bag. Given her experience with Natasha, she thought it very suspicious that Ward was focusing so much on strength training with her rather than mobility. Either he was deliberately sabotaging her, or his machismo wouldn’t admit that he didn’t know how to train someone with a smaller, lighter frame. She couldn’t quite figure out which it was, yet. In either case, she was silently glad that this wasn’t her first experience with SHIELD training.

If her first SO had been Ward, she would never have made it as an agent.

Most of the team were still underestimating her skills, though, so she was able to keep running her systems sweeps unhindered. In doing so, an odd trace caught her attention. Someone, possibly several someones, had tried to re-open some of the holes she’d patched.

And it looked like it had come from the inside, not the outside.

She quickly erased any signs that she’d detected it, but she flagged an encrypted data trace for Maria immediately. But she didn’t have much time to worry about it, as the team began to investigate the disappearance of one Dr. Hall.

Getting the Evite to Quinn’s gathering was actually pretty simple; harder was finding a moment to send an encrypted text to Natasha. Tips for getting an egotistical businessman to spill his secrets? she asked.

Flatter him. Pretend to trust him. Be attentive, but not pushy. Then, a moment later. Stay sharp and don’t get overwhelmed.
Skye smiled as she put the phone away again. Going undercover while already undercover was a little nerve-wracking, but Natasha believed she could do it. She had to as well, or the team wouldn’t trust her with this.

But they had to.

Being cornered by Quinn wasn’t all that scary. Close-quarters with Quinn being unarmed, Skye could have easily taken him. What was far scarier was cutting her earwig to get inside and giving her team access to the network. She was glad she didn’t have to hear what they said about her, but Skye had no idea if her team was going to come for her or not. They could have easily cut their losses and run.

Skye may have had been undercover, but the second Skye was staring down the barrel of a gun, Skye forgot her cover and disarmed Quinn from muscle memory. The second that Skye had the gun in her hand, she internally re-established her cover, ditched the gun, and jumped into the pool. Thank goodness it was a skill Ward had actually begun teaching her! Hopefully she could play it off as Quinn’s overconfidence if the question came up.

She had never seen a more beautiful sight than seeing Ward coming to her rescue. She would probably be able to fight Quinn’s guys off, but then she’d still be stuck in Malta with no rescue. Surviving on the streets would be a pain before Natasha managed to track her down via the GPS in her anklet.

After they got back and Skye was changed and dry, she managed to get a little information out of Ward. After her workout, she opened the ghost partition on her laptop and accessed Ward’s file, confirming what Skye thought, that Grant Ward was one of those Wards. Even for a politician, Skye had always gotten an odd feeling off of Christian. The same feeling she got off of Grant now. Something was definitely going on, Skye just couldn’t figure out what.

After the freaky cybernetic eye mission that gave Skye the heebee-jeebees, came a mission to rescue a kidnapped man from SHIELD’s index: Chan Ho Yin. Once she tracked down that it was Miles who had hacked SHIELD server, using a hole that had been reopened in order to get in, she knew there was only one way to play it. She had to come clean, to Miles at least, and let him know that she was with SHIELD. So she waited until the team dispersed and followed Coulson to his office.

“So, full disclosure?” Coulson looked up, surprised. “I know Miles.”

“Yeah?” Coulson looked interested.

“You, May, and Ward come at him, he’ll take off and we’ll never see him again,” Skye said. “Guy’s jumpier than anyone I’ve ever met.”

“So how do we get him?” Coulson asked.

“Honestly?” Skye said. “Let me bring him in. If I tip him off when you pretend to catch him. He’ll let me know where he lives right now.”

“Why would he do that?” Coulson asked incredulously.

Skye smirked. “He’s, uh, got a thing for me,” she said.

“Yeah? You got a ‘thing’ for him too?” Coulson asked, now suspicious.

“Nah, I got my soulmate I met six months ago,” Skye said. Coulson’s eyebrows went to where his hairline used to be. “We’re still getting to know each other, but Miles is so not worth rocking that
boat. Before that we’d hook up once in awhile, but it never went beyond that.”

“You okay with May tailing you?” Coulson suggested.

“As long as Ward doesn’t. Has anyone shown him where the word ‘subtle’ is in the dictionary is? Because frankly, I’m scared to try.”

“Ok,” Coulson said, nodding, pressing a button on his desk. “May, can you get up here?”

A minute later, May came up. “What’s up?” she asked passively.

“Skye knows Lydon,” Coulson said. “She says if we go near him, he’ll rabbit, but Lydon won’t if Skye approaches him; so Ward and I are going to pretend to go after him and you’ll follow Skye and capture him.”

“Skye?” May asked, clearly impressed.

“It’s true,” Skye confirmed. “I’ve known him on and off for a few years, now. He’s never been caught, but he’s super paranoid because of it. If I make him think I’m on his side, he’ll tell me where to find him. Then I can keep him in one place while you come in behind me.”

May considered the plan, and Skye, and then nodded. “Alright. Sounds viable. How long can you occupy him?”

Skye shrugged. “Depends on what’s going on. He’s been trying to get into my pants since after the invasion in New York; I’m not willing to cross that line, but I can string him along for a bit if I have to.”

May’s lips quirked just a bit. “Hold him for ten minutes, fifteen tops. I won’t be far behind.”

“Thank you,” Skye responded, relief evident in her tone.

The op went precisely as planned; Skye tipped Miles off, then arrived at his place shortly after he did. They bickered like they usually did, Skye reading him the riot act for going after SHIELD while she was on the inside.

“You could have ruined everything, you dumbass!” she grumbled.

“Seems like you handled it,” Miles told her.

“I’ve come too far for you to…” she began, then broke off when she realized he was staring at her. With that look in his eyes, like he was a lion and she was an antelope. “Why the hell are you looking at me like that?”

“Did you just call me ‘dumbass’?” Miles asked her flirtatiously.

“I told you,” Skye said. “I met my soulmate. Us falling in bed together after a marathon hack while I’m passing through town isn’t happening any more.”

“Sorry, I can’t help it,” Miles said. “I’ve been missing you like crazy. You disappeared after New York.”

“I was there, you know,” Skye said. “Aliens raining from the sky, fearing for my life. Took me a while to get my feet from under me, okay?”

“So if you don’t want to hook up then why are you here?” Miles said.
“I don’t know,” Skye said. “Why’d you hack SHIELD?"

“It wasn’t for anything important. Just low-level stuff for most recent release,” Miles said. Skye scoffed. “Hey, things have been tough for the Rising Tide since you went into SHIELD. 75% of us are gone, you know that? SHIELD executed this massive sting operation and a lot of the younger hackers who were left scattered.”

“Sounds like revenge,” Skye said, leaning against the wall.

“Maybe a little, yeah. So what?” Miles said with a shrug. “You know if you send me ciphertext, I could be working on algorithms …”

“Hell no, I shouldn’t have even contacted you now. I’m taking a huge risk in all of this, coming to you.” She heard May outside of the hall. She kept her face straight and sidled herself between Miles and the window, leaning against the radiator idly.

“What’s it like? On the inside?”

May chose that moment to burst through the door. Miles tried to bolt toward the window and through Skye, so Skye tripped him and Miles ended up sprawled across the floor. “A bit like that,” Skye said.

“Ward teach you that?” May asked as she handcuffed Miles.

“Try ten years living in a van,” Skye said, not lying. “You wouldn’t believe the hobos I’ve had to chase off.”

“You sold me out,” Miles raged as May hauled him to his feet. “Hey! I want a deal. You wouldn’t believe the secrets I could tell you about this chick.”

“Why would we ever believe you?” May asked.

“She’s got a motive of her own, you know? Why do you think she infiltrated SHIELD?” as he was practically frog marched out the door.

May looked at Skye. “Later,” she said quietly. From the look on May’s face, she was on pretty thin ice. Skye knew that coming forward with the information about Miles had earned her a lot of credit with May, but it wasn’t limitless. May nodded finally.

“So what, you sold out? Where you behind the end of the Rising Tide too?” Miles said.

“Ask May,” Skye said.

Miles actually looked pretty frightened of May. The fear was a nice alternative to the lust Skye was used to seeing. Skye hacked Miles’ accounts, and started muttering angrily to herself. After they brought Miles into interrogation, Skye stopped May and Coulson. “Let me talk to him. I’ll explain everything once this is done, but let me question him. I know his buttons.”

“Okay,” Coulson said. “Mind if I’m in there to?”

“Nope,” Skye said.

Miles looked dumbfounded when Skye walked in. “You really did sell out,” Miles said. “What, did you do? Drink the kool-aid?”

“Oh yeah,” Skye said, heavily sarcastic. “I’m a SHIELD Agent. I also know the Avengers and I got to pretend to be one of their dates at a party.” She could practically feel Coulson smiling behind her.
“Maybe I saw the writing on the wall when everyone else got caught up and I’ve been seeing the other side of things. Maybe I’m seeing that there are secrets that need to be to be kept.”

“Secrets that need to be… What are you talking about?” Miles exploded.

“You wanna tell me about the million dollars I found in your bank account? What about that secret? What happened to your idealistic platitudes about information being free for all?”

“It should! But that doesn’t mean I should starve while I’m doing it. So I took a stupid payment from a woman in a flower dress from an insect study on centipedes for a location of someone on SHIELD’s wanted list.”

“You idiot!” Skye said, shoving the table against Miles. “You realize that someone might actually die for money?”

The look on Miles’ face told Skye that he really had no idea what he’d done or who he’d given the information to. She scowled. “You really need to research your clients more, Miles! Why would someone doing a study on insects want the name of someone on a SHIELD list?” She glared at him.

“Who cares? I could’ve funded us for years! We could all eat well, live well, and still do what we do!” Miles protested. “You lived out of your van for two years.”

Skye shook her head and turned to Coulson. “I saw the payments on Miles’ bank accounts. I can track those. We don’t need him.”

“I’ll tell May wheels up,” Coulson said, leaving the room.

“You really have changed,” Miles said, betrayal heavy in his voice.

“No,” Skye said. “I may be more… enlightened about certain things, but I’m not any different. At least I wasn’t lying about who I was.”

“I didn’t lie to you, Skye,” Miles protested.

“You did. You made me believe that you really were in it for the ideals. Sharing information, pieces solving a puzzle,” Skye said.

“I did. We did. What happened, Skye? You’re not the girl I thought you were.”

“I could never have fit your image of an ideal girlfriend, Miles. I’m too independent. But you’re not the guy I thought you were. Selling information, a person’s identity… for money for yourself,” Skye said softly.

She knew they were at the point where Miles had nothing else to tell her that she wanted or needed to hear, so she left him in the cage. She was a little surprised to see Ward waiting in the hallway for her. “Hey,” she greeted him.

“Hey, rookie,” he answered, falling into step as she walked away from the cage. “You did a good job today. Given the way Lydon bolted when he saw me, I think we’d have lost him if not for you.”

Skye smiled. “I thought we would, yeah,” she said with a nod. “I didn’t want the whole team to know right off, though; I hoped Coulson would trust me.”

“You’re right, I might have been more suspicious,” Ward answered agreeably. “We all know your past is a little sketchy, and some of us might have jumped to conclusions.”
“Well, Coulson didn’t, and I’m glad. We caught him, and that’s the important part, right?”

“Absolutely. And I’m glad you made it work out.” Ward studied her for a long moment, just quietly assessing. She recognized the look from Natasha, sometimes.

“I am too,” she responded glibly, pretending she hadn’t noticed. “So, we should go find the team, yeah? See what’s next?”

“Yeah. Why don’t you go round up Fitzsimmons and we’ll meet in the command center?” Ward suggested.

“I can do that,” Skye responded. She waited until he was out of earshot before muttering, “Because you still don’t know which is which,” to herself.

Skye made her way down to the lab, pausing in the doorway. “Hey, guys. What’s up?”

“Oh, just looking into Mr. Chan’s file,” Simmons answered blithely. “I think I might know why Centipede would want him, but I’ll wait until the briefing for that.”

“Right,” Skye said. “Wouldn’t want to explain it twice.”

“Right,” Fitz agreed. “How are you doing?” he asked Skye. “You know, after the mission to capture your boyfriend… erm, ex-boyfriend.”

Skye smiled. “I’m fine. Really. We were never really good together, and it’s been a very long time since we broke up. It’s cool, really.”

“Well, that’s good,” Fitz said, smiling. “We wouldn’t want you to be… to be divided over him being here.”

“No, I’m good. I helped catch him, remember?”

“Right, right.”

“So, um, we’re on the move?” Simmons asked.

“Yep. I think we’re meeting as soon as May can put on the autopilot,” Skye replied.

“Good, good. We should get what we need, then.” Skye smiled; Simmons was totally Miss Organized.

The mission itself only lasted a few hours after they reached Hong Kong. Unfortunately, they weren’t able to save Chan Ho Yin, which made Skye a little sad. And worse, they didn’t know if Centipede could now stabilize their serum. They would just have to keep on it, one mission at a time.

Skye wasn’t terribly surprised when Coulson wanted to see her, after they wrapped up, though. She saw May and Ward sharing a drink, but she didn’t ask for company. She knew Coulson would have questions, she’d known it since the moment she decided to admit that she knew Miles. At least she didn’t have the weight of everyone’s disapproval on her shoulders.

“Come in, Skye,” Coulson invited when she reached his office. “Have a seat.” Skye sat, looking at Coulson attentively. He studied her for a moment, a bit like Ward had, but his expression was as much understanding as assessing. “You were expecting this,” he finally said.

“Well, yeah,” she answered readily. “I knew the moment I admitted to knowing Miles, that you’d have questions. Especially when he started rambling at May about my secrets.”
“Everybody has secrets,” Coulson replied with a shrug. “But there are only a few that I think I need to know. Why are you here, Skye? On this Bus, on this team. I trusted you, and you held up to that, which is why we’re having a nice conversation about it.”

“Instead of another interrogation, I get that,” Skye answered quietly. “And I appreciate your trust. It’s why I came to you, because I thought if I wanted you to trust me, that I needed to trust you. You knew I was Rising Tide when you picked me up, you knew I didn’t like secrets, and you offered me a place here anyway. I didn’t want to screw that up.”

“And I appreciate that. But what I’d like to understand is why. Why did you accept my offer to join us? Why work with us, when SHIELD is everything you professed to hate?”

Skye reached inside her shirt and withdrew a tiny data card. She set it on the desk, though he didn’t take it right away. “That’s why.”

“What is it? Were you collecting data on us?”

“No. What’s on that card is about me. The only information I was ever able to find about myself. A single file. Redacted.”

“Redacted… by SHIELD?” Coulson asked, stunned briefly.

“That’s why I taught myself to hack, learned to crack systems. My lifelong search to find details on my parents. But there’s nothing. No trace, beyond that. It’s all I ever wanted.”

“You might not like what you find.”

Skye shrugged. “No, I don’t expect I will. But I’m not sure it could be worse than never knowing.”

“Does your soulmate know about this?” he asked in a low voice.

“Yes,” Skye answered, completely honestly. “She said she’d help, if she could. She understands why I’m here, and we text when we can.”

“She?” Coulson blinked, then shrugged. “Interesting. Well, maybe I can help. I can’t make any promises, though.”

“I know. And I promise, I won’t push. I want to know, but… it’s not our focus,” Skye said, carefully hiding the fact that she already had her answers. “Whether or not you believe me, I really have come to understand that there are some secrets that need to be kept. I don’t agree with everything SHIELD does, but we protect people. Sometimes that means protecting them from themselves. But I spent my whole life wondering why I was left at the orphanage, why I was never good enough for any foster family to keep me. I just wanted to know.”

Coulson rested his hand on her shoulder. “I understand. Sometimes it’s the things we don’t know about ourselves that are the hardest to handle. Thank you, for telling me.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner,” she said softly.

“Trust works both ways. You needed time, and I get that,” Coulson said. “I’ll talk to May; she’ll take it better from me.”

“Okay. Thank you, AC.”

“Skye… if there are things you need, I hope you’ll come to me.”
She gave him a small, genuine smile. “With some things, I will. With others… maybe someday.”

Coulson smiled back. “Best I can ask for. Get some rest, Skye. You’ve earned it.”

Skye let herself out of Coulson’s office and headed down to her bunk. It was early enough, maybe she could text with Nat and Maria for a little while before bed.
Chapter 8

We can't say it enough; you guys are awesome. Comments, kudos, reblogs... this story has really spread around, and it's amazing to see.

We've also been gifted a couple of pics for our story! Yay! I hope you'll all forgive me, though - the picture for this chapter really only fits in this chapter. But I promise, fanart in the next post! If anyone else has artistic skills and would like to send us a picture, manip or banner... we'll gladly share in upcoming chapters. There is no greater measure of a writer's impact than to see others inspired to create something to go with it.

Chapter 8

Time passed on the bus. Coulson and May were now trusting Skye more, Fitz and Simmons allowed her into their lab while she ‘memorized’ SHIELD manuals, and Ward watched Skye while Skye pretended not to notice. Skye was tempted more than anything during their encounter with the Chitauri virus to come out as Agent 42, but she doubted that a background in nuclear physics could do much for a virology problem. Thanks to Agent Weaver, who was once again able to send her
encrypted training assignments now that she was on the bus, she had a good foundation of all the sciences, but nothing near Ph.D.-level work in biology or virology.

A source of internal entertainment had come to her not long after when Fitz and Simmons started discussing the topic of Agent 42 on the way to the Hub. “I wonder what they’re like,” Fitz had started. “Not much is written about them in the official file.

“You know, I caught a glimpse of the SciTech test results,” Jemma said. “A basic understanding of all science subjects and an IQ of 172.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Skye asked, feigning curiosity.

“Just another Agent of SHIELD,” Jemma said dismissively, “it’s nothing important.”

“Does everyone get agent numbers?” Skye quipped. “Because 8 has always felt kinda lucky to me.”

Jemma laughed, “No, that’d be silly. Numbers are only assigned to Agents whose identities need to be hidden for their own safety. They don’t happen very often, but when they do, they’re related to high-level Agents or their soulmates are high-level agents. Apparently the security around Agent 42 is so tight he or she couldn’t even go to the SciTech academy.”

“That’s just speculation,” Fitz pointed out. “Though I do know a physicist working on gamma radiation fields who collaborates with her - well, he says ‘her’ anyway - via email.” Skye remembered consulting on that project. There had been a couple minor math errors that came from staring at equations for too long that had been altering the expected results significantly. She had also noted a flaw in the scientist’s logic regarding how much gamma radiation the human body could withstand before death occurred (or in Bruce’s case, becoming the Hulk). Skye had referred him to several medical texts that discussed the parameters of the limits of gamma radiation and the last thing Skye had heard, his project was back on track.

“Really?” Jemma asked. “What are they - she? - like?”

Fitz shrugged. “He said she was smart. Like… crazy smart. But it’s hard to get a sense of someone’s personality via email.”

“Very true,” Jemma agreed. Skye genuinely liked Jemma, even though the woman had a bit of an extreme ‘academia or bust’ attitude. Skye could tell that the fact that she barely had a GED (officially) threw Jemma a little bit, but she seemed to be mostly getting over it.

Skye protested the level 8 briefing just for the microexpression of reassurance on Ward’s face. She had started acting a little more antiestablishment to establish that she might have trusted the team, but she still didn’t trust SHIELD. May seemed like she was hiding something too. Skye wasn’t entirely sure what was happening. She wasn’t used to seeing evil around every corner, but her years in foster care had given her the skills to tell when someone was being genuine. In foster care it was a skill that sometimes meant life or death. Not for her, but she had met others where it had.

Coulson turned and gave her a look before going into the briefing and she smiled, acting like she hadn’t noticed the looks from Ward and May. “Don’t worry about me,” she said, pulling out her phone and waving it. “Call me when you’re done,” she said.

Coulson nodded and entered the briefing. May and Ward followed suit after a moment of hesitation. Skye checked in with Fitz and Simmons in the tech corridor, then found a corner where she could sit and chat with her soulmates, informing them that she was at the Hub. She updated Koenig on what projects she had been doing from her ghost partition in the late night hours in her bunk, though those
were few and far between these days, and updated Weaver on the training progress she had made.

“You okay?” May asked. Skye hadn’t heard her approach and looked up quickly.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Ward and Fitz have been assigned a mission,” May said. “We have 36 hours of down time. I’ve been charged by Coulson to assess the progress that you’ve made with Ward.”

Skye stiffened. She knew May was good, had heard stories about her from before she transferred to admin. “I’ve only been training for a month,” Skye said. “Ward still has me running drills on the bag, pull ups, push ups, that sort of thing. He says that I’m starting from the ground up.”

The corners of May’s mouth quirked up, “Has he discovered that you’re a woman yet? Your body type is more suited to speed and finesse than brute strength.”

“No, I’m pretty sure Ward doesn’t think of me as a person, just an annoyance. Just a rookie,” Skye quipped lightly, shrugging. “I would guess that he’s teaching me the way he learned, but…”

“You don’t have the experience to know for sure,” May commented. “Well, come along anyway. We’ll see where you’re at, and maybe I can give you some tips.

The session was awful. Skye had to focus very hard to use only the skills Ward had taught her, and not to respond the way Natasha had drilled into her. It was ridiculously difficult, especially because May’s fighting style was akin to something between Maria and Natasha. Which made sense, when she thought about it, because Maria’s skills were a cross between the more traditional military training and May’s or Natasha’s more dexterous abilities… May, who was once Maria’s SO, and Nat, who was Maria’s first soulmate.

May tossed Skye a bottle of water during a break, frowning. “Ward’s working with you all wrong,” she said critically. “You seem to be naturally light on your feet, and he’s going to have you tripping over them if he’s not careful.”

Skye just shrugged. She didn’t know how to respond to that, but she couldn’t disagree. Nat had taught her so much better. She watched quietly as May’s assessing gaze raked over her figure.

“Alright, new test,” May said after a moment. “Forget trying to hit me, or trying to stay in close. Try to avoid me for as long as you can, within bounds of the mat; I’ll go easy on you to start.”

Skye bit her lip nervously; either she was going to have to deliberately fail in such a way as to not give away how much she was holding back… or she was going to tip May off that she had more training than she ought to.

“Skye.” May’s voice was low and hard. “Now.”

Reluctantly, Skye stepped onto the mats. She bounced a bit on the balls of her feet and side-stepped quickly when May first rushed at her, shuffling aside and back quickly. She turned to keep her eyes on May at all times.

It took thirty seconds for May to pin her in a hold Skye couldn’t defeat without giving herself away, so she tapped out. The second time, May genuinely took her by surprise with a move she hadn’t seen before and she was down in half the time.

“Come on, Skye. You can do better than this! Focus,” May scolded as she got up for a third round. This time, Skye dodged and ducked faster and managed to evade for almost a minute. “Better,” May
said, but Skye took it as praise from the usually laconic woman.

“Alright,” May said when they took another break. Skye was panting as she downed half a bottle of water. “I’m not going to step in just yet. Ward is teaching you some valuable things; how to deal with an attacker of his type, if nothing else. But I am going to start teaching you Tai Chi. It will help you keep your natural flexibility and, when you learn to apply it, some moves that might surprise you.”

Skye nodded, smiling. “I would like that.” Tai Chi was entirely new to her; she had her dance routines with Natasha, and mixed martial arts training, but they hadn’t focused on a single style like this. This could work out in her benefit quite nicely.

“Be ready at 5am; I practice in the lounge in the mornings.”

“Ward has me starting at 5:30…” Skye began tentatively.

“Plenty of time, once you get the basics down.” May shrugged.

“Okay. Can we start now?” May’s eyebrow rose at Skye’s question, but she nodded and fell naturally into her starting stance. Skye moved to stand beside her mimicking the stance as best she could.

“Good,” May told her when they finished the beginning set of moves. “You move well.”

“One of the foster homes I stayed in for a couple of months, the mom was a dance teacher,” Skye offered, which was true enough. “I was kinda rambunctious, so she gave me some lessons rather than letting me just run it out.” She’d told more of the story to Natasha, but May tended to frown at her when she got chatty so she decided it was better not to in this case.

She figured she’d made the right choice when May just nodded her acceptance. “Tomorrow. 5am. Don’t forget,” was all May said before sweeping out of the gym with her usual grace.

Skye let her shoulders slump as she was left alone. Hopefully anyone watching the security feed would assume it was weariness or resignation. In truth, Skye was getting tired of keeping the truth from people she ought to be able to trust. People she wanted to trust, but who couldn’t be told the truth just yet.

It was hard, and tiresome.

Watching the security feeds, Skye noticed something off about the activity at the Hub. There were a lot of people moving about, like they were about to hit something major. Skye didn’t know why but it set her gut off. Something seemed very strange to her about the whole thing. Maria had always told her to trust her gut, and her gut told her to check on Ward and Fitz’s mission. She knew enough about the systems to know exactly where to go. She didn’t care about what they were doing or what the mission objective was. All she needed to know was the ETA of the extraction. She paled when she saw that there was none.

She knew from the tales that Clint and Natasha would tell her that they would often go into a mission without an extraction. It worried her, but she knew that with their years of experience, not to mention their experiences pre-SHIELD, that if they thought they could handle it, then they could. And she didn’t doubt that Ward could handle himself in a situation like that. He’d probably been on dozens of missions where his extraction point was compromised. No, her worry was strictly for Fitz, a scientist who had zero experience in the field, who was in the lab full-time until less than a month ago.

She knew what she wanted to do. But what she wanted to do was call Maria to alert her that Hand
had sent Fitz into a situation that was well over his head. She wondered momentarily, if Fitz knew there was no extraction, but she shook her head. Fitz wouldn’t have been nearly so excited about the mission if he’d know about the danger.

Deciding what to do, she raced back off toward the Bus. “May,” Skye said, a little out of breath hoping she could sell this.

“What’s up Skye?” May asked, not looking up from the plane diagnostics tablet.

“Look, my hand to god I didn’t look any mission files -”

“Skye…” May said.

“I checked the extraction schedule.” Skye said, remaining out of breath. It was harder to spot a lie from someone who was panting. “I wanted to know when the boys were coming back so Jemma and I could whip something up for them. Conquering heroes and all of that. Except there’s no extraction listed anywhere on the schedule for their mission.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I don’t think the mission Ward and Fitz were sent on ever had an extraction scheduled. Even if there was one listed and it was compromised, there’d be a log of it, but there’s nothing.”

May put down the tablet. “I’ll check with Coulson. You go get Simmons, I think she’s still in the tech corridor.” Skye nodded and started back out of the Bus. “And Skye?” Skye froze and turned expecting to be reprimanded. “Good job.”

In the end Coulson managed to confirm from Hand that there was no extraction for Fitz and Ward and their team had taken off to go rescue them. Now they were on a six hour hold at the Hub before wheels up. Skye got the distinct impression during the debrief that Hand now had a strong dislike for her based on her claim that she had hacked SHIELD to get the data, but Skye would trade Hand disliking her for Fitz’s and Ward’s lives without a second of hesitation.

Sifting through parts of the alien ship in Greenwich was boring, but Skye figured she owed the SciTech division some kind of recompense for being mostly unavailable for consulting while she was on the Bus.

Jemma’s phone rang twice while they were working, and each time she just silenced it. Skye listened to the defensive grumbling from Jemma about not wanting to talk to her parents but decided to stay out of it. Not only was it none of her business, but she might slip and say what she really thought.

“Must be nice,” Skye muttered under her breath as the others moved out of hearing distance.

“What?” Fitz asked curiously.

Skye whirled around and colored. “I’m sorry Fitz, that was… I wasn’t thinking…”

“I’m just curious,” Fitz said, no judgement in his voice. “What were you talking about?”

“I just… it must be nice, having parents that care about you enough to call and want to make sure you’re okay.”

Fitz’s face grew serious. “I can understand that frustration. You know, I don’t tell a lot of people this, but my da, he took off when I was young, and my mum, well, she never really understood me. Don’t get me wrong, I love her, but… well, you don’t see my phone ringing ten times a day.”
“You’re right, Fitz, I didn’t think about that,” Skye said softly.

Fitz shrugged. “It’s fine. I prefer to keep it that way, that nobody thinks about it. But Jemma’s never really experienced anything other than… a mum and a da and getting everything she needs.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Fitz,” Skye said gently. “I’m happy knowing that most people don’t know what it’s like to have no family, or any place to call home. It’s just hard to see her blow them off when I’d give a lot to have parents who called to check up on me.”

“I understand, Skye,” Fitz replied; he rested a hand on her shoulder and she surprised him when she turned into the gesture and hugged him. He wrapped his arms around her carefully, hugging back. “It’s alright, you know. You can… you can always lean on us.”

“I’m starting to learn that. And maybe someday fate will bring me my family.” Skye phrased the comment very carefully, hoping Fitz wouldn’t assume more than was common.

“You have a soulmark?” he asked curiously as he let her go.

“Mmhmm,” she hummed confirmation, simply neglecting to specify how many.

“That’s lovely. I hope fate brings you all the happiness you deserve, Skye.”

“Thank you, Fitz. That’s really sweet.” Fitz blushed a bit, but smiled at her. They split up again, moving back to their separate tasks.

Skye rather enjoyed discussing gods versus aliens with Coulson.

“You know,” Coulson said, Skye trailing him as he walked around the room, “it’d be really nice if, for once, Thor and his people could send down the god of cleaning up after yourself.”

After their time at the Hub, Skye felt comfortable enough with May to tease her a bit about wanting to take an alien ship out for a spin, but Coulson broke in with a comment about alien artifacts in human hands before May could reply.

Skye glanced at May, then replied to Coulson, “I wouldn’t mind getting my human hands on Thor.” Coulson looked a little perturbed when she added, “He’s so dreamy.”

“Sure, he’s handsome, but…” Coulson began, but May interrupted.

“No, he’s dreamy,” May said, smirking at Skye before walking away. Skye chuckled to herself, happy she was finally starting to feel more comfortable with the team in general.

Chasing down pieces of a legendary Asgardian staff wasn’t quite what Skye expected from their next mission. Nor did anyone expect the scholar to turn out to be Asgardian himself. Skye had to admit, though, that Ward in a berserker rage was damn terrifying. She initially resolved to keep Nat far, far away from the thing; she thought she might need to reconsider when she watched May with it instead. Especially when she heard May’s reply to Ward’s question of how she handled it.

Skye was pretty sure Natasha saw many of her demons on a regular basis, too. Maybe that was the difference; May was stronger than Ward because she faced her issues instead of trying to shove them into a box. Natasha was the same, facing her past and trying to be better. So maybe Nat wouldn’t have as much of a problem with the staff as Ward did.

Still, she didn’t know if she really wanted to find out.
The next morning, Skye was quietly flattered when Coulson told her he wanted her to pay close attention to the process of meeting and dealing with a possible powered individual. He admitted to her, quietly, that he felt that her existing skills with people could make her very good at it in time. Still, she quipped at him about taking Warm and Fuzzy with him to meet the woman in question, rather than the friendly half of the team.

He relented and said she could come along, but just to observe. He didn’t want her involved in the meeting itself.

Better than being left in the car.

Moments later, Skye pretty much regretted her decision. A black SUV pulling up to a house in suburbia gave her flashbacks of being taken away from foster families during her childhood, unwanted for anything more than a paycheck in many cases. The mob of people yelling at Hannah that no one wanted her here, that she killed loved ones and hurt neighbors didn’t help things either. What hurt more was the look on May’s face as she shot Hannah with the night-night gun.

Coulson wanted Skye to observe the initial intake interview over the security feeds and Skye was further bothered by FitzSimmons’ discussions of how May had gotten her title of ‘The Cavalry.’

Skye didn’t know what happened, but given Maria’s story about how May had been so devastated that she had transferred to Admin, Skye was fairly sure that the story of a brave Agent riding in - on a horse - to save the day was just that: a story.

But that was fine. She could take a joke. What hurt more was Fitz scolding her for touching the holoprojection in the lab. She hadn’t actually used one before, but she had studied up on the technology under Agent Weaver’s direction. She simply hadn’t been anywhere that she could have actually practiced, until now.

Skye knew Fitz was protective of his tech toys. She knew that. But it still hurt to have him verbally smack her down like that. So she made a crack about SHIELD Hogwarts and left the lab before things could get worse.

So she went up and found Ward, Coulson and May reviewing the tape of their interview with Hannah. “Sir, I can talk to her. Keep her calm,” she argued. Both May and Coulson looked unconvinced. “I know you don’t think I have experience with this sort of thing but if there’s one thing I know better than computers, it’s people.”

“She's not dangerous. She's nice ... like, overly nice. She never misses a birthday post to her friends, runs the youth program at her church, rescues dogs. People don’t put that much effort into faking nice,” Skye continued, seeing Coulson’s resolve start to melt.

“People fake nice all the time,” Ward pointed out.

“Yeah, but on the internet? You can be as mean as you want to be on the internet and it’s mostly anonymous. Her social media sites are all sunshine and cute pictures of baby animals and feel good gifs. Nobody puts that much effort into faking nice,” Skye continued, seeing Coulson’s resolve start to melt.

“You can’t know that,” May countered. “And you’re not cleared for combat. If it went south in there.”

“I can know that,” Skye said. “I may have aged out, but I’m still a foster kid. I was raised in a system that was so broken that most of the people you stay with are just in it for the income. The system is broken, so you learn which people can be trusted. I trust Hannah. I trust that she’s a good person
who’s terrified of herself more than she’s terrified of the person who shot her. She feels guilty because her friends died on her watch. Surely you three can understand that guilt.”

May’s eyes widened as Skye’s perception of Hannah forced them to re-evaluate both Hannah and Skye. Ward went stiff and silent, but Coulson softened as he studied Skye’s expression.

Skye, for her part, stood her ground. She knew she had to wait for a response; if she kept pushing, they’d shut down. At the moment, they were thinking and that was what she needed.

“Alright, Skye,” Coulson said finally. “You can go talk to her. But,” he said, forestalling her departure, “May is going with you. She’s going to be listening in, and if she thinks things are going bad she’s going to pull you out. And you’re not going to argue; trust her judgment of the situation.”

Skye looked from Coulson to May, then nodded. “I can do that. I just want to talk to her. I want her to know that she’s not alone, that we really do want to help her if we can.”

“Go,” Coulson told her. Skye smiled at him, nodded at May, and headed straight for the cage. May followed, fixing an earpiece into her ear so she could listen in. She also knew that Coulson would likely be watching, but that didn’t bother her. What she was doing was the right thing to do.

Skye let herself into the Cage and shut the door behind herself. She didn’t approach right away, choosing instead to sit on the floor, leaning against the wall by the door. “Hi, Hannah. We haven’t met yet, but I’m Skye.”

“Are you here to kill me?” Hannah asked dejectedly.

Skye shook her head vigorously. “No, Hannah, I’m not here to kill you.” Tears started welling up in Hannah’s eyes and Skye took a risk, shooting forward and embracing the woman. Skye heard a hand on the door, but it did not open. “This isn’t your fault,” Skye said to Hannah, backing off a little, but remaining close to her. “What’s happening right now, I know that it feels like you’re fighting so hard to keep your life the way that it is. I understand that fight.”

“You do, don’t you. I can see it in your face. Are you okay?”

Skye smiled. “I should be asking you that question. You must be hungry. Maybe you’d like something to eat a little later while we figure things out? We may not be a five star restaurant but I’m not too horrible at making a home cooked meal.”

Hannah smiled. “I’d like that.”

“I know it makes you sad to think about, but… do you have any idea what happened at the factory before it exploded?”

Hannah shook her head. “Tobias kept filing reports to my office. Things in his division kept breaking. I’d go down there every few days, it felt like. I couldn’t figure out what was wrong. Systems that were supposed to be unrelated to each other kept going absolutely haywire.”

“Were there any other reports?” Skye asked curiously.

Hannah shook her head. “Nothing out of the ordinary at least. I mean, every division files the occasional report. With Tobias, though, it was daily.”

“What about after? When did you notice that things -” Skye started, then quite suddenly, the room went dark and the plane dropped out of the sky. As they fell, Skye struggled to assist Hannah into one of the jump seats before getting in the second one herself. If they were going to crash land, it
would ensure as little damage as possible to them.

“Oh, God, are we crashing?” Hanna asked, panic in her tone.

“I don’t know,” Skye answered honestly. “But just in case…” Hannah shut her eyes tight, gripping the safety straps tightly.

“Do you believe in God?” Hannah asked when the plane finally stopped shaking, her voice back to being as shaky and weak as when Skye had first come in.

“How can belief in God have a long version or a short version?” Hannah asked.

Skye smiled. “I’m an orphan. The only place that ever came close to being called home was the Catholic orphanage I’d stay at between foster homes. It wasn’t the most inviting experience I’ve ever lived.”

“I think God cursed me to punish me for what happened,” Hannah said.

Skye stared at her for a moment. “Okay, long version? The nuns there were old-school. The way they’d lecture us on sin and evil… it kind of turned me off of the whole thing. But there was this one nun who was newer. She used to tell us ‘God is love’. So I believe in love. I believe in people. Maybe that’s a belief in God, maybe it isn’t. I don’t really know, but what that nun taught us always stuck with me. That God is love. I don’t think God is punishing you, Hannah. I think you’re a good person that something horrible happened to.”

Skye got out of the jump seat, then unstrapped Hannah. “I know I’m being punished, and I deserve it,” Hannah protested. “You should go, before it gets you too.”

“You don’t deserve this, Hannah. No one does. You made a mistake, a terrible mistake, but still a mistake. And I think God would forgive a mistake,” Skye insisted. “That’s what they teach us, right? That all we have to do is ask, and we’ll be forgiven?”

Hannah nodded slowly, eyes wide and frightened. “I want to believe that. I do,” she whispered.

“Hold on to that, for now,” Skye said, taking Hannah’s hands for a moment. “I promise, we’ll do whatever we can to make all this stop.”

“I… I’ll try.”

“Good.” Skye smiled. “I’ve got to go see what happened to the others. But I will be back. I promise.”

“Be careful,” Hannah said, letting Skye go without an argument.

May was right outside when Skye opened the door. “Are you alright?” she asked as soon as the door closed again.

“Yeah. I got us into the jump seats. Did we crash?” Skye asked quickly. May nodded grimly. “I’ll guard her. Go find the others.”

Skye was as surprised as anyone to find that May had taken Hannah off the bus. But everything worked out in the end, and they were able to put an end to the strange occurrences surrounding Hannah. It seemed likely to Skye that she would have to move, though; the community didn’t seem
inclined to forgive, even if the accident wasn’t Hannah’s fault.

But life would go on.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Celebrating Christmas away from SHIELD.

Chapter Notes

Gotta say, it's super weird to be writing about Christmas in July and August!

As promised, art by someone else for this post! Many, many thanks to Dubstep_Wombat (reprehensiblewombat on Tumblr) for the lovely picture!

by Dubstep_Wombat

Chapter 9

In the run-down to Christmas, all was quiet on the Bus. They had a few routine missions, but nothing major. Given that, Coulson approved a full month of leave for everyone over Christmas and New Year’s.
Fitz and Simmons immediately set about making plans to go back to the UK for the holiday. When Coulson asked what her plans were, Skye smiled and told him she was going to visit her soulmate. He accepted that with a nod, not asking additional questions; more like he wanted to check that she had a place to go before making his own plans. She smiled to herself, glad that she did actually have someplace to go.

She’d told Maria and Nat she was getting leave, of course, but she deliberately didn’t tell them when to expect her. So no one was home the afternoon she arrived back in DC. Skye happily let herself into the apartment she’d quickly come to think of as ‘home’ and tossed her bag into the bedroom before heading to the kitchen to start something for dinner.

Not telling Nat or Maria when she was coming home was intentional. After months and months undercover, she needed to separate Bus Skye from the real Skye and she needed some time to do that.

She decided on fried chicken and waffles for dinner, a dish she had learned while going through Texas so many times. She was whipping up the waffle batter when she felt surprise and joy come through the soulbond. She set down the bowl and turned around; a second later she was wrapped tightly in a hug. “Welcome home,” Maria said happily, dropping a light kiss on Skye’s hair. “I didn’t know your leave was due today.”

“Yeah, Fitz and Simmons are off to the UK, I think Coulson’s going to Wisconsin of all places, and I have no idea where May or Ward went.”

“May goes to Arizona, Ward usually ends up wandering around the Triskelion,” Maria supplied, still keeping Skye embraced. “We missed you here.”

“I’ve got about a month off,” Skye said. “I’ll probably spend some of it catching up on SciTech consulting, but I have a lot of time.”

Maria finally released Skye and started helping her make dinner. “So how was working undercover?”

Skye sighed heavily as she set to work herself. “Hard. It’s hard to constantly be lying to other SHIELD agents; people I, in theory, should be able to trust. I know people are going to be really hurt when it all comes out.”

“Yeah, that’s usually the downside of undercover,” Maria said. “I hear they assigned Ward to be your SO? How’s that going?”

“I don’t know, honestly,” Skye said. “He either doesn’t know how to teach a woman how to fight or he’s trying to sabotage me for some reason.”

“How so?”

“He’s teaching me boxing and having me work on strength training,” Skye responded as she finished the waffle batter and set it aside.

Maria frowned. “I mean, Ward generally isn’t known for his personality. He’s hostile, angry, sullen…”

“Yeah, the T-1000 definitely isn’t a part of the fun machine of the Bus,” Skye quipped. “Coulson’s good though. He’s taken me under his wing.”

“Coulson likes to take people under his wing,” Maria said. “I think it’s a side effect of being Clint
and Natasha’s handler for as long as he was.”

Skye smiled, nodding, then sighed again. “I just worry that he’ll find out the truth about me, and it will ruin everything. That the trust I’ve gained from him and May and Ward and the science twins will all evaporate because I’ve been lying to them all this time.”

“I understand. Honestly, I think Coulson will understand. He’ll be angry at first, but he’ll be the first one to tell you to trust the system,” Maria said soothingly. “May will be the same, though it might take a little longer. The others... I don’t know. Does it matter?”

“Kinda?” Skye shrugged. “I mean, I suppose if my identity is discovered my mission will be a bust anyway, so I could always just leave. But... I like them. Even Ward, once in awhile. He has his moments, and I’d be much more inclined to trust him if I weren’t worried about him sabotaging my so-called training. I expect that if I hadn’t been trained by you, Nat and Clint first, I would’ve bought the idea that he’s a good SO.”

“If they’re your friends, as well as SHIELD Agents, I think they’ll understand that you had your orders and that your identity couldn’t be compromised,” Maria replied in a reassuring tone.

“I hope so,” Skye replied. “At least with me on the Bus, no one is overly surprised to see me logged into SHIELD systems. They don’t know what I’m doing, of course, but at least I don’t have to hide my access. Just the extent of my access. Which reminds me, you get anywhere with those data traces I sent over?”

“They’re... worrisome,” Maria admitted. “Most of what we’re doing is business as usual but, if anything, Fury is even more paranoid now. He’s playing things very close to his chest, but we have a handful of people we know we can absolutely trust. So at least that’s something.”

“Yeah. Let me know if there’s anything I can do?”

“Of course,” Maria agreed. “Now, then. You’re supposed to be on vacation. No more work talk.”

“Okay,” Skye agreed. “When’s Nat supposed to be home?”

Before Maria could answer, they heard the door open. “Right about now,” Maria said with a chuckle.

“Skye!” Natasha exclaimed as she entered the kitchen; abandoning all sense of decorum, she dashed over and scooped Skye into her arms, spinning around, before setting her on her feet and leaning up for a kiss.

Maria pushed them aside with a fond smile, taking over cooking so dinner wouldn’t burn while Skye was distracted. Since they could both feel her amusement through the bond, they just let her push them aside without breaking apart.

“Hi,” Skye said when they finally stopped to breathe. She bent her head, resting her forehead against Natasha’s and just lingering close for long moments.

Maria snorted derisively. “Go set the table, you two. This is almost done.”

Natasha helped Skye set the table, unable to stop herself from giving Skye subtle touches every few moments, smiling wide. “Movie tonight?” Natasha asked.

“Totally,” Skye said. “Maybe something from the family list? Something we can cuddle to?”
“Sure,” Natasha agreed.

“No Christmas movies yet,” Maria called her input from the kitchen. “You know we’ll have a bunch of them on repeat when we get to the Bartons’ next week.”

Skye blinked. “We’re going to the Bartons? I actually get to meet the super-secret family?”

Natasha laughed. “Yes. The kids were disappointed that we weren’t there last year; Clint had to promise we’d make it this time.”

Skye looked around at the apartment, which was decorated to the nines with Christmas paraphernalia. Natasha hadn’t had Christmas while in the Red Room, so Maria and Natasha had a tendency to overindulge. Skye didn’t care how much they celebrated Christmas, but the fact that she had someone to celebrate with meant a lot. “You said that the traditions you taught me last year are traditions that you’ve shared with the Bartons for years, right?” Skye asked.

Natasha nodded. “Laura’s a natural-born mother. When Clint brought me in and when he trusted me enough, he brought me to his place and I met his wife. Maria and I have been part of the clan ever since. And now you are, too. You wouldn’t believe how excited Laura is to meet you.”

Skye blushed. “Okay, dinner is served,” Maria announced, bringing in the food and saving Skye from further embarrassment.

Skye snuggled between her soulmates later as they watched the movie, happy to be home. “Love you,” Skye said to them softly.

“Love you,” Natasha and Maria said in stereo. Later, once the movie was over and they were getting ready for bed, Natasha grabbed Skye around her middle and rested her head on Skye’s shoulder. “I’m glad you’re home,” Nat said.

Skye blinked blearily for a moment the next morning, forgetting that she wasn’t in her narrow bed on the Bus, but the wall-to-wall bed, curled up with her soulmates. Skye checked her watch and noticed that it was quarter to five. She grinned, extracted herself from their bed, grabbed her iPod, headphones, and panic button, wrote a note to her soulmates where she was going, then went out for a run.

Skye started running her old route around the reflection pool. Leaving one earbud off her ear. “On your left,” came a familiar voice, Skye grinned widely and kept going. After she ran 7 miles, her pace having increased in her absence, she stretched next to Steve who was waiting for her to finish. He offered his fist and she bumped it like she taught him. “You back? How was your assignment?”

“It kinda morphed into a different assignment,” Skye said, stretching her hamstrings out. “How’ve you been?”

“Good. Been doing regular missions of SHIELD, working on catching up on that list you left me,” Steve said.

“Feeling a little bit more at ease with the world?” Skye asked.

“I have a good base now,” Steve said. “People still recommend what they like, but I think I’m beginning to discover what I like. Old jazz, big band, and techno sometimes when I run.”

Skye laughed, stretching her shoulders. “Steve Rogers listens to techno when he runs, I can see the gossip rags now.”
“Let alone the blogs,” Steve countered.

“Oh god, don’t read the blogs!” Skye laughed.

“Yeah, I learned to keep away from those. People get weird on the Internet.”

“You have no idea,” Skye said.

“The only thing I’m having issues with is the technology,” Steve said. “I tried asking Tony, but I don’t understand what he’s saying half the time.

“We’re going away for Christmas, but I’ll be home for a few weeks after we get back,” Skye said. “I’ll give you a tutorial.”

“I’d like that,” Steve said with a smile. “I just wish that there was something I could teach you in exchange.”

“I wouldn’t mind some true stories about what the Howling Commandos were like, if you’re offering,” Skye said.

“I could do that,” Steve said as they started back towards their apartments. Steve walked Skye to her door, a habit which Skye couldn’t tell was a product of security or Steve being from a different era.

“Morning Steve,” Maria greeted, opening the door and greeting Skye with an embrace and a nuzzle. “Want to stay for breakfast? We made cinnamon rolls.”

“Nah, I’m gonna head back,” Steve replied. “I took Tony up on his invitation to spend Christmas in New York and I have to pack. You got plans today?”

“Yeah, we’re doing our traditional D.C. Christmas before we head out ourselves,” Natasha said, hugging Skye from behind.

“Have a good time,” Steve said.

“Did you have a nice run?” Natasha asked.

“Yeah,” Skye said. “I don’t get to run in the open when I’m on the bus. It’s good to be home.”

“We’re glad to have you home,” Maria said, giving her side-hug as she served herself herself.

Skye had done most of her Christmas shopping online and had it delivered, pre-wrapped, to their home, but she still had to find gifts for Lila, Cooper, and Laura. Maria and Natasha helped her with picking things out that morning when they went to the mall. Gifts for people she didn’t know were tougher than she’d thought. She also picked up a few extra things for her team, for when everyone got back.

They went and drank hot apple cider and looked at the Christmas tree in front of the White House, all three of them subconsciously scanning the crowd for any security threats. They then had lunch at the Old Ebbitt Grill and went to a matinee of the Nutcracker at the Kennedy Center. They rounded out the evening with dinner at Fiola Mare and ice skating at Washington Harbour.

They were all exhausted by the time they got home, though, and they flopped on the couch together to relax. They made it an early night, cuddled up as was their habit.

They woke far too early, even for Skye’s more recent standards of being up at 5am. It was a 15 hour drive to Clint’s house from their home. Stark had apparently offered them a plane without knowing
where they were going, but the three of them respected the fact that Clint wanted to keep the farm a secret. Besides, they had been separated a long time and a fifteen-hour car ride was a good chance to allow them to spend time together.

In particular, Skye got the chance to give Natasha and Maria an in-depth analysis of the team and they discussed whether Ward was incompetent or if it was something else. Natasha told Skye what she could about the missions she had been on, both with and without Steve. Maria told them about life at the Triskelion. After they exchanged about their work lives, they talked about other things. Skye talked about how much it bothered her that everyone on the plane basically treated her like she was an idiot and Natasha shared her wisdom about how not to take what was said while you were undercover personally.

“A lot of my targets think I’m just a pretty face,” Natasha said. “People reveal more around a pretty face than around the real me, so I let them underestimate me, but even I struggle to remember that that isn’t the real me when I’m on long assignments.”

“And it’s harder for you because these are fellow agents,” Maria noted. “They don’t know that you’re a Level 9 Comms agent or that you’re being trained in both Ops and SciTech fields.”

“I get that, and I’m fine,” Skye said. “I’m just happy that I don’t have to lie for a little while.”

They traded off driving so they could each catch a nap on the way. Natasha and Maria both had training on staying up long hours during a mission. And Skye had built up a habit of staying up long hours to hack, but they were on vacation and they wanted to enjoy the evening when they arrived.

They were hours and hours into farmland when they slowed down and pulled into a long driveway.

“Oh, we should probably warn you. Laura’s a bit of a mother hen,” Maria said as the car bounced along the pebble-filled dirt road.

“Which is Maria’s way of saying ‘prepare to be fed within an inch of your life’, ” Natasha said with a smile. “Especially since it’s Christmas.”

“She’s a farm girl,” Maria said, smirking. “Food is a necessary thing to her.”

“So discussions about how I used to live would probably be out,” Skye said. Both Natasha and Maria stiffened minutely. Skye knew that they didn’t like the fact that there had been days that she had gone hungry. For her, it was just a part of life, but she was quite glad those days were behind her regardless. “Don’t worry about it; I’ll be fine.”

“It’s not that we think she couldn’t handle the truth,” Maria began slowly.

“It’s just that she grew up in a different way,” Natasha added.

“It’s fine,” Skye answered, brushing their concern aside lightly. “Those days are behind me, and we have more fun things to discuss with Christmas and all. Besides, Clint already knows a bunch of it anyway.”

“And it’s entirely possibly he’s told Laura at least a little bit of it,” Natasha agreed.

“Which would be another reason why you should prepare to be mothered a bit, and fed,” Maria finished. Skye laughed and nodded her agreement.

The old farmhouse was large and brightly lit when they pulled up. There were Christmas lights and garlands strung along the porch, fairy lights hanging from a pair of trees on either side of the drive, and Skye caught a glimpse of a giant pine tree through the living room windows as they parked the
“Let’s go see everyone first,” Natasha suggested as they piled out of the car. “We can come back for our bags afterwards.”

Maria nodded her agreement, so Skye shrugged and just followed them up the porch steps. Natasha knocked twice and then walked in the front door; clearly this place was the next best thing to home for her. Skye lingered just inside the doorway, taking everything in.

What she could see of the interior was as gaily decorated as the exterior. The tree was all lit up, stockings hung from the mantel - including one for her, she noted - and she could hear strains of what sounded like Christmas carols sung by The Chipmunks.

“Auntie Nat!” squealed an excited voice. A little blur rushed into the hall and threw herself into Natasha’s arms; Nat, for her part, just swung the girl up onto her hip with a grin.

“Auntie Maria!” cried another voice. A young boy launched himself at Maria’s legs.

“Hey Coop,” Maria said, picking him up and embracing him. “Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas,” Cooper repeated back.

“Cooper, Lila, this is your Auntie Skye,” Maria said.

“Hi,” Skye said, feeling a little uncomfortable. Despite growing up in the foster system, she hadn’t been exposed to interacting with that many small children. She wasn’t sure whether she should hug them or shake their hands. Cooper was nearest, so she offered her fist. Cooper broke into a grin and fist bumped her. Lila was next and mimicked her brother.

“Hey, Maria. Hey, Nat,” came a new voice. Skye looked up and saw a pretty brunette with a warm smile. Skye’s nervousness redoubled. Fortunately, her soulmates picked up on it and she felt their calm reassurances.

“Merry Christmas, Laura,” Natasha said fondly. “We’d like you to meet Skye, our soulmate.”

“Welcome, Skye, and Merry Christmas,” Laura said, approaching easily. She didn’t hesitate before pulling Skye into a gentle hug, and though Skye stiffened briefly she relaxed again after a moment and hugged back tentatively.

“Merry Christmas,” Skye replied. “Thank you for inviting me.”

“Nonsense,” Laura replied, brushing off Skye’s thanks. “Nat and Maria are part of this family, which means you are too. You’re always welcome here, anytime.” She gave Skye another smile, then moved to hug first Natasha and then Maria.

“Skye,” came a familiar voice behind Laura and Skye grinned to see Clint.

“Hey, Clint,” Skye said, hugging him tightly.

Clint hugged her back. “Hey, how’s your UC assignment?” he asked. “I hear it’s taken on a life of its own. Something about keeping an eye on our old handler?”

“Nah, just the team,” Skye said. “Fury wants to make sure the team assigned to watch him is really the best.”

“No shop talk, it’s Christmas,” Laura ordered. “You know the rules, Clint.”
“Does that mean no weapons training?” Clint asked. “Because I was gonna take everyone skeet shooting in the back field tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow’s Christmas Eve. We’ve got church,” Laura said she turned to Maria. “You guys are staying the week, right? Billy Tompkins is saying that this year’s fireworks are gonna be spectacular.”

“Yeah, we’re all staying the week,” Natasha said.

Skye stiffened. “Don’t worry,” Maria said in her ear, “it’s a progressive community church. They’ve never had an issue with Natasha or I and they won’t have a problem with you. We’re the only soulmates who ever show up to service, so you might get a little extra attention, but nothing bad, I promise.”

“Now, who’s hungry?” Laura asked. “I’ve got beef stew in the oven and I know you guys love to eat.”

“I love your cooking,” Maria said as she picked up Cooper and started inside. “I wish we could get it more.”

“The kids need a normal childhood,” Laura said with a shrug. “That’s what Clint and I agreed to when he joined SHIELD. Unfortunately, that means we don’t get to see you guys much.”

Skye felt a tug on her jeans and looked down and saw Lila asking silently to be picked up. Skye complied, if a bit awkwardly. “Daddy said that you’re my Auntie Nat and Auntie Maria’s newest soulmate and you’re my Auntie too.”

“Yup,” Skye said.

“Am I gonna have cousins soon?” Lila asked. All the adults laughed.

“I don’t know,” Skye said smiling. “I guess we’ll see. We’re all very busy.”

She set Lila down and the little girl hugged Skye around her legs. “I love you,” Lila said. Skye was shocked as Lila ran off somewhere in the house.

“Dinner’s in five minutes,” Laura called after her children. “Please remember to wash your hands.”

Skye looked around the cozy farmhouse that was dressed to the nines for Christmas. It looked exactly like the kind of Christmas that Skye pictured when she was a kid. Her eyes teared up when she realized the stocking she’d spotted bearing her name was hand-knitted and clearly made with care.

“Wash up, you three,” Laura said. Skye smiled as they went over to the kitchen sink and all took turns washing their hands. “You too, Clint.”

Skye was expecting a formal dinner, like she had experienced all those months ago, but instead they all sat in the family room with warm bowls of stew and bread with a fire warming them and roasting chestnuts. Skye dozed against Maria as her soulmates caught up with Clint and Laura. Lila and Cooper had long since been sent to bed.

“She’s gorgeous,” Skye heard Laura comment. “Your pictures don’t do her justice.”

“We haven’t gotten to see her in awhile,” Maria said, tucking a strand of hair behind Skye’s ear. “And I’m biased, but I’d agree.”
“The way she looked tonight… it was almost like she didn’t believe this,” Laura said, a touch concerned. “It’s the same look that Nat and Clint each had the first year here. I know I’m a little Christmas-crazy but…”

“I had never had Christmas before,” Natasha noted. “You know why Clint was a little stunned by the decorations… Skye grew up in foster care and knew to not expect pomp and circumstance. I think the little touches really got her.”

Skye shifted and stretched. “I wasn’t expecting a stocking,” she said sleepily. “I mean, we had Christmas at home last year and the store-bought ones were fine… you didn’t need to make me one.”

“Of course I did,” Laura said. “You’re part of our extended family.”

“It’s funny,” Skye said. “A year ago I had no family, and now I have two, though it feels like three.”

“And we’re not leaving you,” Maria whispered in her ear. Skye smiled, appreciating the reminder.

After a nightcap, everyone went to bed, Skye falling asleep in her usual position between her soulmates. It was the best night’s sleep she’d had in a while.

Christmas Eve morning was a flurry of activity for everyone. Clint was up early, as was Skye, and they ran on the land. Skye couldn’t help but grin the crunch of snow with their strides. It was a couple miles before she realized that all her hard work seemed to be paying off - she was matching Clint, as seasoned agent, stride for stride without too much huffing and puffing.

Clint then coached her through some advanced weapons training, finally fulfilling a long-ago promise to start to teach her how to shoot a bow and arrow. He gave her a training bow of her own, one of his old ones that he had learned to shoot with. Skye had tried not to accept the gift, but Clint had waved her off, saying it wasn’t a gift so much as a training tool.

They did pay closer attention to the time and were back inside to shower and change by the time the kids were getting up for breakfast. Skye found Laura in the kitchen, standing over a griddle as Lila dug into her pancakes and Cooper was pouring syrup onto his under Maria’s watchful eye.

“Morning, everyone,” Skye greeted the family.

“Good morning, Auntie Skye,” Cooper said with a smile. “Mommy makes the best pancakes! You should have some.”

Skye smiled, moving into the room to give Maria a light kiss. “I’m sure I’ll be having some,” Skye told Cooper.

“Of course you will,” Laura agreed. “There’s eggs and ham done already. Plates are on the counter; help yourself. I’ll have more cakes done in a few minutes.”

“No problem. Do you need any help?” Skye asked.

“I think Maria and Nat have the kids in hand, but maybe you could check the coffee? I know Clint will want some, and we may need to start another pot.”

“Sure,” Skye agreed. She poured the last of the coffee into a mug and started a new pot before helping herself to food. She was just settling at the table when a smaller plate with four fluffy pancakes was set next to her.

“We’ve got all the options out because it’s Christmas,” Laura said with a smile. “Butter and syrup,
strawberries and blueberries - frozen, I’m afraid - and whipped cream, powdered sugar… whatever you want.”

“Thanks,” Skye said, buttering her pancakes liberally before adding the berries and whipped cream. “Everything smells great, Laura. Thank you.”

Laura waved her off with a grin. “I love cooking for my family. It’s fun for me. Enjoy it, and that’s thanks enough.”

“Auntie Skye, we get to open presents tomorrow!” Lila said excitedly around Nat’s attempts at wiping syrup off her face and hands.

“I know!” Skye responded brightly. “Do you get to help hand them out to everyone?”

“Yeah!” she exclaimed. “Cooper tells me what the tag says, and I take the present to them!”

“That sounds like great teamwork,” Skye said, smiling again.

“Daddy wrote your name out for me, and I practiced it,” Cooper said, a little shyer than his sister.

“That’s very sweet, Cooper,” Skye told him gently. “Thank you.” She was rewarded with a bright smile from the little boy.

Skye mused on the fact that it would be very easy to get used to being a part of this happy family. She hoped she would be able to keep it that way; though of course a part of her always doubted it on some level. She couldn’t really help it, despite her soulmates insisting that they weren’t going anywhere. They were patient and understanding, though; from what she knew of Natasha, she wasn’t the only one who’d had a hard time adapting to suddenly gaining a family.

Tony’s excessive nature had been too much for most of those living at the tower the first year, but that had never been something that Skye had dreamed about; this home and this family was everything her dreams had ever left her longing for. They spent the rest of the morning preparing food for cooking the next day, making pies and cookies, and generally talking and laughing together. Laura seemed determined to make Skye at ease, teaching her how to chop correctly, how to make a lattice crust, and all sorts of things she had never learned at the orphanage. Lila and Cooper chattered excitedly with Natasha, Skye, and Maria equally about their excitement about the Children’s Pageant (Cooper was going to be a shepherd and Lila a sheep), Christmas, presents, food, and more.

Early afternoon, they all showered and dressed themselves in clean shirts and jeans, then headed to the community church. Skye’s experience of church had been the polar opposite of this one. Nuns had always been obsessed with how you looked, while this church seemed more focused on the community as a whole. It was certainly a church of farmers. People came in nice enough clothing, but it was mainly jeans and plaid shirts, discussing dairy production and their hopes for the coming year’s crops.

“Clinton!” cried the tiniest, oldest lady that Skye had ever seen. She was by no means frail though, clearly she had spent a lot of years working hard, manual labor.

“Miss May, Merry Christmas,” Clint greeted warmly.

“Merry Christmas to you and yours,” Miss May said warmly. “Laura off with the little ones for the pageant?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Clint said. “Miss May, I’d like to present to you Maria and Natasha’s newest soulmate, Skye.”
Skye extended her hand, but Miss May grabbed her and hugged her tightly instead. “Th’ Holy Spirit’s been tellin’ me to be prayin’ for you dear,” Miss May said. “Meetin’ your soulmate can be overwhelmin’. The man upstairs, he has a sense of humor and he’s not afraid t’ use it on us. Most of us ’round here see it as a blessin’. The more marks, the bigger the blessing and he don’t bless those who don’t deserve it.” Miss May looked directly at Natasha when she said this. Skye wondered how much Miss May knew and how much she was guessing based on observation. “My great-granddaughter read a news story about a gal that has six soulmates, but i’ turned out to be a hoax. I says to her, ‘ain’t no quad in over fifty years, Lily. God’d be crazy t’ make seven.’” Skye, Natasha, and Maria all glanced at each other nervously, but Miss May either didn’t see or didn’t care. “I should go, the Campbell triplets are here and someone’s gotta keep an’ eye out t’ make sure they don’t go causin’ trouble. Clinton, you come ’round my place some time next week. My fence needs repairin’.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Clint responded again with a smile. “I’ll be by before the new year, promise.”

“Good lad,” Miss May said, patting his cheek as she walked away.

Skye just blinked after her; Clint looped an arm around Skye and she leaned gratefully into his support. “She’s… something else,” she said finally.

“Yes, she is,” Clint agreed. “She’s also been a staple of this community for longer than I’ve been alive; most of the people will follow her lead more often than not. If she likes you, even better.”

“She seems to, certainly.”

Clint chuckled. “Her intuition and sense for people is famous around here; she’s never yet misjudged a person’s character. If she trusts you, everyone else will soon too.”

Skye smiled a bit finally. “That… would be nice, too.”

“I know. Come on, the pageant will be starting soon.”

The pageant was the same nativity story that was well known across every church community. Lila made a darling sheep, and her brother stood by her side protectively as a pretty cute shepherd too. The hymns were all the same from Skye’s childhood and the service closed out with them singing ‘Joy to the World’. Skye found the children’s chorus of shouting the words at the top of their voices pretty darling.

They got back at dinner time and ate more stew for supper. Laura brought out seven bulky wrapped gifts and passed them around as they were polishing off the last bites of dessert and sipping on eggnog.

Lila and Cooper tore into their presents with gusto as Skye stared at the gift, a little shell-shocked. “It’s a family tradition for Laura to give the year’s pyjamas every year on Christmas Eve,” Clint explained, opening his own and unashamedly revealing boxers with cupids on them and a white tank top that stated “I took an arrow to the knee.” Skye looked over and saw Maria’s were silk Nationals pyjamas while Natasha had been given a long sleep shirt with a ballerina on the front and plain boxer shorts. Skye opened her own and saw cotton pants with ones and zeros all over them and a tank top that said “offline mode”. Definitely not the footie pyjamas that she feared. She could wear these on the bus no problem.

“Now,” Laura announced. “I think all small ones need to get to bed or Santa won’t know it’s time to come deliver presents.”
Laura helped Cooper and Lila set cookies and milk out then shooed them off to bed. Laura returned from putting the kids to bed with a bottle of rum and another pie, pouring some of the rum in her eggnog and serving herself a slice.

“We have a few hours before we have to become Santa’s helpers,” Laura said, it being a tradition Nat and Clint came up with years and years ago.

“Best to be sure they’re asleep first,” Natasha agreed, accepting the rum from Laura. She spiked her own ’nog and Maria’s before glancing questioningly at Skye. Skye nodded and held out her cup, smiling when Natasha obligingly topped it off with rum.

Skye nibbled on cookies while Natasha passed the rum to Clint. She found her attention snared again by the tree, watching the lights twinkle among the ornaments; both homemade and store bought. Laura slid over to sit beside Skye, taking her hand gently. “Tomorrow afternoon, we’ll make new ornaments for next year. So you’ll have some up there as well,” she explained softly. She reached out and turned a few, showing the names on the back. Clint, Laura, Natasha, Cooper, Maria and Lila’s names and the year were inscribed on the back of every hand painted ornament, every hand stitched santa. “If you can come for Thanksgiving and stay the whole weekend, you can help put up the tree, too.”

“I don’t know if I can, but I’ll try,” Skye replied in a low voice. She had to blink to clear her eyes; never had she felt more welcome anywhere - or by anyone, with the exception of Natasha and Maria. Laura just pulled Skye close and guided Skye’s head to her shoulder, stroking her hair lightly.

“We’d like that. Even if your soulmates are busy. In fact, especially if they’re busy. No one should have to spend a holiday alone,” Laura added. “We have Nat or Maria over alone all the time. You’re not gonna be treated any different.”

Skye smiled, feeling warm inside.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Christmas Day.

Chapter Notes

Holy cats, guys. We're averaging like 500 hits a chapter! And we almost have as many comments as kudos. You all rock!

Chapter 10

When they finished setting everything out, Skye was astonished by the pile of presents arrayed under the tree and in stockings. A couple of larger ones sat off to the side by the time they finished their task as Santa’s Helpers. The cookies and milk were gone - both from Santa’s plate and from the pile
Laura had brought out from the kitchen to munch as they worked.

“Wow,” she whispered to herself, but Natasha heard and sidled over to her.

“Pretty amazing, huh?” she said lowly. “I know… I felt like you do now, the first Christmas I spent here.”

“And it’s not even all for the kids,” Skye added in a whisper. It was true; though the kids had more presents than any other single person, there were still several for each person from Santa as well as everyone’s gifts to each other.

“Of course not,” Clint said softly, coming up behind the pair and wrapping his arms around them. The three orphans, for whom this kind of Christmas had been a childhood dream, something only seen in movies, rather than reality. “Christmas is for everyone, not just for the children. Though the kids do make it a lot more fun.”

Laura stood beside Maria, watching the trio with a small smile. They’d been the two with most of the family traditions to bring together, and they both knew that while they understood on some level that their partners hadn’t ever had anything like this as kids… it was something they would never fully comprehend. So they just stood back, together, and let Clint, Natasha and Skye comfort each other with the reality of a real family Christmas.

“Now we can relax a little before going to bed,” Maria said, going back to her eggnog.

“Skye, do you have any holiday traditions that we need to incorporate?” Laura asked kindly.

Skye blinked slowly, then nodded. “Do we have any candles?” she asked. Laura nodded. “On Christmas morning, I used to light candles for my parents. When I blow them out, they take my thoughts and wishes to wherever my parents’ spirits are.” She colored a little. “It’s silly, I know.”

“No, not at all,” Laura said, tearing up. “We’ll be sure to get out candles for you before bed.”

Skye smiled a bit. “Other than that? Well, we - the kids at the orphanage, I mean - used to have a big snowball fight if there was enough snow. After church was over in the morning, we’d have the rest of the afternoon just to play. The nuns left us to ourselves, mostly.”

“Snowball fights we can do,” Maria said with a grin. “We can have teams and build shelters.”

Laura chuckled. “I’ll leave you four to it, with the kids. I’ll make sure we have warm towels and hot chocolate for when you’re done.”

“You’re the best, Laura,” Clint said with a grin.

“You should have seen Nat’s face the first time Laura made her hot chocolate,” Maria said, teasingly.

Natasha’s face colored slightly, but she took the teasing in stride. “I didn’t exactly get hot chocolate in the Red Room,” she said. “We didn’t get a visit from Ded Moroz.”

“Grandfather Frost?” Skye asked.

“You know Russian?” Natasha asked.

“Schastlivogo Rozhdestva,” Skye said quietly.

“Merry Christmas,” Natasha translated softly.
“I only know a little,” Skye said. “I’ve been learning bits and pieces when I had the time. Brushing up on Mandarin too.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Natasha began, but Skye shook her head.

“I know I don’t,” she replied. “But I wanted to. I wanted to surprise you.”

Natasha didn’t reply, just crushed Skye into a tight embrace. Skye wrapped her arms around Natasha and held her close. Maria joined them after a moment and Skye looked up long enough to meet Clint’s eyes and Laura’s, silently inviting them over. The group hug was long and intense, and for once, Skye felt herself relaxing into it. As if in that moment, she really felt that she belonged right where she was.

It might not last, but she was going to enjoy it while she could.

Natasha was the one to finally break the group apart. “Alright, guys, you can let me out,” she quipped, though the tone was warm and loving.

“We should probably be getting to bed anyway,” Laura agreed. “The kids are likely to be up with the sun.”

“Ugh, I forgot about that,” Skye groaned.

“You get up at 5am everyday,” Natasha said.

“I guess I’m just used to running, but if I didn’t have to run…” Skye trailed off. “I used to be a night owl. I guess I still equate Christmas with sleeping until noon. Usually hungover from wherever the party was the night before.”

“Come on, hi-ho. Off to bed we go,” Maria said.

“You use that line on cadets?” Skye quipped as she was led up the stairs.

“Shut it and march,” Maria said. Natasha followed after giving all their eggnogs a refill.

They ended up on the balcony of their room. Skye stood by the railing, watching fresh snow slowly falling. It was almost the stereotypical perfect Christmas picture. Though depending on how long it snowed, they could have quite a bit more to work with for their snowball fight tomorrow.

Skye took out two of the candles that Laura had passed her. For some reason, Laura had given her six candles. “Pass some of those over,” Maria said, staring out at the snow herself.

“Here too,” Nat said. Skye looked between her soulmates. “We have things to say too.”

Suddenly, Skye understood why she had been given six and passed candles to each of them. Skye pulled out a lighter and lit one of the candles. She filled her father in on the skills she was learning, then lit the other one and told her mother about how she had grown as a person, learning to love more and live more and trust more, and to not be so scared all the time.

She had filled her parents in on finding her soulmates the year before. This year she updated them on becoming a spy, on the work she was doing to help keep the world a little safer. She told them about her new teammates, her latest projects and studies. She nestled them into holders as she spoke, letting the warm glow help keep her focused.

Natasha listened to Skye for a few moments before lighting her own candles. While Skye was
occupied with her stories of the people she worked with, Natasha spoke very softly to the flames. She promised Skye’s parents that Skye wouldn’t be alone any longer. Told them what an amazing person their daughter was.

She heard Maria doing something similar, as Skye’s voice finally dropped away. But Skye just waited quietly for her soulmates to finish, not wanting to interrupt anyone.

She stayed still, watching the snow, and wondered if she’d ever find them, if they were even still alive. She sipped her eggnog, wondering if it mattered any more. When she was growing up she had needed them and hadn’t gotten them. Now she didn’t need them. She had her family. It scared the crap out of her, but she had them.

“I like this tradition,” Natasha said with a soft smile as they went back inside.

“I do too,” Maria spoke up. She moved her candles onto the window ledge beside Skye’s. Natasha added hers as well. “What now?”

“Well, I used to leave them going and blow them out in the morning,” Skye said hesitantly. “But I’m not sure we want to do that here. It’s not really safe…”

“No, I suppose not,” Maria agreed. “So we should blow them out and get some sleep?”

“Let’s finish our eggnog first,” Natasha demurred. “Come here.” She tugged Skye over to the bed, retrieved their drinks from the bedside table, and handed over Maria’s.

They changed into their new Christmas pjs then snuggled in together, sitting up against the headboard so they could drink easily. When the glasses were all finally empty, Skye got up to blow out the candles. The lingering scent of warm wax and sweet cinnamon were wonderful, and Skye fell asleep with her soulmates wrapped around her contently.

The first conscious thought that Skye thought was that she was being attacked. Skye moved to defend herself, but Maria pulled the offending party off of Skye. “What’s the rule,” Maria was saying as Skye blinked blearily.

“No jumping on people,” Lila’s voice came. “But Auntie Maria, it’s Christmas!”

“I know, sweetheart, but it can be very dangerous to wake people up that way,” Maria answered patiently. “We would never want to hurt you, but accidents sometimes happen, you know?”

Lila pouted but nodded. “Yes, Auntie Maria. I’ll try to remember.” Seeing Skye blinking blearily at them from the pillow, she slipped out of Maria’s grasp and flung herself at Skye. “Auntie Skye, it’s Christmas! Can we go open presents, please?”

Skye managed to catch Lila herself this time. But rather than getting up, she snuggled back under the covers with the little girl in her arms. “It’s still early, munchkin,” Skye admonished sleepily. “Come snuggle for a few minutes, and then we can get up, okay?”

“But…” Lila began.

“Five minutes, munchkin,” Skye said. “Promise.”

“Oh, alright,” Lila agreed, hugging Skye happily as she warmed up under the covers. Two minutes passed before Lila’s excitement got the better of her and she squirmed. “Is it five minutes yet?”

“You’re not gonna win this one, Skye,” Natasha said as she rolled out of bed. Maria was already up,
and she tossed Nat the hairbrush.

Skye groaned, then sighed. “Alright, fine. I’m awake.” She let Lila go and the little girl bounced up and out of the bed. “Are your mommy and daddy awake?”

“Cooper was gonna go get them,” Lila enthused. “You need to come see! Santa left us so much!”

Skye took the hairbrush when Nat was done with it, making sure she was at least moderately presentable despite the fact that everyone was still in their nightwear. Lila’s hair was all messy too, but Skye didn’t think she could get the little girl to sit still long enough to have her hair brushed. She supposed it was alright, though… it wasn’t like they were going anywhere first thing in the morning.

“Okay, I’m ready,” Skye said. Lila grabbed her hand, and Nat’s, and tried to hurry them down the stairs. Natasha scooped up the bubbly girl so she didn’t accidentally bounce herself down the stairs the hard way, though, and they all headed to the living room.

Cooper was already there, waiting impatiently, while Laura sat on the couch making sure the camera’s batteries were still good and that the memory card was empty. Clint emerged from the kitchen a few minutes later with a tray of full coffee mugs for the adults to drink.

“Okay,” Laura said as Natasha set Lila down. “Remember, no one gets to start opening gifts until they’re all handed out, right?”

“Yes, mommy,” the kids chorused.

“I don’t know if someone should get Christmas,” Natasha said. “We caught someone jumping on the bed this morning.”


“Yeah,” Lila said slowly.

Clint knelt down to Lila’s level. “Do you remember why we don’t jump on people?”

“Because you and Auntie Natasha and Auntie Maria are ninjas?”

“Right, because me and your Aunts are ninjas. And Skye is a new ninja and is still training. I think you scared her. Can you apologize?”

Lila’s eyes went wide, welling up with tears. “I scared you, Auntie Skye? I’m sorry!”

Skye knelt down beside Clint and held out her hands. Lila threw herself into Skye’s arms, and Skye hugged her. “I forgive you, Lila.”

Clint nodded and smiled. “But we want you to try to remember, baby girl. Because we make rules to keep you safe, right?”

“Right, daddy,” Lila answered, sniffing.

“Good girl. Thank you for apologizing; I think because you were good and because Skye forgave you, we can still do Christmas,” Clint said.

Lila’s tears dried up as she began to smile. “Okay,” she agreed. When Skye let her go, she ran over to Cooper. “Can we find a Auntie Skye gift first, please, Cooper? So she knows I’m really sorry?”
Cooper nodded and handed Lila a brightly wrapped present. Lila delivered it to Skye, who sat on the floor in front of the couch where Maria was lounging. “Thank you, Lila,” Skye said lightly. She waited and watched as the kids handed out gifts; Cooper was sure to make sure everyone had one before he stopped caring and just gave gifts to Lila, telling her who each one was for. Cooper’s went on one side of the tree, and Lila’s on the other, for when they were done.

Soon, everyone had a small pile of bright packages on their laps and all around them.

Nor was Laura the only one with a camera. Clint had one, and so did Maria. When Skye looked questioningly at all the cameras, Maria leaned down to whisper, “We don’t miss as much this way. And there are pictures of everyone.” Skye nodded her understanding; the person behind the camera seldom showed up in photos.

The adults mostly watched as the kids tore into their gifts. Shrieks of glee and calls of thanks followed most of the packages, though there were occasional pauses as the kids had to decide which package to open next or got distracted by the contents of the one they’d just opened.

The kids were happily playing with some of their new toys when everyone else started in on their presents. The camera-wielders took turns, making sure at least one of them was able to capture images at any point in time.

The adults exchanged more meaningful, personal gifts. All of Skye’s would have to be kept at home, of course. Skye wished that she could take something with her under cover. Until she came to her last gift, a tiny box. She opened it and gasped at the charm bracelet inside. There were three charms on it, one was a computer, another was a baseball bat, and a third was a pair of ballet shoes. “Oh,” Skye gasped.

“That’s pretty, Auntie Skye.” Lila said.

“I gave one to Natasha on our second Christmas together, and Natasha gave me one two years after,” Maria explained. “We all have different charms for each other, no one put it together, but it does mean we can wear them in SHIELD without anyone being the wiser.”

Skye teared up a little. “Thank you,” she said softly. “I was just wishing for something I could take with me…”

“Well, you can definitely take that,” Natasha said with a smile.

“I love it,” Skye said, putting it on.

“Okay, egg bake time?” Laura suggested to the adults. The kids weren’t paying attention, but they were easily moved.

“More coffee?” Skye asked.

“Of course. We have mimosas too,” Laura said. “It’s a Barton holiday tradition.”

“No, the Barton Christmas tradition involved a case of beer, a turkey, and a gun,” Clint said. Skye looked at him questioningly. “After the case of beer, Dad didn’t know it was already dead, dressed, and cooked.”

“Yeah, I’ve had foster dads like that,” Skye said. Laura and Clint looked at her sharply. “In retrospect, I’m very, very happy for the SHIELD protocol in place with some of the families I was placed in.”
“Blessings in retrospect,” Laura said. “Come on, food time.”

They all sat down and only at the smell of food did their kids set down their gifts. “Okay, we are not a grace household, but can you two list what Christmas is about?” Skye anticipated the chorus of ‘Jesus!’

“Family,” Cooper piped up.

“Giving,” Lila said.

“Okay, good. Take your food and go play,” Laura said. She exhaled and sat down as the kids dashed off. “We made it,” she said, clearly exhausted. “Only, what, 10 more to go until they both sleep in?”

“More if we get my way and we have two more.”

“Are you having those two?” Laura asked.

“Come on, we’ve got the space,” Clint argued.

“Clint always wanted a big family,” Laura said.

“I get it,” Skye said. “I always thought about that myself.”

“Yeah?” Maria asked. They had never discussed kids.

“Not specifically… I mean. I’m a foster kid,” Skye said slowly. “I grew up alone. I always dreamed I would eventually spare other kids of that fate.”

“Oh, Skye…” Maria said softly. She glanced at Natasha, who just shrugged.

“We can talk about it later,” Skye said with a shrug of her own. “Happy thoughts for Christmas, right?”

“Right,” Clint agreed when neither Maria nor Natasha answered. He could understand that Skye maybe didn’t want to talk about it right away. “So, mimosas?” he asked, lifting the pitcher. He poured one for everyone when the general consensus was, “Yes, please.”

They lingered over breakfast, sharing stories of Christmases past. Even Skye chimed in with a few things that had happened the prior year at the Tower. Which reminded Skye that she really wanted to call Bruce and Steve and wish them a Merry Christmas. But it could wait until that evening.

The snow continued through most of the morning, so Skye didn’t mention the snowball fight again. Besides, she didn’t think they’d be able to tear the kids away from their new toys just yet. Maybe after lunch the weather would clear up.

Thankfully, it did.

About an hour after lunch, Skye - fully dressed and only needing outdoor gear before heading into the snow - headed to the living room. “Hey, guys. Can you come talk to me for a minute, please?” she asked.

Cooper obediently put down the legos he was playing with and moved to stand by Skye. Lila trailed after him, a couple of building blocks still in her hand. “What’s up, Auntie Skye?” Cooper asked curiously.
Skye crouched down to their level, smiling. “Would you two like to come join in one of my Christmas traditions?”

“Yes!” Lila exclaimed. Cooper was a little more cautious. “What is it?”

“Ever since I was a kid, on Christmas afternoon I would go outside and have a big snowball fight with the other kids,” Skye explained patiently. “I know we don’t have a bunch of kids to play with, but if your daddy and Auntie Nat and Auntie Maria come play too, I think it could still be fun. Would you play with us, please?”

Cooper grinned. “Yeah,” he agreed as Lila clapped her hands. “I think we can.”

“Thank you,” Skye smiled. “Why don’t you go get warm clothes on so we can go outside, yeah?”

“Okay!” Lila charged out of the room, yelling, “Mommy, help me find snow clothes? I wanna go play with Auntie Skye!”

Cooper followed at a slower pace, shaking his head at his sister’s yelling. Skye followed with a smile and Cooper leaned over to whisper to her, “I know where my snow clothes are. I don’t need help anymore.”

“I believe you,” Skye assured him seriously. “But if you want help anyway, just ask, alright?”

“Yes!” He dashed lightly up the stairs to his bedroom and Skye chuckled to herself.

“Why do I get the feeling I’m in trouble for suggesting this?” Skye asked Clint as he joined her in the hall.

“Because we have three long-term agents, one newbie agent, and two kids. And a whole lot of snow,” Clint declared with a grin.

“How should we divide up teams?” Skye asked as Natasha joined them.

“Well, if the kids hold true to form, Lila will want to be with Nat and Cooper with me,” Maria began. “Usually he wants to be on his dad’s team too. If that doesn’t change, that would put you with Lila and Nat.”

Skye shrugged. “I don’t have a problem with that. What if the kids change their minds?”

“It’s Skye’s tradition. They may both want to be on her team,” Clint pointed out.

Skye shrugged. “Then we change up teams and play again tomorrow?”

“That might work,” Natasha agreed. “Guess we’ll see when they come back down.”

They all came in, hours later, snow in every crevice of their winter gear and some slightly more bruised than others. Clint had fallen out of a tree at one point, though nothing was broken, and the adults had devolved to throwing ice balls at each other for impromptu evasive training while Cooper and his sister went inside. Skye wasn’t too good at evasive maneuvers and Natasha and Clint had put it on the list of things to work on once Skye’s assignment was over.

Laura greeted them all with a basket of still-slightly-warm towels and mugs of hot chocolate, spiked with just a touch of Irish Cream to help them warm up quickly.

“You’re amazing,” Skye told Laura as she sipped her drink, toweling herself dry enough to walk through the house and change clothes. “Thank you.”
Laura grinned. “You’re welcome.” Laura brushed a strand of damp hair out of Skye’s face. “Go change and come sit by the fire. You’re half frozen.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Skye replied cheekily.

Skye changed and headed downstairs, putting her charm bracelet back on; she had taken it off to go into the snow.

Lila migrated to her lap as soon as she sat down, offering up the paperback version of Where the Wild Things Are that she had gotten for Christmas. According to Maria, Laura and Clint left the fun gifts to friends and extended family, while they gave their kids more practical and educational things.

“The night wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind…” Skye started, being careful to angle the book so Lila and Cooper (who was trying to pretend he was too big to be read to) could both see the pictures.

Not long after, Lila and Cooper both fell asleep in front of the fire. Skye was just trying to figure out how to get Lila off her lap when she heard the click of a camera.

“Not nice,” she said, looking up and glaring at Clint.

“If it counts for anything,” Clint said. “You’re good at this.”

“I’ve known them for a couple of days,” Skye said. “That’s different than interacting with them 24 hours a day, seven days a week with no out.”

“Yeah, I’m just saying that I had the same feeling when I was your age.”

“What changed?” Skye asked curiously.


“Yeah, I’m not just ready for that yet, though surprises like that won’t happen to us either,” Skye said. “I’m happy getting used to being an Aunt. I get to be cool when I’m an Aunt. Plus I’ve got that other thing that we have to finish first. But maybe someday.”

“Fair enough,” Clint said. “But I’m keeping the photo.”

“Mean,” Skye said. “Can you help me out here? I was going to go help Laura with dinner.”

“It’s actually almost ready. I came in here to rouse the kids so they can wash up.” Clint smiled. “Sometimes the best way to help Laura with something is to keep the kids occupied so she doesn’t have to worry if they get too quiet,” he added with a wink.

Skye laughed softly and managed to shift one hand enough to rub Lila’s cheek gently. “Hey, sweetie,” she said softly. “Time to wake up.”

Lila stirred slowly, blinking large eyes up at Skye. “Sleepy,” she murmured.

“Are you hungry, baby girl?” Clint said as he rubbed Cooper’s back, waking the boy gently. “Dinner’s almost ready.”

“Okay, daddy,” Lila said pliantly, snuggling closer to Skye. “Can we read more after dinner?”

“Sure,” Skye agreed. She got Lila to wiggle around until she could help the girl to her feet. Cooper was picking himself up, rubbing his eyes, as Clint helped steady him.
“Go wash your hands, okay?” Clint prodded the kids. They wandered off towards the bathroom.

Christmas dinner at the Bartons was the sort of thing Skye had mostly seen in movies. Dinner at the Tower the previous year had been just as lavish, if not more so, but she knew it was all catered. This… was a real, home-cooked, family produced dinner.

And it was amazing how much food covered the table. A huge ham, mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, fresh rolls, acorn squash with butter and brown sugar, something red that Skye couldn’t identify but smelled like cranberries; even at the orphanage for dozens of kids, Skye had barely ever seen such a spread of food.

Skye just stood in the doorway and stared until Clint gently pushed her towards the table. Natasha and Maria gently guided her into a chair between theirs, understanding her shock and near-disbelief.

“Holy cats, that’s a lot of food!” Skye exclaimed when she finally found her voice.

“Let’s eat while it’s still hot, yeah?” Maria suggested gently as Clint and Laura got the kids settled into their places and started to prep their plates. Lila could eat for herself, if messily, but everything had to be cut up for her so she could eat it easily. Clint did much the same for Cooper; while the boy could and would pick things up and take bites readily, it was less messy if most of his meat was cut and rolls buttered for him.

Maria, Nat and Skye served themselves. Even Skye’s ingrained tendency to not take too much for herself was overcome by the sheer quantity of food. And there was more, too; Skye could see that some of the serving bowls could be refilled from pots and dishes in the kitchen. Also on the kitchen sideboard were no less than four pies, some of which they’d made the day before.

“Are Steve and Thor coming by?” Skye asked, stunned.

Laura laughed, “You’ll be surprised how fast it goes,” she said. “These two are tiny vacuums and I know you guys all eat a lot with your workouts. We eat this stuff and only this stuff until about New Year’s and by then it’s mostly gone.”

“It’s too delicious to let it go bad,” Maria said, pouring gravy over her ham, mashed potato, roll, and dressing. “There’s a reason why we come here every year for Christmas and Thanksgiving.”

“None of us can cook for shit?” Natasha asked.

“Basically,” Maria said, laughing.

“I’d kind of like to learn more, though,” Skye put in quietly. “I know basics, and there’s a few things I do alright with.”

Laura shot Skye a smile. “I’d be happy to teach you more, Skye,” she offered. “Maybe next year I can put you in charge of a couple of things and Maria can read to the kids instead.”

“I could try,” Skye said, smiling a little. “Though I don’t know that I’ll have a lot of opportunity to practice unless I start cooking for my team or something…”

“I’m sure you’ll find a way,” Natasha reassured her.

“I can only imagine the look on the team’s faces if I started making popovers and casseroles for them,” Skye laughed.

“I remember the first time I brought Coulson and Nat cookies from home,” Clint said. “And he
thought that they were store bought.” Coulson was becoming an easier topic, it seemed. “He spent years checking out all the bakeries in DC, trying to figure out where I got them.”

“Should we screw with him and have me bring him some?” Skye asked.

“It can be your first lesson,” Laura said mischievously.

They all dug into their food, eating until they had no more room. Cooper and Lila had eventually tapped out, going off to play until dessert. The adults lingered, sipping their wine, someone occasionally helping themselves to a little more food. Skye still couldn’t quite believe how much they’d actually finished, but there were plenty of leftovers to get them through the week. It would be pretty simple to throw a couple of slices of ham onto a roll for a quick snack.

They called the kids back in for dessert: pie and ice cream. There were plenty of choices, too; apple pie, pumpkin pie, cherry pie, and Laura had thrown together a chocolate cream pie that afternoon. They were all thoroughly stuffed by the time they finished.

Maria, Natasha and Skye offered to pack up leftovers while Laura and Clint got their drowsy kids ready for bed. Skye piled dishes into the dishwasher and set it to run before going after the larger pots and roasting pan with a soapy sponge; she was plenty used to doing dishes, and it was a chore she didn’t mind too much.

“Not bad,” Laura said, observing her now clean kitchen.

“Does that mean what I think it means?” Clint ask.

“Yes, you can go fire your weapons,” Laura said.

“YES!” Clint cried, pumping his fist in the air. “Time for Project Train Skye by New Year’s; operation commenced!”

“No alcohol at the shooting range,” Laura called as they all went to put on their coats. “And come back in before midnight.”

Clint stopped and went over to his wife, kissing her passionately. “Love you, Laura.”

“Love you, Clint.” Laura responded.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

More shenanigans on the Bus.

Chapter Notes

We can't say it enough; the support for this story has been amazing. Thank you all so much!

Not a manip, but still poignant.
Over the next week, the agents split equal time between training, spending time with Lila and Cooper, and spending time with each other. They dressed warm and cuddled together at the High School football stadium for the New Year’s Eve fireworks, then went to bed in the early hours of the morning together, warmed by heavy blankets and hot chocolate. They returned to DC, where Skye was true to her word and taught Steve about technology while he gave her stories about the Howling Commandos as real people rather than the published stories that she had learned.

Sadly, her vacation away from undercover work ended as Coulson called them all in again in mid-February. They had a couple missions together that allowed them to get her groove back. Skye appreciated getting to see Mike again when he was brought on for a mission to try and get back Po, but their reunion was short-lived when Centipede came back into play.

But it wasn’t until Mike double-crossed them on the Bridge that everything went to hell. Skye was stunned to see the helicopter fly off. She clutched Ace against her chest, shielding the boy from seeing the explosion that hit his father. She doubted anyone could have survived an explosion like that, and if part of her was troubled by May’s insistence that they get out of there and try to track down Coulson immediately… she also understood it.

Unfortunately, Skye’s situation went from bad to worse. Without Coulson to protect her civilian consultant/hacker identity, Skye found herself ejected from first the search for Coulson, then the Bus entirely.

Skye was taken aback completely when May agreed with Hand that Skye was of no use on the Bus. She was tagged with the same bracelet than they had given Miles, though FitzSimmons and Ward helped her slip away before Hand’s minions could keep her in their claws. Thanks to Nat and Maria, Skye had access to emergency documents and money in safe deposit boxes scattered all over the world; getting around wouldn’t be a problem, it was just the damned internet nanny.

So when her phone pinged an alert at her, Skye was completely taken by surprise. She checked it, and unlike the computers at the Internet Cafe… it actually allowed her access.

Bracelet inactive. Do what you can. Skye grinned down at the message from Maria. Thank goodness for soulmates in positions of power within SHIELD!

Skye quickly found another ‘net cafe and went to work. She got together what she needed, “borrowed” a car, and headed out of town. On the way, she called Simmons and ended up talking to May.

When they finally found Coulson, Skye knew immediately that he was reliving the aftermath of TAHITI. She recalled vividly what Maria had said about Coulson begging to be allowed to just die. She rushed to him, trying to call him back to the present as May unplugged the machine he was in.

“Skye,” Coulson whispered, and she couldn’t keep the tears from falling as he finally came to enough to recognize her.

“I’m here,” she promised him. “It’s going to be alright.”

Between herself and May, they got Coulson back to the SUV and then to the Bus. Fortunately, Hand and her teams were gone on their other missions to take down Centipede so there was no one to protest her return to the Bus. And, even more thankfully, Coulson had enough authority to remove the tracking bracelet. She didn’t want to have to explain to anyone else why it wasn’t actually blocking anything.
She waited until everyone was asleep, then climbed in the back of the SUV and pressed her speed
dial 1. “Everything okay?” Maria asked without greeting. “Everyone okay?”

“All good,” Skye confirmed. “Thanks for the help after Hand went…”

“Yeah, Hand might be getting some very unpleasant assignments in the near future.”

“She runs the Hub,” Skye said. “What assignments could you give her?”

“I might send Stark her way for a couple of weeks,” Maria said.

Skye chuckled. “Somehow I fear for someone either dying or blowing up the Hub in that situation.”

“Which is why I’m sending Bruce with him. Pepper’s going to check in once a day or so,” Maria
said laughing herself.

“I want security footage,” Skye said.

“I’ll send what I can,” Maria said.

“Was Nat read in on this whole thing?”

“She’s currently on-mission,” Maria said. “This is status quo for us. Even big things have to be put
on hold during on-mission.” Which made sense, but still sucked sometimes.

Skye went back to her bunk after the call and bolstered the blow-up pillows she had been given over
Christmas, pretending that her soulmates were holding her after the stress of watching Coulson beg
for death. Even though she’d known what happened, hearing it in his voice… it was way more
disturbing than she’d been prepared for.

Rolling over, Skye sighed softly. She was never going to get to sleep this way. She missed her
soulmates’ comforting presence more than ever; she closed her eyes again and tried to pretend she
could feel their presences right beside her. She’d almost convinced herself that she could when all of
a sudden, she actually did. Not physically, but mentally, she felt Natasha’s gentle soothing and
Maria’s firm confidence.

It didn’t last long - the connection wasn’t really sustainable at this distance. But it was enough, and
Skye finally fell asleep.

She received an encrypted correspondence from Weaver with another physics project to review the
next morning. She gave it an initial scan and marked the document with notes, things to research for
her second pass-through. She then got up and joined May for 5am Tai Chi, then went down to ‘train’
with Ward.

“We’ve got a mission,” Coulson said as they gathered around the holotable. “Someone froze the
Pool at SciOps.” He pulled up an image of a tiny device. “This was found in the filter.”

“**That’s** what froze the pool?” Skye said, not hiding her astonishment. She scanned over the specs
quickly. The skill to build something like that would take more than a couple PhDs. Fitz and
Simmons talked interchangeably, a mile-a-minute about the scientific specifics.

“So we’re going to the Academy,” May announced, finally cutting off FitzSimmons’ pablum
regarding the minute details between them.

Skye blinked. SciTech was one of the few places Skye had never been but sometimes wished she
could have. Then she smiled to herself as Coulson dismissed them. She could use the rest of the trip to keep working on the new project for Weaver; she’d have to do some research, but maybe for once she’d have the opportunity to discuss a project with her SciTech SO in person.

If there was time, and she could come up with an excuse, at least.

It was surprisingly difficult to see Agent Weaver so thrilled to see Fitz and Simmons when she couldn’t actually acknowledge that she knew Skye at all. Still, the look in Weaver’s eyes when their gazes met briefly told her that if not for her cover, she’d have every bit as effusive a greeting. They nodded politely at each other, then Weaver returned her attention to her former students and led the quartet inside.

While her team studied the incidents with freezing students, Skye got a few text messages from Weaver on her private phone. They couldn’t talk directly most of the time, but it was still nice for them to finally meet in person.

Skye wandered the campus, picturing herself being fifteen or sixteen, studying complex scientific theorems and actually being encouraged in her intelligence rather than what her New York P.S. teachers did, which was write her off. She loved science, always had. She hadn’t lied to Ward that day when she told him that CS came naturally to her. All science and math did. It wasn’t like CS didn’t take both, not that Fitz, Simmons, or Ward seemed to be aware of that fact.

She found her way to the wall of valor and discreetly took a picture of Bucky’s star on the there, sending it as an encrypted message to Steve, letting him know that no one at SHIELD had forgotten him. She then found Linda Avery’s star, and the other names of the SHIELD team who had died in China, silently thanking them for their service. For saving her life. She hoped that working in Special Projects for Fury made up for it.

“You okay?” May asked from behind her.

“Yeah,” Skye said, sniffing and remembering her cover. “I, uh, I was just thinking … it puts things into perspective all this … history. I just wish … I was a part of it.”

“You are,” May said evenly. “You’re here.”

“Yeah, except all of you earned this. I … hacked my way in.”

“You’re not the first person to cut the line,” May said. “Hawkeye and the Black Widow are SHIELD agents and they never went to an academy.” Skye couldn’t believe that May was offering information up freely, but she just did. And not just any information, but something that would actually help Skye feel better about her position.

“Really?” Skye asked.

“Others skipped the Academy too. SHIELD doesn’t deal with useless, Skye, remember that,” May said with finality before walking off. “You coming? We’re going to watch FitzSimmons give a bunch of scientists the ‘bad seeds’ talk.”

Skye took one more look at the Wall of Valor before following May. Coulson had gone off to the Triskellion for some type of meeting that he wouldn’t tell them about, so May was put in charge of the team.

She knew Ward and May were bored. She was pretty sure they might wander back to the bus for some time alone, having known that they were sleeping together since after that thing with the Asgardian stick. Good for them, she figured, missing her own soulmates. As the boy in class started
freezing, Skye lept over to help. Simmons and Fitz concentrated on the boy while Skye located the device and smashed it.

Later that night while Ward and May went to the Bus and Fitz and Simmons went off to the Boiler Room, Skye wandered the halls until she idly wandered “accidentally” into Weaver’s office. “Agent Skye,” Weaver said. “Or Agent 42.” Skye stiffened. “Relax, sometimes I have to turn off the A/V monitoring to work on Level 9 documents. No one will suspect anything.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you in person, ma’am,” Skye said with a smile.

“You as well. My physics division says that you’ve been a great help to them, even with your other work.”

“They’re very smart and skilled,” Skye said. “They make it easy to copyedit their scientific jargon.”

“You’ve been through a lot in the last few months,” Weaver stated. “If you need an ear…”

“Watching Fitz and Simmons work over the F.Z.Z.T. virus was hard,” Skye admitted. “They’re good people.”

“Undercover work can be a challenge,” Weaver said. “I suppose that you’re in a unique situation since you have to hide your intelligence and your skillset, or rather skillsets.”

Skye laughed dryly. “Yeah, no kidding. Simmons just said this morning that I’d only be accepted to Comms academy, obviously, because it’s the easiest school to get into.”

Weaver laughed. “That’s partially Jemma being, well, Jemma, and partially departmental rivalry.”

“And partially the fact that she has no idea who I am outside of my cover,” Skye agreed. “It’s hard, though, when I want to help but I’m not allowed to.” Skye sighed. “You know, when I started training for undercover, I never expected to have to keep a cover for months on end with a SHIELD team. Part of me wishes I could just tell them, get it over with, because as SHIELD Agents they’re people I ought to be able to trust…”

Agent Weaver nodded, her expression sympathetic. “But your mission is still secret, and your identity even more so. Especially if…”

“If?” Skye asked curiously.

Weaver shook her head. “Just that there are concerns brewing about some of the puzzle pieces you’ve passed on. I haven’t had anything confirmed, of course, but there are some concerns that perhaps not all of our fellow agents really can be trusted.”

Skye’s eyes went wide. “You mean that there could possibly be other problems... people on the inside of SHIELD?”

“We hope not, and as I said, I’ve had nothing confirmed. But I am concerned for some of the students, especially now.”

“Wow,” Skye said with a slow exhalation. “That’s a lot to deal with.”

“We all play our parts. You know that as well as anyone,” Weaver replied with a smile.

“I’ll take another pass at the system when I have a chance,” Skye said. “I’ll try and see if I can backtrack the leaks at all.”
“I’ll update Fury on the plan,” Weaver said.

“It really was great to finally meet you,” Skye said.

“You too, Agent,” Weaver said. “I hope to see you again soon.”

It wasn’t long before the truth of the winter weather machine came out. With the cleanup of the academy and her other work, training with Ward, team bonding, and keeping up with Nat and Maria, Skye didn’t realize that she hadn’t backtraced anything in the system until four days later when she was once again undercover on a train. While she appeared to be the uncomfortable newbie rookie, she was keeping a cautious eye over Fitz. Fortunately, he wasn’t usually involved in field ops, so he didn’t pick up on the subtle signs that she knew more about what they were doing than she should.

The bad accents were not faked, mostly since Maria and Nat hadn’t covered that yet. She got Comms up and settled into the mission. The problems came when they realized that the teams had been made. Skye wasn’t happy when she realized that she and Fitz were the only ones capable of following the package to its destination, but she also knew they didn’t have a lot of choice.

She and Fitz made sure Jemma was as safe as she could be before they snuck out of the train to follow the tracker’s signal. The trek wasn’t far, Fortunately; they knew what they were doing when they stopped the train where they did.

They arrived at a large, sprawling Italian estate almost without fanfare. Skye knew from the moment she told Fitz she was going in that it was a terribly bad idea. Natasha was either going to be ridiculously proud or incredibly pissed… and maybe both. Still, when she found the chamber containing Mike Peterson, she thought perhaps it had been worth it all.

Skye was too far away from Quinn when she realized that he had a gun. Still, when Mike left her alone with Quinn she thought maybe she had a chance. Quinn didn’t seem the type to do his own killing; he had people for that. Skye never took her eyes off Quinn as they were left alone together, which was why she managed to twist to the side at the moment he pulled the trigger.

The bullet bit into her side, deeply but not fatally. Still, her pain and panic reached out to her soulmates. She felt their flare of worry at her pain; it was just enough of a distraction in addition to the pain of being shot that she couldn’t move when Quinn moved closer to her. He whispered softly that he had orders too as he pulled the trigger a second time, right into her gut.

She had sixteen years of foster care and months of field training, but nothing quite prepared her for so much pain. She felt the terror from both Natasha and Maria as Quinn let her body drop to the floor and Skye found herself bewildered that she couldn’t get up, could barely take a breath. Skye whimpered as Quinn wiped his hands on a handkerchief and dropped it on top of her before walking out. “Help,” Skye whimpered. Too quiet for her team to hear her, but her soulmates were getting the message. “Help,” she begged one more time before the darkness dragged her under.

Coulson was just on the safe end of panic when his phone rang. “Hello?” Coulson asked.

“I’ve sent you GPS coordinates,” came Maria Hill’s voice. “Get there as fast as you can. She’s in the basement.” Coulson hung up and passed the coordinates to May. He had never heard that sound come out of Maria Hill’s mouth. Fear.

“Those coordinates match Fitz’s tracker,” May said. “Wheels up in two.”

Maria was already on the move, not even bothering to stop to call Natasha. Through the bond she already knew. Nat happened to have gotten home from a mission that morning and had been
sleeping, so they were meeting at the hanger.

“What’s up?” Clint said, coming onto the Quinjet that Maria had requisitioned. It was unusual enough for his curiosity to have been piqued.

“I’m here,” Natasha said, moments later.

“Wheels up,” Maria said.

“What’s going on,” Clint asked again.

“We don’t know,” Natasha said, her voice expressionless as Maria set her face, concentrating on take off.

“Skye… her bond went dark,” Natasha said.

“No,” Clint said, paling.

“She’s…” Natasha started then choked up. “Not yet,” she managed to finish before her expression crumbled into tears. The only people she would ever let see like her were on this plane… and Skye.

“We’re headed to Zentrum in Zurich,” Maria said while Clint held Natasha, stunned. “ETA’s four to six hours, depending on how much we can tax the engines. They’ll take her there; it’s closest to their current location.” Four hours would tax the engines, but Maria didn’t give a damn.

“I can’t… do you know what happened?”

“Not enough,” Maria said grimly. “They were on an op tracking a Cybertek package through Italy; hoping to get it, possible links between Cybertek, Quinn and this Clairvoyant we keep hearing about on and off.” Maria sighed. “Keep this to yourselves, though; I’m really not supposed to be telling you.”

“So we have her coordinates, but no idea how she’s been… hurt,” Clint summarized.

“Basically.”

“Clint,” Natasha murmured. “She was so scared. And then the pain… sudden and deep. I think… maybe she’s been shot…”

“Damn,” Clint muttered. “Look, I can fly this bird if you two need some time…”

“Maybe later. I need something to do right now,” Maria replied. “Nat, my tablet is beside you if you want to tap SHIELD 616’s systems. Skye left me a backdoor.”

“Got it,” Natasha agreed, feeling immensely better just by having something to do. They had to get to Skye; the rest could wait.

“She didn’t want to die alone,” Maria said. “I can’t feel her through the bond, which means that she’s… she was shot badly enough to have lost consciousness.”

There was no fast forward button on the next five hours. Every moment, every second of the time they spent in the air was agonizing.

What hurt more for Natasha was having to stay behind when Maria went for Coulson. Maria could be in Zurich for any one of a dozen reasons, but two Avengers would draw attention they didn’t need. Particularly since they weren’t supposed to be aware that Coulson was even alive.
Maria, however, had no such restrictions as the Assistant Director of SHIELD, particularly when Coulson kept calling Fury. She had barely landed when she bolted out of her seat and down the ramp. She got Skye’s surgical wing from reception and went as fast as she could without making it seem like she was in a hurry.

Coulson was yelling at Fury’s messaging service when Maria entered the Waiting Room. “Agent Coulson,” Maria said in her best director voice.

Coulson looked around, “Director Hill,” he said. “About time I got an answer. I’ve been calling you and Fury since -”

“With me,” Maria snapped.

Coulson looked like he’d been slapped, but followed Maria into an empty office. Maria set down a small cube designed to block any monitoring devices.

“What the hell is going on, Maria?” Coulson demanded. “How did you know where Skye was?”

Maria’s chin shook. “She’s my soulmate,” she admitted softly.

Coulson’s face changed. “What? But… Natasha…”

“We’re a quad,” Maria said softly. “I called… she has a GPS around her ankle… she was terrified and in so much pain…”

“God, Maria. I’m so sorry,” Coulson said sympathetically.

“Do you have the man that shot her?” Maria asked weakly.

“We do,” Coulson said. “We were waiting to see….”

“Yeah,” Maria said softly, trying not to land on what Coulson was waiting for.

“Maria… the doctors say she’s…” Coulson began. “But I’ve been trying to get through to Fury. Find out where… where he sent me…”

Maria’s breath caught in her throat. If it was that dire… Fury wouldn’t budge, Maria knew that. But she also knew where the Guest House was, and how to get in.

“Fuck it,” Maria swore softly. “I can get you there, even get you inside. There probably won’t be doctors there, but…”

“If we can get the drug, Simmons can handle the rest, I think,” Coulson said softly. “Especially since the surgeons here have done all they can.”

“Fury’s gonna have my head… but if it saves Skye, it’ll be worth it,” Maria decided. “You arrange to have her transferred back to your plane.”

“I’ll do my best,” Coulson agreed with a smile. “I’ll meet you back at the Bus once I make arrangements for Skye.”

“Coulson, where we’re going… this isn’t going to be a SHIELD Op. I need you to leave FitzSimmons and Ward here,” Maria said.

“What?” Coulson asked, startled.
“We’ll read May in too, into the parts we can tell you, but you have to leave the other agents behind for the time being.”

Coulson shook his head. “My team won’t go for that,” Coulson said. “Besides, won’t we need medical assistance from Simmons?”

“We’re just going to be giving her a drug, Coulson. All of us going on this mission have enough medical experience to give her an injection. Doctor Simmons isn’t an actual medical doctor anyways.”

Coulson conceded. “Okay, Maria, I trust you.” They agreed to meet on the bus in an hour’s time.

Maria headed back to the quinjet, where she’d left Natasha and Clint. Once the ramp was safely closed, she wrapped Nat in her arms and took a long, deep breath. “Skye’s stable, for now, but it’s… it’s bad.”

“How bad?” Clint asked, knowing Nat couldn’t at the moment.

“They told Coulson’s team to get her family here,” Maria admitted quietly, having seen the reports during her check-in on Skye. “Nat… Coulson has been trying to reach Fury. He wants to use the same drug that saved him to save Skye.”

Natasha gasped. “But…”

“He clearly doesn’t know the whole story, or remember it all,” Maria said slowly. “But… I agreed to take him there.”

“And we can’t go,” Natasha said slowly, pain edging her tone.

“No… no, this isn’t going to be a SHIELD mission,” Maria said. “I’m not exactly going against Fury’s orders here, but…”

“But if you asked him, he’d say no,” Clint filled in.

“Clint, this’ll go easier if it’s just Nat and I,” Maria said slowly.

“Yeah,” Clint said. “I get that. Just… make sure you do everything you can for her.”

“Goes without saying,” Maria said, hugging Clint. “Nat, I assume you can locate the Bus on your own?”

“Already located the dock where it is. I’ll get there without being detected,” Natasha said with a nod.

“Alright. Nat, I’ll see you on the Bus,” Maria said. “Clint…”

“I’ll call everyone and let them know. I’ll see you back in DC. Tell Skye that when she’s back on her feet, I’m gonna make her run drills for a week to pay us back for scaring us this bad.”

Maria nodded, grateful for Clint’s faith at that moment. “I’m gonna go back to Coulson to see how the transfer is going. I’ll see you on the Bus, Nat.”

Maria joined Coulson watching over the transfer of Skye’s medpod onto the Bus. “The team isn’t happy that they’re staying behind. They’re all worried about her.”

“Yeah, well… after what happened, I don’t trust any of them with Skye’s safety,” Maria said. “She shouldn’t have gone in alone, even with what she knew.”
“What she knew?” Coulson asked, clearly not understanding.

Maria shook her head, realizing she was letting slip more than she should. Skye’s condition really was getting to her. “I’ll explain with the rest. It’s… complicated.”

Coulson sighed, but accepted that for the moment.

They got onto the Bus and May passed them. “Wheels up in two,” May said shortly. Maria nodded, knowing May would demand an explanation once the autopilot kicked in.

“I sent the coordinates to the Nav computer,” Maria said.

“How long have you known Skye?” Coulson asked softly.

“Two years at the end of May,” Maria said softly. “I don’t think… no offense, but I don’t think I can tell this story more than once. Can you wait until May’s free to hear this too?”

The floor vibrated as the engine started up. “Somehow, I get the feeling this is going to be a story worth hearing.”

“You have no idea,” Maria said, tearing up again.

The three of them met in the lounge area five minutes later, on their way to the Guest House. Maria sat, wringing her hands for a minute before she started. “Nat and I met Skye just after New York. She was Rising Tide, convinced that that was all she could do. We convinced her to join SHIELD. When we tested her… the only person who was surprised at the results was her. She has a 172 IQ and passed all three tests easily.” Maria gave a dry laugh. “She actually broke the Comms test, her score was so high.”

“So Nat and Clint started her Ops training and Fury decided not to dedicate her to any one department.”

“You’re telling us,” May said slowly. “That Skye’s Agent 42?”

Maria nodded. “She took to it like a duck to water. When we were sure that her Ops training was far enough along, Fury sent her undercover to tag members of the Rising Tide to bring them down. Skye’s assignment ended shortly after you picked her up. She was initially supposed to keep her cover until she could come in, but after a long discussion with Fury, we decided to have her keep her cover and stay on your team.”

“Why?” Coulson asked, clearly betrayed. “Were you spying on me?”

Maria shook her head. “Spying on your team. I know you know about what Fury had them do to you. It… took a while for Nat and I to accept the fact that Fury did what he did. But that doesn’t mean we don’t still care for you. And while we know and trust May, we don’t know or trust the rest of them. Which is why they aren’t here.”

“You suspect Fitz, Simmons, or Ward of something specific?” May asked.

Maria shook her head. “Skye got the impression that Ward’s either sabotaging her training or hasn’t realized that Skye needs to be trained in a different way than he was to make her a good Ops agent. Given Ward’s history, I’m inclined to believe that he’s just ignorant, but at this point it’s anybody’s guess.”

Coulson pinched the bridge of his nose. “Let me get this straight. Skye is actually part of a quad -
incomplete, unless there’s something you’re not telling us - and is a SHIELD agent. She’s not just a trained Ops agent but also Comms and SciTech. And she’s been undercover on this plane to keep tabs on my team.”

Maria nodded. “That’s the gist of it.”

“She’s good at undercover work,” May commented appreciatively she looked at her former rookie. “You’re extraordinarily calm for someone who’s soulmate is on life support.”

Maria blushed. “Nat’s been sending me… impressions… of what’s going on downstairs.”

“Natasha’s here?” Coulson asked curiously. “She knows?”

Maria nodded. “And now that you’re caught up, I’d like to join her.”

They went down into the medpod and Natasha looked up from her position, curled against Skye amidst wires, tubes and IVs. “What’s our ETA?” Natasha asked, eyes not leaving the screen that displayed Skye’s SATs.

“Three hours,” May said.

Maria slipped her hand into Skye’s and pushed reassurance and love through the bond, desperately trying to give her wounded soulmate something to hold onto. Something to fight for. She wondered if this was worth it. So far every person that had been given the drug experienced such severe side effects that they had had to remove the memories. Coulson wasn’t aware of the almost sure chance of hypergraphia, insanity, and more. Maria had explained the side effects to Nat and Skye a few days after she had given them the news that Coulson was alive.

“So they know, and we’re going off-book?” Nat summarized.

“Essentially, yes. And hopefully Skye will be more comfortable on the Bus now that someone has some idea of who she is,” Maria said softly. “But Nat… you know I’d do anything for Skye, that we will and we are. But… should we really subject her to this? The possible effects…”

Nat frowned. “Coulson hasn’t displayed any..?”

“Not that we know of. But Skye… she won’t have the memory replacement,” Maria murmured, hoping the pod’s cameras couldn’t pick up the low tones.

“I’d rather take the risk. Maybe the soulbond will help keep her stable,” Natasha whispered back, her expression fierce. “I won’t just let her go, Maria. I can’t.”

Maria sighed and dropped her head, resting her cheek on Nat’s arm. “I know. I can’t either. But… I had to ask.”

“I know,” Natasha freed one hand to gently stroke Maria’s hair. “We’ll get her through this, Maria.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the cliffhanger last chapter. Well, kinda, anyway. ;) Hope you enjoy the new chapter!

“We have to save her.”

Chapter 12

Getting Skye through her injury was easier said than done; she coded just before they landed at the Guest House. Fortunately, between Maria and Natasha they had more than enough triage experience to resuscitate her.

“Go,” Nat scowled at Maria and Coulson. “She’s not going to last much longer. I’ll stay here; we can’t leave her alone. Just go!”

Maria nodded and gave Nat a quick kiss. “We’ll be as fast as we can.”

She went out and pressed the intercom on the side of the mountain that would buzz them in, Coulson and May following in her wake. “How was the drive from Istanbul?” came a voice.

Coulson looked expectantly at Maria and she answered back carefully, “I wouldn’t know, we flew here. Flight was a little turbulent, if you’re asking.” With that, they were buzzed in.
“There’s no medical staff here, Assistant Director Hill,” one of the soldiers said when they arrived at the security desk.

Maria switched from concerned soulmate to all business in an instant. “We know, we just need a dose of the GH-325. The patient is still alive, but won’t hold out for long.”

“Understood,” the soldier said. “This way.” The soldier led them back to the lab and Maria tracked down a vial of the drug that they’d need to save Skye. She turned back and suddenly realized that Coulson and May had not followed her.

“I’ll get them. You help the patient,” the soldier said with a small smile, resolving Maria’s feeling of being torn between finding them and going to help Skye. “The patient comes first, I’m sure.”

“Thank you,” Maria told him. “I’ll get this topside and come back if they’re not out shortly.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Maria strode quickly back to the facility entrance; only the need to keep her professional demeanor kept her from breaking into a mad dash. Even so, as soon as she was out of sight inside the Bus she ran for the med pod.

Natasha, knowing that Maria was on her way back, had untangled herself from Skye and prepped the equipment they would need to get the drug to where it was needed. Maria came in and handed off the ampoule to her immediately.

“How much, and where?” Natasha asked, all business for the moment.

“Full dose, and I don’t think it matters,” Maria answered.

Natasha nodded and prepped the injection smoothly and professionally. They both held their breaths as they waited to see what would happen. They held on tight as Skye’s vitals suddenly went critical, Skye gasping for breath against the breathing tube that had been put down her throat as the drug went to work.

“Hold on, honey,” Maria whispered. “You can do it.” Natasha whispered something similar in Russian, both of them holding her as tightly as they could through the soulbond.

When Skye relaxed and her vitals went back to something resembling normal, all three of them needed a moment to catch their breaths.

“It worked,” Natasha breathed, watching the monitor in case any additional spikes occurred. “It worked.”

At that moment, May and Coulson came dashing in. May took one look at Skye and the monitor and paused, shocked after everything she’d learned that day. “She’s… she’s stable?”

“You used it… do you know where that stuff comes from? Do you?” Coulson demanded, his eyes wide with shock and frenetic worry.

“Of course I do,” Maria said matter of factly.

“How could you put… that… in her?” he demanded.

“Because it works!” Maria insisted. “You’re still here, aren’t you?”

“But at what cost?” May asked in a whisper, her eyes meeting Maria’s. Knowing what had pulled
May out of retirement, and what that likely cost her former SO, Maria just shrugged.

“I’d rather have tried and deal with the possible fallout than just let her die like this!” Natasha spat furiously. “You were behind this fifteen minutes ago; what happened?”

“Nat,” Maria said softly, and Natasha’s eyes met hers for a moment before flicking back to Coulson and May.

“The drug is of alien origin,” Coulson threw back. “That… that thing is down there, and we’re distilling drugs from its blood and… and whatever else.”

Natasha frowned, sudden worry dawning in her eyes. “It’s… alien..?”

Maria sighed. “Yes, it is. A lot of our higher end drugs in the past fifteen years have been similarly derived, though we’ve been able to synthesize a lot of them. This one, though… no one can duplicate its effects. Trust me, they’ve tried.”

May’s expression was one of deep disapproval, but she said nothing further for the moment. Coulson was less reticent. “So you just put alien blood into your soulmate ?”

“Yes. Because I’d rather have her alive than dead!” Maria said, exasperated. She sighed. “Look, Coulson, I get your concern, but the Skye you know isn’t all there is to her. We know her a lot better than you or any member of your team thinks they do. You didn’t have to feel how completely terrified she was in that basement. You didn’t have to feel how much that bullet hurt.”

Natasha put a hand in Maria’s as a calming presence. “You know a Skye that’s anti-establishment, who thinks outside of the box, who has a tragic backstory that makes you want to… fix her.” Natasha added. “To us… she’s dedicated and brilliant and resourceful and never not thinking. You think we didn’t discuss stuff like this with Skye? What to do in a situation like this? Skye said to do everything we could to save her. That now that she had found her happy ending, she wanted to hold onto it as long as possible. This… is everything, as terrifying as that is.”

“Skye is, or at one time was, all those things you know about her. You know the Skye we first got to know, too,” Maria said, knowing how much Skye hated lying to her team. “But she’s changed, too, grown so much in the past couple of years…”

May studied Maria and Natasha silently for a long moment, then quirked a small smile. “Then I guess I’ll look forward to getting to know your Skye.”

“We want to tell her that you know,” Natasha said after a moment. “Being undercover for months on end is exhausting; it might help her to know she has a place to go where she can be herself for a while.”

“She can always come see me,” Coulson offered. “I like Skye, I always thought she had a lot of potential. Turns out I wasn’t wrong, just that someone else saw it first.” He shrugged, smiling just a little as he began to relax. “If she needs to work on things the others can’t see, she can come to my office.”

“For now, we have to focus on getting her better,” Maria said with a small smile. “The drug will accelerate her healing, but it’s not instantaneous full recovery. She’ll need time.”

Coulson nodded. “We should go back to Zurich, pick up our team. They’ll want to see her, to know she’ll recover. But we can drop Skye off in DC for a bit of medical leave.”

Natasha smiled slowly, an expression that Coulson could tell was genuine. “I’d like that. Thank
you.” She got up and moved to Coulson, hugging him tightly. “We’re so glad you’re not dead, Phil,” she whispered. “However it happened.”

Coulson hugged Natasha back, smiling a little. “I know, Tasha,” he whispered back.

About an hour before they reached Zurich, Skye’s eyes fluttered open. Seeing her soulmates flanking her and Coulson in a chair near the end of the bed, Skye smiled just a little. “Hi,” she whispered.

“Welcome back, sleeping beauty,” Maria whispered back in a moment of whimsy. Natasha just brushed a strand of hair out of Skye’s pain-glazed eyes.

“How are you feeling?” Natasha asked lightly.

“I hurt,” Skye answered honestly, knowing that especially at this proximity she had zero chance of hiding her pain from her soulmates. “But… not as much as I did, I think…” She was still pretty fuzzy from all the drugs in her system, and she couldn’t quite focus despite knowing her soulmates were right beside her.

“It will get better,” Maria assured her. “We’ll get you healthy again.”

“Sorry,” Skye murmured.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Natasha forestalled her. “For now, just rest.”

“Stupid idea,” Skye mumbled, almost to herself. “Hurt you. Sorry.”

“We forgive you,” Maria promised. “Sleep, love.”

Skye let her eyes close again with a soft sigh.

The next time she woke up, she was surrounded by her team and Skye furrowed her eyebrows in drugged confusion. She felt her soulmates nearby, so she didn’t quite understand why she couldn’t see them. Someone had certainly given her more pain meds, that was for sure. Still, she shifted very slightly and whimpered at the jolt of pain she felt.

“Easy, rookie,” Ward said. “Despite whatever magic Coulson and May managed to find with Agent Hill, you’re not ready to leap out of bed like nothing happened. Coulson said the doctors say you have at least a week off the plane and they want to take a look at you before they tell you how long you’re on light duty.” Ward was clearly unhappy by the fact that the full mission was heavily classified. Level 10, Skye would guess, since Coulson’s file was classified at that level.

“Are you in any pain?” Jemma asked anxiously. “I could adjust your medications…”

“I’m fine,” Skye said, distantly. “… ‘m all floaty.”

“Well we’re glad you’re okay,” Jemma said, fussing with Skye’s blankets.

“I’m so sorry,” Fitz said softly. “I shouldn’t have… I should have…”

“Hey… no… you kept Quinn from leaving…” Skye said softly. “It was… important… we get him?” Her sentences weren’t entirely coherent, but she got her point across.

“Agent Triplett and Agent Garrett picked him up about two hours ago,” May said from where she was standing in the corner. “We just got a communication about ten minutes ago that he died mysteriously out of the blue.”
Skye smiled as a fresh wave of medication hit her. She somehow knew that Natasha had something
to do with Quinn’s condition and from the subtly amused look on May’s face, she knew it too. She
closed her eyes and heard Coulson ushering her team out.

It wasn’t until the third time Skye woke up that she became more aware of herself. She was still on
oxygen, felt the electric leads attached to her chest, and knew that she had two needles in her arm
and hand. “Hey,” Coulson said, and Skye looked over and saw Coulson sitting next to her. “We’ll
be landing in DC soon. Officially, you’ll be staying in the Triskellion medical department.
Unofficially, you’ll be moved to a private hospital within the hour.”

Skye smiled. “I’m sorry I lied,” she said softly.

Coulson shook his head. “I understand. You had your orders; how can I expect you to trust the
system, if I can’t do the same?”

Breathing out a sigh of relief, Skye nodded. “It was all still me… before I got involved with m’
soulmates.”

“I was told,” Coulson said. “I’m glad to know that I wasn’t the only one who saw great potential in
you, Skye. The only thing I had wrong was the timing; not that you’ll be a great agent someday, but
that you already are.”

Skye blinked at Coulson for a moment, then smiled. “Thank you, AC.”

“Promise me something, Skye,” Coulson said, looking at her seriously for a moment. “I want you to
talk to Maria about the drug we used on you. What it is… and where it comes from.”

“I can promise I can ask her,” Skye said. “But if she asks me not to, I’m not going to look into it
further.” Coulson looked at her, a little shocked. Skye shrugged, then winced at the slight pull of her
torso it caused. “She’s my soulmate, AC. She… she loved me back when I wasn’t a genius, ninja,
super agent. Nat did too.”

“Just… try, please. I think you need to know, that you deserve to know. It... might be something we
have to work on together, in the future,” Coulson insisted.

“I will, AC.” Skye smiled. “I know it’s going to take a little getting used to, but I have the clearances
I do in part because Maria trusted me and we proved to Fury that I could be trusted.”

“That’s hard to do,” Coulson agreed. “And impossible to get back if you break it. Alright, Skye, I
trust you too. Do what you can.”

Skye held out her hand and smiled when Coulson took it. “It means a lot to me that you do,” Skye
said softly. “I was so afraid…”

“I think the team is more likely to be impressed that you stayed undercover as long as you did, not
upset that you had to,” Coulson assured her. “But you’re going to have to keep it up with everyone
else. May and I both know the truth, but for now the others still can’t.”

With a nod, Skye smiled a bit. “It’s okay. It’s hard, but…”

“But now that someone knows, you can have a bit of reprieve.”

“Yeah, and well… we’re spies. Background checks only go so far. And there’s still a lot of
unknown factors. I don’t know…”
Coulson looked at Skye sympathetically. “You’ve been investigating them,” Coulson said without any judgement in his voice.

“I mean, Ward might understand, but Fitz and Simmons …”

“They told me about what else you’ve been doing. Normally I’d say that there’s nothing to investigate, but now… I get it. I’m not happy, but I get it.”

Coulson left to let her sleep. They must have drugged her for transport because when she woke up again, she was somewhere else and Maria and Natasha were asleep by her side. It must have been late, given how dark it was.

Maria startled and groaned when Skye shifted, trying to get more comfortable as her medication started to wear off.

“Hey,” Natasha said with a smile.

Skye started to tear up at the undercurrent of worry and lasting fear that came from the last events that she remembered. Her soulmates feeling helpless as she herself bled out on the floor of that house in Italy. Maria slipped a hand into Skye’s. “I’m sorry,” she whimpered, tears starting to stream down her face.

“Hey, no,” Maria said. “You get to feel however you need to feel right now. We’re not mad.”

“Though Clint might be training you on small knives,” Natasha quipped.

Skye gave a short laugh, then started coughing, wincing at the pain. Natasha made a sympathetic noise and crawled into one side of the bed while Maria crawled into the other. “They’re dialing back on your meds, so you might be in more pain.”

“It’s not that bad,” Skye said, burrowing into her soulmates.

“Uh huh,” Maria said noncommittally. Natasha was just as bad, on the occasions she got injured, so Maria was well familiar with handling a soulmate who brushed off their own pain.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Skye whispered as her healing body began to pull her back towards sleep.

“We’re glad you are, too. Go back to sleep, Skye. You’ll likely have visitors tomorrow,” Natasha told her, snuggling as close as she dared with the medical lines running everywhere.

“I’m sorry I scared you,” Skye said, half-asleep.

“Shhhh,” Maria said.

Natasha and Maria stayed awake a little longer, making sure Skye was completely back to sleep before trying to get a little more rest themselves. The next morning, Natasha and Maria were awake well before Skye, but that was hardly surprising.

“I suppose I should go face the music,” Maria said with a sigh. Natasha knew she didn’t really want to go, but it would be better than Fury busting down the door to yell at them.

“Do you need me?” Natasha was pretty sure Fury was going to want answers from her, but she had no intention of giving them.

“No. Well, yes, but no, it’s alright,” Maria said. “One of us should stay with her, be here when she wakes.”
“I could call Clint. Or Steve,” Natasha suggested. “They’d sit with her for us in a heartbeat.”

“Hell, I’ll be surprised if Clint’s not here the moment they allow visitors in.” Maria considered it for a moment. “Call Clint,” Maria conceded.

Nat immediately picked up the phone and pressed a button. “Yeah, can you come to Skye’s room?” she asked. She hung up the phone. “When has Clint ever observed visitor’s hours?” she asked rhetorically.

Maria extracted herself from the bed. “We should find a way to thank everyone,” Maria said. “The changes of clothes alone when we got here, the non-hospital food…”

Natasha got up herself. “I spent an hour yesterday convincing Laura not to come to DC to cook Skye homemade meals once she gets released. We’re keeping her home, right?”

“Possessively keep home our soulmate who was nearly shot and killed by a billionaire madman? Uh, yeah,” Maria said, grabbing clean clothes and heading for the bathroom.

“Good,” Natasha said.

“Hey,” Clint whispered coming in. “How is she?”

“Sleeping,” Nat said.

“When you called…” Clint told her in a low voice, “I had to call everyone else. Steve was freaking out. Tony apparently didn’t stop working until we got word that she would be alright.”

“Which means, knowing Steve, he’ll probably be here when visiting hours start, and it’s entirely possible that Stark and Banner will be shortly behind him,” Maria said, coming back in with clean clothes on and pinching the bridge of her nose. “Fine, as long as they don’t all keep Skye from sleeping when she needs to.” Natasha took her place in the room’s bathroom to change.

“Everyone’s worried, Maria,” Clint said lowly. “She’s one of ours, whether you like the idea or not.”

“I know, and mostly it doesn’t bother me. I just…” Maria sighed and shook her head. “Nevermind. It’s the stress.”

“We need to go check in with Fury,” Natasha said softly to Clint as she emerged, fully dressed. “We definitely don’t need him coming here to yell. Will you sit with Skye while we’re gone?”

“You know I will,” Clint said, his tone sympathetic. “She won’t be alone when she wakes, I promise.”

“Thank you,” Maria replied. “By the way, Clint, Coulson and May know but the rest of the team doesn’t. So if you hear from May… watch what you say.”

“Don’t I always?” Clint asked. Maria glared at him. “Sorry. I will watch what I say.” Maria and Nat started for the door. “Hey, if you need an ace card, when I called Steve to tell him that it might be time to say goodbye to Skye, I’m pretty sure I heard him crying.” Natasha raised an eyebrow. “Yes, really. Your girl really knows how to get to people.”

Maria smirked, then shook her head. “I’m not surprised. It would take someone like that to balance us out. Come on, Nat; we should go…”

“Tell Stark if he doesn’t let her sleep when she needs it, I’ll kick his ass back to New York,” Nat told
Clint over her shoulder as she and Maria left the hospital room.

Clint grinned and settled into the chair beside Skye’s bed, prepared to keep watch for as long as it took.

Skye was still asleep when Steve poked his head into the room. Clint held a finger to his lips but gestured Steve into the room. Steve gently shut the door behind himself and moved quickly to Skye’s bedside. He stroked her cheek gently, then took up the chair on the other side of her bed where he could hold her hand.

“She’s going to be alright,” Clint whispered the reminder. Steve nodded, not speaking, but glad to be there.

Skye slept another half hour before beginning to stir. Clint jumped up, half-perching on the edge of her bed as she woke. Skye blinked blearily up at the figure beside her, immediately aware that her soulmates were… somewhere else. “Clint?”

“Hey, darlin’,” Clint greeted her in a low voice. “How are you feeling?”


“Well, you’re stuck with Steve and I until Nat and Maria get back,” Clint told her with a smile.

“It’s okay,” Skye said. She turned her head to offer Steve a small smile, realizing who held her other hand so lightly. “Hi.”

“Hey, Skye,” he greeted her, his voice a little husky and his eyes bright with tears of relief. “Thank God you’re alright.”

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, her eyes moving between them. “Didn’t mean to worry everyone.”

“You scared the life half out of us all, missy,” Clint scolded lightly. “We’re definitely upping your combat drills when you’re up and about.”

Skye chuckled lightly, until it made her cough. Steve grabbed the cup of water from the table and held the straw to her lips. “Thanks,” she said when the spasms eased. “Can do more combat drills. Ward’s still… making me punch bags.”

Steve frowned, but didn’t comment. “You can worry about that when you’re better,” he said instead. “I’m sure you’ll have plenty of people to practice with if you want.”

“Gonna make my team-boss jealous,” she said with a smile. “I get to work out with Steve Rogers.” Steve smiled brightly back at her; she’d always seen him as Steve rather than Captain America, and he treasured that about her. “I really will be okay,” Skye reassured them, though she winced as she tried to shift to a better position.

“But you almost died,” Clint pointed out, handing her the remote to adjust her bed when she tried to move again. “You’re going to have to put up with us being careful with you for a while.”

Skye looked down at her blankets, trying not to think about what everyone was talking about. About why she was in the hospital in the first place. “Yeah,” she said softly.

“You okay?” Steve said.

“You know, after New York, it was hard to think about for a long time,” Clint said. “If you need to
talk to anyone... “

Clint had talked to her about this before, agents burning out because they never dealt with trauma. Skye didn’t look up from her blankets. “I partially dodged the first shot, you know,” she said softly. “I would have been hurt but I would have at least walked out of there… but I was… stunned for a moment. It… the pain…” She stopped and took a deep breath. “Quinn… walked over to me… held me… and s-shot me again.” There was a crunch that made Skye jump. She looked up and saw a broken chair arm in Steve’s hand and a storm across his face. “I never thought… I never thought I’d ever be happy that someone else was dead… but I’m glad he is.”

“I think you’ve got five Avengers and a dozen SHIELD Agents, including the Director, agreeing with you, not that he’d admit that,” Clint told her.

“He can’t hurt you anymore, Skye,” Steve said in a tightly controlled voice.

“I know,” Skye said softly. “He can’t hurt anyone, anymore. Now we just have to work on stopping the people he was working with at Cybertek and whoever else.”

“We’ll get them,” Clint promised her.

“You’ll have to beat my team there,” Skye said dryly. “But maybe we can all work together.”

“And anytime you need an ear, you call,” Clint admonished her gently. “Day or night, whatever it takes. You’re probably going to have nightmares for a while. It happens.” Skye nodded obediently, listening with wide eyes. “Anytime. I mean it. I know you have Maria and Nat, and they’ll help you all they can. But if they’re not around, or if you feel like you can’t talk to them about it…”

“I’ll call,” Skye said softly. “If I need to.”

“Good girl,” Clint said, his tone serious.

“Thank you,” Skye added. “Not just this, but, you know, being here with me.”

“Where else would we be when a friend is hurt and needs us?” Steve asked, a genuine smile touching his eyes for a moment. Skye blushed and looked away.

A knock at the door interrupted before Skye could think of a reply.

Clint was immediately wary, despite knowing that it could be nothing more than a nurse. With a look, Steve remained at Skye’s side while Clint went to answer the door. They both relaxed when they realized the new visitors were the rest of their teammates.

Bruce came into the room with a bouquet of flowers, carnations and lilies mostly, and a “Get Well Soon” balloon tied around the stems. He set the vase on the table beside Skye and moved to her bedside as Tony followed him in. Tony looked a little bashful with a two-foot teddy bear in his hands.

“Hi Bruce, Tony,” Skye greeted them, pretending to be better than she really felt. “It’s good to see you again.”

“It would’ve been better to see you, you know, less hospitalized,” Tony quipped. He pushed the bear into her arms, leaning in to brush a kiss on the top of her head. “I’m glad you’re okay, sweetheart,” he murmured.

“Thanks, Tony.” Skye snuggled the bear for moment, finding it almost unbelievably soft.
“How are you feeling?” Bruce asked.

“Pain’s manageable,” Skye replied, rolling her eyes when Bruce frowned. “It is. I’m going to be fine.”

“Mmhmm,” Bruce hummed his agreement. “I’m surprised your soulmates aren’t here.”

“They had to go check in,” Clint said easily. “They’ll be back.”

“So, do they give people food here or is that against hospital policy?” Skye asked curiously.

Tony pulled out a phone. “What do you want? I can have it delivered.”

“She’s on a restricted diet,” Clint said. “Liquids only. I’ll go talk to her doctors.”

“Doc tors?” Skye said, sitting up and wincing. “I have more than one?” Clint gave her a pointed look. “Okay, I get your point.” Clint left without another word.

Skye sat and looked awkwardly around the room. “I’m sorry I’m not more entertaining,” she said to Tony, Steve, and Bruce.

“We’re just happy to see you alive,” Bruce said softly.

“I have a feeling I’m gonna hear that a lot in the next few days. Now, I’m bored, so does anyone want to help me out of bed for a walk?”

“You want to go for a walk?” Steve asked disapprovingly. “You can hardly move without wincing.”

“That’s why there’s this thing called a wheelchair,” Skye said.

“Skye,” Bruce began, warning implicit in his tone.

“Tell you what, sweetheart,” Tony said with a grin. “You stay put for now, and I’ll make you a wheelchair with a low-power repulsorlift. Give me a day or so. Then you can wander around for yourself.”

Skye’s eyes went wide and she nodded quickly, but then her eyes met Bruce’s and she realized that not only were her soulmates in overprotective mode but so were most of her friends. Oh, well. They couldn’t keep watch on her constantly. Eventually she’d get out of this bed.

Clint returned with a doctor, and a large cup with juice in it. Clint held onto the cup while the doctor moved deftly to the bedside so he could check Skye over. “Well, young lady, it’s good to see you awake,” the doctor said. His nametag read Daniel MacNeill, M.D. “If everyone will excuse us for a few moments, I need to give you a look-over.”

Bruce shuffled everyone else out of the room, respecting the doctor’s request and Skye’s privacy. Clint took up a ‘guard’ position by the door.

Skye listened politely as the doctor began to discuss her healing progress and her restrictions. Her healing had been accelerated, damaged tissues regenerating, so at least her time scale wasn’t weeks or months. She would be on a liquids-only diet for the next 24 to 36 hours, and he handed her the juice cup to drink slowly while he spoke.

If she did well with the liquids, and her scan results looked good, they would switch her over to soft foods. She’d stay on that for a few days before she got the okay for normal foods again. In the meantime, assuming that all went well, she would be released in three days to home care.
Skye smiled at the idea of going home with her soulmates.
Well, damn. We both had such busy days (and weeks!) that we almost forgot to post! Oh, the tragedy. Still, I remembered last minute so we’re only a few hours later than usual rather than having to leave it 'til tomorrow. So, sorry, but it could be worse!

As always, thanks to all our lovely readers for comments, shares and kudos. We love to hear from you, even if you just want to squee! ;)

Not my best work, but hopefully enough to give you the idea.

Chapter 13

Natasha and Maria came back looking grim-faced and with Nick Fury behind them.

“Director,” Skye said, nodding.

“Good to see you made it through, Agent,” Fury greeted stiffly, ignoring the presence of the Avengers in her room.

“Good not to be dead,” Skye quipped.
He awkwardly gave her a package that was covered in brown paper. “Standard SHIELD get-well-soon package,” he said as an explanation.

“What? Since when do we have those?” Clint complained. “I never got one of those.”

“You get injured every other week,” Natasha pointed out. “SHIELD would go bankrupt.”

“Not nice,” Clint said, pretending to be insulted. Skye laughed, then winced and put her hand over her wound. It had healed over, but the nerves were apparently still reconnecting.

After Fury visited for a few minutes, Skye drifted off again. She slept for a couple hours, during which time Tony and Bruce left, Tony leaving behind a Seamless gift card that had so much on it that they could get delivery for every meal for a month.

Bruce gave her a more reasonable gift card towards Dolcezza, a gelato place that wasn’t terribly far from their home.

Skye awoke again, and they raised the bed so Skye could have lunch, very thin soup broth and Jell-O. They chatted for a while until Clint and Steve left, then after a long discussion with three of Skye’s doctors, Skye was transferred to a wheelchair and she got outside. Kind of. There was an arboretum one floor down that she was allowed to visit for a few minutes, but it was enough to see green plants and remember that she had survived and wasn’t on her deathbed any more.

Skye was officially sick of the liquid diet at dinner, since she was only allowed a cup of broth and more Jell-O. What was worse was the early bedtime that seemed to be imposed on her. Skye was tired of sleeping and Maria and Natasha were still silently fussing over her.

She was lucid enough, though, to give Maria a verbal report that she could send to SHIELD after dinner. Skye really wanted to be sure someone other than her knew what happened to Mike Peterson; it was important to her that they try to help him. To save him, if they could.

When morning came, Skye was given a plate of eggs and a serving of yogurt. Skye ate with gusto, then was allowed to walk to the end of the hall and back. By the time she returned, she was exhausted and fell asleep until lunch, which was nearly over-cooked spaghetti and a bread roll with butter.

Maria had to go into the office for a meeting that couldn’t be moved without revealing Skye as her soulmate, so Natasha and Skye cuddled. “So what did Fury say?” Skye asked softly. “Was he mad?”

Natasha silently stared up at the ceiling for a moment. “He’s pretty mad, but not at you. He takes the chain of command really seriously and for Maria to circumvent that for her soulmate, even if he was unreachable and it was an emergency, isn’t something he appreciates. He just wants to make sure Maria won’t go rogue.”

“If the chain of command is such a big deal, shouldn’t he avoid being completely unreachable?” Skye asked skeptically. “If I’m understanding it right, in the absence of the commander, decisions fall to the second in command. If Fury’s unreachable, then it basically becomes Maria’s decision, right?”

“In theory, yes, but under most circumstances she wouldn’t make decisions that she knows he would refuse,” Natasha explained. “They’re usually pretty well on the same page; this time, she gave permission for something that he wouldn’t have, specifically for your - and our - benefit. That kind of changes the game.”

Skye frowned. “You don’t think Coulson would have done it anyway?”
“He probably would have tried.” Natasha shrugged. “Would he have been successful? I don’t know.”

“Agent May said that the facility was rigged with explosives,” Skye said softly. “Trying to get in there could have gotten people killed. The whole facility might be gone. Isn’t it better this way?”

“Well, we think so,” Natasha said with a small smirk.

“Did you get in trouble, too? About… Quinn…”

Natasha shook her head. “No more so than for going with you and Maria in the first place. I don’t think Fury expects anyone who hurts you to live to tell the tale.”

Skye sighed. “As much as I’m glad he can’t hurt anyone else… I think I kinda hate being the reason someone else died.”

“You’re not, Skye,” Natasha soothed gently. “He is. He chose to hurt people. He chose to pull the trigger. He chose to try to offer patronage to those boys at SciTech, and then chose to abandon them. From what you said in your report, he chose to make Mike Peterson a Cybertek weapon. It’s not just you, Skye. He was a seriously horrible person.”

“I suppose so,” Skye admitted. Natasha hugged her close.

“Just relax for now, Skye. Your only job right now is to get better.”

Skye did wind up napping for a while; her healing body needing the rest. When she woke again, Natasha pulled out a tablet with some electronic games on it. She climbed onto the bed beside Skye and they played to pass the time. Skye was grateful; the boredom in the hospital was killer, no pun intended.

She got another walk in after dinner and before bed, her soulmates flanking her, but needing to rely on them less this time. They watched a movie after dinner, Skye falling asleep half-way through. All was right in the world.

She dreamt of Quinn’s Italian Villa, wandering the halls until she found a door that she was simply compelled to go through. But even having been nowhere near the basement, she suddenly found herself there with Mike and Quinn, only this time Mike held her in place while Quinn took aim. Quinn shouted her name over and over while he got closer and closer to her with his gun.

“No!” she shot up suddenly, the pain coming only secondary to her fear. She ran a hand over her wound. Her soulmates were not only awake, but right next to her, holding her up.

“You want to talk about it?” Natasha asked as they helped Skye lay back down.

Skye was silent for a long time, so long that Maria and Natasha had started whispering to each other. “I…” Skye hesitated, then pushed herself into speaking, however slowly and haltingly. “I was… back in Italy. Only… not the same. And… I was shouting. And Mike…”

“Shh,” Maria soothed. “It was only a dream. Memories mixed with fears.”

“I… I know,” Skye said, taking a deep breath. “I just…”

“When you were there, in the dream, it was so real,” Natasha finished, everything about her demeanor speaking of deep understanding. “It’s alright. We’re here with you.”
“Don’t want to sleep again,” Skye murmured, even though her body was demanding more rest.

“Don’t be afraid,” Maria said. “We’re here.” Skye felt them wrap her in a blanket of warm emotion as sleep pulled her back under. As Skye relaxed, Maria reached out a hand to Natasha. “I’ll stay awake with her for a while, if you want to get some more sleep.”

Natasha considered, then nodded. “Wake me in a couple of hours and I’ll take over so you can get some sleep, too.” Cushioning Skye’s nightmares with the soulbond wasn’t something they could do indefinitely, but for a couple of days… it might just work.

“I wish we could spare her of all this,” Maria said softly.

“We just have to be there,” Natasha said. “You were, in the early days. It made us that much stronger.”

“We just need our last mate,” Maria said.

“We’ll find her,” Natasha said distantly, already half-asleep.

Maria settled in to sit up with her soulmates for a while. She wound up grabbing her tablet, reading through reports while keeping Skye close. Whenever she felt the emotional spike of a nightmare, she focused soothing thoughts at Skye through the bond.

She might not know until morning if it worked, but Skye didn’t wake again nor did she seem to be in distress while Maria focused on her.

When fatigue started to get to her, Maria gently woke Nat to take a turn.

“Sleep well,” Natasha whispered as Maria settled in for a nap before the doctors would come in to check on Skye and wake them all.

Skye submitted to a new battery of scans with the promise that if her progress was still good, she could go home after lunch. Her scans came back slightly better than expected, so she was released with the admonition to stick with soft foods for a few more days and not to overdo it, moving around.

Skye had thought that meant that once she was released she could get back to a normal schedule, maybe after a couple of days of vacation with her soulmates. Instead, they put her on virtual bed rest, only allowing her to leave the bed for meals and showers, though the latter was only allowed with one of her soulmates to help and to make sure her wound stayed mostly dry. Natasha was shipped out with Clint a couple of days after she came home, so Steve sat with her during the times that Maria had to go into the office.

She had a few more nightmares about Quinn, though sometimes instead of Quinn it was a member of the team or, horrifyingly one of the Avengers. Once it had been Nat. No one had really slept that night after that admission.

But it was getting better, slowly. She spent some time talking with Steve, who she already knew was a great listener. And in exchange, he’d told her about some of his harder missions during the War. He talked about losing Bucky one afternoon when it was just the two of them in the apartment, and how he had flashed back to that moment when Clint had called to tell him that Skye was dying.

Skye had felt guilty about it, but Steve waved her off, acknowledging that she nor Bucky could have controlled it. It hadn’t been her fault any more than it had been Bucky’s; if anything, Steve felt bad that he couldn’t be there for her when it happened. She flipped the tables on him, though, reminding
him that he couldn’t be everywhere at once and that her training was supposed to help her protect herself and others.

Being a SHIELD agent meant taking risks, and she was okay with that.

It was just hard, recovering. And harder on the people she loved, who had to deal with the results of those risks.

Steve visited daily, even if for just a couple of minutes. Once he brought a pretty blonde that Skye had seen around the neighborhood. “Skye, this is Agent Sharon Carter,” he introduced almost shyly. “Sharon, this is Skye. Skye, Sharon’s my soulmate.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you Skye,” Sharon said, no jealousy or possessiveness in the woman’s voice. “Thanks for keeping an eye on my soulmate over the years in the modern era.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Skye said kindly. “I’d offer you something to drink or eat, but they hardly allow me out of bed except for physical therapy or the bathroom.”

Steve groaned and Sharon chuckled. “I understand that feeling,” Sharon said easily. “Pretty much every Ops agent worth their salt understands that feeling, present company excepted.”

Sharon and Steve spent the afternoon hanging out with Skye. Skye learned that, like her, Sharon was a numbered agent, but not because of Steve. Instead, Sharon was numbered because her Great Aunt happened to be Peggy Carter, the founder of SHIELD.

“It’s an exclusive little club, the numbered agent status,” Sharon explained. “There are only about ten of us right now. I eat lunch with Agent 33 about once a week, unless one of us is in the field. Her Uncle’s a Level 9 Agent within SHIELD. Once your assignment is finished, you should have lunch with us.”

“I’d like that,” Skye agreed with a smile.

Sharon, it turned out, had been assigned as Steve’s security detail when he was home, and had outed herself when they first exchanged words. Since she lived next door, she also visited Skye almost every day, her 9 to 5 at the Triskellion allowing for it.

Then one afternoon, out of the blue, Skye’s cell phone rang. It was Coulson.

“Hey, Skye. I’m sorry to bother you while you’re recovering, but we need your help,” he told her.

“I’m getting better, AC,” she said, carefully not using his name while Steve was with her. “What’s going on?”

He explained the situation with Ward and Lorelei and told her what they needed. Skye reached for her laptop, grabbed it, and pulled it into her lap.

“Got it. I’ll do what I can; I’ll send over anything I find ASAP.”

“Thank you, Skye. I hope you keep getting better. We miss you,” Coulson said.

“Miss you guys, too. Hopefully I’ll see you soon.” Skye hung up the phone and went back to setting up the search parameters to locate Ward.

“Problems?” Steve asked curiously, coming into the room from the kitchen where he had been doing dishes.
“Yeah. My team needs to track down someone who’s MIA,” Skye explained absently while still typing. “I’m the computer expert, so with me here… they’re lacking some skills on the team.”

“I understand,” Steve said. “I’ll stop distracting you; just holler if you need anything.” He picked up a book and settled in nearby to read.

It turned out that a busy and distracted Skye was a much easier one to deal with, when it came to keeping her in one place. Steve got up to get her a snack once and more water to drink a few times, but other than that she barely moved apart from her rapidly moving fingers.

“I’m home! Hey, Steve,” Maria greeted, hours later, Skye still tapping away. “Skye?”

Skye didn’t respond. “She’s been like that all afternoon. She got a call from her team leader and hasn’t moved since,” Steve explained.

Maria nodded, “Okay,” she said, nodding. “Thanks, Steve. Do you want to stay for dinner?”

“Oh, I don’t want to impose…” Steve said.

“Nonsense, it’s on Tony anyway. Skye’s back on a regular diet so we won’t even have to listen to her bitch and moan.” She gave Skye a pointed look. “Not even that… did she do her Physical Therapy today?”

Steve nodded that she had, and Maria accepted it. “I’d love to stay for dinner then,” he replied. “What should we order?” Skye was the most omnivorous out of all of them. She ate any and all food.

“Where’s your list?” Maria asked. After they helped Steve with catching up on films and music, they branched out to arts and entertainment, sports, and food. Realizing that there were a great number of cuisines Steve had never eaten (and Tony rarely ordering anything beyond the typical take out standards of pizza, chinese, thai, and burgers). Maria, as the real foodie of Steve’s friends, had given him a list of cuisines to try.

Steve got out the piece of paper. "Uh… Moroccan?” He suggested, selecting one he hadn’t tried yet at random.

Maria smiled. “I know just the place,” she said. After ordering their feast on Seamless, she gingerly made her way over to Skye. “Skye? I think it’s time you stopped working.”

“Look, I got a request from my boss -”

“I know,” Maria said. “And I get it, but you have to eat and rest. You’re still healing. If your boss has a problem with it, he can lodge a complaint, but even at SHIELD we give you a couple weeks R&R when you almost die. Now, I’m cutting you off for the night. No more work.”

“Five more minutes,” Skye said. “I need to make sure these will run without monitoring when I stop, otherwise it’s all wasted effort.”

Maria sighed. “Fine. But done or not, you’re stopping when the food gets here.”

Fortunately, it didn’t take Skye that long to finish up what she needed to. “There. Now it’ll ping when it finds something, and I don’t have to watch it run all night.” She stuck her tongue out at Maria, who just rolled her eyes.

“Get over it, Skye,” was all she said. Steve looked a little awkward, but fortunately was saved by the
door buzzer. While Maria went to retrieve their food, Steve helped Skye clear off her lap and get into a better position for eating.

“Thanks, Steve,” Skye said in a low voice.

“Anytime,” he replied with a small smile.

“Sorry if I ignored you all afternoon. I really do appreciate your help, and your company. Being stuck here alone would suck.”

“It’s fine, I really don’t mind. I got some good reading in,” he said, still smiling. “But you really do need to remember to take it a little easier.”

“I’ll try. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Maria set the table that they had put at the foot of the bed and Steve helped Skye move. “It smells good,” Skye said. She sighed heavily.

“You okay?” Steve asked.

“Just… I’ll be happy when it doesn’t hurt to breathe again,” Skye admitted. Steve frowned in concern as Maria made a dissatisfied noise as she divided the food, giving Steve a far bigger portion than her or Skye. “I got shot,” Skye argued. “I’m okay with it hurting a tiny bit when I breathe over not breathing at all.”

“I love you,” Maria said softly, bending over and kissing the top of Skye’s head.

“I love you too,” Skye said happily. “How was your day?”

“Fury and I have been trying to figure out who would have had the ability to make the holes in the SHIELD firewall that you found.”

“And?” Skye asked.

“The scary part?” Maria said. “Every single person on our suspect list is someone Fury or I trust.”

Skye stared at Maria. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Maria said. “Level 9 or higher security would be required for a couple of the holes in the firewall. Serious hack skills required too.”

“I’m keyed in with most of the community,” Skye said. “I could work up a list.”

“That might help,” Maria said. “Though not tonight…”

Skye frowned. “I’m… on that list, aren’t I?”

“Not as far as I’m concerned,” Maria said firmly. “I know you just found it, you didn’t cause it.”

“But because she could cause it, some people are still suspicious,” Steve concluded aloud. Maria didn’t like it, but she nodded reluctantly.

“You can’t lie to your soulmate,” Skye said slowly. “Are you..?”
“By association, yes. But that’s the very reason why Fury isn’t seriously considering us.”

“You’re sure?” Steve asked.

“As much as I can be,” Maria replied. The trio ate quietly for a few minutes, not wanting to continue that line of thinking.

“I should probably get back to my apartment,” Steve said finally, setting down his fork. “Can I help with the dishes or anything before I go?”

“No, it’s fine, Steve,” Maria answered. “They just go in the dishwasher; not a big deal.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” Skye asked.

“You bet, unless you call me that Natasha is home,” he assured her with a smile. Skye let him take her dishes away before he leaned in to give her a hug. “Get some sleep, okay?”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “Night, Steve.”

Maria gathered up the rest of the dishes and empty cartons, with Steve’s help, and deposited them in the kitchen before seeing him to the door. “Have a good evening, Steve.”

“You too, Maria. Call if you need anything,” Steve said as he headed down the hallway.

Skye gave a big yawn as she leaned heavily against the palm of her hand with her elbow on the table. “How long did you work today?” Maria asked as she settled in beside Skye, remote in her hand so they could watch a movie.

“Coulson called a little after lunch,” Skye said softly.

“Skye, what happened to easing into it a little?” Maria asked.

“I know that was the plan,” Skye said, scooting over to lean into Maria. “But you know me. You know me because I’m like you. I don’t ease into things. I jump with both feet. Ward’s missing and even if I suspect him of something, that doesn’t mean that his actions are tied to whatever’s going on with the firewall. We don’t even know if his actions are anything beyond your initial assessment that his personality simply sucks.”

“That’s true,” Maria conceded. “Did I ever tell you about the field assessment I did on Ward before he joined Coulson’s plane?”

“I don’t think you ever did,” Skye said.

“Under ‘personality’ I drew a porcupine,” Maria said, getting herself another beer. Skye was still on some medications and was not allowed just yet.

“What did they think you drew?” Skye said. Both of them knew that Maria couldn’t draw to save her life.

“A poo,” Maria said, blushing. “With knives sticking out of it.”

Skye laughed. “Given the way he’s been training me lately, I’d agree with that assessment.”

“Not going any faster?” Maria asked, concerned.

“I’m beginning to think he has some kind of fetish with that punching bag,” Skye said. “He’s never
shown me how to spar. He doesn’t even know that May and I got a couple sessions in.”

“Now that she knows, you can spar with her without holding back,” Maria said, pulling out a large bowl. “Popcorn?”

“Yes please,” Skye said.

Maria tossed a popcorn bag in the microwave and turned it on. “Now I wish we had champagne,” Skye said.

“You have a check up tomorrow. I think you’ll be taken off the rest of your medications. You’re doing well on your physical therapy and I think they might be okay with placing you on modified duty.”

“Good. I can go back to the Bus and help them with the search with Ward.”

“Skye…” Maria started.

“No, I’m a SHIELD agent. I have been for two years. I know a lot of the things that that means, but I also know for sure that means that you stick with your team and my team needs me.”

Maria sighed. “Let’s just wait and see what the doctors say,” Maria said. “Natasha gets back from her mission tomorrow too. We’ll have to celebrate.”

“If the doctors clear me, I’ll be back to running,” Skye said.

“Take it slow,” Maria advised.

“I know,” Skye said. “And I get it… I just hate being idle. I always have. I’m used to 36-hour hacking binges and working until I solve the problem.”

“I know it’s hard,” Maria said softly. “I know you want to help, and I’m not going to stop you from doing so. I’m just asking you not to over do it.”

“I can do that,” Skye said softly. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, none of that. I understand. Nat’s like you too. So was I, when I was a field agent.”

Skye did scale back and made good on her promise to Maria to pace herself. She was cleared for light duty by her doctors and started working out with Steve and Clint. She walked and jogged around the reflection pool while Steve ran and Clint started her back up on her training. After three days of searching, Skye was feeling almost completely better. She still rested when she felt she needed to, but Skye worked hard to get back on her feet and to search for Ward. Finally, she got a hit in Vegas.

Immediately, she called Coulson. “Hey, I got a hit on Ward’s location.” she said, well aware of Steve standing next to her, but the urgency of the matter didn’t afford her or Ward time.

“Where is he?” Coulson asked. Steve had stiffened when Coulson spoke, filling Skye with dread. How good were Steve’s enhanced senses?

“Vegas. Caesar’s Palace.”

“There’s a few female agents on standby at the Triskellion. I’ll let them know and we’ll go get him once we arrive.”
“I’ll come too,” Skye said.

“Skye…”

“I’m only cleared for light duty. Relax, I’ll stay on the Bus. But you might need a hacker in a hurry and I want to be available if you need me.”

“Fair enough, but remember that you aren’t cleared for full active duty yet.”

Skye knew what Coulson wasn’t saying. “Understood,” she said softly. She still had clothes on the Bus, and knew the team was keeping her bunk the way she left it, so she really only had to pack up her laptop.

“Was that…?” Steve started.

Skye bit her lip. “It’s classified,” Skye said. “I would tell you all about it if I could, but I have orders…”

Steve nodded, no anger in his face. “I get it. Remember, I was a soldier myself before I joined SHIELD. I can figure out what’s going on another way. You haven’t broken protocol.”

Impulsively, Skye launched herself forward and wrapped her arms around Steve. “Thanks for understanding,” she said quietly.

“Always,” Steve said fondly.

She pressed her speed dial for Maria’s office phone and put her phone back up to her ear. “Hill,” Maria answered. “We found Ward and Coulson’s gonna call for an all-female team to bring him in.” Skye said. “I’m going onto the Bus in case he needs help with the non-physical stuff.”

“Skye, I don’t think you’re ready…”

“‘To do what I’ve been doing at home?’ Skye asked.

Maria sighed. “Promise me you won’t go anywhere near anyone with a gun or Lorelei?”

“Cross my heart,” Skye said.

“I love you,” Maria said. “Transport will be there to pick you up in five minutes.”

“I love you too. I’ll call when we get the team back together.”

“Be careful,” Maria said.

“Yes, dear,” Skye said mockingly.

She packed her bag and double-checked that she had everything necessary. “So this is it then?” Steve asked.

“You can be relieved of babysitting duty, yes,” she teased lightly. Then she saw his expression and grew serious. “I will be careful, Steve. I promise. But my team needs me. There’s an Asgardian with the power to enchant men; they need all the female help they can get, even if I’m not leaving the Bus.”
Steve frowned, then sighed. “I’d offer to help, but…”

“But if she got to you somehow, we’d have no way to counter you both,” Skye said gently. “I’ll keep in touch, okay? It will be easier, now, since part of my team knows and can cover for me.”

“Alright,” Steve said gently. Skye hugged him tight, and he held her carefully for a moment. “Just be careful, and come back in better shape, please?”

“You got it. And you be careful too; you’re not indestructible.”

“I’ll do my best,” Steve agreed.

Skye grabbed a snack for the road and then her transport, a black, non-descript SUV arrived for her. At the Triskellion, she was back to her ‘consultant’ mentality.

Coulson had pre-arranged her security clearance and she got on the quinjet bound for Las Vegas with several other women, all nodding to her professionally. She was the only one not in tactical gear or carrying a weapon, but the other agents didn’t treat her with any less respect. Particularly not when she pulled out her tablet and began checking for building specs as well as her video feed scans.

Vegas was full of cameras; Ward couldn’t possibly avoid them all.

When Coulson met them at the airfield, he smiled brightly to see Skye walking down the ramp of her own accord. She moved more carefully, still in some pain if she twisted wrong, but she could walk on her own just fine.

Coulson briefed the other agents while Skye sat off to one side, listening to the situation status while making sure they had the best information she could provide. When Coulson dismissed everyone to get ready to go, he moved over to Skye.

“It’s good to see you better,” he told her quietly.

“Thanks, AC. It’s good to be back.” She smiled up at him. “And thank you… for the time home,” she added in a very low voice.

“Glad I could help. Simmons wants you downstairs for a check-up, and I’d like you two to stay together as much as possible during this op. Keep Fitz nearby, too; this whole thing is dangerous, and it’s better for you all to be in one place.”

Skye nodded. “Sure. I don’t mind finding a corner of the lab, unless you’d rather they stayed up here with me.”

“Use your best judgment,” Coulson told her. Skye nodded.

Skye was unceremoniously pushed back into the medpod by Simmons, Skye idly wondering why they still had it.

“Hey Simmons,” Skye said. “How are you?”

“How am I?” Simmons asked, clearly mad about something and starting to take vitals. “How am I? You disappear on your deathbed and you don’t come back until days later and you want to know how I am?”

“I saw you,” Skye said furrowing her brow. “At least… I saw you, right?”

Simmons softened. “Yes, but I wasn’t allowed to examine you,” she said. “All they’d say was that
you were on the mend and out of the woods. You were still in critical condition."

“I’m sorry,” Skye said softly. “I promise, I’m recovering well. Been doing my physical therapy and everything.”

Simmons frowned slightly. “You’ve been up and about. It’s too soon. How can you be that much better so soon?”

Skye shrugged. “At a guess, whatever drug they used to save me? I don’t really know how it works, Jemma, I just know that it did. I’ve been doing PT for days now.” She lay back obediently and let Simmons run her scans; the results had Simmons staring at her, wide-eyed.

“These wounds are almost fully healed. You’ll have nothing more than scars soon, at this rate,” Simmons said softly. “Can we… can we go through your physical therapy? So I can check your range of motion?”

“Yeah. We can,” Skye agreed gently. She walked Jemma through her therapy exercises, taking it easy due to how worried Jemma clearly was.

“Good,” Jemma said finally. “That’s… that’s good…” Skye abruptly found herself in a tight hug. “I was… we were… so worried about you…”

Skye hugged Jemma back. “I’ve had the best medical care SHIELD’s doctors could give me. I’ll be fine, honest.”

“I can see that,” Jemma said, regaining some of her emotional control. “But I still want you to stay here while we’re handling this mission. Just to be on the safe side.”

Skye sighed. “Alright. I can work from here, anyway. But… maybe you and Fitz could stay nearby? I’d kind of like the company; I did miss you guys, you know.”

Simmons brightened a bit. “Of course. Let me go find Fitz…” She didn’t have to go far, though; Fitz was waiting down the hall for a chance to see Skye too.

“It’s good to see you better,” Fitz told Skye, giving her a brief hug. “You are better, right?”

“ Mostly, yeah,” Skye told him with a smile. “Still hurts a bit if I move wrong. Physical therapy is a bitch.”

“Good. That’s good. No, wait, that’s not so good. I mean,” Fitz stammered; Skye thought it was cute.

“It’s fine, Fitz. I understand. And I will be okay.” Skye smiled. “Since the Warden,” Skye glanced at Jemma with a teasing smile, and Jemma huffed even as she smiled back, “is keeping me here for this mission, do you guys have a portable project you could work on here to keep me company?”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure, we can do that,” Fitz agreed. He and Simmons left briefly, and Skye set up her laptop to monitor Coulson’s op. Coulson was the only male on the field team, and he had plenty of people between him and where they thought Lorelei was.

Simmons returned first; Skye told her a bit of what was going on in the city while they waited for Fitz.

“You know… he’s been gone rather a while,” Simmons ventured as Fitz’s continued absence became noticeable. “You think he’s alright?”
“Maybe we should check…” Skye began. But the door to the med pod wouldn’t open. Jemma’s medical override wouldn’t get the door open either; it was jammed. “Damn. Now what?” Skye considered her options, trying to weigh when would be the tipping point that she would have to blow her cover to save the team. Even injured, she’d be able to help May, and maybe between the two of them they could take on an Asgardian. Maybe.

She checked on the location of everyone on board. “Shit, we’re in the air. Someone opened the airlock on the cage,” Skye said, her tone worried. “There’s video footage of Lady Sif being thrown out… Looks like Ward has cockpit control. He must be on board, with Lorelei.”

“It’s hopeless, isn’t it,” Simmons said, her tone both listless and frightened.

Skye shrugged, tapping away. She could lock Ward out of any controls and re-direct the plane to the Triskellion. If she warned Maria ahead of time they could evacuate all men from the base and Lorelei could be greeted with a legion of women. She looked up when she heard a sound from the hall. “Someone’s coming,” she said. Jemma grabbed the fire extinguisher and hid out of sight, next to the door.

It was Coulson who came in. “Where’s Simmons?” he asked. That’s when Simmons attacked Coulson.

“What the hell are you doing?” Coulson demanded.

“Sir, are you…” Simmons started.

“Of course I am!” Coulson shouted. “We need to unlock the cage. Fitz trapped Lady Sif in there.”

Skye did so with a few keystrokes at the same time as Simmons said, “Sir, she was thrown out of the airlock.”

“She’s Asgardian,” Skye said. “You’ve heard the stories about Puente Antiguo - they’re built of sterner stuff than us. Door’s unlocked.”

“Right,” Coulson said. “Good. Stay down here, you’re still not cleared for active duty.”

Skye sighed. “Yes, sir,” she replied in a resigned tone, clearly not happy about it. She’d have to keep watch on the Bus’s cameras; she wouldn’t be able to sit down here if the team needed her. And her soulmates couldn’t even take her to task overmuch, because Nat would do the same thing.

With her heart in her throat, Skye watched the two main feeds showing activity; Sif fighting a smaller woman with lovely red-gold hair who she assumed was Lorelei, and May fighting Ward in the main lounge. Thankfully, Ward stopped fighting once Sif got a weird looking collar on Lorelei; Skye assumed it was meant to block her enchantments.

After the team regrouped and after Ward went off to lick his wounds, Simmons and Fitz went off together to tend to Fitz’s head injury, and May running diagnostics, Coulson led Sif downstairs. “Someone wanted to meet the person who helped her back inside,” Coulson said with a grin.

“I owe you a great debt, Lady Skye,” Sif said, inclining her head. “If not for you, I do not know if victory could have been achieved.”

Skye waved off the compliment. “All I did was push a few buttons. From the stories I’ve heard, I knew that it would be in our best interest to get you back in the fight.”

Sif frowned. “What stories have you heard? Where have you heard of me?”
Skye paused, considering, then pressed a few buttons to shut off the security feeds and send a feedback loop through any bugs in the pod. “Just some stories I’ve heard from Thor… indirectly, of course. I haven’t actually gotten the chance to meet him quite yet.”

Sif’s eyebrows raised. “Surely you are not the quarter-mate of Lady Natasha, the warrior who bested Loki at his own game?”

Skye nodded, “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone else on… Midgard about it though.”

Sif looked very confused at this. “Are you ashamed of your quarter-mates?”

It was Skye’s to be shocked. “God no, not at all. But… well, all three of us have enemies because of what we do.” Sif still looked lost. “… and if one of our enemies got wind of who our soulmates were…”

Sif seemed thoughtful. “You are not all warriors, then?” she asked after a moment.

“No, we are all trained,” Skye shook her head. “But even the best warrior can be compromised when you hurt what they love most. And we can’t be together all the time.”

Sif nodded slowly. “But would it not be a great dishonor to attack the soulmate of your enemy? Soul bonds are rare and quite revered on Asgard.”

Skye made a face. “You would think so, but there are many out there without a sense of honor as Asgardians all seem to have. Some people just don’t care about other people, or what other people might think. It makes them very, very dangerous.”

Now Sif understood. “One with no honor would strike at any person or place they felt the most vulnerable. And you tolerate these among your people?”

“Not readily, but our laws are made so that such a person cannot be prosecuted and brought to justice until we can prove they’ve done something illegal or harmful,” Skye explained. “Our population is huge, Lady Sif. It’s impossible to know everyone, to understand everyone. So we protect ourselves by minimizing the risks we take. One of which is that only our closest friends and family know who our soulmates are.”

“I understand, and I will guard your secret faithfully,” Sif responded with a bow of her head. “I appreciate your trust in me, that you have shared your true identity.”

Skye smiled. “Are Asgardian soulmates all generally known, then?” she asked curiously.

“Yes. Soul bonds are exceptionally rare among our people, as our generations are long and our lives longer still,” Sif explained patiently. “For a meeting of such souls to occur is a joyous occasion and one much celebrated among our people. Those so gifted are held in highest esteem, blessed by the fates with their perfect match.”

“So harming one would be a terrible crime,” Skye concluded, and Sif nodded her agreement.

“Should you and your quarter-mates ever need my assistance, I would be honored to give it,” Sif added.

“I think we would enjoy having you visit,” Skye said with a smile. “Thank you; if we need help, we’ll call.”

“Good.” Sif saluted briefly. “It was an honor to meet you, Lady Skye.”
Skye bowed as best she could from her medical bed, where Jemma and Coulson had once again insisted she stay. “And an honor to meet you as well, Lady Sif. Please, give my regards to Prince Thor and your warrior friends.”

“I shall,” Sif agreed as she left to retrieve Lorelei and go home.
Chapter Notes

Based on comments, we've gotten a few new readers! Welcome, and thank you for joining us! To those of you sharing or recommending our story - thank you bunches! The best support any writer receives is when readers enjoy their work enough to share it with friends. :)

You're all awesome and amazing!

Chapter 14

It took a few hours for Skye to convince Coulson that she was fine and could sleep that night in her own bunk, that she didn’t need the medpod. Jemma remained unconvinced and tried to persuade Skye to donate more than one sample of blood, as the first batch had been used by Jemma’s testing to make sure Skye was healing and healthy.

So when Ward came out of his room for dinner, he was greeted by the sight of Skye standing at the stove, cooking the team meal, laughing at some story that Fitz was telling about his and Jemma’s time at the academy.

“Skye?” Ward said, shocked. “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you still be in the hospital?”

Skye wrinkled her nose. “Thank you, but no. I spent more than enough time there, and the physical therapists have signed off on my being on light duty. I even started back up on training, slowly.”

Ward was shocked. “And you’re cooking?”

Skye nodded. “We can’t miss Taco Tuesdays just because of the Asgardian game of Cat-and-Mouse you guys just dealt with. I’m glad you’re okay, though,” she said, adding the last part quietly.

Ward smiled tightly but didn’t otherwise comment about her concern. “So. Tacos. And you’re cooking?”
“Sure. Tacos can be made in one pot over a portable hot-plate, you know,” she informed him, keeping to her cover information. “Pull up a chair. I’m almost done; the meat is just finishing, the beans are hot, we have lettuce shredded, tomatoes diced, cheese shredded… it’s all here. Maybe get the sour cream out of the fridge.”

Blinking at her recitation, Ward did retrieve the sour cream for her while Fitz got out plates and Jemma went to call Coulson and May for dinner. “Are you sure you’re alright, rookie?” Ward asked in a low voice while everyone else was distracted.

“Yeah, I’m good,” she assured him in a low tone. “Still a bit sore, but I’m healing well according to all the doctors.” Ward gave her an odd look. “What?” she challenged.

“It’s just… ‘good’ isn’t exactly how I’d describe you after seeing you… after…” Ward actually looked stricken.

“Hell, Robot, you need a tissue?” Skye quipped. Then she softened again. “I know it wasn’t good, but whatever that drug was… I’ll be good as new once I finish healing. I’m almost there now. It’s okay.”

“You nearly died and you’re telling me it’s okay?” Ward growled in a low tone.

Skye frowned. “Yes. I am. If it had been you or May or any other agent… SHIELD agents are always supposed to be prepared to give their lives in defense of others.”

“But you’re not even an agent.”

“No, but that’s the whole point of the training, isn’t it?” Ward looked away, not answering her question. “We caught Quinn. We know what the package was. We know Mike Peterson is still out there, being manipulated and used. It’s worth it, Ward. And I didn’t die, so it’s definitely worth it.”

“How can you say that?” he asked in a low tone.

“You’re telling me that if it had been you, you’d think otherwise?” she asked skeptically.

“No, but that’s what specialists are for.”

“I’m just another agent, Ward,” Skye demurred.

“No. You’re not,” he denied.

Skye didn’t know what to say to that, but May gave them a look as she entered the kitchen and Ward backed off. He helped her take the finished food to the table and sat on the other side of the table, letting Fitz and Simmons flank her the way they usually did.

“Are you sure you’re okay to eat so much?” Jemma asked, concerned, as Skye loaded up her plate.

“Yep,” Skye confirmed. “Been back on normal, eat what I feel like meals for the last few days. I had pad thai the other day.”

Simmons still looked worried, but she didn’t argue further.

“How was the Triskellion?” Fitz asked.

“Big,” Skye said, remembering her first impression of it. “It looks like a bank, oddly enough. Especially with the SHIELD-issued suits. Now I know why Miles could have so easily spotted you guys. Ever thought about changing it up to not look like International spies?”
“Might have to take that up with Fury next time I see him,” Coulson said lightly. “There are times for looking official and times we really should be better at operating under the radar.”

“Back with us full time?” May asked. Skye glanced at her, and though May seemed as stoic as ever, there was a hint of interest in her dark eyes.

Skye nodded. “Once medical clears me for active duty, yes,” she agreed. “At least until someone else decides I don’t belong on the Bus,” she added with an amused roll of her eyes as she remembered Agent Hand.

May shook her head slightly with a glance at Coulson. “Not gonna happen,” was all she said. Skye beamed; even if on some level she knew that May’s sudden acceptance had more to do with finding out her true qualifications than recent events, her cover identity would be thrilled with any kind of acceptance.

“I think it’s safe to say that you’ve more than earned your place on this team,” Coulson agreed, a hint of a smile on his face.

Skye blushed, wondering vaguely if she had earned loyalty more from what happened with Quinn or her soulmates’ reveal of her Agent Status.

Coulson had actually emailed her, requesting that she create a Level 1 Agent status complete with badge that could be used for Coulson to ‘give’ her to explain to FitzSimmons and Ward how she was being granted to secure systems for future missions. It was more than a little funny that Skye had been an agent for two years, and was a higher level agent than any of them, even Coulson.

She knew that her Level 9 Comms status had initially been mostly the fact that she could hack in and out of SHIELD with ease before she patched it. That and Maria’s influence with Fury. But not only was she a higher level agent in general, she was a higher level SciTech agent than Fitz or Simmons were, though she was still only Level 4 Ops. Clint was now training her on how to handle small knives and she carried one on her at all times. But she also knew that Coulson’s position as team leader was safe because, levels aside, she didn’t have the experience or depth of understanding that Coulson did.

“Agent Evans emailed me this afternoon,” Fitz said to Simmons.

“Evans in Nuclear Physics or Evans in Engineering?” Simmons asked curiously.

“Nuclear Physics,” Fitz said. “She said she got to work with Agent 42 again.”

“I wish I could work with Agent 42,” Simmons signed. “Makes me really wish I was back at SciTech.”

Ward gave them an odd look. “Agent 42’s an Ops agent,” Ward said.

Fitz and Simmons both looked up sharply. “That’s impossible,” Fitz said. “She’s SciTech. We both have friends that have worked with her.”

“Yeah, well their SO is rumored to be Agent Barton. I don’t see him being smart enough to be involved with SciTech.” Skye bit her lip, feeling bad to hear Clint so summarily dismissed, but distracted herself with her food rather than say anything.

“Sir, do you have clearance to know which department Agent 42 is in?” Simmons asked, clearly convinced she and Fitz were right. Skye’s eyes followed everyone else’s to Coulson, though her gaze held curiosity and amusement. She hadn’t realized the rumors had spread quite so much.
Coulson swallowed before answering. “Sorry, I can’t help you. Agent 42 came on after I died and I’ve been on the Bus since.”

“Skye, what about you? Did you hear anything while you were at the Triskellion?” Simmons demanded.

“Damn, Simmons. You wanna ease up a little bit there?” Ward said, raising an eyebrow.

“I didn’t hear anything,” Skye offered easily. “Of course, they don’t really tell the ex-Rising Tide hacker much of anything there. Particularly in the medical area. The doctors weren’t really chatty, outside of talking about my condition and my therapy.”

Simmons sighed, disappointed, but nodded. “I still think she’s SciTech.”

“How do you even know they’re a ‘she’?” Ward asked skeptically.

“I, well, one of our colleagues said ‘she’ after working with her for a while,” Fitz said.

“Did your colleague actually meet her?” Skye asked curiously.

“Um, no. Just email. But…”

“Then you don’t really know. You’re assuming based on an impression over email,” Ward concluded.

“No, we don’t really know,” Fitz admitted. “But I have no problems believing that such a brilliant mind could belong to a woman.”

“And what about the rumors of them training with Barton, working undercover?” Ward asked.

May just shot Ward a frosty look, and Coulson chuckled. “Why wouldn’t Agent Barton train a woman, Ward?” he asked blandly. “He was partners with Romanov for years, you know.”

Realizing his gaffe, Ward backtracked. “I don’t have any problems with Agent 42 being a woman. It could be. But they could also be a man, just that no one here seems to acknowledge that we just don’t know.”

“Well, I think the idea of Agent 42 being a woman is cool,” Skye said, letting her bubbly side show. “Agent Romanov is definitely cool, Agent May is very cool, and I think it would be awesome if more of the famous agents were female. Kind of a kick at the whole male superiority thing,” Skye added in a teasing tone.

Ward rolled his eyes at Skye’s teasing, but didn’t appear to take offense.

“Of course, Agent Romanov and Agent Barton are both Avengers, now,” Skye continued to chatter, distracting people from speculating on her alternate identity further. “So of course they’re both cool and famous. But Agent Romanov is the only female Avenger, and I bet it would be awesome for her to have more kick-ass ladies around, you know? But maybe they’ll find more women with powers now that there are some visible superheroes…”

May looked amused when no one interrupted Skye’s rambling and Coulson chuckled under his breath. Ward looked a little impatient, but if no one was going to cut Skye off he seemed resigned to letting her get it out of her system.

“Girl power and all that, am I right, May?”
May nodded very slightly.

“Hey, what about May?” Fitz asked.

“What about her?” Ward asked.

“Maybe she knows something about Agent 42,” Fitz suggested.

May gave Fitz a look. “Do you or don’t you?” Skye quipped. “Which non-expression is it now?”

“Maybe she is Agent 42?” Jemma suggested way too enthusiastically. “Maybe some previously undiscovered talent in Physics?”

“I’m not Agent 42,” May said evenly. “And Admin doesn’t deal with numbered agents. The only people who handle their real identities are the Agents who recruit them and Maria Hill.”

“So, if you told me agents are given numbers for their own protection,” Skye asked, recalling the last time Agent 42 had come up, “should we really be speculating about their identity and who knows about it?”

“No,” Coulson replied firmly, and both Fitz and Simmons looked a little abashed. “We shouldn’t. It’s natural for us to be curious, but we should trust that it’s hidden for a reason.”

“All we really wanted to know was what department she’s in,” Simmons said softly.

“But it doesn’t matter, or it shouldn’t. We’re all SHIELD agents,” Coulson replied. The team nodded, except for Skye who looked down at her plate. “We’re all on the same team.”

“Technically, I just consult for the team,” Skye said, unable to resist.

“That doesn’t make you any less a part of this team,” Coulson told her.

“Agent Coulson’s right,” Fitz said, wrapping a comforting arm around Skye. “You’re one of us.”

Skye smiled. “Thanks, guys.”

Time passed. Skye worked on her training, pushing herself as hard as she dared, making everyone worried about her. Jemma flat out refused to sign off on Skye being cleared for field duty two days after she got back up. She didn’t want to, but she refused to not be allowed to participate when they brought in the Clairvoyant. She knew once they got the person who ordered for her to be shot, Natasha and Maria would both want a piece of them. Skye wanted a piece of them herself.

All of a sudden, Skye put a hand to her head as an emotional storm hit her through the soulbond. She distanced herself from the team, dealing with the aftermath of Blake’s injury and following the next steps to find Nash, trying to sort out what was in her head.

Anguish and sorrow coming from Natasha. Steely determination, anger and sadness coming from Maria. Skye locked herself into her bunk, trying to figure out what was happening, but all she was getting were the emotions and some vague impressions. Skye grabbed her private phone and shot off messages to both Maria and Nat, trying to find out what was happening.

The response she got came from Natasha. *Fury’s dead. Assassin. Watch yourself.*

Skye reeled mentally, not sure how to deal with the idea that Fury had been assassinated. It was going to change everything, that much she knew. She grabbed her laptop and checked all the reports she had access to, but so far there was nothing. So the word wasn’t out officially, which meant she
couldn’t let anyone else know. Well… maybe Coulson…

It took her some time to process, both her emotions and her soulmates’. But she also knew her team needed her. If Nat and Maria did, they would let her know. More likely they thought she would be safer with Coulson and his team, though, so wanted her to stay where she was.

But then they were scrambling to find Thomas Nash the very next morning. Both for Blake’s sake, but also for Mike Peterson. And Skye herself, really. Jemma still wouldn’t clear her to go after Nash with the others, but their orders were to bring him in so she resigned herself to staying behind. Again.

Skye knew Ward had a little bit of a thing for her. She had exploited it and batted her eyelashes at him to throw him off the scent. She hadn’t realized how well it had worked until Ward shot Nash. Skye was still trying to figure out if it was because of Ward’s infatuation with her or if it was because of something more.

Then Skye was hit with another wave of emotion, this time just from Natasha.

Fear. Resignation. Pain. Skye reached out to her, trying to figure out what was happening, and only got an impression of Steve and an explosion.

Knowing this was not the time to distract her soulmate, Skye sent another frantic text message to Maria. But she knew realistically that it could be a while before she got a response.

The next day, Nat’s pain got worse. Skye was fairly certain she was injured. But Skye had no way of tracking either Nat or Maria, and neither had responded to her messages yet. She knew they knew she was worried, but they were trained for this sort of thing. She had to trust that they could take care of themselves, especially if she wanted them to trust in her the same way.

Though she might have to insist that if she was going to wear a GPS, they all would. It wasn’t fair. In point of fact, it sucked seriously to not have any idea where they were.

Skye was talking with Coulson, trying to figure out how to break the news to him that Fury was dead, when she and Coulson figured out that the Clairvoyant wasn’t Nash, but instead was a high-level SHIELD agent. All the pieces finally made sense; the holes in SHIELD’s data systems, the attempted intrusions from within… and Fury’s death.

And then Fitz found May’s encrypted hard line to Fury, which Maria had told her about, and everything went to hell when the autopilot changed course abruptly with no one at the controls.

After helping Coulson subdue May, Skye bolted up to the cockpit. She had read the plane’s manuals, just in case, but all she needed this time was to plug her laptop into the nav computer and hack the autopilot to reset it. Skye kept the autopilot on the same course, like nothing had happened. She then checked their destination; they had been set to go to the Hub.

Then Garrett docked with them and they received the encoded communication. She paled when she decrypted it. This was why SHIELD kept filling with holes, even after she patched them. This was why Natasha had been hurt. This was why… Garrett, FitzSimmons, and Ward. Four people on this plane that she couldn’t completely trust. She couldn’t tell Coulson outright without questions arising. Skye opened a webpage in front of everyone and typed SHIELD in Google News.

“Holy Shit,” Skye said. The others looked up at the screen. News of Fury’s death plastered the first page of the site.

“What?” Coulson said, shocked.
Even Garrett looked scared. “Fury’s dead? Fuck…”

“I tracked our route,” Skye said. “We’re headed to the Hub.”

“Hand’s the Clairvoyant, and the Clairvoyant is HYDRA,” Garrett said.

“I cracked the autopilot. We could try to make a break for it,” Skye said.

“Damn,” Garrett said. “You are good.”

“I made my bones hacking SHIELD and releasing information,” Skye said. “Just because I’m Level 1 doesn’t mean I don’t still have those skills and it didn’t seem like the time for protocol.”

“Simmons is at the Hub,” Coulson said.

Skye nodded. “That’s what I thought you’d say. I don’t think May’s HYDRA,” she said.

“Yes, I don’t think Ward is either,” Coulson said either. “I’ll go get them out of the cage.”

“I need to get Fury on the line,” May said, coming out of the cage a moment later.

“Fury’s dead,” Skye said. “And HYDRA’s infiltrated SHIELD.” She gave May a look, hoping May understood where she had gotten the information.

“I’m gonna try the line again,” May said.

She came back a moment later when Ward came out with Coulson. She shook her head. “Fury is dead,” she said.

“Did you know? After everything?” Coulson said, clearly upset. “Did you know how I died? I gave you a second chance when I assembled this team!”

“I assembled this team,” May shot back.

“What?” Coulson now looked devastated.

“I gave Fury the parameters I needed. A biochemist to keep you alive. An engineer to reprogram your brain, and a specialist to take you out, if it came to that. I … your death shattered people, Phil.” Skye tried her best not to flash back to those early days at the tower, everyone nearly swallowed by grief. The day that Maria had come home looking pale and horrified. She understood it now. The dedication to Coulson, the horror that Fury had gone too far… Skye couldn’t say she blamed May.

“Fitz, go cut hydraulics to the cargo ramp,” Coulson ordered. “Skye, there are files on our drive. 0-8-4 specs, Asgardian weaponry, portal creation, the weather machine… gravitonium.”

Skye already had her laptop out. “I’m wiping our drive, backing it up,” she said.

They divided and conquered when they reached the Hub. Skye went with Ward, who questioned her idly about how she had survived until Skye spat, “I wasn’t conscious, Ward. Ask Coulson or May.” Then, Ward moved on to skirting around her offer to talk in Dublin, implying that he was interested in hooking up. Ward’s timing needed some serious work.

“It was just to talk, Ward. I wasn’t offering to hook up,” Skye said. “And now really isn’t the time.”

The rest of the day was a blur as they fought, as they found out Hand was on their side, Trip and Jemma were safe, and Garrett was the Clairvoyant. Then Coulson put her to work on SHIELD’s
files, and she learned about Steve and Nat and the Battle at the Triskellion. Skye forced herself not to feel until she finally got back to the Bus, shut herself in Coulson’s office and broke down in tears. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and called Maria.

“Hey,” Maria said, sounding tired.

“How’s Nat?” Skye asked, her voice cracking.

“Sad.” Maria said. “How are you?”

“Scared,” Skye admitted. “John Garrett, Ward’s former SO, was HYDRA.”

“I’d say I’m surprised, but I expect I’m gonna be saying that a lot. Tony offered me a job as head of SI security.”

“... you gonna take it?” Skye asked.

“I need the protection Tony’s army of lawyers provides,” Maria admitted. “I’m too high profile. People are going to associate my name with HYDRA, even though I’m not. Keep your cover. Now more than ever.”

“It might be a while until we can meet up,” Skye said tearing up. “Everything is in chaos here.”

“Be careful,” Maria said.

“Just… tell me something happy?” Skye asked.

“Fury’s still alive,” Hill said. “But you can’t tell anyone. This goes in the vault.”

“Not even Coulson?” Skye asked.

“Not right now. But I promise, I’ll make sure Coulson is told as soon as we deem it safe enough. Give Fury time to go to ground first,” Maria told her.

“Thank you,” Skye said. “I just really needed to hear good news. I wish I was home. Is it even still secure?”

“It is, but Stark hired movers, who packed it all up and moved it all to the tower for security. I haven’t been back there, neither has Nat.”

Someone knocked on the door. “Call you later,” she said.

“Love you,” Maria said.

“Yeah, you too,” Skye said, then hung up the phone and sighed, then opened the door. Coulson was there.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hi,” she said.

“So I’ve been meaning to ask you… did you know?”

“I knew May was here to watch you,” Skye said slowly. “I knew you were brought back to life. I didn’t know how.” Coulson nodded, defeated. “About three weeks after I met Nat and Maria, Maria came home looking like… some combination of seeing a ghost and someone having kicked her dog.
Maria told me and Nat, Nat told Clint... seeing their faces, the horror... so when you picked me up and Maria asked me to go UC and keep an eye on your team. How could I say no?"

“They didn’t trust May?” Coulson asked, startled.

“I don’t think it was that. I think it’s more that they knew May would be watching you, so someone needed to be watching the team. Just in case.”

Coulson nodded again with a sigh. “So what level are you really?”

“Depends on the division, but it’s really not safe to say right now. When things settle, I’ll tell you more,” she offered. It was the best she could do when she didn’t know who to trust. “Coulson...” she began in a low voice, even though with the door closed no one should be able to hear. “I know you don’t think Ward is Hydra, despite Garrett. And you could be right. But... I don’t trust him, not completely, and I don’t think you should either.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Coulson gave her a tight smile. “What makes you say that?”

“He was being a little creepy, while we were alone. He looked real intense, like he wanted to kiss me or something.”

“I think he might have feelings for you, Skye.”

“I never encouraged it,” Skye protested. “I told Fitz once that I have a soulmark, I’m pretty sure Jemma saw at least one of them when she was checking me over. I don’t see how he wouldn’t know that I’m meant for someone else.”

Coulson shrugged. “I don’t know, Skye. But we’ll keep an eye on him.”

She nodded. “Yeah. We’ll have to. We don’t have much left. So he went with Agent Hand, to take Garrett to the Fridge?”

“Yes. And good riddance,” Coulson said grimly. “The Fridge is still ours, and hopefully it will stay that way.”

“We can hope.”

When collecting everyone’s badges, they discovered the coordinates being displayed by Coulson’s. So they went there, and eventually found Providence Base. Skye was a little startled when they were met by Eric Koenig, but if he recognized her he gave no sign of it and Skye quickly began to pick up on differences between Eric and Billy.

Fortunately, though all the Orientation questions were meant to determine her loyalty to SHIELD, none of the questions he asked in any way compromised her hidden identity. She wondered about the boast of a lie detector that Nat couldn’t beat - she’d have to ask Nat about it next time she was home - but Eric’s questions didn’t force her to break her cover.

She wondered if Coulson had spoken to him first or if she’d just gotten lucky.

Then they found out that the Fridge had fallen and that Hand was likely dead.

Skye began to wonder again about Ward when he showed up, wounded but not badly. He did make it through orientation, but he was acting strange. When she found fresh blood on him, she wasn’t entirely sure she believed him when he said he must have broken open a wound... and when she found Eric dead, she knew she was in a lot of trouble.
She panicked, but only for a moment, as Natasha was immediately in her mind. She calmed quickly, sent a text message to warn her soulmates that she was alone with a HYDRA traitor… and found a way to hide a message in the bathroom for the rest of her team, when they came back.

Agreeing to go with Ward to “help the team” wasn’t as hard as she thought it might be; she knew her soulmates had been alerted, and that they could track her. She only hoped Nat or Maria would be in touch with Coulson, in case her message wasn’t found.

Ward’s argument for unlocking the drive was so thin that Skye wondered how dumb her team really thought she was, but she went with it.

Hacking the LA Police department and putting the BOLO out on Ward reminded her of something Steve once said. “Sometimes the devil you don’t know is better than the devil you do,” he advised once in the early days of life at the tower. She understood that now. SHIELD - the true SHIELD that Fury and Maria and Nat represented - were a lot better than Miles’ fake platitudes. And now calling the police who might be HYDRA but might not was a lot better for her than Grant Ward, who was now looking at her seductively.

She could have totally taken on Ward, just by sheer force of him underestimating her, but she chose to run away instead, having learned her lesson about taking people on without any backup the hard way. What she wasn’t prepared for was Mike coming out of nowhere and capturing her. It didn’t take long before Mike knocked her out. Her last conscious thought was that she hoped Maria or Natasha was coming for her soon.

------------

The panic coming from Skye had been what had brought Maria with the US Army to Providence. Her expectation of what she’d find ranged from HYDRA overrunning the base to Coulson finally showing symptoms. Either way, the panic (and slight undercurrent of betrayal) had her worried. Arriving at the base, Maria was puzzled to find Trip, Coulson, May, and FitzSimmons, but no Skye and no Ward. Checking Skye’s GPS, she was informed by JARVIS that Skye had relocated to Los Angeles while Maria was beelining it to the base. Horror hit Maria as her brain leapt to the seemingly obvious conclusion. Ward had Skye. This was her fault. She had let Coulson take him on the Bus in the first place.

It was even worse when she found out that her arrival with Talbot had prevented Coulson and his team from going after Skye. So she did everything she could to get Coulson’s team out of the base, gave Coulson what she knew about Skye’s current location - which she had to have routed through the tower, because she didn’t have a tracking program on her new phone. All her old SHIELD stuff had gone away with SHIELD.

After shaking Talbot off her trail, Maria made a very important decision. SHIELD or no, if Coulson was going to take on Garrett and Centipede, they were going to need some backup.

“Hey,” Nat answered, traces of worry in her voice when Maria called her. “You coming home with Skye?”

“There’s been a bit of a snag,” Maria said.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Nat answered, waiting for Maria to elaborate. When she did, Nat’s voice was steely. “I’ll be there as soon as I can snag Clint to fly me.”

“Both of you, bring your gear,” Maria told her. “And whatever spares you can snag for me. They’re going to need our help, Nat.”
“Agreed. We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

It hurt Maria almost physically that she wasn’t going on the Bus when they left to get Skye, but Coulson was going to be sneaking in. And he knew the layout of the Bus better than she did and he had more contingency plans available to him, just in case. They expected to take back the Bus, but everything seemed to be going wrong in the last few days. Besides, if she weren’t with the rest of the team when Nat and Clint arrived, there could be other problems. Best that she be there to make contact.

Though ideally, Coulson and Skye would be safe before Nat and Clint even arrived. But that was probably wishful thinking.

She could do one thing though, and that was push Ward’s buttons to distract him. So she hailed the bus and ordered his surrender, knowing that Ward wouldn’t be able to resist.

When Ward didn’t answer, she pushed again. “You gonna answer me Ward, or do I have to come over there?”

“Maria Hill. I hoped you went down with the Triskellion,” Ward finally answered.

“And I hoped you weren’t the flaming sack you turned out to be, but I guess that’s just the kind of day we’re having,” Maria answered back.

“Gotta tell you, Hill. I’m having a really bad day. So I’d stay out of my way if I were you,” Ward growled back.

“Give up Skye and we’ll talk about it,” Maria said, trying her best to sound unattached. If Ward hadn’t shot Nash, they might have figured all this out before everything went to shit and Skye wouldn’t be in danger right now.

“Yeah, that’s not happening,” Ward growled possessively.

“Coulson tells me she has a soulmate,” Maria said.

“They don’t deserve her,” Ward spat. “She’s mine.”

“You know, I never liked you,” Maria shot back, allowing herself to get angry, “not since our first sit-down, but I never figured you for the type to work against fate. You’re nothing more than a lapdog.”

“And a lot of us lost respect for SHIELD when Fury chose you as Assistant Director. If he needed the eye candy, he could have chosen Romanov.”

“You wanna tell that to her face? She’ll be here within the hour.” There was silence on the other line. “Hand over Skye and I won’t send the Avengers after your ass.”

“Even if you had that pull, which I’d be willing to bet you don’t, Coulson would never risk Skye like that,” Ward answered.

“He won’t sacrifice her to the likes of you either,” Maria said. “Therefore, I won’t either.”

“I have Skye,” Ward said. “You come anywhere near us, and I’ll make her regret it.”

“You have a choice, Ward. You don’t owe Garrett anything,” Maria argued.

“You’re wrong,” Ward replied.
In the end, Maria let Ward go. She’d bought Coulson enough time to get onto the plane, at the least, and Coulson was enough of a pilot to land again once they subdued Ward.

But, of course, it couldn’t be that simple.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

In which everyone realizes how insane Ward really is and plans are made.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

---

Chapter 15

Deathlock being on the plane hadn’t been part of their consideration. Thankfully, Lola could fly and Coulson had gotten Skye out of there. Still, Maria spent several terrifying moments thinking about pressing the panic button of her own and calling in the rest of the Avengers. Steve was still out of commission, but the others would come running. Steve would probably try and come anyway, given the fact that it was Skye who was in trouble.
What ultimately kept Maria from hitting her panic button was the fact that Skye hadn’t used hers. That meant that, whatever she was facing, Skye didn’t think it needed the full team of Avengers to get her out of it. Of course, Skye hadn’t had the opportunity to use her panic button in Italy… but from what Ward had said about Skye being his Maria doubted that he really intended to hurt her.

Meanwhile, Maria and May took Trip and FitzSimmons to the motel and checked in using Maria’s non-SHIELD cover ID that Skye created for the three of them when holes started reappearing in the firewall.

“Where’s Skye?” Fitz asked.

May and Maria exchanged a look. “Ward had her,” May finally said. “Coulson got her back.”

“Damn,” Trip said, resigned to the fact that Garrett and Ward were both HYDRA.

Simmons gasped. “What?”

“She’s fine,” Maria said, reiterating what Coulson had reported.

“Ward must have some reason why he would…” Fitz said, concerned.

“He did,” Maria said, clenching her jaw. “He wants her.”

Fitz looked at Maria sharply, now confused. “I don’t know if you were aware, Agent Hill, but Skye has a soulmark.”

“Yeah,” Maria said shortly. “Apparently, Ward doesn’t care.”

Simmons gasped. “But… that’s savage ,” she said.

“He kidnapped Skye so he could…” Fitz filled in the blanks himself, looking somewhat shell-shocked. “But Skye wants to wait for her soulmate! She said it was important to her, that she wanted to give it a chance to work. That even if her being an agent meant they had to take things slow, it...”

“It would be worth it,” Jemma finished for him when Fitz trailed off.

Maria kept her smile internal, knowing that Skye had been honest with her friends in at least that much. “Ward told me that her soulmate doesn’t deserve her,” Maria said in a low voice. “And while he may not be wrong, that doesn’t mean he gets to make that choice for her. It’s Skye’s relationship to choose or not choose.” And Skye had chosen, Maria knew that.

“He’s crazy,” Trip said. “You don’t mess with soulmates. Everybody knows that. You don’t mess with fate.”

They all settled into their rooms. May and Maria decided that someone who was cleared for combat should be paired up with someone who wasn’t. It ‘happened’ that May was put in a room with Simmons, and Maria was in with Skye. It also ‘happened’ that the adjoining room of Maria and Skye’s room was where Clint and Natasha were staying (Trip was with Fitz and Coulson got a room of his own).

When Skye and Coulson finally arrived, Simmons and Fitz all but attacked Skye, hugging her and pulling her over to the side to ensure that she was okay. She assured them both that she was okay, nodding to Trip and May with a very small smile. Though she wished she could throw herself at Maria similarly, she had to settle for a warm wave of emotion through the bond that was the next best thing to a hug.
“Skye,” Coulson said. “There are some people that I’d like you to meet.” Skye turned to face Clint and her soulmates.


“You can just call us Clint and Natasha,” Clint quipped. “You can also call us awesome.” Nat hit him hard enough that Clint grunted.

“And I’m hardly an Agent any more,” Maria said. “I’m just Maria.”

“Nice to meet you all. I was only an Agent for, like, a day. I’m just Skye.”

Fitz and Simmons were both grinning. “Bet this is a dream come true for you, Skye,” Simmons said teasingly.

“Yeah, didn’t you say you cosplayed in front of Stark Tower?” Fitz asked.

Skye blushed. “Guys, it was one time,” she said.

“Who did you dress as?” Clint said, picking up on the teasing. Skye would kill him later. “Please don’t say Stark. He got a lot of cosplayers outside of the tower, but he’s a total asshole about it. Steve gets a fair amount of cosplayers too, not that he wants them.”

Skye reddened further, half angry that Clint was seriously putting her cover in danger and half embarrassed. Then she got an idea. There was no way for them to confirm it. They didn’t have the resources any more. She could say anything. “Thor,” she admitted. “I dressed up as Thor.”

“I can’t say I blame you,” Maria supplied. “Thor is a god.”

“A dreamy god,” May supplied, assisting Skye’s cover. Skye’s smile at May was at least as much of thanks as of agreement with the assessment of Thor. They’d had a bit of fun with that one a few months ago, and she knew May hadn’t forgotten either.

“He is,” Nat agreed, and Clint pouted at her. “Oh, hush, you baby,” Natasha scolded Clint with a smirk.

“Sorry you all got dragged out here to rescue me,” Skye said after a moment.

“You guys have a lot on your hands,” Maria said with a shake of her head. “We thought you could use some backup.”

“And we are the… least conspicuous… of our team,” Natasha added. “Or can be, when necessary.” Coulson nodded. “And your help is welcome. There aren’t many people we know we can trust, but you three make the top of that list.”

“Do we?” Natasha’s expression was pointed, and Coulson only sighed.

“We should let them talk,” May said, beginning to usher the younger agents away from their newest arrivals.

“I need a moment longer with Skye,” Coulson said with a glance at May. May just nodded and Skye stayed behind.

As soon as the rest of her team was gone behind a closed door, Skye threw herself at Maria and Nat. The trio crashed together in a tight tangle of arms, relief washing over them. Coulson looked on
fondly for a moment, then sighed and turned away to give them as much privacy as he could for the moment.

Clint turned away at almost the same moment, and his expression went from fond to cool in a matter of heartbeats. But Coulson caught the brief expression of anguish in Clint’s eyes before he masked it. “I’m sorry,” Coulson said softly. Clint’s eyes went wide. “I’m sorry they wouldn’t let me tell you when I recovered. I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

Clint shook his head in denial. “You’re sorry? You’re not the one who should be sorry. I… Phil… I got you killed…”

It was Coulson’s turn to shake his head, saying, “No, you didn’t, Clint. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I was still in there,” Clint said, physically shaking. “I should have fought against the influence harder. I should have…”

“Clint… Loki is a psychopath. The influence? It made a lot of people do a lot of things they normally wouldn’t.”

“Was,” Clint corrected.

“What?” Coulson asked, curious.

“Loki was a psychopath. The last time he visited, Thor told us that Loki was killed by the Dark Elves.”

Coulson stared at Clint. “He’s dead?”

“Yeah,” Clint said. “It was still… I told Loki about you. Told him that if he had any hope of escaping, he’d have to take you out. I know you Coulson. You would have stopped at nothing to take him out and prevent the Battle of New York.”

“I keep telling him that doesn’t make it his fault,” Natasha said, approaching slowly. She eyed Coulson for a moment, then pulled him and Clint in for another three-way hug. “Just please, Phil, be more careful? Losing you once was hard enough.”

“I’ll do the best I can,” Coulson assured them, returning the hug readily. He wondered if Skye picked up the impulsive hugging from her soulmates, or if it was just something that helped bind them all together.

“Good,” Clint said, a little teary-eyed but calmer now.

Skye joined the trio and gave Clint a hug too. He held her tightly for a long moment, before whispering, “I’m so glad you’re safe,” before he let her go.

“To be honest, I was more scared of Ward than I was of Quinn… Ward’s… unhinged. He kept ranting about how someday I’ll understand and that his feelings for me are real. The way he was talking… the way he looked at me…” Skye shuddered. Maria and Nat sandwiched Skye, hugging her close and whispering comforting words to her, both in English and Russian. “He’s a psychopath,” Skye said.

They parted ways and went to their rooms, Fitz, Skye, and Jemma wound up soaking their feet in the pool, talking, while Trip looked on. Coulson, May, Maria, Nat, and Clint sat at a table talking quietly and planning on their next steps.
Coulson was a little surprised when it was Clint who pushed the issue of getting Skye more combat training. He’d expected either Maria or Natasha to be concerned about her ability to fight back, especially given that Skye had been so badly hurt not all that long ago.

“Look, we all know Ward was a crappy SO,” Clint said firmly. “He was teaching her all wrong, whether deliberately or not, and it’s only because she had prior experience that she knew to say something about it.”

“Clint, we can’t…” Maria began, shaking her head.

“You can’t, but I can,” May spoke up, pinning her former protege with an understanding look. “I’ll work with her, help her get to the next level. I’m guessing she was holding back when I tested her out at the Hub.”

“A bit, yes,” Natasha admitted, “but not as much as I’d like. She needs practice, and more than just with a punching bag or doing pull-ups.”

“I started teaching her Tai Chi a few months ago,” May admitted. “She hasn’t learned to apply it yet, but she’s doing pretty well with the katas.”

“That’s good to know,” Coulson said with a small smile. He turned his attention to Maria. “Who is her SO? Actually, and not the nonsense with Ward?”

“She has more than one, depending on the project,” Maria answered, though not with the information Coulson wanted.

“Who?” May asked, pushing a little.

Natasha sighed. “We three handled most of her operations training, though unofficially,” she admitted in a very low voice, her eyes darting around to make certain they wouldn’t be overheard. “But she had Agent Koenig in Communications and Agent Weaver in SciTech,” she added just as quietly.

“Not Eric…” Coulson began, but Maria shook her head.

“No, not Eric. Billy. They did most of their work remotely.”

“We haven’t heard anything from Agent Weaver yet?” May asked.

Coulson shook her head. “Last Jemma heard, Weaver was at SciOps Academy and it was under attack. I have no way to reach out to her now.”

“Skye might,” Natasha pointed out.

“You think so?” Coulson asked. Natasha rolled her eyes.

“Agent Weaver was her SO; she and Skye were in touch regularly. If anyone would know how to contact her, Skye’s likely at the top of that list.”

“We need to get the Bus back first,” May pointed out. “One of us needs to take two agents and track it down.”

“That’d be me,” Clint said. They all looked at him. “Tell me I’m wrong that I’m the best here at tracking,” Clint said.

No one dissented. “We also need to get an ear in at Cybertech and check their records,” May said.
“We’ll need FitzSimmons to feed us what we need to say, since they’re not combat ready.”

“Or Skye,” Natasha said, unhappy that it clearly wasn’t just FitzSimmons and Ward who had put Skye down over the last year.

May froze, then nodded. “Or Skye,” she agreed. “I’m sorry. I’m used to thinking of Skye… differently.”

Natasha softened. “I’m sorry too,” she said. “It’s hard to remember that Skye spent the last year in a position where it was her job to make it so nobody would assume that she’s as smart as she actually is.”

“I think we need Skye to hack Cybertek instead of manually infiltrating it,” Coulson suggested evenly. “We have Fitz and Simmons who can help us with the science and technology end of things, but no one can hack quite like Skye.”

Maria smiled a bit. “Very true. We can definitely have her work that angle.”

“If we do have to go in, we may still need to stick with FitzSimmons for feeding us discussion, simply because the inventions are theirs,” Coulson pointed out. “I’m sure Skye could help fill in, but in my experience no one can talk about a gadget like the person who created it.”

“That’s fair,” Natasha agreed. “And if you do end up needing to go in to find a connection, Skye will probably have enough to occupy her with trying to track a connection for you. But we’ll see if she can just hack them first.”

That evening, Skye lingered outside with the younger half of the team for just long enough to be sociable and allay suspicion. But when she told them she was kinda wiped, Simmons just gave her a sympathetic smile and a comment about how she’d be worn out too if she’d been kidnapped and rescued in a short span of time.

Skye was entirely unsurprised to see Clint and Nat with Maria in their room when she got there. “Sorry it took me so long,” she said lightly, joining the snuggle pile on the bed. “Since Fitz, Simmons and Trip have no idea that my family was waiting for me, I had to play it off until I could justify being tired.”

“We understand, Skye,” Natasha said, pulling her in closer. “How are you, really?”

“I’m alright,” she replied. “No, really, I am. He was creepy, but he didn’t really hurt me. I thought Deathlok would for a few minutes, but they needed me…”

“Why?” Clint asked curiously.

“When I wiped the Bus’s computers, I backed it all up and encrypted it so it would wipe the back-up if anyone else tried to access it,” Skye explained. “I tied the encryption to the GPS, like I tend to do, except in the bus I tied it to altitude rather than longitude and latitude. They couldn’t get into the drive without me to tell them how, to set up the unencryption.” Skye sighed heavily. “Unfortunately, the drive was unencrypting when Coulson pulled me out, so I’m pretty sure Ward and Garrett have what they want by now…”

“Do you think you can handle staying undercover for a couple more days? We could tell FitzSimmons and Trip now if you want?” Maria offered.

Skye shook her head. “The fewer the people who know, the better, right? Besides, I’ve already gone nearly a year with them not knowing the truth. A couple days or months more isn’t going to make
much difference.”

“Well, we’ll probably be too busy in the short term for it to make a lot of difference,” Maria observed.

Skye sighed softly. “I know you want me to come home with you, once this shit with Garrett is settled,” she said in a low voice. “But realistically, my reasons for taking on this job won’t have changed. In point of fact, the world needs protection even more now than it did before…”

“And we really could still use someone who can watch the team, no matter who that is,” Maria said. “Just because we know Ward is HYDRA doesn’t mean that someone else won’t try to infiltrate SHIELD. Things have become very unpredictable.”

“You can say that again,” Skye said, then froze when she realized something. She turned to Clint. “Is… is everything okay?”

Clint nodded, immediately understanding she was asking after Laura and the kids. “SHIELD never knew. Fury set it up,” he said. Skye visibly relaxed again. “Like many things Fury kept close to his chest,” he added, nodding towards the three of them. “Not everything was lost when SHIELD fell.”

Of course. While Nat had released all of SHIELD’s accessible data to the public, the Level 10 Only documents weren’t on the SHIELD mainframe. Skye had relocated several of them when she realized how many holes were in the firewalls, and the rest had never been online at all. So Skye nodded at Clint with a small smile and let it go at that. She’d make a point of sending Laura a message on the down low when things were a little more stable.

Nat, Maria, and Skye fell asleep all piled together, grateful to have made it through the worst of the last few days.

The next day, Coulson and May went into Cybertek while Fitz and Simmons sat in the van outside, feeding them lines. Skye and Natasha sat on the other end of the van trying to find the mainframe and hack it, acting like they didn’t even know each other. Skye wanted desperately to reach out and touch her soulmate, but she resisted for the sake of the mission.

When she found that there were no Deathlok files on the mainframe - no mainframe at Cybertek period, Coulson and May managed to find the files the old-fashioned way, in a filing cabinet. Going through the files the long way never made Skye miss JARVIS more.

At least it was a task that could be shared; Skye, FitzSimmons and Trip spent their time combing through files, with Trip and Skye passing along to Simmons anything that looked particularly relevant.

“What’s she like?” Fitz asked Skye as they worked.

“What’s who like?” Skye asked, confused.

“Agent Hill,” Fitz supplied.

Skye stared at them. “How should I know?”

“You’re rooming with her,” Simmons argued.

“It’s not like we stayed up all night, braiding each other’s hair and telling war stories. I went into my room and went to bed. Hill took the bed closest to the door for security purposes, but we didn’t talk much beyond that.”
“I think they’re just curious,” Trip said evenly. FitzSimmons looked a little shocked at the reaction. “Agent Hill’s a bit of a mystery to most agents. She only takes meetings with higher level agents and there’s a lot of rumors that went around SHIELD about her.”

“I was an agent for a day, guys,” Skye argued, softer this time, “and the whole time I’ve been with you. It’s not like I’d know that.” She paused. “What sort of rumors?”

“Oh, you know,” Jemma said. “She’s close with the Avengers, and actually stayed at the tower for a while. She’s best friends with Agents Barton and Romanov and she’s dating Steve Rogers.”

Skye looked at Jemma sharply. “Captain America?”

“It was never confirmed,” Fitz said. “Other people think she’s involved in an orgy with the entire group.”

Skye actually choked on her own spit on that one. Trip hammered her on her back until she stopped coughing. “Granted, there were also rumors going around the bases in the 60s that SHIELD faked the moon landing,” Trip supplied. “No one really takes what a few low-level agents imagine up during their down time as anything more than that.”

“Still, I wouldn’t say no to an orgy if Thor was participating,” Jemma admitted.

“Not many would,” Skye said, happy to get off the topic of who her soulmates were rumored to be screwing. “Evidence suggests that he’s pretty committed to Doctor Foster though.”

“Holy shit,” Trip said staring at a file. “Coulson should definitely see this. I found the file on the first Deathlok program. It dates back to 1990.”

“Mike wasn’t the first?” Skye asked curiously.

Trip shook his head, pale-faced. “According to this, John Garrett was.”

“Twenty five years ago? How did they even have the technology for that, back then?” Skye asked, grabbing the file as Trip surrendered it. Jemma and Fitz crowded in on either side of her, all three of them looking over the files. “This is intense…”

“Well, now we know why Cybertek is involved with Hydra. And why Garrett is involved with the Centipede soldiers…” Jemma murmured, still reading the file.

Trip just snorted and eventually Skye gave the file over to FitzSimmons and shifted to sit beside Trip. “I know this has got to be hard for you,” she said in a low voice.

“‘S alright. I can handle it,” Trip answered with a shake of his head.

“I’m sure you can,” Skye smiled. “But if you need an ear or a shoulder…”

“I may take you up on that,” Trip conceded in a low voice. “It’s all just so screwed…”

Skye nodded. “I get that. My SO is on their side, too. He kidnapped me, not just for the information he needed, but because he believes that somehow he’s better for me than my soulmate. It’s all just so messed up.”

Trip looped an arm around Skye and tugged her into his side. She leaned against him, wrapping her arm around his waist as they sat together in mutual support. They talked in low voices, trading stories of their respective SOs and past missions, to the extent they felt safe given that security clearances
were more or less non-existent at this point.

By the time Coulson called everyone together, both Skye and Trip were in slightly better moods. They’d been able to discuss their sense of betrayal with someone else who really understood, and felt much better for it.

Coulson outlined the plan; the team was going to split up. Fitz, Simmons, Nat and Clint would be tracking down the Bus, tagging it with a locator at a bare minimum and getting inside if they could. The others would be checking out a location in Havana, hopefully getting another shot at finding a computer that would let Skye activate her Trojan.

The teams moved out quickly, knowing they didn’t have a lot of time.

When they found the airfield where the Bus sat, Clint played lookout while Natasha shadowed Fitz and Simmons. She let them do their thing, knowing they were good at it. They used their tech toys to tag the bus, but then after they reported in to Coulson they stopped to talk.

“I know we’re not supposed to engage,” Simmons said softly. “But if they get away, we’ll be back to square one. I can’t handle square one again.”

Clint signaled Natasha; someone was coming. Nat quickly moved closer to the pair of scientists. “We’ve got it tagged; we can find it again later. Now we have to go. Company’s coming.”

“But…” Simmons began, only to be silenced by Nat’s sharp glare. She hustled them out of the shed, just moments before Ward rounded the corner with a gun in his hand. Natasha got them all under cover, trusting Clint to have his eyes on Ward.

Backtracking to the car, Clint joined them on the way. “He spent some time examining the tracks at the shed. He may try to follow, though, so we should hurry,” Clint informed them.

--------

Skye jostled her knee up and down during the trip to the barber shop. “Nervous?” Trip asked.

“The last time I was out in the field I almost died,” Skye said. “Coincidentally going after the same billionaire egotistical bad guy who was funding Project Deathlock.”

“What happened?” Trip asked.

Coulson and May both visibly tensed. Maria only did so minutely.

“I did something stupid,” Skye admitted softly. She tried to keep the explanation brief, to the point rather than emotional. “I was cut off from most of my team, but I followed the package we were tracking into its destination anyway. I learned Mike was still alive so Quinn shot me. Didn’t think he had it in him and underestimated him.” She knew Maria and Coulson probably didn’t want to hear about it again, but if she skirted around the issue, Trip might get suspicious.

“Oh, man,” Trip said, taking Skye’s hand. “You’re the agent who was shot? Coulson told us about you when we picked up Quinn but never mentioned a name. But you’re alright now, right?”

“Yeah,” Skye agreed. “I’m fine. I had the best care anyone could offer.”

“And Quinn’s dead,” Coulson said shortly.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t believe the paperwork involved when someone dies mysteriously while you’re
transporting them,” Trip said. The look on Maria’s face was clearly her ‘sorrynotsorry’ face that Skye saw when she talked about junior agents during the early days of their relationship. Times like these… it made Skye wish to have those days back again. She’d certainly savor them more, knowing what she knew now.

“How long did it take you?” Skye asked.

“A couple hours for me,” Trip said. “Garrett was filling out paperwork for something like three days.”

Skye chuckled softly. “Well, I’m sorry you got stuck with that job. Can’t really say I’m all that broken up about Quinn being dead, though.”

“I hear ya, girl,” Trip said with a shake of his head. “Can’t blame you for that; at least he can’t hurt anyone else, right?”

“That’s pretty much it, exactly,” Skye agreed.

“Time to gear up, guys,” Coulson broke into their discussion. “We’ll be landing shortly.”

“You got it, boss,” Trip replied with a cheerful smile. “Come on. Let’s go give someone else a bad day.”

Even Maria chuckled softly at that comment.

The barbershop in Havana was empty, abandoned, but Skye tracked a power source still pulling an awful lot of current. They found the hidden access and went cautiously downstairs. Trip and Maria had Skye’s back while she worked at the computer terminal, but when the Centipede soldiers attacked… the situation wasn’t good.

Then they found the Berserker Staff. May grabbed it, using it against the super-soldiers relatively effectively and then bringing the whole place down when Skye finished up. She tossed the staff into the rubble as they escaped, hoping that would keep it out of further trouble at least for a while.

They relocated to a new motel, one on the outskirts of Santa Fe. Instead of standard motel, the motel featured a series of cabins. The agents had a two-story cabin with five rooms branching off of the sitting area and kitchenette.

When Coulson opened the door, he froze. Nick Fury was standing at the kitchenette, making a pot of coffee.

“ Heard you guys could use a hand,” he said. He spotted Natasha. “So this is what you meant by finding a new cover?” he asked.

“There were rumors that Coulson had acquired a hacker who was better than anyone SHIELD had ever seen. I figured if anyone can make an ID that would pass muster, she could,” Nat replied.

“Do the others know?” Fury asked Maria.

“ Someone might have told them after the Triskellion fell,” Maria said.

“I thought the orders were voided!” Clint argued. “SHIELD isn’t even a thing any more.”

Fury sighed. “I was hoping to avoid the fallout from this,” he said.

“Avoid away,” Clint said. “I’m not going to be the one to tell them you’re not dead.”
Skye kept her expression well-schooled while FitzSimmons and Trip looked like they were about to pass out. Skye reminded herself that it wasn’t every day that most agents stood in the presence of the recently-declared-dead director of SHIELD, much less speak to him in a private group setting.

Coulson seemed to remember himself. “Sir, these are Agents Trip, Simmons, Fitz, and Skye.”

Fury shook each of their hands. Simmons looked like she was about to pass out. “Agent Skye,” Fury said, offering his hand.

“Director,” Skye said, taking it. She had worked for him for two years, one undercover, first to take down the Rising Tide and then to watch over Coulson. “Good to see you aren’t dead, sir,” she continued, echoing the words from not long before from when she had been shot by Quinn.

“Good not to be dead, Agent,” Fury answered without even a hint of irony. He looked different without the trenchcoat and eyepatch on. Almost human, rather than the titan he had always appeared to be.

“If you guys are starting some kind of club, I want in,” Clint said.

“You’ve never come close to dying,” Natasha said. Clint opened his mouth and Nat rolled her eyes. “Budapest doesn’t count.”

“We’re a small but elite group,” Skye quipped, diffusing the tension a bit. “Just don’t call us the Special Victims’ Unit.”

“Duh-duh,” Clint said, mimicking the well-known theme music.

“Oh god, there’s two of them,” May said, clearly unimpressed by either of their antics. Fitz and Simmons both laughed at Skye and Clint.

“Maybe I should just take you home, then,” Clint quipped. “Away from these ungrateful fools.”

“You aren’t stealing my hacker,” Coulson said. “If Stark even gets a whiff of her computer skills I’ll never see her again.”

“I don’t know about Stark, but I’ve met JARVIS,” Skye said with a grin. “JARVIS is awesome.” Everyone looked at Skye, shocked. “Skye?” Coulson started, clearly wondering if she was breaking her cover.

“What? Hacking Stark was even easier than hacking SHIELD. SI has so many security holes, if I hadn’t decided to join you guys I could’ve applied to their IT.” Skye grinned at the dumbfounded expressions on everyone’s faces. Fury just smirked at her, though, and Skye winked back at him.

“In any case, I hear you’re going after Garrett and his super soldiers,” Fury continued, ignoring the brief diversion.

“We are,” Coulson agreed. “Turns out Garrett is one of them. The first Deathlok.”

Fury’s expression hardened. “Is that so?”

“Excuse me, sirs,” Simmons spoke up. “But I think I might know why he’s done… everything he’s done.”

“What’s that?” Maria asked, speaking up first.
“I think his systems might be failing. The early model Deathlok tech isn’t the same,” Jemma ventured. “I think perhaps he’s been searching for something that will keep him alive.”

“That would explain why the Clairvoyant wanted us to figure out how Coulson died and came back,” May agreed. “Even at the risk of killing Skye.” It seemed logical to her, given that they knew he wouldn’t have had access to that information.

“So, what’s the plan?” Fury asked.

Chapter End Notes

We couldn't resist bringing in Fury a little early. After all, we have his 2ic, his archer, his spyyassassin, and his favorite hacker...
Chapter 16

Skye liked this plan. She couldn’t help but smile before they went in, Nat and May with her while she got to stride in seemingly all bad-ass.

She walked in and held the backpack they had gotten at the Salvation Army up high. “This is a bomb,” Skye shouted, as people looked her way and she saw terror in their eyes. “You’ve seen Melinda May through the eyes of those super soldiers, so you know what she can do,” she said, pointing to May. “I’m pretty sure you’ve heard of Natasha Romanov’s reputation by now. You don’t want to mess with us, is my point.”

“You won’t be able to hijack the soldiers,” the head of the division said boldly.

“We’ve thought of every possible scenario,” Skye said smugly. “Including this one. Let me guess, you switched the soldiers to default directive?”

“Yeah…” the man said nervously.

“Give me your phone,” Skye demanded.

He did, with shaking hands, and Skye pressed the speed dial she was looking for.

“Yeah?” asked the man she wanted to contact.

“Hey John, just wanted to call. You know. Catch up,” Skye said slowly.
“Skye,” John said. Sounding… odd. “You sound different over the phone.”

“Want to know why I’m calling from your precious command center?” she teased.

“Can’t bring myself to be too concerned with that,” Garrett answered crazily. “After all, if anyone but an assigned handler were to give them an order, they’d blow up.”

“Damn it, Garrett. Coulson didn’t think about that. You’ve outsmarted us again,” Skye said sarcastically.

“Phil’s here too? Great! We’ve got a lot to catch up on,” Garrett responded before he hung up.

She questioned the man about the Incentives program until Ward showed up out of the blue. “She’s not going to kill you,” Ward said over-confidently, striding in. “She didn’t even kill me and she claims to hate me. Of course, I think that deep down she actually wants to run off with me.” Skye curled her lip in disgust and approached Ward, her gun raised. “The woman has a soul mark and she’s willing to defy fate to be with me.”

“A drink,” Skye growled. “Noun. A setting in which one gets shit-faced and talks about the bad things that have happened to them. It wasn’t some open invitation to do whatever you wanted with me, Ward.”

“Oh, but I think it was,” Ward said seductively, edging closer. She so would need a shower after this mission. “I’ve learned things about you, Skye. Things you’ll want to know. The drug that saved you, for example.”

Skye paled. “What?”

“We went and got it for Garrett,” Ward offered freely. “His body was breaking down. I had to save him. But Skye, there’s more. Things about your family.”

“Already got one of those,” Skye said, thinking of Nat and Maria.

“Things about your parents,” Ward said. “You and I aren’t that different.”

“We are, though,” Skye said. Ward scoffed. “You think you’re the only one with a shitty childhood? The difference between us is I didn’t use it as some excuse to become a psychopath. I did what I could with the hand I was dealt.”

Fury flashed across Ward’s face. “You have no idea…” he started.

“The difference between us Ward is that I’m strong. You? You’re just weak… pathetic… I hope Garrett orders you to walk into traffic.”

Ward had been furious, then immediately had become calm. “You’re right,” he said, taking another step forward and invading Skye’s personal space. “You woke up a weakness in me. For the first time in a long time I’ve actually wanted something. Maybe it’s time that I wake up something in you, and just take what I want.”

All of a sudden, a black and red blur hurtled into Skye’s field of vision and tackled Ward. “Yeah, that’s never gonna happen,” Skye scoffed, stepping back as Nat wrapped Ward in her powerful thighs and tossed him to the ground. “You see, I have some pretty amazing friends, and they’re damn sure not gonna give you the chance to act on that particular bit of stalkerish behavior.”

Skye watched for a few minutes, giving May time to get a few kicks of her own in, knowing that
May was pissed at Ward for herself as well as for Skye. Then Skye grabbed the worker, growling, “Let’s talk about incentives.” May shot one more assessing glance at Nat before following, but Skye trusted her soulmate to call if something happened and she couldn’t handle Ward for some odd reason.

Finding Ace Peterson was the key to getting Mike on their side.

Skye tossed the keys to May so the other agent could keep releasing people while she spoke with Ace and got a message to Mike. After that, their job was mostly done. Skye and May did what they could to reassure everyone that their captivity was over. Skye kept Ace close to her, and he seemed content with that as he played with the Hulk toy she’d brought in for him.

Skye learned later, when the team regrouped after the various battles, that Mike had changed sides immediately. Garrett was dead… twice, actually, because Coulson had found him partially regenerated and in a new Deathlok body and had blown him to bits with one of the 0-8-4s they recovered.

She hoped that two deaths was enough for anyone and that they wouldn’t have any further problems from that particular piece of work.

They went to the Playground and went through Orientation again. Jemma and Fitz hugged Skye, happy that she seemed to be just fine after the mission. Seeing Sam reminded Skye of Eric and it made her heart hurt, but she made it through; she did wonder for a moment if Billy knew, but assumed that someone would have told the brothers. Shortly thereafter she, Maria, Clint, and Natasha were behind closed doors. It was only then that Skye let the fear and horror of Ward’s words go. She had been aware of the fact that Ward was obsessed with her, but hadn’t guessed how deep the obsession went or how far Ward would go.

Natasha led her over to the bed and cuddled her close as Maria and Clint stared at them, bewildered, while Natasha held Skye as she sobbed. Maria soon climbed onto the bed on Skye’s other side, knowing that her soulmate needed comfort even if she didn’t yet know why. It wasn’t until Skye calmed down a little that Natasha explained what Ward had said.

“He won’t touch you,” Maria said possessively after Natasha explained. “He’ll never get near you again.”

“He’ll have the Avengers to answer to if he even tries,” Clint growled, perching on the edge of the bed nearby and rubbing Skye’s shoulder soothingly. Their words, combined with the soothing protectiveness of her mates through the bond eventually helped Skye to relax. She fell into a fitful sleep, but Natasha worried that in Skye’s current state of mind she would wake from a nightmare sooner or later.

“I’ll go get us some coffee,” Clint offered, smiling fondly at the trio curled up on the bed. “I have a feeling she’s going to have a restless night, and one of us should be awake with her.”

“Thanks, Clint,” Maria said with a hint of a smile. When they were alone, she sighed and stroked Natasha’s cheek gently. “How are you, after all that?”

Natasha growled. “I was so mad, Maria. I wanted to do more than beat him to a pulp. I want him dead. Skye absolutely does not need his shit, and I don’t particularly care what Coulson thinks he could tell us.”

Maria sighed and nodded. “I don’t think this one’s up to us, but for what it’s worth… I think they should get what they can and put him down.”
“I’m not going to be sleeping for a while, not after all that,” Nat offered in a low voice. “Why don’t you rest with Skye for a while, and I’ll come wake you when I start to crash.”

“Alright. But promise me you won’t do anything rash tonight.”

Natasha considered the request for a moment, then slowly nodded. “I promise. For tonight.”

Maria smiled as she settled in closer to Skye. Nat got up and moved to the outer area; the room wasn’t quite a suite, but it was large with a partial wall separating a sitting area from the sleeping area. She’d wait there for Clint to return.

Clint came back with a carafe of coffee and three mugs. “She still asleep?” Clint asked, pouring coffee for two of them.

“Yeah,” Natasha said running a hand through her hair and taking the mug.

“You okay?” he asked.

Natasha sighed. “The Red Room were always a threat to my soulmates,” she said softly. “I was always afraid that they’d be killed. I never thought…” she stopped. Clint sat down next to her and brought her close.

“If it’d make you feel any better, we could move her to the tower,” Clint suggested.

“It would,” Natasha said softly, “but we can’t keep her locked in there forever. Not even the tower is invulnerable. Despite what Stark would like us to think.”

“In the last month, Skye’s been nearly killed and her team mate who had a passing obsession with her turns out to work for HYDRA and promised to rape her if he gets the chance.”

“Would you let a threat stop you?” Skye asked softly; Nat and Clint both looked up to see her standing in the doorway, Maria right behind her. “How many times have you been hurt or nearly killed?”

“Never as close as you were. Please understand how badly that scared us. And we’re trained for it, Skye,” Natasha protested.

“So am I; not as well, but we all start somewhere,” Skye said, moving into the room. She sat down in a chair, so they could all talk, and swiped Clint’s coffee mug while he wasn’t paying attention. “I have a panic button. I wear a GPS tracker for you. Which, by the way, is totally unfair that I wear one and you guys don’t. It sucked seriously during everything going on in Washington, and I know Steve got hurt.”

All three of them looked startled, not having even considered the fact that Skye would want to know their whereabouts as much as they would hers. “I think we could agree to wearing trackers of our own,” Maria said slowly, trading glances with Nat, who nodded. It was a small enough compromise.

“Coulson and May both know to call you guys immediately, if anything happens,” Skye went on. “And I’m pretty sure we’re going to have to tell the rest of the team eventually; there are so few of us left that we’re going to need my skills. Possibly all my skills, and that will shake things up anyway. But I need to know when I can. And I need you to be okay with it.”

“You want to stay,” Natasha said with a sigh.

“If you weren’t high on the government’s list of people to find, wouldn’t you?”
Maria looked thoughtful. “If it were possible… well, SHIELD has been a very large part of my life for a long time. I wouldn’t have left if I’d had any real choice.”

“Are you sure, I mean really sure that you can trust them?” Clint asked in a low voice.

“The people here, right at this moment?” Skye asked. “Yes. And if we’re going to find other agents, bring them back to help keep SHIELD going… they’re going to need to be able to trust us. Soulmates are mostly private, but if my identity as Agent 42 is public… that will help, I think. We can always let it be known that the cover was due to who my soulmates are; that doesn’t mean I have to make the identities of my soulmates generally known. But I would like to be able to choose to tell people, when they earn my trust too.”

“If you’re going to stay here, I’d almost like you to tell people about me,” Natasha said thoughtfully. “While I don’t need my enemies after you, that being the point of the secrecy, if people know just who will be after them if something happens to you…”

“You might stay a little safer,” Maria finished.

“Guys, this isn’t a safe job,” Skye protested. “You knew that when you met me. You wanted me to join up anyway. And I did. So guess what; you’re stuck with it now. I love you. God, do I love you. You know that. But I can’t walk away from this. My team needs me, more so now than ever. Stay or go, that’s up to you. You’re Avengers, that’s bigger than what I’m doing here. But I can’t just stop doing it because you want me to be somewhere safe.”

“She is right,” Maria said in a resigned tone. “We’ve never let our relationship with each other stop us from taking risks because we knew what needed to be done. We can’t insist that Skye do so, because we wouldn’t have. We still won’t.”

“What if you set a timeline?” Clint suggested.

“Enough time that we can trust the new team?” Natasha agreed. “Two years?”

Skye gave a dry laugh. “Six months seems like enough time. Sam’s already adjusted the lie detector.”

“Split the difference,” Maria decisively. “15 months. Unless something happens that makes it so we need to reassesses.”


Skye chewed her lip. “Okay,” she said.

“Tony’s not gonna like it,” Nat said. Skye looked at Nat tiredly. “What? He’s been after us for weeks to get you back to the tower. After this he’s going to be intolerable.”

“Have you told them yet?” Skye asked.

“There’s a lot to tell them,” Natasha admitted. “We’re having a team meeting in three days. I expect that you might get a few visitors after that. They’re gonna want to see you.”

“I have to get back to New York as well,” Maria said. “I start work on Monday.”

Skye knew that this was their lives until a better arrangement could be made, but she still couldn’t help but feel a little hurt by the development. “So this is it then?”
Natasha rushed forward and embraced her. Maria did the same behind her so she was cushioned in her soulmates’ love for her. “Neither of us have to leave for a couple days yet,” Natasha murmured.

Skye sagged sleepily against her. “Come on,” Maria urged. “Let’s go back to bed. We’ll talk in the morning.”

None of them slept much that night. No matter who lay next to Skye, she woke every couple of hours or so from a nightmare. In the morning, Skye was semi-forced to go off with FitzSimmons who were exploring the new base and expected Skye to come along with them.

They spent the morning checking out the lab that Simmons wanted retrofitted and found a few machines that needed updating. They both spoke in quick scientific double-speak that Skye had to pretend she didn’t understand. She wondered idly if Sam knew she was Agent 42, and if he didn’t know, maybe he should. One thing was for certain. She was going to rebuild the heck out of the firewall in the coming days. Now that she was the unofficial highest level Comms officer who worked for SHIELD, she was going to make sure that HYDRA never got into their servers again.

“Hey, Fitz… think you can help me update the networking in this place?” Skye asked when they found a bunch of phone jacks but no CAT-5 outlets by the computer banks. “I mean, I can run cable but it won’t be pretty.”

“Um, yeah, sure,” Fitz agreed, making a face when he joined her by the ports in the wall. “We’d need to do that anyway or none of our newer tech will run anyway. We need high server responsiveness for the holoprojectors.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna have to work on that, too, but we might be better off just replacing the servers entirely if we have the resources for it,” Skye agreed. “I’ll have to talk to Coulson.”

When Skye went to see Coulson, he was meeting with Maria. And it turned out resources weren’t as big a problem as they might have been.

“You did what?” Skye demanded of her soulmate, hands on her hips.

“When Quinn… died in custody, all his assets were frozen. Garrett stole Cybertek and its backing, but the rest… well, we thought it only fair to transfer them into your name,” Maria said with a smug look on her face. “After all he dedicated to killing you, we thought you should be… compensated. We couldn’t sue him for damages, but we could do this.”

“Maria… seriously, I never wanted Quinn’s money. I still don’t,” Skye protested.

“I know that,” Maria said quietly. “But you can choose to use those assets to fund SHIELD until we can consolidate what’s left of the resources SHIELD once had.”

“We won’t be getting Federal funding anymore, we can be assured of that much,” Coulson added.

“Fine,” Skye conceded, rubbing her forehead to ease the tension there. “We’re gonna need it, anyway. This place has 90s technology for networking. We’re going to need to do some serious updating, as well as new network servers. And then I’m gonna make our systems more secure than they’ve ever been… unless you’re hiding someone somewhere, I’m the highest ranking Comms agent you’ve got.”

“We never did have that discussion about your level clearance, Skye,” Coulson reminded her with a small smile.

Skye rolled her eyes. “Well, seeing as you’re the new Director, you get to know. I’m level 9 Comms,
both because I broke the testing scale and because Fury needed me to secure our systems. I never did figure out how new holes were appearing after I started patching them; I assume now it was people like Pierce and Garrett. I’m also level 6 SciTech and level 4 Ops.”

“Wow,” Coulson said after a moment. “Not many agents have varying levels in the different disciplines.”

Skye shrugged. “Apparently there were enough people who wanted me on tap for Fury to give me a special designation. I’ve been consulting for various SciOps projects on and off over the last two years, among other things.”

“So you really do understand FitzSimmons when they start chattering, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Skye agreed simply.

“It must be hard to have to pretend you don’t,” Coulson said sympathetically. He slanted a glance at Maria. “But I presume you’d prefer to keep this quiet a while longer?”

Maria nodded. “We discussed it, and especially if you’re going to be working to bring back some of the agents that slipped through the net after DC, we’d like some time to ensure that everyone is trustworthy.”

“And what about our core team?” Coulson pressed. “May and I know, of course. But there’s Fitz, Simmons and Trip, as well as Koenig.”

“Does Sam even know about me? Billy was my SO for Comms…” Skye wondered.

“Sam probably knows of you, but Billy wouldn’t have betrayed your identity,” Maria said confidently. “Still, Sam can probably be trusted.”

“And the rest of my team?” Coulson asked pointedly.

Maria hesitated. “Loyalties can change after something like this,” she said slowly. “And neither Fitz nor Simmons are trained enough to know when not to say something. Simmons in particular is known for her inability to lie. Our worry isn’t that a member of your current team can’t be trusted. The worry is that one of them will say something to someone who can’t.”

Coulson looked torn. “I’m not wild about lying to them about something like this, especially so soon after we’ve lost everything.”

Skye smiled a little. “That’s a thought that I’ve had every single day for the last year,” she said. “From a strategical standpoint, it’s a good ace card to play. You have me, you have my soulmates, you have the Avengers. If any of the other Level 9s or Level 8s think you can’t do this job, they’ll be in a precarious position.”

“About the Avengers,” Coulson started.

“Only Clint and Nat know,” Maria said.

“... and Steve,” Skye admitted guiltily. Both Maria and Coulson looked at her, surprised.

“Coulson called me on bed rest,” Skye accused, shifting the blame. “It’s not my fault my warden has super hearing. He recognized the voice, but accepted my answer that it was classified. I don’t know how much he’s found out since then, but he respected the fact that I couldn’t tell him.”
“Which reminds me that technically I’m still mad at you for doing that,” Maria said to Coulson. “Did you know she worked for six hours straight tracking down Ward that first day, you had her so worried? She wasn’t even on light duty at that point.”

“I know, and I wish I hadn’t had to. But I didn’t have any other way,” Coulson began, his tone contrite. “We just don’t have anyone as good as Skye at what she does.”

Skye sighed, though Coulson’s comment made her smile slightly. “We’ve been over this. I got involved in what I was doing and lost track of time. It happens all the time.”

Coulson still looked guilty. “She does, and she’s not the only one. Fitz gets like that too. Simmons is pretty good about making sure she and Fitz eat, though, even if they’re still working. I’ve a mind to make sure Skye’s office or work area or whatever is nearby, because Simmons will most likely handle her too that way.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Skye replied with a shrug. “They’re usually fun to work with, even if I can’t let them know that I understand most of what they’re saying. Hmm. Maybe I could get a couple of basic science tutorials that would justify a degree of increase in that…”

Coulson smiled at her. “I’m sure you could, if you wanted to. Speaking of science, though, do you think you could get in touch with Agent Weaver for us, Skye?”

“Well, we don’t know where she went to ground,” Skye said thoughtfully. “But I have a few protocols that might let me get messages through. Why, what’s up?”

“Among other things, she was in charge of SciOps Academy. We don’t know what happened to the cadets at all, or where she and the other teaching staff may have wound up,” Maria explained.

Skye pulled out her Agent 42 phone while she listened to Maria, tapping out a message to Weaver. She got a reply back fairly quickly, mostly a “thank goodness you’re okay” response. Skye looked up from the message to ask, “What do you want me to tell her?”

“You’ve reached her already?” Coulson asked, surprised.

“She was worried about me,” Skye explained.

“Is she in a position where she could come in and meet with us?” Coulson asked.

Skye relayed the question. “She could get away for a bit, but she’d rather meet somewhere neutral,” Skye paraphrased the answer. “We could take a short trip to New York,” she suggested to Coulson. “Nat, Maria and Clint need to head back in that direction anyway, and it wouldn’t be a terrible thing for you to talk to the rest of the Avengers.”

“I suppose I could excuse a trip for both of us under the cover that I’m bringing you along to see if Stark would fund us. He likes…”

“Young, talented techs he can try to screw with?” Skye said with a fond smile.

“I was going to say women who speak his language, but sure, that works too,” Coulson said with a grin.

“You’re forgetting that I lived with him for nearly six months,” Skye said.

“You should have seen how they first met,” Maria said. “It was hilarious.”
“Yeah?” Coulson asked.

Maria nodded. “So, Skye and I met when I was trying to keep the cosplayers off the sidewalk in front of Stark Tower for a benefit, so I pulled her in and introduced her to Nat. To provide her with a cover of being at the party, she went as Bruce’s date. So when Stark goes up to her and starts grilling her about who she is, she pretends to have no idea who Stark is, then proceeds to gush all over Pepper.”

“Bet that earned you some points with the others,” Coulson said.

“It wasn’t like that. I was just teasing…”

“Well Bruce, Nat, Clint, and Steve were already sold. And she hasn’t gotten to meet Thor yet,” Maria said.

“That reminds me, did… Agent 13… make it out okay?” Skye asked.

Maria nodded. “There was a slight scare when Brock Rumlow held a gun to her head, but she’s fine. Stark already has one of his security detail on Peggy until we can figure out how best to move her closer to New York.”

Coulson was staring at her. “What?” Skye asked, curious.

“It’s weird…” he said. “Even after Hill told us, we’ve all seen you as … our Skye. I don’t think it’s hit me until now how different you actually are.”

“I know,” Skye said in a small voice. “It’s something I’ve worried about over and over. I’m still Skye. The Skye you know was me about three years ago. But I’ve changed in some ways and grown up in others… and it’s probably going to be the little things that trip people up the longest.”

“It’s not going to help team morale to learn that yet another member of our team was here undercover, either, regardless of the reason. May for Fury, Ward for Garrett, you for… whomever,” Coulson said in a low voice.

“Fury, mostly, but also for Maria and Nat. We were all worried about you and your… recovery process.”

“Be prepared for Stark to try and poach her,” Maria said.

“Yeah, that wasn’t going to happen the first six times,” Skye said with a grin. “They’re also going to be… weird. The last time a lot of them saw me, I had just been shot. Clint was sent on a mission right after, and Tony… really hates medical.”

“Sounds like we have a game plan then,” Coulson said. “Maria, you said that transport comes to get you tomorrow?” Maria nodded. “Then that’s when we’ll leave.”
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Reorganizing.

Chapter Notes

Many, many thanks as always for the amazing levels of support we receive for this story. You're all amazing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 17

Returning to the Tower wasn’t quite coming home, for Skye, but it was close. The apartment in DC had really been the only home she’d ever really considered hers but since their apartment’s contents were all here in the apartment Stark set up for them… it was probably just going to take some getting used to.

It was really a good thing that only Coulson was with her, though, because just being in the Tower with any of her other teammates would have blown her cover.

“Skyenet!” Tony greeted her cheerfully. “Welcome back!”

“Hi Tony,” Skye replied with a wave. “How’ve you been?”

“Good!” He looked her up and down. “You look much better than last time.”

“Being out of the hospital has been good for me,” she teased.
“Yeah, between you and Rogers falling off a damn Helicarrier, I’m vetting doctors as we speak so we’ll have our own medical - holy shit,” he rambled, stopping when he suddenly realized who was standing next to Skye.

“Mr. Stark,” Coulson greeted Tony, nodding.

Skye shifted uncomfortably as Tony looked at her looking deeply hurt, his trust in her cracked a little. “Skye?” Tony all but breathed.

“It’s a very long story,” Maria said, placing a protective hand on Skye’s shoulder. “One that no one here is at fault for.”

Tony looked from Skye to Coulson to Maria then sighed. “I need a drink,” he said, going over to the bar.

Tony’s actions drew attention from Steve, who came over, walking a little tenderly. Before acknowledging Coulson, he went over to Skye and hugged her tightly. “I’m glad you made it out okay,” he said.

“You too,” Skye replied, hugging him back. “Don’t go falling off any more helicarriers.”

“I’ll try my best,” Steve said with a small smile. Steve then turned to Coulson. “Agent Coulson,” he greeted respectfully, extending his hand.

Coulson took it. “Actually, it’s Director now,” he said.

“Congratulations on the promotion,” Steve said easily. “Wish it was under better circumstances.”

“We all do,” Coulson agreed.

“So what brings you here?” Steve asked with a small smile.

“Several things,” Coulson said. “But I’d hoped to be able to speak to the Avengers as a whole, if at all possible. And I was reliably informed that if I didn’t bring Skye to see you all, I’d likely have visitors dropping by my secret base unannounced.”

Tony smirked and Steve laughed. “Damn straight,” Tony said. “Well, we can send a message to Thor easily enough; he’s in London these days. Bruce is just downstairs, so he’s easy.”

“Tony, you should call Pepper,” Skye said softly. “I know she’s not an Avenger, but she’ll be terribly hurt that Coulson was here if she doesn’t get to see him…”

Smile frozen in place, Tony looked at Skye and his expression softened. “You’re right, I should. If you’ll all excuse me for a few minutes…” Tony left the room without a backwards glance, and Skye just shook her head.

“I’ll get a message to Thor,” Steve offered. “Skye, you want to go get Banner?”

“I can do that,” Skye agreed. “JARVIS, is Dr. Banner in the labs?”

“Yes, Skye,” JARVIS replied. “Would you like an elevator to take you there?”

“Yes, please.” Skye gave Coulson another smile, then skipped off to the elevator. It was only moments before the elevator dropped her off at Bruce’s lab. She knocked on the door before letting herself in.
“Skye!” Bruce’s voice was startled, but he smiled quickly. “It’s good to see you healthy again.”

“Thanks,” Skye answered, moving into the room when her quick look around revealed no signs of anything dangerous to approach. “I figured I should come visit, but I’m also here in a more official capacity.”

“Oh?” Bruce asked curiously.

“Despite Washington, SHIELD isn’t really gone. And even if Steve and Nat got Pierce, there’s probably still more of HYDRA out there,” Skye said softly. “So, we’d like to have a good relationship with the Avengers. Officially, as well as for my sake.”

“I think that sounds worth discussing,” Bruce agreed. “So who’s with you?”

“The newly appointed Director,” Skye began. “And as much fun as it was to shock Tony, I don’t want to disrupt your equilibrium the same way.”

Bruce visibly braced himself, closing his eyes and taking a few deep breaths. “Alright,” he said after a moment. “I’m ready. Who’s the new director?”

“Agent Phil Coulson,” Skye said softly.

Bruce’s eyes snapped open to meet hers. “But… Coulson was killed.”

“I know. And it’s a very long story. Will you come upstairs with me and listen to it? Please?” Skye asked.

“Yes,” Bruce agreed after a moment. “I think I need to hear this.”

“Thank you,” Skye replied with a smile. Bruce offered his arm as he got up, and Skye took it as they headed back to the elevator. “JARVIS, lock down Bruce’s lab until he returns, please,” Skye said aloud before they left. “No one, not even Tony, is allowed to mess with it until Bruce can pick up where he left off.”

“Yes, Skye,” JARVIS replied.

Bruce slanted a curious look at Skye. “How do you manage to get Tony’s AI to keep Tony out of places?”

Skye smirked. “Tony’s security isn’t as good as he thinks it is.” Bruce just laughed. “Seriously, JARVIS is amazing and does a lot of things Tony can’t do without his help. But though Tony is an awesome engineer, he’s not a hacker.”

“Makes sense,” Bruce said with a smile. “And if he’s still underestimating you, well, that’s his own fault.”

Skye winked at Bruce as the elevator let them out back on the common floor. She took Bruce over to Coulson, who shot her an amused glance to see her arm looped around Bruce’s. “Doctor Banner,” Coulson said, holding out his hand. Bruce shook it readily.

“Agent Coulson. I… I’m looking forward to hearing your story,” Bruce said politely. “I think, anyway.”

A rumble of thunder from outside interrupted them. Skye immediately went to the window, not ever having seen Thor arrive before. She was looking forward to meeting him, finally. “You won’t see
anything from there,” Natasha said in her ear, sneaking up behind Skye while she was distracted.

“Aww,” Skye pouted. Natasha laughed and shook her head. “When he gets here, you have to take a pic of me and Thor,” Skye added cheerfully.

“Why?” Natasha raised an eyebrow.

“Because it’ll make May envious,” Skye replied with a smirk. “She might be the only one I can tell, but oh, can I tell her.”

“Might not be the best idea to piss off your SO,” Natasha replied mildly.

“So I’ll show her after training.”

There was a huge crack, like a gunshot, which made Skye jump. Her hands immediately flew to her stomach as she flashed back just for a moment to Quinn’s Villa.

Natasha and Maria both immediately sent reminders of their love and safety over the soulbond; she took a deep breath and reminded herself that she was no longer in danger. “You okay?” Nat asked after giving Skye a moment.

Skye nodded and smiled. “I’m okay. It just reminded me… just for a moment. I wasn’t expecting it, is all.”

Natasha smiled warmly. “You don’t have to explain yourself to us, you know that, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Come on, let’s go meet Thor. He tends to lavish attention on Maria and I. Apparently, soulmates are so rare on Asgard that they’re practically venerated.”

“Sif said something like that when I met her. I call Goddess of Technology,” Skye quipped, over her moment of fear as the excitement leached back in.

Natasha laughed. “You’ll see what I mean, come on.”

Thor came through wide doors, clearly designed with Avengers in mind. “Hail friends, what news of import have you found?”

“It’s either the zombie apocalypse or the rapture,” Tony grumbled from his spot by the bar, clearly on his way to a bender. “My money’s on Fury lied to us. Either way, apparently Phil’s still alive.”

Thor looked around and spotted Skye’s boss. For a single instant, Skye saw him for as old as he was. He was thousands of years old and had probably lost a good many friends in war and battle. His eyes look tired. Then they transformed slowly into shock and wonder as recognition set in. “Son of Coul? What sorcery is this? What evil befalls the remains of a dear friend?”

“No evil, just one very hinky science experiment,” Coulson said. “Can we all sit?”

The group sat tentatively and Coulson shifted his weight a couple of times. “Fury took some steps… to resurrect a fallen Avenger, in case it was ever needed. Instead, he resurrected me.”

Everyone stared at Coulson. “Is such magic possible on Midgard?” Thor asked curiously.

“No…” Tony said slowly, staring at him. Steve was looking deeply concerned.
Coulson sighed. “The truth is, Fury didn’t lie to you on the Helicarrier. I was dead at that time. I was dead for five days before Fury managed to bring me back."

The entire group, even Skye, looked horrified at this. “He,” Skye started, her voice cracking. She cleared her throat. “He was begging to die,” Skye said softly. Coulson looked rather pained at the admission, but Skye thought that they deserved to know. “Fury… the procedure took a long time and he was begging to die.”

“What the hell?” It wasn’t Tony who spoke up, but Pepper. Tony and Steve were still shocked.

“Yeah, that’s about the reaction I had,” Coulson said. “Fury wanted to cover up the bad memories of the resurrection, so he gave me a memory of recovering in Tahiti.”

“I found out three weeks later, while Coulson was still in recovery,” Maria said. “Fury said it was classified and if I told anyone, it would put Coulson in danger. I managed to talk him into allowing me to tell Nat, Skye, and Clint.”

“That’s… messed up,” Steve said after a long silence, wherein most of the room was still having difficulty wrapping their heads around the news they’d been given.

Tony scoffed, “Boy Scout. That’s really and truly f*cked up, that’s what it is.”

“For once, I think Tony’s got it right,” Pepper said wanly. She pushed herself to her feet and moved over to Coulson, leaning against the arm of his chair. “Are you alright, Phil? Really alright, I mean?”

Coulson gave her a smile, the same smile he always gave her when he’d been around to deal with Tony. “Yeah, Pepper, I’m alright. It took quite a while before I remembered any of it at all.”

“Why didn’t you come back sooner?” she asked softly. “We had a memorial for you, went to your funeral…”

“We couldn’t let it be generally known,” Coulson answered in a low voice, though everyone could hear him. “And more, all the people on whom the drug had been used prior had massive breakdowns. There were people put on my team to make sure the false memories held, that I wouldn’t break down too… and if I had, wouldn’t it have been kinder for you not to have been given the hope I would be back and then lose me again?”

Pepper bit her lip, not sure how to answer that.

“We have to make the most of whatever time we have with the people we care about,” Steve said, his voice soft but firm. “We never know if it will be days or months or years. We don’t ever get to know that. We just have to be grateful for the time we have together, and not take it for granted.”

“You would know, Cap,” Skye commented lightly, smiling. “But I think you’re right. Even if I’d died in Italy, it would have been because I tried to do the right thing. And every one of my friends would’ve known that I loved them.”

Pepper gave Phil a hug before returning to her chair beside Tony’s. She took Tony’s hand gently, reassuring him. “But you didn’t die, Skye,” Pepper said with a smile. “And we’re all glad about it. Just like we’re all glad Phil’s still with us, however it happened.”

“What I saw, that day,” Maria said lowly, “it’s not something I’d ever have chosen to put someone through. But… from this side of things, I think we’re lucky to still have you around.”

Thor still looked a little puzzled about the whole situation. “Why would Fury have tortured you thus,
Son of Coul?"

“He said something about not being willing to lose his one good eye,” Coulson said lightly.

That answer appeared to mollify Thor somewhat. “I can understand this. To lose such a great ally is to lose part of oneself. Fury was right to think highly of you, Son of Coul. And I, for one, am pleased to see you well and in your right mind.”

“I think that’s true of all of us,” Bruce spoke up finally. “It sounds as if the process was unpleasant, and I’m not sure I would want such a thing for myself - even if Fury thought the Avengers were worth having a revival plan for. But given that it’s already done and you’re here… I’m glad to have you back.”

“What sort of… experiment… are we talking?” Tony asked, his scientific mind clearly at work again.

“An experimental drug with pretty amazing regenerative properties,” Coulson said briefly. “And unfortunately, also some serious side effects.”

“Which we will likely never actually resolve, as the facility producing it blew up not long ago,” Maria added.

“This was a SHIELD product?” Bruce asked skeptically.

“Not officially, no, though we did work with the facility,” Maria said. “It was developed by a third party. The facility was apparently broken into by someone without access clearance, and the self-destruct failsafe kicked in.”

“Self-destruct?” Steve’s voice was shocked. “What kind of place was this?”

“A dangerous one,” Maria told him.

“Ward told me they were the ones who went,” Natasha and Maria both tensed at the name when Skye spoke up.

“Ward?” Steve asked. “I thought he was your teammate?”

“I thought so too,” Skye grumbled.


“Short version?” Skye said, her voice clipped and tense. “He was a HYDRA plant on our team. Reality is that he was there to spy on us, to get information that Garrett wanted - namely how Coulson is still alive.”

“You are upset that he betrayed you, and rightly so,” Thor commented gravely.

Skye hesitated, not sure she wanted to explain. Maria, Nat and Clint were already overprotective enough. Did she really want to make it worse?

“She’s upset because the guy’s obsessed with her,” Clint spoke up, taking the choice away from her. “He kidnapped her once, has convinced himself that he’s better for her than her soulmates, and has essentially promised to take her against her will if he gets the opportunity. Guy’s nuts.”

“You have soulmates, Lady Skye?” Thor spoke up, addressing her directly despite the fact that they hadn’t been introduced. He’d heard Pepper use her name and the other Avengers addressed her
familiarly, which told him enough. She nodded, and Thor continued, “Then this villain must not be allowed to approach you. There is no greater crime than to keep soulmates apart against their wills.”

“I’d like in on the interrogation,” Natasha said ruthlessly.

“We can’t kill him, Natasha. Even if we made it look like an accident,” Coulson said resigned. “He’s … connected.”

“What, so rich evil guys get a pass?” Tony asked defensively. “What are you going to do, keep him locked up forever?”

Coulson pinched the bridge of his nose. “We haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“The prison cells of Asgard is open for your use,” Thor said. “We are far more adept at holding prisoners. And the courts of Asgard frown quite deeply on those who would accost another’s soulmate. Even the most treacherous villains would not dare do such a thing.”

“For what it’s worth, I’ll rest easier knowing my creepy stalker won’t be locked up in the basement indefinitely,” Skye chimed in.

Coulson sighed. “I’ll take it into consideration,” he said diplomatically. “For now, I need to question him on what he knows about HYDRA and any cells that might be left. The only thing is, I went down to talk to him last night. He claims he’ll only talk to Skye.”

“Not happening,” Steve said first, but a chorus of agreement from the Avengers followed.

“I would really rather not, if I can avoid it,” Skye said. “But if I have to, I definitely want Natasha or Maria there with me. I think if I’m not alone, I can deal.”

“You know, we’ve been telling you for two years that you don’t ‘have to deal’ any more,” Maria said, hip-checking Skye sideways into Natasha. “We’ve got your back.”

“I’ve interrogated worse than Ward with nothing more than a little black dress and a pair of stilettos.”

“Tis true,” Thor chimed in. “Loki is known as the God of Lies and even he was impressed by the Lady Natasha’s skills in extracting information.”

“It’ll give me the opportunity to assess FitzSimmons and possibly train them on basic subterfuge,” Natasha said. “It’s going to be more important than ever for them to be able to lie if they need to, now that SHIELD is officially labeled a terrorist organization.”

“Sir, before we go on to our next meeting, I’d also like to put in for a week’s leave starting July 1st?” Skye said.

“I suppose all of you are gonna need some leave time after everything. Coming up to New York for a friend’s birthday?” Coulson asked giving a sideways appreciative look at Steve.

“More like a joint birthday celebration,” Steve said. “Bit of a tradition with us.”

Skye blushed. “My real birthday is July 2nd,” she admitted. “My first year… we wanted to keep it private. A small party, but Steve had nothing to do, so he hung out with us. The next year, we just celebrated both birthdays on the third.”

Coulson gave her a sad smile. “Your ‘birthday’ in your file is made up, isn’t it?”

“It’s the date the nuns at the orphanage guessed at,” Skye corrected him gently. “It was the date I
used for everything before I met Maria and Nat, and Maria was old enough to remember when she
got my mark.”

“I’m not sure that makes me feel better,” Coulson admitted. “But you can have your leave time. We
can celebrate with the team on your un-birthday.”

Skye grinned, and everyone in the room except Thor and Steve laughed; Thor and Steve just looked
puzzled. “Alice in Wonderland, the Disney film,” Skye explained with a smile just for Steve. “Based
on the Lewis Carroll novel.”

“Oh!” Steve said. “There’s a movie?”

“A couple, actually. And the one AC is referencing isn’t the most true to the original, but Disney
seldom is,” Skye clarified. “But we can watch it later if you’d like. I think we left it off your list
because it’s for kids, but it was out in ’51 so it shouldn’t startle you overmuch.”

“Sounds good.”

“Now that you’ve all sidetracked everywhere,” Pepper spoke up, reining the group back in. “Was
there something you needed, other than just letting us know you’re alive and that Skye’s still
working with SHIELD?”

Coulson nodded with a small smile for Pepper. “Yes, actually. In all seriousness, both groups have
been after the HYDRA groups since Washington, each in our own ways and with our own focus. I
think we’d accomplish more if we worked out a plan for working together…”

The next meeting she, Maria, and Coulson had was in a burned out factory in Hell’s Kitchen. Nat
had come along and was checking the perimeter of the building. Weaver arrived fifteen minutes after
they did and looked extremely relieved to see Skye.

“Agent 42,” Weaver greeted. “Agent Hill. Agent Coulson. It’s good to see you three made it out of
the worst of it.”

“Yeah, it was… touch and go there for a minute,” Skye said.

Weaver looked hesitant. “Honestly, Agent 42, I wasn’t anticipating other Agents.”

Skye nodded. “We can talk alone. Agent Hill, Agent Coulson, can you excuse us for a moment?”

Maria looked hesitant, but nodded and ushered Coulson within eyesight but outside of earshot.

“Listen, Agent 42, I’ve been ordered to recruit you to SHIELD.”

Skye raised an eyebrow. “Really? Because… I was going to do that.”

“Coulson’s SHIELD isn’t the real SHIELD, Agent 42. His actions of the last year prove that he’s
not fit to be Director.”

Skye looked down and nodded thoughtfully before meeting Weaver’s eye. “You know, I’ve never
known you to make a decision until all the evidence was in,” Skye noted.

“You think I’m missing some facts? Can you clue me in here?”

“Well, first of all, Fury isn’t actually dead.” Skye said. Weaver’s eyebrows went way up. “Classified
Level 10. Coulson’s acting director until he comes back, though it might be a few years.”

Weaver looked startled; Skye surmised that Fury’s staged death had been far more widely believed than even he might have guessed. “Second, what actions are you referring to? If you’re listening to the late Agent Hand’s accusations of Coulson recruiting dangerous and unreliable people… well, we intended him to take me in, didn’t we?”

Weaver frowned. “Agent Hand’s complaints were against you?”

“Yes,” Skye confirmed with a sigh. “When Coulson went missing, kidnapped by Centipede, Hand tagged me with a tech-restriction bracelet and kicked me off the Bus. Fortunately, that flagged the Director’s office and the restriction didn’t last long, because ultimately I was the one that found him again.”

Weaver sighed heavily. “Gonzalez didn’t say who Hand’s complaints were about. Just that they existed. And he trusted Hand. That combined with the rumors of Coulson’s near death experience… Gonzalez is looking for eyes and ears inside Coulson’s SHIELD. But if Fury and Hill think Coulson’s reliable enough to lead SHIELD…”

“They do. I do, too, honestly,” Skye said, willing the older agent to believe her. “Coulson has been very good to me, despite only finding out who I really am within the last month. He trusted me before that, gave me leeway other people - like Hand - wouldn’t have.”

“I did hear, though, that Agent Coulson nearly got you killed on a mission,” Weaver said tentatively, and Skye guessed that she suddenly wasn’t sure how reliable her information was anymore.

“It wasn’t Coulson’s fault. Our team was betrayed by the Italian police we were supposed to be working with,” Skye explained. “Agent Fitz and I got separated from the rest of the team and tried to complete the mission anyway. While Fitz disabled the vehicles outside the building, I went in. Alone. And got caught.” Skye made a face. “Not my brightest move, but I’m still here so I suppose that’s something.”

“I am glad to hear you’re alright, Agent,” Weaver said sincerely. “And I’m doubly glad to hear that you survived HYDRA’s attacks.”

“Thank you.” Skye smiled. “Coulson wants to change SHIELD, to make sure this doesn’t happen again.” Skye said. “We’ve already gotten rid of the Agent Levels; sorta pointless at the moment. All missions are just need-to-know. If you have any thoughts of how we could make SHIELD better, Coulson’s open to suggestions. That’s part of why we wanted to talk to you.”

“What about the possibility that Coulson’s near-death experience has left him unstable?” Weaver asked forthrightly.

“It seems unlikely at this point, but there are more than a few of us in the know, so to speak, and we’re keeping an eye on things,” Skye admitted. “But I also don’t think any of us are likely to let him go off the deep end without stepping in or doing something about it. There’s me. There’s Agent May. Maria Hill, despite working for SI these days, is also still in touch. And several of the Avengers are currently working on arranging visits to our SHIELD base.”

“But none of you can be there all the time,” Weaver pointed out.

Skye shrugged. “Probably not, but I wouldn’t think any sort of breakdown would happen all at once. There should be signs.” Skye studied Weaver carefully. “We’re not going to be able to heal the breach between our SHIELD and this other one, are we?”
Weaver shook her head. “Not easily, at any rate. Gonzalez is… persuasive. And very firm in his beliefs.”

“I don’t like the idea of two branches of SHIELD at odds with each other. What if…” Skye paused, her mind racing. “What if we allowed Gonzalez his eyes and ears within our division. Would you be willing to keep us informed about his? If only so that no one gets hurt in the crossfire, should it come down to it.”

“Would you be able to stick to that sort of agreement? Would Coulson allow it?” Weaver asked.

Skye shrugged and looked over her shoulder. “Hey, AC!” she called out. “We have a question for you.”

“What’s up?” Coulson asked, rejoining them.

Skye gestured to Weaver to go ahead, not wanting to say more than the other agent would prefer. “There is… another division of SHIELD rebuilding; one that questions your appointment as Director,” Weaver said carefully, watching Coulson. Coulson just nodded, listening carefully. “Agent 42 has offered to allow this division to place an agent or two into your division to be eyes and ears, if I keep your division informed of their movements in return.”

“You believe the differences between the two divisions are irreconcilable?” Coulson asked.

“At the moment, yes,” Weaver confirmed. “They are specifically against you being in charge, for various reasons.”

“May I ask who’s behind this mindset?”

Weaver hesitated, then sighed. “Robert Gonzalez.”

Coulson looked startled. “Agent Gonzalez is a good man; I was planning to look for him as we got back on our feet again.”

“I don’t think we can change his mind about you without evidence to counter his current position,” Weaver explained. “But Agent 42 has a point, in that I would absolutely not wish for other agents to be harmed as a result of the division of SHIELD.”

“Gonzalez was stationed on the Illiad,” Maria said, coming up to them as well. “Are you saying the Illiad didn’t go under?”

“It didn’t,” Weaver said carefully, “but we lost a lot of lives getting it back. It’s going to take a couple of months to get it back to working order. In the meantime we’re reorganizing our leadership structure. Gonzalez’s idea is to create a Board of Directors rather than having one leader.”

Coulson nodded, “Much like the Level 9s, without Fury at the top?”

Weaver tilted her head in thought. “I suppose. I never really thought about it like that.”

“And the cargo you were transporting?” Hill asked.

Weaver nodded. “Safe.”

“What were you transporting?” Coulson said.

“We’re not exactly sure,” Weaver explained. “All documentation that we’ve obtained on it since we were given it says that it’s a weapon - that it’s dangerous, but it looks like it’s just a rock.”
“A rock?” Skye echoed.

Maria nodded. “SHIELD has obtained a few things over the years - dangerous items that shouldn’t be in anyone’s hands. Not all of them can be destroyed.”

“Another thing on my list,” Coulson said. “Fury said it was important to track the few that exist down and destroy them. The Gravitonium that Raina made off with at Cybertek being one of them.”

Weaver nodded. “That made our list as well. Perhaps this will work out - two branches of SHIELD pooling their resources for the best outcome?”

“Is there anything else we need to address?” Skye asked after there had been a long pause.

“I don’t think so,” Coulson said after a moment.

Weaver nodded her agreement. She turned a bright smile on Skye. “I would agree. But I am very glad you’re alright, Agent 42.”

Skye returned the smile and nodded. “Thank you. And… when it’s just us like this… call me Skye.”

Chapter End Notes

Because Skye couldn't keep her identity secret from everyone forever. ;)
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

The Playground settles into a routine.

Chapter Notes

We've heard from a few new readers this past week. Welcome! We hope you continue to enjoy the story. We absolutely love to hear from you, comments or questions or points you feel need clarification. Please feel free to let us know what you think. We also really appreciate fic recs or reblogs, if you're on Tumblr. Winter posts chapter updates on Tumblr as soon as the update posts here, so you're welcome to tune in that way as well.

Many thanks, as always, for your continued support. We may write because we have ideas, but you guys are the reason we continue to post!
Skye’s 5am runs resumed as they settled in at the Playground. Tai Chi with May began at 5:30 daily. Though they didn’t train 7 days a week, Skye found that the morning routine helped ground her. Just, on her off days, sometimes she’d go back to bed afterwards. She really only slept in if something she was working on kept her up until 3am, and that was rarer these days.

It only took a few days for Skye and Fitz to wire the main offices, labs and communications area for high speed internet and get the new servers set up. The other base areas were in progress, but they’d slowed down a bit after the initial push to get the working areas handled. Skye also had highly
encrypted wi-fi up across most of the base.

They were enjoying their time together, though. Between the planning and the work itself, they spent hours together and they chatted as they worked. He had a lot of questions about soulmates in general and hers in particular. Skye answered some of them, knowing that he would never associate her descriptions with Maria Hill - since Maria was the dummied up contact in her phone he’d let Fitz see once or twice. Others she answered more vaguely, saying that they preferred to keep their relationship private until the time was right. Fitz was genuinely understanding.

As their work progressed, they spent less time on it and training continued. So Skye was startled one morning to see Trip come into the gym as she and May finished their Tai Chi routine. “Morning, Trip. What’s up?” she asked cheerfully.

“New plan, girlfriend,” Trip replied with a grin. “Agent May asked me to come train with you today.”

Skye glanced at May, who nodded. “You need a new physical type to test yourself against. Trip isn’t going to be like fighting with me or Agent Ward.”

“Ward barely sparred with me,” Skye groused.

“But you still have an idea what it’s like to fight his body type,” May said. May was right, and she had also regularly sparred with Clint and Steve. “We’re going to try to expose you to as many types as possible.”

Skye moved towards the mat. “So basically you’re telling me that teaching me to spar is going to result in the Firefly definition of ‘interesting’?”

Trip laughed, “Naw girl, it won’t be like that.” May looked at him curiously. “Firefly definition of ‘interesting’,” he supplied. “‘Oh god, oh god, we’re all gonna die.’”

May cracked an evil smile. “We’re also going to start you on how to fight multiple assailants,” she said.

Skye felt a little nervous at that announcement. That wasn’t something that Nat had yet covered.

“You really think she’s ready, May?” Trip asked curiously. “You’ve only been teaching her for, what? A few weeks?”

“Skye’s a natural,” May said, nodding. “She’s ready.”

“Can I renege on this whole ‘field agent’ thing?” Skye asked jokingly.

“Just wait until weapons training,” May countered with a rare grin. “I have a feeling you’re gonna like that.”

It was easier around the base now that she had to hide less of herself. Her true skill in Comms, most agents had written off as her being restrained as the consultant and former Rising Tide hacker before HYDRA came out of hiding. Her Ops skills were slowly improving, both for her cover and for herself, and she had talked Simmons and Fitz each into ‘teaching’ her more about the SciTech end of things.

The lessons were unbearably boring, making Skye feel like she was back in school, but she hoped the end result was that she could spend less time playing dumb. She did also download herself a number of lesson programs, both for science and for languages. She took the quizzes for the science
stuff without doing the boring lessons and had Fitz or Simmons check one every few days, which also helped speed up the stuff she was doing with them in person.

“See, Skye?” Simmons said after checking another of her quiz results. “You could have done better in school. You just needed to focus.” Skye managed to avoid rolling her eyes at Jemma and just nodded. Focus wasn’t what she’d needed, back then. But there was really no way to make Jemma understand without breaking her cover. Maybe once she was able to stop… once Nat made some headway in teaching FitzSimmons much needed concealment skills...

Skye worked with both May and Nat on languages. She was still working on Russian, but added French, German and Spanish to her list. It wouldn’t get her through everywhere, but it would give her a foundation in most of the language types commonly used. Her focus was on spoken language; the different writing systems could come later.

Though they would have to come eventually. Maybe once she got her Ops skills up and stopped spending the majority of her days in various training sessions.

May was right, though; when they got to weapons practice, Skye did enjoy herself. Guns still intimidated her a little, but Nat had at least gotten her out of the habit of saying ‘bang’ every time she pulled a trigger. May took her further. A lot further.

“Wow, girl,” Trip said one afternoon, several weeks later, as he watched her change clips on the shooting range. “That’s some consistent clustering.” They’d been working on maintenance before letting Skye get in some shooting practice; she was getting better at stripping and cleaning various kinds of guns, too.

“Thanks,” Skye said with a small smile. She hoped one day she could show Trip what Clint had taught her to do with a bow and arrow. She found that once she got over her wariness of the gun, aiming came easily to her. She was even better at long range, and May was starting to talk about getting her trained on a sniper rifle.

Probably the hardest part of Ops training, for Skye, was emotional control. Meditation and Tai Chi helped her keep her cool most of the time, but May also got her a heart-rate tracker bracelet so she could be more aware of what emotions did to her body. And, by extension, to her soulmates through the bond.

Her soulmates were the biggest reason why Skye worked so hard on control.

Time flew by and Skye’s birthday leave came quickly. It was much easier to keep in touch with her soulmates from the Playground, though. Not only did she have more privacy, but communications was mostly under her control. And given the cooperation between them and the Avengers, many of her friends were in and out of the base.

Skye had caught a cab to the airport and flew commercial to JFK. Tony had offered a private jet, but Skye still got nervous about large amounts of money being given to her or used on her. She did allow Happy to pick her up from the airport, mostly since she hadn’t seen Tony’s friend and the head of SI Security since she moved to Washington. She caught up with Happy on the commute into Manhattan, and she noticed how much had changed since she had last lived there. Construction was starting up again and the place was actually starting to look livable.

“Welcome back, Skye,” JARVIS said. “Shall I tell the others you’re here?”

Skye grinned up at her electronic friend. “Maybe we should let them figure it out?” Skye said.
“I will refrain from informing them,” JARVIS said as the elevator rose.

The doors finally opened; Skye grinned when she saw the huge banner that said, “Happy 121st Birthday Skye and Steve!” Tony had added her 27 years to Steve’s 94 to be funny.

Skye smiled as Natasha spotted her and launched herself at her. Skye kissed Nat hard. This was going to be a good week. “Party’s not for two days,” Skye said between kisses. “Maybe I can steal you for a while?”

“Maria’s got meetings all afternoon and I happen to have cleared my schedule,” Natasha said, dragging Skye back towards the elevator as Tony and Clint catcalled them. Skye knew it was just a brotherhood thing rather than the far more annoying ‘straight guys turned on by lesbians’ thing.

Collapsing on the bed hours later and panting hard, Skye grinned. “Haven’t been able to scratch that itch in a while,” Skye said.

“We’ll have to fix that,” Natasha said with a languid grin. “The Playground’s a lot easier to break into than an ever-moving airplane.”

“I wouldn’t say no to that arrangement. Might piss off Coulson if you repeatedly break in though.”

“I’ll be walking in a couple times too. Prisoner interrogation starts in two weeks. Coulson says he can’t sit and wait for Ward to explain any more.”

Skye nodded and nuzzled into Nat. “Good. I need more of you guys in my life.”

“Everybody decent?” Maria called.

“Are we ever?” Skye called back, laughing. “We’re naked but just cuddling, at the moment.”

“Tony’s ordered a truckload of Mexican food, it should be here in an hour or so,” Maria said, coming into the room. “And Sharon and Sam are both here.”

“Sam’s the guy who helped you guys at the Triskillion, right?” Skye asked.

“Yeah,” Nat said.

“Remind me to thank him for having your back.” Skye said. “It’ll be good to see Sharon again though. What she been doing?”

“She joined the CIA,” Maria said. “She’s… keeping an eye on things for us.”

“And she and Steve are happy?” Skye asked as she got up and started attempting to locate where they had thrown her clothes.

Maria nodded. “They moved in together,” she said. “And are talking about getting married.”

Skye frowned. She had never really thought about marriage. Plural marriage was allowed if you had soulmarks, though still frowned upon (not that Skye gave a damn). She imagined herself married to Maria and Natasha and it felt… wrong. Incomplete. Skye realized that marriage would come, but she wanted their fourth. “You okay, Skye?”

“Yeah, I was just thinking about…” she said, pulling on her pants.

Maria and Nat both froze. It clearly hadn’t occurred to them either. “Oh,” Maria said finally.
“I want to wait… until we find our fourth,” Skye said. “But yeah.”

Maria and Nat both looked at her lovingly. “We can do that,” Maria said, all choked up, coming over and embracing her. “We can do that.”

Birthday festivities were perhaps a little louder than Steve and Skye would have preferred, given Tony’s penchant for hard rock and harder drinks. But everyone had a good time, and that was the important part. Deep down, she loved Tony’s enthusiasm. It made her feel… loved. Wanted. And accepted by the other Avengers. She was Skye, not just the soulmate of Maria and Nat.

Skye also had a chance to catch up with Sharon. “Oh, hey… are you still in touch with Agent 33?” Skye asked when she had a moment.

“Occasionally, why?” Sharon asked.

“If she’d like to come back in, I think she’d be welcome. Just put us in touch, maybe, if she’s interested?”

Sharon nodded. “I can mention it. Actually, we’re supposed to be having lunch on Saturday. Maybe you’d like to join us?”

“I don’t think I have plans. That could be cool,” Skye agreed with a smile.

That’s how Skye found herself in a cafe below Stark Tower that Steve had recommended. “Hey, welcome to Clark’s. I’m Beth; I’ll be your server today. May I take your order?”

“I’ll have a martini,” Sharon said. “Extra olives.”

“Margarita on the rocks,” Skye said. “Salt on the rim.”

“Can I get you guys any appetizers? We’ve got some great stuffed mushrooms,” Beth offered.

They ordered appetizers and started some small talk when someone approached their table. “Sharon?”

Sharon looked up and grinned, then stood up. “Kara!” Sharon exclaimed. The two exchanged a brief embrace before sitting down again.

“Hi,” Skye greeted the newcomer with a smile.

“You must be the newest member of our little club,” Kara replied with a smile. “I’m Kara.”

“Skye. Nice to meet you,” Skye answered.

Kara sat down and sighed. “Nice to meet you too,” she said. “Though I wish it were under… better circumstances. It’s not exactly easy looking for work when the Agency…”

“Imploded?” Sharon suggested, scanning her menu.

“Yeah, and now we don’t have nearly the protection as we used to,” Kara said. “Things could get dangerous.”

Skye looked at them both seriously, concern evident in her eyes. “If you had the choice to go back… would you?” she asked in a low voice.

Kara looked surprised, then suspicious. “What do you mean? That’s not an option, is it?”
They paused when Beth brought over their drinks and they took a moment to place their lunch orders. May didn’t approve of Skye’s usual eating habits, but not only was she not present, Skye was also on vacation. So she ordered a double burger with the works. Sharon ordered the turkey bacon club, and Kara decided on the reuben.

When they were alone again, Skye answered Kara’s question. “There’s a small team of us regrouping. We can’t operate out in the open… but some of us felt the need to clean up the mess made when everything fell apart.”

Kara glanced at Sharon, noting her lack of surprise. “You knew about this?” she asked quietly.

“Not before I wound up with the CIA, but yes,” Sharon replied. “I’m needed where I am currently, but we keep in touch.”

Kara took a deep breath and nodded thoughtfully. She was quiet for a bit, toying with the straw in her drink. Sensing her need to process, Skye changed the subject. She asked if Sharon had gotten Steve to watch *Alice In Wonderland* yet. They discussed favorite Disney movies as their lunch arrived and eventually Kara joined the conversation again.

They spent the rest of their lunchtime talking about everything but SHIELD, spies, and HYDRA. Slowly, Skye started to feel like a normal person rather than a spy. It felt good to have friends who didn’t talk about Ops training, spycraft, biological and technical development, and enemies who wanted you dead or worse. They parted, exchanging numbers, a little tipsy as Sam met them to escort them back to the tower, since he was the most subtle of the Avengers.

As a special gift at the end of her vacation, Pepper treated Nat, Maria, and Skye to a day of spa activities and boutiquing, all courtesy of her credit card. The masseuse turned Skye’s muscles, tense from hours of training, to mush. Pepper had insisted on the facial and the body scrub.

They rounded out the evening with a romantic dinner and a suite at the Four Seasons. Maria excused herself for a couple hours so Natasha and Skye could have a tumble in the sheets (or two). When Maria returned, they had an extra long cuddle and a watched a movie, falling asleep in the king-sized bed, completely content.

Steve and Maria both accompanied Skye back to the base after her vacation. They wouldn’t be staying long, but it was nice for Skye to have them around even for a little while.

“Hey, Steve,” Skye said as they headed for the accommodation wing. “You wanna come to my ops training session this afternoon? We could spar for a while…”

“Sounds like fun,” Steve agreed with a smile.

Trip was already waiting for them when Skye skipped into the gym with Steve right behind her. Trip’s eyes went wide and his jaw dropped for a moment. “Trip, meet Steve Rogers. Steve, this is my teammate and sparring partner, Antoine Triplett.”

“I… wow. It’s an honor to meet you, sir,” Trip stuttered out. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

Steve raised an eyebrow as they shook hands. “So much? From Skye?”

Trip shook his head, shooting Skye an amused glare. “No, I had no idea she knew you. From my granddad, Gabe Jones.”

It was Steve’s turn to boggle briefly. “You’re Gabe’s grandson? I’d love to hear about him. You know, after the War ended.”
“It would be an honest pleasure, sir,” Trip said with his trademark grin.

“Mission accomplished,” Skye quipped with a cheeky grin. “Though maybe I should’ve waited until after sparring to introduce you…”

“No, sorry, Skye. Of course we can still spar,” Steve said quickly. “Agent Triplett and I can speak afterwards, if he’s willing.”

“Anytime. And please, call me Trip. Everyone else does.”

“You’ve got it,” Steve agreed. “And call me Steve.”

Skye was aware of the fact that a crowd had gathered to watch her and Steve spar. She wasn’t holding back any more, except for things specific to what Nat had taught her, and Steve wasn’t holding back much either, except in pulling his punches due to the serum.

Steve landed a punch to her ribs and Skye countered by grabbing his arm and twisting it behind his back. Knocking his feet out from under him, Steve pitched forward, breaking free from Skye’s grip, then tumbled into a roll and the match continued.

The session lasted for ten minutes before Steve managed to pin her and deliver the finishing blow. Skye was breathless, panting as Steve helped her up. People were clapping and cheering and it took her a minute to realize that they were clapping for her.

“You’re improving,” Steve said quietly, a subtle undercurrent of pride in his voice.

“Thanks,” Skye said, taking a long pull from her water bottle and kneading out a stitch in her side. She was sure Steve had further notes for her, but didn’t want to talk so openly with a crowd around. She fully acknowledged that some of Nat’s paranoia was probably rubbing off on her, but she didn’t want to give any hint to anyone that they were anything beyond acquaintances.

She did get commentary from Agent May. Trip was too busy grinning at her for holding her own against Steve.

An hour later, though, Steve knocked on Skye’s door while Skye was running a system-wide firmware update and simultaneously going through yoga poses to cool down. “Hey, Steve, what’s up?” Skye asked getting up from her last sun salutation.

Steve entered and closed the door, his eyes quickly going to the hula girl she kept on her desk, confirming that there would be no bugs in the room. “I need a favor,” Steve said softly.

“Sure,” Skye said. “Anything.”

“I need your help to track down Bucky,” Steve said.

Skye couldn’t help but hold back a grin. Nat and Maria had told her about Steve’s discovery, and they had discussed it at length during her vacation. Skye had simply been waiting for Steve to ask for help.

“I’ve got a few ideas that could work,” Skye answered, rather than wondering why he hadn’t come to her sooner. They’d been too busy with Centipede cleanup, even though she would’ve at least gotten started. “You haven’t seen him since your hospital stay, right?” she asked, just to confirm.

“Yeah,” Steve agreed with a sigh.
"We’ll find him, Steve," Skye said reassuringly. She picked up her tablet and started pulling up news clips from D.C., needing something to work with that her facial recognition programs could identify. She could start with Bucky’s historical photos, of course, but updated details would be useful. She ought to be able to merge the two. “Here, sit with me, I’ll show you what I’m doing.”

Steve sat, and Skye began explaining - in layman’s terms, because Steve would never be a tech no matter how comfortable he was getting with computers - how facial recognition software worked, and how she could sneak into systems worldwide, including traffic cameras, if she had to. Steve nodded, listening raptly as she set up her searches while the photo software did its thing. She pulled up the updated image and showed it to Steve. “There. Is that how he looked when you saw him?”

“Yes,” Steve said with a tone of admiration. “You’re good at this,” he told her.

Skye smiled. “Well, that was mostly just having the program combine his historical photos with the poor quality images we have from the news so we have enough to work with. What I’m gonna do now is put this image into the search, and it will turn up results with an 80% or better match to the base picture. Then I look at the pictures, send you the promising ones to confirm, and keep track of dates and locations. But it might take a while; from everything I’ve heard about him, he’s good at staying out of sight.”

Steve nodded. “I understand. Still, I appreciate your help, Skye. It means a lot to me.”

“I know, and you’re welcome. I’ll keep you posted, I promise.” Skye studied him for a moment. “Can I ask you a question, Steve?”

“Of course.”

“Why didn’t you just ask Tony to do this? Between him and JARVIS, they probably could’ve started a lot sooner…”

Steve hesitated. “Can you keep a secret?” Skye laughed and looked around and Steve blushed. “Right. Stupid question… Tony’s parents were… they were killed as part of HYDRA’s mission.”

Skye’s eyes went wide. “Does he know?” she asked carefully. “It was… they sent the Winter Soldier, didn’t they?” Steve nodded grimly and Skye exhaled out slowly. “Steve, you have to tell him.”

“I don’t want to hurt him,” Steve said. “This devastated me… I can’t imagine…”

Skye nodded. “I think the fact that you’re telling me means that you know what the right thing to do is. You know me Steve, I’m the poster child for how secrets can change someone’s life. If Maria or Nat had kept my file from me… being told hurts less than finding out, I know from experience.” Skye flashed back to Miles and how much it hurt to find out that everything he told her was a lie.

“Okay,” Steve said softly. “I’ll tell him. I just have to find… the right time.”

“The right time would be the second you get back to the tower,” Skye pressed. “The longer you wait, the harder it will be, and the more Tony will be upset that you kept it from him for so long. Please, Steve, talk to him. Right away. I’d say we can call him right now, but I think it’ll go better in person.”

“Do you… do you think it would help if we put together the files on the Winter Soldier?” Steve asked. “They had to have been messing with his head, if he didn’t even know me. The Bucky I knew would never have turned assassin; he’d have died first.”
“It might. It will give Tony something to look at, real facts he can work with,” Skye agreed. “I’m guessing you’d like my help with that, too?”

“Could you, please?” Steve asked in a rough voice.

“You bet.” Skye rested her head on Steve’s shoulder, hugging him gently. “I’m here for you. Like you’ve been here for me. Yeah?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Skye.”

Skye set to work. A lot of the search algorithms she set up ran automatically in the background and were set up to notify her if they got any pings. She got Steve the data he wanted before he headed back to New York, though.

Weeks passed and it seemed that Bucky was very good at avoiding security cameras. Tony still wasn’t talking to Steve, but according to Maria, he no longer left the room the second Steve entered. He had grilled Nat extensively on what had happened with Bucky and, despite his deep and abiding rage at the situation, appeared to be deeply disturbed by Natasha’s news that HYDRA had brainwashed him so badly that Bucky didn’t even recognize his own name or his best friend.

Jemma left on a vacation of her own, and Natasha came to interrogate Ward. Skye asked her about it, as they were cuddled in ‘post-reunion sex’ bliss. Natasha frowned. “For someone who refuses to speak, he’s saying a lot,” she said finally.

“What do you mean?” Skye asked curiously as Nat stroked her hair.

“He’s not just obsessed with you,” she said. “He’s fixated on Garrett and is angry at Coulson for killing him. He shows evidence of Stockholm Syndrome. Which probably didn’t help him recover from the childhood he had...”

Skye looked up at her questioningly. “You sound… sorry for him?”

Nat sighed. “Ward’s family and Garrett created a violent psychopath with a penchant for obsession and low impulse control. I can relate. I was Ward, in many ways, not long ago. The difference between us being the second I found a way out, I took it.”

“When Clint made a different call,” Skye said quietly, remembering the story.

The Russian nodded. “Clint made a different call and brought me in. He gave me the opportunity to make my own choices. Ward could have gone to Fury or Coulson or even you, if he didn’t trust SHIELD. He’s not paranoid. He didn’t think any of you were HYDRA. He knew that Coulson wasn’t. Ward’s had opportunities in spades, including those three weeks that Coulson sat and tried to get him help. But you can’t help people who don’t want help.”

“I just… I don’t get it,” Skye said with a frustrated sigh.

“You don’t have to understand him, Skye,” Nat said firmly. “You don’t have to empathize with a man who promised to take away your own choices. In fact, I’d really rather you didn’t.”

“I normally do get people, though,” Skye said in a soft voice. “I get where they come from, I understand why they react the way they do. Especially people with a rough past, like you or Clint. But Ward… Ward I just don’t get. And it’s weird.”

“I think…” Natasha began, then sighed. She really didn’t want Skye to feel for Ward, but she could tell Skye wasn’t going to be satisfied until she could at least understand. “You can’t understand him
because you’ve never been sure what’s him and what’s not. What was an act and what was true. He’s a Grade A manipulator, and he played your whole team for a long time. Even here and now, and when you were completely undercover, there was a lot of you in who you were showing to the others. Ward wasn’t like that, and so you can’t get him.”

“You may be right.” Skye cuddled closer to Natasha, who just held her comfortingly. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Natasha stroked Skye’s hair, though who it was comforting more was anyone’s guess. “I love that despite everything you’ve been through, you still want to see the best in people. Even if it’s not there. And even if I don’t like it, sometimes, because it gets you hurt… I love you for yourself. Because you’re Skye.”

“I love you too, Natasha. For all of the everything that you are.”

Several days later, Ward was gone. Skye hadn’t wanted to go out and watch Ward get led away by Natasha and Steve. Between the influence of his brother, Ward’s own skills, and his obsession with Skye, all parties agreed that jailing him on Asgard was best for everyone involved. There was little chance of Ward escaping from those prisons.

That said, Christian Ward was in for a surprise the morning after Ward was sent to Asgard. Skye had a whole release planned, filled with the information that not only was Christian Ward’s brother HYDRA, but also the megabytes of files that SHIELD had on Ward’s childhood (psychological evaluations, unsealed hospital records from Ward’s childhood, the records from juvie) that had all seemed to escape the data dump Nat had done. Doing this untraceable release, Skye realized that she could hate Ward and hate what Ward’s brother did to him at the same time, whether or not the story of the well was true.

Truthfully, the night after Ward was sent to Asgard was the first night since Cybertek that Skye slept well. Natasha had come back after passing Ward off to Thor under the ruse of debriefing Coulson and Maria had slipped in with her. When Natasha mentioned it the next morning, Skye simply shrugged. “I was having nightmares,” she admitted. “Dreams that Ward broke out of Vault D and… and no one else was around and…”

In retrospect, Natasha shouldn’t have been surprised. But she blinked at Skye for a minute before pulling her into her arms. “He can’t hurt anyone, not anymore.”

“I know,” Skye answered, but she let herself be snuggled for a long moment. “Dreams don’t always make logical sense. The mind does what it does.”

“Still, we should have realized…”

“You can’t be in my head all the time, Nat.” Skye smiled. “You’re here when I need you, and that’s the most important part.”

“I always will be.” The simple statement was profound for both of them, both of them having grown up without anyone else to depend on.

“I know. And I’m always here for you too, even if you don’t seem to need me as much.” Skye smiled, holding up a hand to forestall Nat’s protest. “I said seem, and I’m not wrong. I know you need me, and I know we’re good for each other in countless small ways. But it’s not always as apparent that it goes both ways, you know?”

Natasha looked down and nodded. “I keep too much inside. I always have, and sometimes I can’t help it. But you are good for me, too, Skye. You somehow just see inside, so that I don’t have to
show it. You just know it’s there.”

“I know.” It was Skye’s turn to hug Natasha close, stroking her hair gently. “I was making a comment, not a complaint. I promise, if I have a problem with something you’ll know about it.”

“Good. Thank you.” Natasha pulled away with a smile. “So, should we go meet May for an off-the-books sparring match?”

Skye grinned. “Sounds like fun.”

True to her word, May set up a sparring session with both herself and Natasha against Skye. Since everyone was occupied, Skye held nothing back, even throwing in a few signature moves that Nat had taught her. She was just tossing May to the ground with Nat’s signature thigh move (very carefully to avoid injury to May’s neck) when a crashing sound was heard near the doors. All three of them looked up and saw Trip staring at the three of them, wide-eyed and gray-skinned.

It was a full three seconds before Trip spoke. “Holy fuck,” he stammered.

“Trip,” Skye said, trying to think up an excuse.

“Who the fuck are you?” Trip asked. “Because there’s no way you learned all that in a matter of weeks.”

“Trip,” Skye said again. She looked from Nat to May, communicating through feelings through the bond with Nat. Skye sighed. She needed to put a pin in this. She couldn’t have her cover being blown before the RealSHIELD recruits arrived in two days. “I’ll explain everything,” she said. “In my room.” Trip looked hesitant. “Trip, I swear to god, it’s nothing bad,” Skye said.

Finally Trip nodded. Maria was waiting for them when they got to the room.

Nat and Maria sat on the bed, while May leaned casually against the door. Skye was still trying to figure out how to explain. “I… I wasn’t a Level 1 SHIELD Agent the day HYDRA came out of the shadows,” she said pausing for any interjection Trip might make, but he let her continue. “I was a Level 9 Comms Agent.”

“You were Level 9?” Trip asked, dumbfounded.

Skye nodded. “I was undercover, geotagging Rising Tide users when Coulson picked me up. I was told to maintain my cover and watch his team for anything… off. I know what you saw because I was also Ops Level 4.”

Trip objected to that. “No SHIELD Agent has ever been a member of two departments,” he argued.

Skye nodded. “Technically, you’re right. Because I was a member of all three. Officially listed as ‘Special Projects,’ directly under Fury. I was known as Agent 42.”

Trip stared at her, then cracked a grin. “You’re Agent 42. That’s… that’s priceless. I mean, who’d suspect an ex-Rising Tide hacker with just a GED and is only a consultant for SHIELD.”

He was looking at her almost proudly. “You’ve been holding back on me,” he said.

Skye nodded, blushing a little. “By a lot. Technically I’m still undercover for… a good number of reasons, actually. Most of which I can’t tell you.”

“You actually understand what FitzSimmons are talking about, don’t you. Were the science lessons
Skye shrugged. “Some of it was, some of it wasn’t… I do have a fairly high IQ, but while I was in school no one cared enough to notice. So it’s true that I did drop out of school and get my GED, I also spent a lot of time during High School to cut class and go read books on… well, pretty much every scientific topic under the sun.”

“Can I ask why you got classified the way you did? Or is that part of the ‘most’ things you can’t tell me?”

Skye glanced at Maria and Nat. They both nodded. Skye took a deep breath. “So you know Maria Hill and Natasha Romanov as Agents of SHIELD, but what was never disclosed is that they’re two members of a quad. A quad that I’m a member of too.”

Trip sat forward. “Skye, you’re saying…”

“These are my soulmates. Two of them, at least.”

“Damn, girl. There hasn’t been a recording of a Quad in nearly a hundred years. I guess that’s a pretty good reason to keep all of this a secret.”

“We trust that you won’t share this news with anyone,” Natasha said quietly, her voice full of calm assurance but with an edge that wasn’t quite a threat.

“Of course; I’ll keep this to myself and help all I can,” Trip answered, not unmoved by Natasha’s tone but making it as clear as he could that it wasn’t needed. “Look, I know that it’s hard to trust each other. Especially after, well, everything. But… Skye’s my friend, my teammate, and almost the little sister I never had.” Skye blushed but couldn’t help smiling. “I appreciate your trust in me, and if I can help keep things under wraps for you, I will.”

“Coulson and May know, obviously,” Skye explained. “But no one else does. Fitz and Simmons… they’re great friends, but until they learn to…”

“Lie a little better?” Trip offered with a grin. “I pointed that out to Simmons, back at the Hub. She’s a surprisingly terrible liar for an agent.”

“It’s not lack of trust in them,” Maria agreed. “But you’re right; they’re terrible at concealment. And until they can do better, or circumstances dictate otherwise, we can’t let them know.”

“Understood,” Trip agreed. He opened his mouth to ask another question, but Natasha spoke before he could.

“Skye, you know what can be shared and what shouldn’t,” Nat said to Skye with a glance at Maria. “And we have some other tasks that need seeing to. If you’d excuse us?”

“Sure,” Trip agreed. He waited a moment while the trio traded hugs and kisses before leaving Trip and Skye alone again.

“I’m sorry to have to ask you to keep this from the rest of the team,” Skye said quietly when they were alone.

“Nah, don’t worry about it, girl. It’s fine.” Trip smiled. “So three soulmates, hmm?”

“Well, only the three of us so far. But we’ll find our fourth when the time is right,” Skye answered with assurance.
“What’s it like?”

Skye smiled. “It’s… it’s like coming home after a long time away and knowing that everything is right where you left it, that you can curl up in your own bed with your best pillow and your cozy blanket and just be safe. It’s… it’s just amazing.

“I’m happy for you, Skye. You deserve it,” Trip told her sincerely; then his eyes lit up as he apparently made another connection. “You don’t just know Steve Rogers, either. You know him. And… I assume, the rest of the Avengers too?”

Skye laughed. “Yes. I met them before I ever wound up on this team. Dr. Banner is part of the reason for my multiple division status. I audited a couple of classes when he was teaching, and apparently impressed him. He has been part of my cover, on and off, when operating with other scientists.”

“Damn, girl,” Trip was grinning again, and Skye smiled too because the expression was infectious. “Can you tell me more about them?”

“Sure, but you didn’t hear about it from me!” Skye laughed.

“You got a deal!”
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

RealSHIELD arrives and things get interesting.

Chapter Notes

Holy cats, guys! We're closing in on 10,000 hits and 500 kudos in under 20 chapters. You people are amazing! Thank you as always for all the love, comments, shares, etc. We really appreciate it!
Skye makes friends with everyone, doesn't she?

Chapter 19

As it turned out, it was good that Trip walked in on them when he did. May partnered Skye with Trip for missions, so May didn’t have to be constantly watching Skye’s back; the hacker had already unnecessarily been shot once under SHIELD’s supervision. Nat and Maria had made it clear that if it happened again, Skye wouldn’t be coming back. The Avengers could certainly use someone of her multitude of skills. Clint was already making noises about training a replacement and taking fewer jobs(barring global emergency), not wanting to be away from home as much as he had been during his ‘agent’ days.

Clint was convinced that Skye could be his replacement, despite Skye’s skepticism. May had been right that once taught to use a sniper rifle, Skye’s accuracy rate was extremely high with or without the scope. The calculations necessary for accurate targeting at long range were something she could do fairly readily and without extensive thought. She wasn’t in Clint’s category yet, but she probably
could be if she decided to dedicate herself to it. But Skye was still uncomfortable with taking lives unless absolutely necessary. She preferred ICERS to live-ammo guns, and both the bow and the sniper rifle were definitely weapons of the more lethal variety.

Slowly, the Avengers were coordinating with Coulson and Skye to take down HYDRA cells. SHIELD was designed as a spy agency, gathering intel, rather than them taking down the groups themselves. The SHIELD teams and the Avengers were learning to work with each other as they progressed, and the entire operation became much smoother over time.

Skye and Trip had gone out on a couple assignments with them, and since Trip knew who Skye was, Skye was able to take those opportunities to take a break from her cover for a little while. It was a welcome relief, knowing that for those brief periods she could just be herself. Skye was also trying to track down who the heads of HYDRA actually were, and that was another major project of its own. They were all extremely well hidden, of course, but finding them was necessary. The intention was to identify as many as possible and take them all at once if they could; taking them one by one would allow those left to bring others in as replacements, and that wasn’t a good idea.

But surely, steadily, they were making progress.

Skye also continued her quiet contacts with Agent Weaver. They accepted the ‘recruits’ from RealSHIELD, as the group was calling itself; former agents Bobbi Morse and Alphonso Mackenzie - or Mack, as he asked to be called with a friendly smile. Seeing how close Fitz and Mack got, bonding over mutual love of building things, Skye was guiltily glad that Fitz didn’t know her secret and so couldn’t let it slip accidentally. Fitz would never betray her intentionally, but sometimes when he got on a roll he didn’t censor his thoughts very well.

As their plans progressed, Coulson also brought Izzy Hartley, Idaho, and Lance Hunter into SHIELD. Skye immediately liked Hunter. It wasn’t just that she knew he wasn’t part of RealSHIELD, it was their similar worldviews that made her like him. A lot of agents, even after all they’d seen, looked at things with a black and white worldview.

Hunter gave her a once over the first time the pair of them were in a room alone together. Since they happened to be in the kitchen. Skye grinned and went over to the fridge, pulling out a beer and handing it to Hunter.

“You certainly know a way to bloke’s heart,” Hunter said.

“Yeah, I got a soulmate,” Skye said, taking a sip of her own beer and pulling herself up on the counter. “But I could certainly use a teammate and a friend.”

“Woah, wait, I didn’t mean…” Hunter scrambled, backtracking verbally. Then he saw Skye laughing at him and grinned sheepishly. “You were havin’ me on, hmm?”

“Well, the soulmate part is true,” she answered cheerfully. “But I didn’t seriously think you were hitting on me or anything.”

“Bloke can’t help appreciating a pretty woman,” Hunter defended himself, but his tone was mild as Skye gave no impression of being offended.

“Thank you,” Skye said, dipping her head. “What do you think, so far?”

“This place? Bit dark, isn’t it? This whole secret-agency thing.”

“Why are you here, then?” Skye asked matter-of-factly.
“Iz and Idaho. They’re my team, my partners. An’ Iz, she felt like we were needed here. So here we came,” Hunter explained.

Skye’s smile turned genuine. “I know what you mean. My team… they’re special to me too. Gotta stick with my team.”

“Glad t’ hear it,” Hunter said. “If more of these SHIELD folk had the same ideas, maybe we’d have gotten along better before.”

“Well, SHIELD is a much smaller place these days,” Skye replied, her tone light but her expression serious. “Some of us, about all we have left is each other. So we’ve had to embrace it.”

“Sounds like a group of people I can work with, then,” Hunter replied, taking a swig of his beer.

“I’m not wild about secrets either, you know,” Skye said. “I used to work for the Rising Tide. If you told me before the Battle of New York where I’d be now, I would have laughed in your face.”

“Wait, you worked for the Rising Tide? How the bloody hell did you end up here?” Hunter asked.

Skye laughed until she almost fell off the counter at Hunter’s reaction. “It’s kind of a long story, but the basic gist is I learned that not all secrets are bad. And sometimes SHIELD can be really useful.”

“I get that, I guess. I’m just used to working without annoyances like rules and laws,” Hunter said.

Skye nodded. “I get that,” she said. “A part of me still misses that aspect. Total freedom.”

“Never knowing what the day was going to bring when you woke up,” Hunter said. “Taking any job you wanted. Not dealing with bosses.”

“Waking up not knowing what state you were in,” Skye said.

“Or Country,” Hunter said.

“I’ve been through North and Central America,” Skye said. “All I had was this old, blue van. Everywhere else I’ve been to was with the team.”

“I was all over the world with the SAS before I left,” Hunter admitted. “Been a lot of other places since. Some amazing, some not so pretty.”

Skye made a face. “Can’t quite picture you in the military, with your opinion on rules,” she teased lightly.

“S’why I left, love,” Hunter quipped back. Skye laughed, nodding. “Wasn’t for me, but hey… we’re all young and stupid at some point, right?”

“True enough. How do you think I wound up living in my van?” she replied.

“Sounds… interesting,” Hunter replied with a tilt of his head.

“That’s one word for it. I loved the independence, having my own space that was just mine,” Skye said. “But I also learned about the… hmm… shall we say less pleasant side of that sort of life.”

“And what side is that?” Hunter asked, seeming genuinely curious.

“Not knowing where your next meal is coming from,” Skye admitted quietly. “Not having a home to go to, so you take your chances on your own wherever you happen to be. That sort of thing.”
“No family to visit?”

Skye shook her head. “Nope. It’s pretty common knowledge around here; I’m an orphan. Left the system on my own when I was 16. Was just me, myself and I until I joined SHIELD. Even the Rising Tide is just a loose collection of black hats, not an organization with real teams or anything.”

“That’s rough,” Hunter agreed. “Now I know why you’re happy here,” he added, teasingly.

“It’s fine. Is what it is,” Skye answered with a shrug, smiling. “But yeah. Coulson was the first person to trust me, just as me, and to want my help on the team. And the team is the closest thing I have to family.” Which was entirely true, but the team she meant was much bigger than the team he would hear about if he asked around.

“I get that,” Hunter agreed. “Well, then. To teammates,” he said, raising his bottle in her direction. She clinked her bottle against his and they both took a long drink.

“So,” Skye said, sliding off the counter. “You had the grand tour yet?”

“More or less. But I haven’t met many folks yet,” Hunter said.

“Let’s see if we can fix that,” Skye offered. Hunter nodded and followed her out of the kitchen.

Though various teams were in and out of the base regularly, Skye introduced Hunter to FitzSimmons and the science staff fairly easily. When they bumped into Trip, he joined the impromptu tour of people. Skye got to meet Izzy and Idaho, too; she knew she had to be careful around them, because Izzy at least was known to RealSHIELD, but it was tough. She really wanted to like Izzy; the older woman was rough-and-tumble with a quirky sense of humor and definitely not afraid to get her hands dirty.

In fact, she preferred it. Skye very quickly learned that though Izzy was proficient with all kinds of firearms, her weapon of choice was a large, heavy combat knife. Skye admitted some training with unarmed combat and short weapons like knives and Izzy was quick to rope her into a sparring session one day soon.

At least Nat and May would be happy to know that she could mark another body type and fighting style off her list of things to she needed to learn.

But the sparring match never happened. Coulson sent them in to take a 0-8-4, the original 0-8-4, back into custody. Izzy didn’t die, but she lost her arm just below her elbow after grabbing the thing. If she lived through surgery, physical therapy would take a few months before she’d be mission-ready again.

Hunter, who had become Skye’s drinking buddy, railed at her during Izzy’s surgery about how Fury should have destroyed any and all 0-8-4s they came into contact with rather than squirreling them away. She felt extremely awkward as Hunter ranted, not feeling safe enough or comfortable with the idea.

Agent 33 showed up a week later for debrief. She had been on-mission when HYDRA attacked and barely made it to a safe house. Given the details of her mission (which Skye was not privy to, but didn’t care), she had been forced to go dark and ditch all her phones and electronics. It hadn’t been easy, but she had made it back and fortunately had still trusted Sharon enough to make their lunch meeting. Skye was simply grateful that she had made it back.

As was SOP for numbered Agents, Kara barely acknowledged Skye and Skye barely acknowledged Kara. They both had their separate duties. Kara was sent on a couple missions with the Avengers at
Sharon’s recommendation. With her current combat skills, Skye wasn’t at Avenger-worthy level just yet, but May said that she was getting close.

Her own secret numbered status had caused quite the controversy between Bobbi and Hunter not long after Kara’s arrival. When the topic of numbered agents came up, Skye had walked in on the middle of it when she had come to dinner (Jemma had had to pull her out of the malware/spybot scan she was doing on their servers).

“... telling you it’s too good to be true,” Hunter was saying. “It’s probably an old S.H.I.E.L.D legend that just resurfaced. We had a few of those in SAS. One was the crazy rumor of a hooded figure that appeared when you needed assistance most. It isn’t real.”

“And I’m telling you that, whoever they are, they’re real!” Bobbi insisted. “S.H.I.E.L.D has a long history of numbering Agents with either dangerous connections or high-profile family. And Agent 42 is known to have been involved in several undercover operations! They say his or her input is part of why there’s a S.H.I.E.L.D here to begin with; that she could break into the control feeds of the controlled soldiers.”

Which was true, Skye reflected, but she had had no idea how that had gotten associated with Agent 42. Unless people were just starting to take anything they couldn’t quite believe and attributing it to the unidentified Agent.

“We still don’t know what department they were a part of or if they survived…” Jemma said. “It’d be a shame if they didn’t, given what they could do.”

“I used to be pretty close friends with Barton,” Bobbi noted. “Rumor had it that he was her SO.”

“That’s what’s so frustrating,” Jemma whined. “All we have is rumor and speculation. No one has even seen her. Skye, do you think you could find anything if you looked?”

Trip was trying to keep his face straight and mostly succeeding. Skye shrugged. “A number isn’t a name,” she said. “Based on what I’ve seen so far, the numbered agent files are so encrypted that there’s no way to track them without knowing actual names. Besides which, I’m starting to wonder if we even should. Clearly Fury never felt the need to make the names public and neither does Coulson. Shouldn’t we trust that they know what they’re doing?”

Jemma looked bothered by this, as did Bobbi, Izzy, Idaho, and Mack, but Skye pretended not to notice and knew it was for different reasons. She filed away the mental note as she kept her expression schooled that Jemma might be someone to watch who might be sympathetic to Gonzalez’s… coup.

“I’m just pointing out that if we could track her down and bring her in, she could help,” Jemma said.

“They’re probably safe with whoever qualified them for Agent Status,” Trip put in.

“That’s true,” Jemma conceded. “We all have loved ones that wanted us to stay home rather than come back.”

“Or, if it’s true that Barton really is their SO, maybe they’re safe working for the Avengers,” Trip suggested, trying to help Skye divert the speculation a bit. Bobbi and Jemma both looked as if that idea hadn’t even occurred to them. “And we’re working with the Avengers, so maybe they’re already helping and we just don’t know it.”

“But if he or she is working with us, shouldn’t we know it?” Bobbi asked, undeterred.
“Why should we?” Hunter asked skeptically.

Trip just raised an eyebrow. “Why were the numbered agents given numbers to begin with?” he asked instead of answering.

“High profile relatives or other dangerous connections,” Bobbi answered by rote, even though she’d said something just a few minutes before; Trip hadn’t made it into the room yet, so the question didn’t seem too out of place.

“And if those connections are still dangerous, wouldn’t they be more so now that SHIELD is so much smaller? Should we put them at risk by exposing them now?” Trip pointed out.

“You might have a point,” Bobbi conceded.

“Well, who would be capable of providing that kind of security within SHIELD?” Jemma asked brightly. “Maybe we can at least rule out some people.” She turned to Skye. “Could you hide someone’s identity so thoroughly?”

Skye rolled her eyes. “You are aware that I deleted all my history prior to the Rising Tide, right?”

“So you could,” Hunter chimed in.

“Well, yeah,” Skye agreed with a shrug. “But I was barely a level 1 agent when SHIELD fell, and we had bigger problems at the time.”

“Have you been asked to cover anyone else’s tracks since then?” Jemma asked excitedly.

“Yes,” Skye answered forthrightly. “When our team left the HUB before the military could get there, DC asked me to erase our whole team’s IDs. Make us all ghosts so the military couldn’t get any of us. You, Fitz, May…” And Ward, but Skye didn’t want to think about it.

“So she could have done something similar,” Jemma said. “It can’t be that hard if you have CS knowledge.”

Hunter eyed Jemma speculatively. “So you keep goin’ on about Agent 42 bein’ a ‘she’... an’ you’re causing a right scene over ‘her’... maybe Agent 42 is you, and you just don’t want us to know.”

Trip and Skye laughed as Jemma spluttered for a moment. “I’m not!” Jemma protested. “I wish I were. Then I wouldn’t have to keep wondering about her!”

“I’m pretty sure it’s not Simmons,” Trip finally said, coming to Jemma’s rescue. “When we first met, she was the worst liar I’d ever seen with a Level 5 clearance.”

“I’ve been training some with Agent Romanov,” Jemma said primly. “She said she’s working with everyone who might be at risk should Talbot come after us again.”

“Also, if it were Simmons, I’m pretty sure Fitz would know,” Skye agreed. “Neither of them is really good at keeping things from each other.”

Hunter turned his speculative glance on Skye. “Now I’m wondering if you do know something,” he said. “Either it is Simmons and you’re covering for her… or you know it’s not, because you’re 42.”

Before Skye could respond, Jemma shook her head. “It’s not me. And it can’t be Skye either. She’s too new to SHIELD. And besides, it is known that Agent 42 passed every test for all three SHIELD Academies. Skye couldn’t do that, she didn’t even graduate high school properly.”
Skye blushed and ducked her head, not having to act out her embarrassment at what Jemma thought of her. It was one of the things about her cover that she was really starting to hate, that she had to let her teammates keep thinking she was stupid.

“Damn, girl,” Trip said in a hushed tone; he shifted a few feet so he stood right beside Skye in a show of solidarity. Skye peeked and saw everyone looked shocked at Jemma’s words. “That’s just mean.”

“Yeah,” Bobbi said, giving Skye a comforting look. “You don’t have to be an asshole about the fact that not everyone goes to college.”

“I only could because I went into the Army,” Hunter agreed, nodding. “Couldn’t afford it otherwise with my grades.”

Jemma blushed. “I didn’t mean it like that,” she protested. “Skye is doing quite well with her science… projects…” Jemma stumbled over trying not to outright say that she and Fitz were teaching Skye science. “Just that you have to have a Ph.D. to even apply to SciTech, and…”

“We get it,” Hunter interrupted dryly. “Most of us don’t qualify to be in your super secret club. It’s fine.” He looped an arm around Skye’s shoulders comfortably.

“I always thought doing well in school was just being able to quote the teacher on a test,” Mack noted. Skye was a little surprised by his support. Mack was pretty aloof. “Just because you can’t give information back rote doesn’t have a damn thing to do about intelligence.”

“Guys, I’m fine,” Skye interjected. “I appreciate the support but I don’t think Jemma meant anything by it.” Which wasn’t entirely true, but Skye had been UC long enough to be convincing. “She’s right. I don’t have the experience that most SHIELD agents have. I never went to any of the Academies. I’m here because Coulson thought I could help, and computers are something I am really good at.”

“And you’ve come a real long way in your ops training,” Trip agreed with a grin. “Even Agent May says so.”

As the tension diffused, the group began to break apart, smaller conversations starting up here and there. Hunter gave Skye one last side-on squeeze and went back over to Bobbi; the two quickly started bickering about something else. Skye was a little startled when Mack approached her, though.

“Hey, Skye… you know anything about cars?” Mack asked tentatively.

“Um, a little… I used to tinker with my van a bit. Had to Macgyver a few things in order to run my computers from inside,” she offered.

Mack smiled. “Want to come tinker with me tomorrow? Always did prefer hands-on over theory.”

Skye was a little taken aback and she just blinked at him for a moment. Then a slow smile spread across her face. “I’d like that. Maybe after lunch? Agent May has my mornings pretty well booked…”

“Sure. Just come find me when you’re free,” Mack offered.

“I will. Thank you.” For more than just the invitation, but Skye thought Mack picked up on it.

“Sure thing,” he agreed, before drifting off to talk with some of the more mechanically minded agents who’d just come in to the lounge.
“So, Skye…” Bobbi started as Skye took a sip from her water bottle. “A couple of us were wondering. You’ve mentioned a soulmate a few times, but you don’t say who they are. And we’ve noticed how close Captain America is with you…”

Skye swallowed her water and gained a look of disgust at the thought. Steve was… She was close to Clint, but they had a more brother-sister relationship. They gave each other shit but if someone messed with the other sibling, there was hell to pay. But Steve…After being running buddies for so long and exchanging music and film recommendations, Steve had become like her best friend.

Trip laughed, “I’m gonna take that as a no,” he said.

“Rogers isn’t my type,” Skye said almost forcefully.

“You’re telling me you don’t have a thing for Tall, Hot, and American?” Izzy asked; she was up and about, but with her arm in a sling. “I might be a recent widow, but he’s still nice to look at.”

Skye smiled a little sadly. Izzy had been married to Victoria Hand and had expressed on more than one occasion her regret that she didn’t get to exact vengeance on Ward. “Nice to look at, sure, but he treats me like just one of the guys. If we were soulmates wouldn’t we be all over each other?”

“That’s true,” Jemma said meekly. “Rumor has it Agent Romanov kept trying to set him up with various women because she thought he needed to get laid. Apparently, he never had sex before the war and hasn’t since.”

“Does SHIELD really have rumors about everything?” Skye asked after a moment of startled silence. “I mean, geez. Next you’re going to tell me that Director Fury and Maria Hill were secretly a thing. And if there were rumors about that, I don’t want to know,” Skye forestalled further comments.

Izzy laughed. “We’re a spy agency. There’s a lot of secrets that people don’t know much about. The senior agents know better, but the junior agents like to speculate. You should have been at the Triskellion after the Battle of New York.”

“Or SciOps Academy. Rumors were running wild there too,” Fitz added.

“Most of it isn’t actually true,” Trip said, his tone amused. “And I think most people know that. But that doesn’t keep the rumors from flying around.”

“But you do know your soulmate?” Bobbi pressed lightly.

Skye nodded. “I do. But I’ve been dedicated to the team, on the move, for the past few years. And I don’t want to be a risk to them anymore than they would want to be a risk to me. So I don’t talk about it a lot.”

“That’s understandable, actually,” Izzy said in a firm tone. “What we do can be dangerous,” she added, wincing slightly.

“It can,” Skye agreed. “And there are people who know how to reach my soulmate in an emergency.”

“Good,” Izzy said with a sad smile. “Hold on to them for as long as you can,” she said. “I might have not had a soulmate, but we spent 20 years together. It sure as hell felt like we were.”

“We may not get as much time together as we’d like, but I hold onto the memories of every moment we have together,” Skye said softly, a wistful smile on her face. “Sometimes I think that we’d be just
as close without the soulbond, but I don’t know that I’d have ever had a chance without the bond. So maybe it’s just that we have the soulmarks because it wouldn’t have happened otherwise. Maybe you and your wife didn’t need them.”

Izzy turned to Skye with a fond expression and a wistful smile of her own. “That’s a very sweet thought, Skye. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

The days passed quicker now as summer turned to fall. Skye worked with May and Trip every day, still, but she started splitting her afternoons between her comms work and the garage with Mack. She asked to have her van brought to the base after a few weeks of tinkering on the base’s vehicles with Mack. After it arrived, she hesitantly asked for his help with it.

“What’s up, Half-Byte?” Mack asked when she stood by uncertainly. Skye smiled at the nickname; he’d argued that she couldn’t be a full byte of data because she was tiny. And compared to him she was, so she let it go.

“Well, I thought… maybe if you’d be willing, we could take a look at my van today?” she suggested.

Mack smiled. “You got it. Where is it stashed?”

Skye led him to the out-of-the-way corner in which it had been parked. “She’s about one of the only things that has ever really been mine. I tried to take care of her as best I could,” she explained in a low voice.

“I’m sure you did great,” Mack said gently. “May I take a look?”

They spent a few hours a day over the next several days with Mack patiently showing Skye the best way to re-do the modifications she’d made. Her changes were functional, Mack assured her, but there were more efficient ways to go about it. Skye just smiled and worked with him to improve her precious van.

Mack also suggest a paint job and maybe reupholstering the van floor and front seats. It wasn’t necessary, but since the van hadn’t really been updated since the 80s at the least, it might be time to do so. Skye admitted to herself that it was kind of nice having the money to update her home, and also being able to have it on the base, so she could go in her van if she wanted to text Maria or Nat. Apart from the ‘Real SHIELD undercover’ thing, Skye could almost get used to this kind of life. Fixing cars with Mack, learning combat skills from pretty much every Ops agent who wanted to show her a skill, Tai Chi with May, hanging out with Trip and FitzSimmons. She almost didn’t notice how tired Coulson was getting. She had given May a questioning look, but May non-verbally gave her the sign that it was something that was being handled.

The other thing that threw Skye was on a retrieval mission to check out a report of a possible item of alien origin. The mission was a dud until a firefight broke out between rebels and the SHIELD agents, bringing back memories for Skye of her first official mission. Somehow, though, she got cut off from her group and all of a sudden she was face to face with Raina.

“You,” Skye growled. She lifted her ICER, pointing it at Raina unhesitatingly.

“Hello, Skye,” Raina said coolly. “You look… different. Your father won’t be pleased about this change.”
Skye paused, the gun wavering though it didn’t lower. “My father?”

“He’s very angry at Coulson and SHIELD for stealing you away from him,” Raina continued silkily. “He loves you very much. If you’d like, I can take you to him.”

“But… SHIELD didn’t steal me, they saved me,” Skye stammered.

“That’s not the way your father tells it. He’s gotten quite agitated by your choices since he found out where you were. You shouldn’t agitate him, it’s not good for anyone. What’s the way Bruce Banner tells it? Oh yes, you won’t like him when he’s angry.”

“Is that a threat?” Skye spat. “You tell my father that I want to meet him, but I’m not about to abandon my team - my family - just because my biological father demanded that I do.”

Raina tisked behind her teeth, shaking her head. “Oh, dear, he won’t be happy to hear that. But…” Raina shrugged and turned away. “I’ll tell him what you said. It won’t be me he’s angry with. He has so been looking forward to meeting you at last, you know.”

“I don’t believe you,” Skye responded, narrowing her eyes. “You’ve never been straight with us about anything, Raina.”

“You’ll see,” Raina replied sweetly. “Family is the most important thing, after all. We all have a destiny, Skye, and my grandmother told me all about mine. Don’t you want to hear about yours?”

“If they’re going to threaten the people I care about… then no, not really,” Skye shot back. “Sometimes family are the people who take you in and care about you, not the people you never knew.”

“Just be careful, Skye,” Raina cautioned lightly. “Or you’ll lose your chance to become what you were meant to be.” With that bit of mysterious advice, Raina slipped into the shadows and Skye lost track of her quickly.

Rattled, Skye made her way back to her team, May and Bobbi spotting her and giving her cover so that she could make it to the Quinjet. “You okay?” May asked.

“I just saw Raina,” Skye said, feeling the instant feeling of comfort from Maria and Nat before it left again.

“Really?” May asked. “Skye, what’d she say?”

“I’m not really sure…” Skye said. “She insisted that I go with her to meet my father and seemed to indicate that he didn’t like hearing no as an answer to his requests.”

“He could have the Gravitonium,” May muttered. “What else did she say?”

“Just a bunch of cryptic stuff about who I’m meant to be,” Skye said.

“Typical,” May said with a nod. “Strap in. We’re headed out.”

“Everyone else alright?” Skye asked.

“Yeah,” Bobbi agreed. “Nothing serious, though we’ve got a couple of minor injuries.”

Skye nodded her acceptance and moved to strap herself in. She pulled out her tablet, double checking the leads that had brought them here to begin with. She didn’t find anything, but she hadn’t really expected to. Still, it gave her something to keep her mind busy during the flight.
And an excuse to cover her distraction while she reassured her soulmates that she was okay, just a little shaken up.

The debrief sucked. Massively sucked. May, Bobbi, and Trip who had become her partner, all listened as Skye detailed to Coulson exactly what Raina said about her father and the threat that Raina had shared.

Then Skye’s tablet pinged and she paled at what she read. “The rebels we were fighting,” she said, looking at the news articles rolling in. She always set 48 hour news alert before and after they went anywhere. “They’re all dead.”


Coulson paled and May looked scared, too. The fact that May looked scared... Skye’s phone pinged with the alert that one of her hacker emails had new mail. She unlocked the phone and checked it, then paled further. She threw the phone on the table and watched it skitter away from her. Trip looked at her for a second in concern before grabbing the phone and read aloud. “It’s a link to the news report and a message… ‘Courtesy of your father - Raina.’”

Skye was having a hard time escaping the thought that was looping around and around in her mind: that her father had killed all those people. Just to prove he could. Her father was a murderer. Her father was a murderer and he wanted her. Why did she always attract the insane, obsessive types?

“Skye,” May said, moving to Skye’s side. Skye looked up as her SO bent over, hands on her shoulders, and shook her just enough to get her attention. “Skye, listen to me. We have no proof that what she says is true. Remember?”

“Why would someone do this?” Skye asked in a small voice.

“We don’t know,” Coulson spoke up. “But we’ll find out. In the meantime, I’m taking you off the field roster for a few weeks.” Coulson’s voice was tense, terse, and Skye’s eyes widened as she took in the signs of stress on him.

“But D.C.,” Skye began, but then paused. Thanksgiving was only a few weeks away... maybe she didn’t want to protest too much at the moment.

“Just field missions, Skye,” Coulson said in a calmer voice. “We’re going to need your help in tracking down any possible... sources. But Raina got close to you once; I don’t want to give her another opportunity so soon.”

Skye nodded slowly, beginning to relax. May released her, taking the empty seat beside Skye rather than returning to Coulson’s side. “Maybe we should call the Avengers. See if she can stay with them for a while. They have the resources she’ll need, and it keeps her entirely out of Raina’s reach.”

“That’s a good idea,” Coulson agreed.

“You can’t keep me there indefinitely,” Skye grumbled, though a glance from May told her the older agent knew it was just for show. “I won’t be Rapunzel. You need me.”

“Of course we do, Skye,” Trip agreed. “But maybe they’re right and you should keep outta sight for a bit. We don’t want them to get what they want, do we?” Skye shook her head.
“We’ll work it out with them,” Coulson said, his tone containing a note of finality. “For now, everyone go get cleaned up and get some sleep. It’s late.” Skye glanced at the clock and realized it was after midnight. She saw Trip clear the screen of her phone before handing it back to her, and she gave him a small smile.

“Come on, girl,” Trip said, urging her up with a smile. “Let’s get a snack before bed.”

“Sounds good to me,” she agreed with a small smile. Skye cast one more worried glance at Coulson, but saw May shake her head and so Skye kept her questions to herself. Coulson looked wiped; hopefully he would get some rest as well.

Turned out that he didn’t. Skye passed Coulson’s office two hours later, on her way to bed, and noticed that all the lights were on. She paused, concerned, then tapped lightly on the door. Tapped again when the first try didn’t get an answer. “AC?” she called softly.

Abruptly, the door opened just enough for May to pull her inside. Skye blinked at her, startled, then her eyes found the camera behind May, pointed at the wall. The projector screen was up and Coulson stood by the wall, etching… something… into it. “Holy shit,” Skye murmured as May went back to the camera Skye followed her. “What’s going on?” she asked in a low voice.

“This has happened periodically ever since Coulson saw similar writing that Garrett did on the Bus’ lab doors,” May said. ”We don’t know what it means, but we were hoping you could bring some of this to the Tower and show Thor. Especially considering the whole alien thing…”

“Okay, so today’s the day for the freaking me out, right? I mean, first the creepy encounter with Raina, then we find out I’ve got a homicidal maniac for a father who just killed a bunch of people to prove a point -”

“You don’t know that,” May interrupted. “And no, I’m not trying to freak you out. But Skye… I need to know. Does this mean anything to you? You’re not doing anything like this, are you?”

Skye shook her head. “Not a bit of it. I saw a few snippets of what Garrett did, tried to do some searches to see if I could find anything, but it’s not in my head at all. Although…” she trailed off, watching Coulson for a few minutes.

“What?” May asked after several minutes of silence; patience was normally her thing, but Skye could tell she was concerned.

“I couldn’t draw it… but it looks like a map to me,” Skye said slowly.

“A map? We thought maybe it was writing of some sort, but…” May looked at Skye thoughtfully.

“No, I don’t think so,” Skye replied. “When I look at it, I see a map. But a map to what, I couldn’t tell you.”

May studied her protegee for a moment more before nodding. “Alright, I believe you. Can you show some of these images to Thor? Maybe he’ll have a better idea what to make of it.”

Skye nodded. “Yeah. I can ask.” She sighed heavily.

“You okay?” May asked, not looking at her, still taking pictures.

“It’s just been a long day, and when I freak out… they feel it. And then they freak out and it becomes this whole…”
“So they feel everything you feel?” May asked. Skye didn’t blame her. Soulmates were rare, bonds on this level were rarer. May probably hadn’t met many soulmated people before.

“Yeah, more or less,” Skye said. “Sometimes it’s good, sometimes it’s great, and sometimes it really sucks.”

“Did you tell them you’ll be back at the Tower for a few weeks?” May asked; she hadn’t called the Tower because she knew Skye could go there anytime she wanted to.

“Not yet. It’s hard to communicate beyond emotions, and at this time of night I didn’t want to wake them unnecessarily.” Skye shrugged. “But whenever you and Coulson want me to go, I can go. Though we might go away for a few days for Thanksgiving.”

“You know, I used to be Maria’s SO. Maria used to go away for a few days on Thanksgiving or Christmas every year. You going to the same place?”

“I can’t comment on that,” Skye said with a smile.

“Maria never did either,” May said, her voice full of respect.

“It’s not my secret to tell,” Skye said.

“Fair enough,” May replied. “Just, wherever it is… be safe.”

“I’ll do my best,” Skye agreed softly.

“You should go get some sleep,” May said after a few more minutes.

“I know. If you need to sleep in after this is finished,” Skye tilted her head towards Coulson, “go ahead. I’ll work out with Trip and Bobbi in the morning.”

“Don’t short yourself on sleep, either,” May said. “It’s going on three o’clock.”

Skye made a face. “I’ll leave a message for Trip that I got kept up late and I’ll find him when I’m awake.”

“Good Night, Skye,” May said.

“Good night, May,” Skye said as she let herself out of the office. She did send a message to Trip before going to bed herself.

But she didn’t sleep much that night, either.

After she had two nightmares, twenty minutes apart, that left her so scared that she went to her van, Maria and Natasha called her and talked to her. She then catnapped the rest of the night, getting less than an hour of sleep in total. She got up at 5am and was in place for Tai Chi when May walked in, looking tired.

“He asleep?” Skye asked as May got into position.

“Yup,” May said simply. Then they started the routine. They went through the entire routine without speaking a word.

When they finished they also wordlessly went to go spar. Skye didn’t say another word until breakfast, when Coulson stood up. “So I have an announcement. Due to unforeseen events, Skye is going to be taken out of the field and off base.” Skye nearly dunked her head into her coffee mug.
From the lack of response, Skye assumed this wasn’t news to most people. Word had spread from those who had been in the debriefing.

“If you need something, email me,” Skye said finally. “Or call, whatever. I’ll still be working, just not from here.”

“You let us know if you need anything, too,” Trip said lightly. “We’re SHIELD, we take care of our own.”

Skye saw nods around the table, though she noticed Bobbi and Mack hesitate just briefly. “I will. Sorry about all this…”

“It’s not your fault,” Bobbi spoke up. “We all saw the footage; it’s probably for the best for you to be out of reach for a while.”

Nodding but with a soft sigh of relief, Skye tried to smile. “Thanks, guys. I’ll be in touch.”

“Trip, I want you ready in an hour to take Skye to her safe house,” Coulson ordered. “I want you back no later than this time tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, sir,” Trip said with a grin. That would give him plenty of time to see Skye settled in, get to talk with some of the Avengers he was slowly making friends with, and only a few people would know where Skye actually was. 12 hours flight time could get them almost anywhere.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Skye goes to the Tower.

Chapter Notes

I can't believe how amazing the response to this story has been. We're approaching the first 100K words, we've got over 10k hits and over 500 kudos. The comments have been thoughtful, supportive, and wonderful to read - and we've heard from several new readers in the past few chapters who've had a lot to say! So thank you all for being here, and we hope to keep hearing what you all think.

We've also been given another photomanip! It's not in this chapter, but it will likely be in one of the next couple. :) If anyone else has any artistic skills, we'd love to see what you can put together. Until then, I'll keep finding photos and making manips for the chapters because I feel like it keeps things interesting. :)}
Chapter 20

The group finished breakfast a short while later and Trip followed Skye back to accommodation to get her stuff. He had a Go Bag packed so he could be ready for a short trip anytime. “Hey, girl. You alright?”

“Didn’t sleep much last night,” Skye admitted softly. “But I’ll be fine. You know once we get there, I’ll have fewer problems.”

“Yeah, I know.” Trip smiled sympathetically. “Need a hand with your stuff?”

“Nah, I got it,” Skye said. “Just go grab yours.”

“Sure thing. And if you wanna sit up front with me, I can give you the rundown on Quinjet controls…”

Tempting offer. Really tempting. “Hmm. That could be interesting,” Skye agreed lightly.

It was actually a fairly short trip to the Tower, and the lesson passed the time quickly. Skye was glad of that, and also that they had permission to land on Tony’s helipad. She was not up to a long walk through the city or a drive through the chaos that was New York City traffic.

Skye paid close attention to Trip giving her her first flight lesson. He even let her take the controls for a moment in-flight, which was pretty cool and cheered her up a little. But the only thing that really, truly helped was when they landed and Skye was pulled into the safety of her soulmates’ arms. They had been waiting for them when Trip landed, waiting anxiously. Coulson hadn’t told them much about what Raina had said, merely that Skye needed to be kept some place safe for a few weeks while things settled down.

Trip had nothing but a kind smile for them when Nat and Maria both hugged her and whispered comfort in her ear, holding their own fear at bay. He did look a little wide-eyed at Skye speaking softly to Natasha in Russian, but elected to say nothing.

They all went in and went down to the common floor. “Welcome back, Miss Skye. Would you care to play another game of Counter-Hack later today?” JARVIS asked.

Skye gave a small smile. Counter-Hack had been a game she and JARVIS had developed in early days of Skye living in the tower where they tried to hack each other (winner being the one who could hack most undetectably, getting the most data, and while defending their own system). “Maybe, JARVIS, we’ll have to see.” Trip stared. “Tony’s AI,” Skye said. “We’re old friends since my pre-soulmates days.”

“You’re friends with an AI?” Trip said.

Skye nodded. “We spent a lot of time together while everyone else was off at work before I joined SHIELD and back when I was living here.”

“You lived in the Avengers tower?” Trip said.

Maria laughed a little. “We might have read you in on why Skye’s undercover, but this is probably
your first time meeting the real Skye.”

Skye made a face, remembering Jemma’s insatiable curiosity about Agent 42, without knowing that Skye was a cover. She couldn’t help but wonder if she’d still want to be friends when it all came out. She had a feeling that some of the others were starting to pick up on the fact that she was smarter than her GED let on. Mack especially kept commenting on how quickly she picked up on Mechanical Engineering as they worked on her van together. Truthfully, that was in no small part because anyone who lived at the tower picked up some just by osmosis, and Skye had a tendency to read whatever books were lying around - which had largely been engineering books from Tony that he’d left there on purpose.

“Tony keeps sending me applications to Bachelor’s programs in various degrees,” Skye said. Maria frowned and Skye laughed, forgetting the reason why she was there. “I don’t mind it. It’s just his way of showing he cares.”

“Wait, so that part is true?” Trip asked curiously. “I wondered.”

Skye nodded. “The whole background sob-story, the GED is all true. I am an orphan; I did terrible at school, partly because I kept switching schools and partly because the teachers were convinced I was no good. I did drop out and a friend helped me with my GED; what it doesn’t include is the half-dozen college classes I audited for fun by hacking my way into various programs. Or the fact that I spent the time from all the classes in High School that I skipped in the library, reading whatever sounded interesting to me at the time.”

Trip nodded, giving Skye a small smile. “Girl, anyone who can hack like nobody’s business can not be stupid. I never thought like that about you.”

“I know,” Skye replied softly. “It’s one of the reasons why I’m glad you know. Because you never looked down on me over my education or my history. The cover is actually all true, up to a point; the Skye the team knows is the person I was before ever meeting my soulmates. I have changed, I fully admit that, but the easiest cover to keep is the one that just omits those changes. And I’ve very technically been undercover with the team for over a year, now.”

“And you’re doing a damn good job, girl,” Trip agreed. “Though I think Bobbi and Hunter are a bit suspicious…” Maria shot him a sharp glance and Trip shrugged.

Skye sighed. “That’s another issue entirely, and one I really can’t get into right now. But welcome to the Tower, and don’t be surprised if I don’t react quite the way you expect me to while we’re here.”

“Skye, listen a minute,” Trip said, moving to stand right in front of her. Skye tipped her head back to look up at him; his expression was unusually serious. “You’re my teammate and partner. Even more, you’re my friend. I get that maybe I don’t know you, the real you, as much as I’d like, but that’s okay. I get being undercover. I get that you and your soulmates are protecting each other. We all have walls and things we don’t share, and that’s okay.”

Trip caught Skye as she threw herself into his arms, hugging him tightly. They just stayed that way for several minutes, Maria and Natasha looking on with fond smiles, until Skye pulled back. “Thank you, Trip. That really means a lot to me; you have no idea how much.”

His signature grin was back as Trip looked down at the woman in his arms. “You accepted me despite who my SO was, gave me the benefit of the doubt when I needed it. Just call this me returning the favor.”

“I’m not sure we’re even in the same category, there, but if that’s really what you want…”
Trip laughed. “People are going to react in a lot of ways, girl, but most of us have been undercover. After they get over the initial shock, they’ll understand.”

“My worry is how long it’ll take for them to get over it,” Skye murmured.

Trip nodded, knowing instinctively she was thinking about her scientist friends. “Fitz won’t care, you know that right?”

Skye shrugged. “What happened?” Maria asked.

Trip sighed. “Hunter and Bobbi were arguing about who Agent 42 was. It’s not often that the science-types get a numbered agent among them. The rest of us got pulled into it and Jemma ended up making a comment about how Skye couldn’t possibly be Agent 42.”

“It’s dumb,” Skye said, looking down. “I’ve been called worse. I’m fine. I don’t know why I let it get to me.”

“Maybe because the Skye that never met her soulmates would have believed her?” Natasha suggested. Skye froze in realization.

“Yeah,” she said slowly. “I probably would have.”

“Jemma is a very nice girl,” Natasha said wisely, “but she’s had a pretty idyllic life, even if you include recent events. Both of her parents are still alive. She’s an only child, so she’s always been the center of attention at home. Incredibly gifted, so she was the center of attention among teachers. Gained friends, and even a best friend, at SHIELD… The idea that no one would spot that someone was a genius… or even the concept that they wouldn’t care… it doesn’t even register to her.”

“She doesn’t just do it with you,” Trip said. “She even does it to Fitz, with how he grew up. I don’t think she realizes she’s doing it and I know she doesn’t mean to.”

“Unfortunately, knowing she doesn’t really mean to poke holes into people doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt in the moment,” Maria commented. “Ignorance is a reason but shouldn’t be an excuse.”

“Jemma’s also very ‘academia or bust’ generally speaking,” Skye added. “She just can’t imagine a life where someone reasonably intelligent doesn’t give their all to school, nor does she really have any grasp on the kind of obstacles that less advantaged students have.” She sighed heavily.

“When the revelation comes, if she takes it badly… I’ll talk to her for you, Skye,” Trip offered.

“I may take you up on that,” Skye said with a smile. She opened her mouth to say something more, but the chime of the elevator’s arrival interrupted her.

“Skyenet!” Tony greeted cheerfully as he stepped out of the elevator, followed by Bruce. “JARVIS informed us that you’d arrived.” He paused, eyeing Trip. “Who’s your friend?”

The elevator chimed again, letting Sam and Steve out onto the common floor as well. Skye, feeling much better than she had only hours earlier, distributed hugs and smiles to her friends as they congregated. She got everyone to the lounge area to sit by the simple expediency of grabbing her soulmates and flopping onto one of the larger couches.

Trip followed Skye, looking a little uncertain of his place as the group grabbed their more or less accustomed places. Skye tossed a couple of large cushions onto the floor by where she was sitting and Trip settled by her with a smile.
“Everybody, this is my friend and team partner, Agent Triplett. Trip, meet the Avengers… you know, the ones you haven’t met yet,” Skye said.

“I’m very pleased to meet you all at last,” Trip said earnestly. “I’ve heard a lot about you, though mostly not from Skye.”

“Trip,” Steve greeted with a nod and smile. “It’s good to see you again.”

“So, what brings you here with a random Agent, sweetheart?” Tony asked, side-eyeing Trip for a moment.

“Well, I needed a ride and he was available to give it,” Skye replied glibly. “But also because he’s one of the few who knows the truth about me, so letting him bring me wasn’t a serious risk.”

“Because, you know, the happy greetings would’ve been a dead giveaway if we’d had someone here who didn’t know,” Maria deadpanned. Tony blinked at her, then made a face paired with a mildly apologetic shrug.

The question dimmed Skye’s mood drastically, though, as she remembered what had brought her back to the tower a few weeks ahead of schedule. Haltingly, she began to tell them all about the previous day’s mission; getting separated from the group, meeting Raina, the discussion and threats… and the messages that came later. She pulled out her phone and had JARVIS display the message for everyone to see.

“Wait a minute; I thought your parents were dead!” Tony was the first to respond.

“We all did,” Maria said when Skye just shrugged. “The report on the village in China where Skye was found indicated no survivors.”

“So how do you know this is really your father?” Steve asked in a calmer tone.

“We don’t,” Natasha said firmly. “If he approached us peaceably we could do a DNA test, match up his story with the reports. But unless something like that happens, we can’t know for sure.”

Skye sighed softly. “Every orphan wants to believe that their parents are still out there, somewhere. That someday they’ll come back, say it was all a huge mistake. But… Nat’s right. We don’t know. And even if he is my father… do I really want to associate myself with someone capable of… that?” She gestured towards the article about the murdered rebels.

“You certainly win the ‘Worst Parents of the Year Award’,” Tony said, looking over other photos of the event.

“Tony!” snapped Pepper.

“What! All I’m saying is that Howard totally sucked but he never did anything this bad,” Tony said. He saw Skye’s face and grew serious. “Hey, Skye, no,” he said. “Biological parents don’t matter to us. You want me to adopt you? Skye Stark has a nice ring to it. JARVIS is already like your big brother and you’re totally welcome here. I’d be proud to have you as my heir. I’m already leaving part of SI to you.” Skye couldn’t help but grin, though more at Trip’s expression as Tony rambled about adopting Skye. “I am old enough to be your father. It’s actually possible… JARVIS, run a DNA test and compare my blood to Skyenet’s!” he commanded.

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS said, clear exasperation towards his eccentric boss in his voice.

“Welcome to Tower Life,” Clint said to Trip from an open grate in an air vent above them. He
hopped down and hugged Skye. “I’d offer to adopt you too, except it’d be…”

“... weird?” Skye suggested, hugging back. The real reason was the security risk of it all. Exposing his family was something Clint wasn’t prepared to do. Also, Clint being her ‘dad’ when his kids called her ‘Auntie Skye’ would definitely be bizarre.

Clint laughed, “Yeah, it’d be kinda weird. I totally love you, but you’re more like my sister.”

Skye smiled up at him in thanks for the offer, though; she knew she was already part of his family, without the hassle of an adoption or anything like that. But at the same time, Tony’s offer was genuine and it touched Skye deeply. For a person who’d spent her whole life feeling unwanted, having someone offer to bring her into their family and genuinely meaning it was a completely unexpected thing.

“I… Tony, I really don’t know what to say,” Skye said hesitantly.

“You’re Skynet,” Tony said, shrugging. “You never hand me things, you talk to Jay like he’s a part of the family. I can talk tech with you…”

“I think what Tony means to say,” Pepper said in Tony’s place, “is you already feel like a part of the family. If a piece of paper makes you feel better about this whole thing, then we can be your family formally too.”

“I meant it when I promised to keep you safe, Skye,” Steve said quietly. He had been silent thus far and it had worried Skye. Steve was probably her best friend right now, even if she wasn’t his. “Even if it’s from your biological father.”

“And whether he is or not, he hasn’t been a part of your life in so long that he has no real claim on you,” Bruce spoke up, reminding everyone that he was there. “You’re an adult, Skye, and your family is whatever you want to make of it. If that’s us… we’re here for you, always.”

Trip stared as the Avengers all leapt to support Skye, realization crossing his face. “Your life is kinda surreal, you know that girl?”

“Hmmm?” Skye asked as she basked in the love she felt, both through the bond and from her friends and family members.

“Your family is made up of Avengers, girl,” Trip pointed out.

Skye shrugged. “And your grandfather was Gabe Jones,” she responded. “It’s my family. It wasn’t a conscious choice, it just sort of… happened.”

Trip laughed. “Yeah, I’m kinda gettin’ that. I’m thinkin’ your bad side is somewhere I never want to be.”

“I don’t think you have much to worry about,” Skye said with a grin. “You’ve been on my side since the Hub.”

“And at this moment, I’m damn glad of it.”

“You know what this means?” Tony asked, rubbing his hands together gleefully.

“Uh oh. Do I want to ask?” Bruce looked at Tony sidelong.

“Adoption party!” Tony crowed.
The rest of the group just laughed.

“Does that mean I get my own suit?” Skye asked sweetly. She wasn’t quite sure if the gleam in Tony’s eye meant yes or no.

~~~~~

As much as he would have liked to stay, Trip did have orders to be back at the Playground after breakfast the next day. Skye saw him off, giving him a tight hug.

“Be careful out there, yeah?” she said softly.

“Always. Promise,” Trip assured her.

“Good. Call if you need anything. I’m still technically working.”

“And those soulmates of yours are unlikely to let you slack on your ops training,” Trip agreed with a laugh.

“Oh, man, you have no idea!” Skye’s laughter joined Trip’s before she sobered. “Watch out for the team for me. I’m safe enough here, but out there…”

Trip nodded, understanding completely. “I’ll do everything I can.”

Skye nodded and stepped back so Trip could board the Quinjet. She was entirely unsurprised to find Natasha and Clint in the doorway, just waiting for her.

“They’ll be fine,” Natasha offered in her usual cool tone of reassurance as they all went back inside.

“I hope so,” Skye responded, letting them comfort her. “So, what’s new around here lately?”

“Well, you’re not actually Stark’s daughter. the DNA results came back negative, and Tony’s actually pretty disappointed about it,” Clint said in a teasing tone.

“As much as I love you guys, I think it would be weird to find out one of you were actually my father,” Skye said with a laugh.

“Tony going off on this adoption thing is probably the most exciting news we’ve had in awhile,” Natasha continued with a small smile. “We have been keeping an eye on both divisions of SHIELD, of course. Weaver’s intel has been very useful.”

Skye nodded. “I’m glad. I don’t know Bobbi well yet, but I’ve been spending a fair bit of time with Mack. I think he likes to feel needed, and he gravitates towards helping people who need it. We’ve been working on my van. Izzy’s taken it upon herself to teach me how to fight with a hunting knife; she says it’s better therapy than her actual PT. And Hunter and I have become drinking buddies.”

“I’m not sure Hunter is actually part of RealSHIELD,” Clint said thoughtfully. “I think he may just have come in with Hartley, unaware of the bigger picture.”

Skye shrugged. “Without being able to do more than watch, I really can’t tell.”

“Morse is good. One of the best we had,” Natasha replied. “In the current circumstances, I’m not sure I’d be getting much from her in your place. I know I don’t see enough of her currently to get anything at all.”

“I’m more concerned about whatever it is that Gonzalez has against you and Coulson,” Clint sighed.
“I know they don’t have all the pieces, but that’s part of the point.”

“Which reminds me. Agent 33 came to me privately a few weeks ago. Apparently Bobbi has been talking about her uncle, dropping hints that she should get in touch with him. Her uncle is the reason she’s a numbered agent… and if I’m drawing the right conclusions, here, he’s part of RealSHIELD and Bobbi knows. Would Maria know, do you think?”

Clint shrugged. “We can ask. For now I want to see how well Hartley’s been training you.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Skye said.

“Tony’s got these new practice knives that measure stab strength,” Clint said. “So JARVIS will tell you how bad a wound would be.”


“Well, yeah. It’s Stark,” Natasha chimed in.

“JARVIS, to the gym, please,” Clint told the AI when they reached the elevator.

“Why do I always feel like work is where I get a vacation, when I’m at SHIELD, from my real workout?” Skye groaned.

“It’s out of love, I promise you,” Natasha said.

“Ready?” Clint said.

“What is it that you said to me when we first started two years ago?” Skye asked. “Be ready? Channel your fear and anger into something productive?”

“Awesome,” Clint said. “Warm up?”

“I ran this morning,” Skye said. “Did my hundred push-ups, hundred sit-ups. Let me run a mile and a half, and warm up and we can go spar.”

“How’re your archery skills?” Clint asked as they both got on the treadmill and started running.

“Not bad, considering I have to practice in secret,” Skye said.

Clint sighed but nodded. “We can work on that while you’re here. No secrecy required.”

“I told you May started me with a sniper rifle, right?”

“You did. How’s that going?”

“Alright,” Skye said with a shrug. “I’m a good shot, but at this point I haven’t had to pull the trigger on a person. Not sure what’ll happen then.”

“I’m actually glad to hear you say that,” Clint told her seriously. “It’s always different when there’s a person at the end of the scope. It won’t be easy for you, when that happens. Not the first time, for sure.”

“I’m not sure it should ever be easy,” Skye said thoughtfully. “I don’t think taking someone else’s life should be simple or something we take for granted.”

Clint smiled fondly at her. “You’re not wrong, hon, but you will develop a thicker skin over time. It
shouldn’t be easy, but when you know it’s for the greater good… it’s… clearer.”

Skye nodded thoughtfully but didn’t say anything further for the moment.

They spent the next two hours with Skye, working out her fear. After, she’d finished, she checked her emails - no work. She had emails from Fitz and Simmons asking her what it was like at the tower, and an email from Matt, catching her up on the old neighborhood.

Skye was doing some data mining through the SHIELD data dump; she was still combing through when Nat came in.

“I hate you a little bit,” Skye groused at Nat, without any anger in her voice.

“Any particular reason why?” Nat asked.

“I’ve been data mining this data dump for months to try and divide out HYDRA entries and SHIELD entries. It’s not something that I can run automatically. I have to do it by hand.”

“Could JARVIS help?” Natasha asked.

“Absolutely,” Skye said. “Except he already is,” Skye said.

“Indeed,” JARVIS said. “I am sorting the files by the most likely and the least likely, but there are some things only a SHIELD agent can tell.”

“He’s sped up the progress, but you did dump absolutely all of the Level 1 to Level 9 SHIELD files?” Skye asked. “It’s something like… 100 Petabytes of data. Decades of emails, mission reports, admin reports, TPS reports… I get why you dumped it but…”

“You hate me,” Nat said with a grin. “And because of the security… issues that have raised questions… I get it.”

Skye shrugged. “It’s not a priority, but when I have time, I sift through it.”

“Want some help?” Nat said.

“Sure,” Skye said. “Grab a computer.”

The pair of them worked for a couple of hours then went downstairs and did dance.

Dinner was a loud affair, as it always was at the Tower. Tony had issues with quiet and even with the five Avengers who weren’t from other realms, the familial bond was never quiet. “So Sharon, what have you been up to lately?” Skye asked as she and Nat entered fresh from a shared shower.

Sharon smiled softly, “This and that. We moved Aunt Peggy to a home here in the city to keep a closer eye on her, and work at the CIA has pretty much been the same job that I’ve been working at SHIELD for a different organization. Stark keeps offering me positions at SI though.”

“You and me both,” Skye said. It was then that Skye noticed the ring on Sharon’s finger. “No!” she exclaimed. Sharon was grinning proudly and Steve kissed her temple, running a hand through her hair. “When did this happen? Why didn’t you call me?” she demanded Steve.

Steve grinned. “We’ve been busy the last few days. First I had to ask her family for her hand, then I had to ask her, then we told her family and the Avengers. We were trying to figure out how to get down to the base to tell you in person when Coulson called.”
Skye got up and went over and hugged Sharon, then Steve. “I’m so happy for you guys!”

“I still say that you need a party,” Tony groused.

“We decided to hold off on the engagement party until the press gets wind of the engagement,” Sharon explained. “Which I’m hoping isn’t for a couple of months.”

Skye nodded. Steve and Sharon had been understandably discreet about their relationship after HYDRA came out. “Anyone else have any news?”

“I’ve decided to go back to teaching,” Bruce said quietly.

All discussion stopped and everyone turned to Bruce and stared. “When did this happen?” Tony asked.

“I’ve been getting offers for the last few months. I recently got an offer from NYU to teach a physics course online for Fall, next year.”

“That’s great,” Skye said with a warm smile. “You always were an excellent teacher. That didn’t change just because you gained… the other guy.”

Bruce smiled softly. “You’re right,” he conceded, nodding. “And I can’t stick to just research forever. Eventually I have to get out there again. I figure online classes is a good way to ease into things.”

“Good for you, Brucie. You do you and all that. You need anything?”

Bruce shook his head. “I have the lab if I need to make any demonstration videos, but it’s an Intro to Physics class for Freshmen so it’s largely going to be equations and such.”

“What about you Skye? How’ve you been?” Steve asked.

Skye shrugged. “Busy. Now that things have calmed down at SHIELD a tiny bit, I’ve been using my downtime to sift through the data dump Nat did. Sifting through Pierce’s emails has been particularly taxing.”

Tony looked confused. “But, JARVIS can do that.”

“He can search for keywords and phrases, sure,” Skye pointed out. “But HYDRA existed within SHIELD for generations. They’re more subtle than sending emails that all have ‘Hail HYDRA’ in the signature. He’s been scanning through the data and flagging anything with more than a 75% accuracy. That’s how we’ve been finding HYDRA bases for you to hit as well as identifying HYDRA members that we can track or detain.”

“That… sounds like a lot of work,” Steve said slowly.

“Yeah, do you need any help?” Sharon offered.

“I have a meeting with DC tomorrow about the project’s progress. I can ask him if I can have extra hands on it, but considering the material, I’d rather ask his permission before we make any moves.”

“Understandable,” Sharon said.

“Kara’d want me to say hello, if she knew you were here,” Skye added, speaking more freely than the day before since Trip wasn’t there. “Apparently her most recent mission got a little hairy and HYDRA got a little too close, but she made it back safe with the intel we needed.”
“Good. I’ll be sure to email her tomorrow and catch up,” Sharon said.

“Have you guys thought of using Kara to see what the other SHIELD is after? You said she had an uncle who works for them. Maybe use her as a way to verify what you’re getting from your source?” Clint suggested.

Skye shifted uncomfortably. “Coulson and May are thinking the same thing and they might, but I pointed out that that’s pitting family against each other during what’s basically an internal SHIELD power struggle. It seems…”

“Cheap,” Maria piped up.

“Unethical,” Steve added, frowning.

“Slytherin…” Skye said. “I’d rather not use personal relationships to figure out what the other SHIELD is up to, spying on SHIELD. It feels like we’re crossing a line. How’d you feel if I was asked to use my relationship with you to gain information on what the Avengers were doing, Clint?”

“Are you?” Clint asked in the same tone he used with his kids when he was screwing with them.

“I’ll never tell,” Skye said with a wink.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Time at the Tower, Thanksgiving and a mission...

Chapter Notes

We have amazing and lovely readers, followers and friends. Thank you all so much for your continued support!

A lovely manip made for us by mockingbirdsquake on Tumblr. Thank you so much!

Chapter 21

Wanda sat up in bed abruptly, a shuddering gasp tearing through her as she struggled to wake enough to understand that she’d been dreaming. Her fingers tangled in the blanket as she took several long, deep breaths; she finally got her breathing under control, though calm was much harder to find.

A light tap on the door connecting her room to her brother’s sounded only a heartbeat before Pietro appeared at her side and wrapped an arm around her.
“Shh, sister,” he whispered in Romani, the language of their childhood. “It was only a dream.”

“No, Pietro,” she denied. “It wasn’t a dream. It was a warning.”

“What did you see?”

“A girl… in so much pain.” Wanda looked up at him, her eyes bright with tears and full of both pain and longing. “She was changing, almost like we did, and it was tearing her apart inside. And Pietro… she is one of my soulmates. The same one I’ve seen before…”

“The one you believe is the key to you meeting the others?” Pietro asked, concerned for his sister and her future happiness.

She nodded. “She needs our help, Pietro. But she is very far from here.”

“Then we will just have to find a way to get to her,” he replied with a casual shrug. These scientists and soldiers had no real idea of what they had wrought, when they’d given the twins their powers.

Perhaps it was time they find out.

Over the next few weeks, Skye adjusted her life back to living at the tower and with the Avengers. She started each morning running with Steve, then sparred with Steve or Natasha. She checked her email over breakfast and worked on the data mining or any SHIELD projects between breakfast and lunch. Maria would then come up for lunch and the three of them would eat together.

One afternoon when she didn’t have anything else pressing, Skye went looking for Thor. She had promised, after all. She had her tablet, loaded with photos of the ‘map’ from Coulson’s wall, and a lot of questions.

Thor answered the knock on his door readily. “Lady Skye!” he greeted her cheerfully. “To what do I owe this honor?”

“I’d hoped to be able to talk to you privately,” she answered as he stepped back to allow her in. “I need your help with something.”

“If it is within my ability to assist, I will endeavor to do so. Would you like to sit?” he invited.

“Sure,” Skye sat in an armchair with a couch at right angles to it, where they should both be able to look at the tablet screen if they tried. “How much do you know of the beings of other Realms?”

“We learn about many cultures and worlds on Asgard. Is there one in particular you are asking of?”

Skye shrugged. “I’m not entirely sure. Are any of them blue, with… with regenerative abilities?”

Thor frowned. “There are several races with blue skin, many of them humanoid. And quite a few races among the Realms have greater regenerative powers than the humans of Midgard. Why do you ask?”

“Do you remember when we explained the drug that healed Agent Coulson and allowed him to be revived?” Thor nodded and Skye sighed. “The drug was created from the body of an alien, preserved for no one knows how many decades or centuries. We don’t know much about it, other than that it was blue. But… then we started seeing these. They were drawn by people who’d been given the drug.” She pulled out the tablet and started swiping through the drawings, sharing them with Thor.
“That is… deeply troubling news,” Thor said slowly, looking at the drawings. “Has Son of Coul experienced these symptoms?” Skye nodded. “And have you, Lady Skye?”

Skye froze. “No…” she whispered. “Of all the people they tested the drug on… I was the only one who hasn’t.”

“That is indeed most peculiar,” Thor commented, studying the drawings. “Have you made any deductions regarding what this may be?”

“At first we thought perhaps it was writing, but that was when we didn’t have enough pieces. Then Coulson began this…” She pulled up the large image. “And when I saw it, the first thing that came to my mind was that it’s a map. But a map of what?”

Thor looked at her, expression thoughtful and a touch wary. “And this just… came to you?”

Skye shrugged. “More or less, yes. At first, I wondered if that’s just my version of the symptoms. I’m not drawing this, I can’t visualize it without looking at the pictures. But when I see it, I see a map.”

“But you also have another theory,” Thor said, and it was not a question.

“I do, yes. I don’t know who my parents are. I was found by SHIELD as the only survivor of an horrific attack. They classified me as an 0-8-4. An object of unknown origin,” she said in a very soft voice. “We don’t know what’s different about me, but there must be something for SHIELD to have behaved the way they did. Maybe, whatever it is, is why I’m not being affected. And why I see something more than odd shapes in that.” She nodded at the map.

“There is a race that draws three dimensional maps in two dimensions. They use rings around circles, outlines around shapes, to indicate height. The thicker the outline, the taller the object,” Thor explained. “This looks much like a Kree map to me.”

“Kree?”

“The Kree are a warring race. They wage war over petty inconveniences. Before I was born, they had warred with each other and others so often that their numbers were dwindling…” Thor sighed heavily. “That is when the Kree decided to weaponize other races.”

“Weaponize?” Skye asked, wide-eyed.

“They injected their own DNA into other races in hopes of giving them great power that could be used against Kree enemies. It was thought that all of the Kree’s trials had failed…”

“But…” Skye said slowly.

“There are those among the races that believe that the Kree succeeded,” Thor finished.

Skye ran a hand through her hair. “Woah. Okay, but I don’t have any powers?”

Thor shook his head. “I have not seen you manifest any powers that would cause me concern or I would have voiced such. I know not of what your knowledge of Kree maps means, but I assure you that you are most loved regardless.”

Skye smiled. “I know, Thor. You’re a wonderful part of my happy family here, and you are loved too.” She picked the tablet back up, idly sweeping through more pictures. “Do you think you could help us with this, though? Maybe we can figure out where it is? Or why people who have been given this drug are all drawing it?”
“Aye, Lady Skye. I can request assistance from Asgard; perhaps we can locate the place this map depicts.”

“Do you think it could be here on Earth?”

“You think that if the Kree were here, they built a city on your world?”

“It would make sense,” Skye replied. “Why else would our people be drawing the map? Maybe we’re supposed to find it.”

“That thought has merit. I will see what can be determined.”

“Thank you, Thor. I really appreciate it.”

Thor smiled. “You are most welcome.”

The weeks passed and two days before Thanksgiving, they loaded up Clint’s SUV and took off towards the Homestead. It was a great weekend, though Skye wished that the other Avengers could enjoy it. She said as much to Laura one evening, and Laura suggested to Clint that maybe next year he should invite the rest of the team.

Goodness knows the kids would love to meet the Avengers.

Skye thought it might be the first homemade Thanksgiving several of them would ever have. And Thor would finally have a ‘feast of Midgard’ tale to take back to Asgard with him. She’d certainly heard enough about the great feasts the royal family held in Asgard.

Clint and Natasha had seemed more reluctant, but Clint said he’d think about it. Skye couldn’t fault them for wanting to keep this one hideaway to themselves, though. The safety of their family was more important than sharing it with their teammates. Skye agreed completely. But she also thought it might be time.

When they returned to the Tower, Skye felt re-energized by the time off. Nat and Clint had eased off for the long holiday weekend, and they were all better for having had the break. Time to just relax, play with the kids, and enjoy family life wasn’t something they got often enough.

So she settled back into her working routine comfortably. Train, data mine, trace and track for Coulson… all her usual stuff. And no need to worry about her cover, either, because she knew no one in the Tower would ever betray her.

Skye was working diligently, a large plate of sliced fruit, cheese and crackers at her side, when Tony joined her unannounced one afternoon. “Hey, Tony,” she greeted him with a smile. She nudged the plate closer to him, wordlessly offering to share, and he smiled as he picked up a slice of apple.

“I have something for you, Skye,” he said without preamble. “You know, if you actually want it. I mean, you don’t have to, but…” He cut off his own rambling for once and just handed Skye a manilla folder.

She took it curiously, opening it. It wasn’t much, just a few sheets of paper, but when her eyes lit on the title at the top of the form they went wide with surprise.

Application For Adoption. State of New York.

Her eyes went from the application to Tony and back again. The form was neatly filled out, probably
Pepper’s doing, but still. “I… you… you’re serious?” Skye stammered out. She skimmed the form, noting that it would legally name her Skye Stark and that as she was over 18, it also required her signature in addition to his. She had to agree to this.

Tony nodded. “I feel like you and me, we have a lot in common. Neither of us had the kind of family we wanted. We’re not alone anymore; you have your soulmates, and I have Pepper. But… it would be nice to have some actual family, too. I know… I know the blood tests came back that we’re not related, and you don’t owe me anything at all…”

“Is this because of my hypothetical father?” Skye asked softly.

“Not really. Though if it helps protect you from him in any way, all the better,” Tony admitted. “I just… I see you as this strong, resilient, incredible young person who deserves to know that someone will always be there for you. And I figure if I’m old enough to be your father and I have the resources…”

“If you’re really sure you want this… if this isn’t just some whimsical idea that you’ll regret in six months…” Skye paused and Tony shook his head, his demeanor entirely serious for once. “Then… I accept. I would love to have a dad as cool as you.”

“You do?” Tony’s eyes lit up. “Really? Truly? I get to adopt Skyenet, for real?” Skye laughed and nodded. “Awesome! How badly will you think Nat’ll hurt me when I give her the shovel talk?”

Skye grinned. “I think you might want to skip the shovel talk. Besides, I don’t know if they’re required with soulmates… it’s not like we could ever choose to leave each other at this point.”

“Ten seconds in to being my daughter and already ruining my fun,” Tony said fondly.

“Well, it’s not official until we both sign the thing and send it in…” Skye quipped back, offering him the folder.

Tony took the form and signed with a flourish. Then he handed it back to her and she bit her lip for a moment before leaning over the form to sign her name. Skye Stark.

There. All that was left was to submit it to the state.

And holy shit, she was Tony Stark’s daughter.

It was a good thing she’d discussed this with the rest of her family over the holiday. Clint was still a little bummed that it couldn’t be him rather than Tony, but there were a lot of reasons why that just wouldn’t work out so well. Besides, they were already family in all the ways that counted, and Tony…

Tony and this adoption was something that could just be Skye’s. And she knew they all knew it, even if she didn’t say anything about it. And it didn’t hurt that Skye thought perhaps Tony needed this as much as she did.

It was a thought that came back to her a day or two later, when she stormed into Tony’s lab. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” Skye demanded loudly.

Tony blinked at her. “What gives?”

“This!” She flicked her tablet and flung up the code for a program called Ultron that she’d found while browsing through the Tower’s files.
“Ultron? What’s wrong with it?” Tony sounded genuinely puzzled.

“Everything!” she growled. “Seriously, Tony, why did we stop Insight if you’re going to try to replace it with something like this? Haven’t you ever seen Terminator?”

“Skye, sweetheart,” Tony began, setting down his work and looking at her seriously. “We aren’t going to be around forever. We’re not always going to be able to fight. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could create a way to keep fighting minimal? To end wars, end threats?”

“Sure, it would be awesome. But Tony… people aren’t ready for this. And even worse… what if, like in Terminator or even just like Loki thought… that humans are the cause of the problem? What if it decides it’s then logical to wipe out everyone in order to achieve its programmed goals?”

Tony blanched as he listened, then sighed. “I just… I wanted…”

“I know,” Skye moderated her tone immediately. She stepped closer and leaned her head on Tony’s shoulder. “I know what you want. On some level, we all do. But… I don’t think this is the right way to go about it…”

“I just want to see peace happen. I don’t want you to spend your whole life fighting. I don’t want your kids, if you ever have them, to have to take up arms like we did,” Tony whispered.

“Then we have to teach people better. They have to want to do it… you can’t just make it happen.”

Tony wrapped his arms around Skye and held her close. “Alright, Skyenet. You win. JARVIS, delete all files pertaining to Ultron.”

“Yes, Sir,” the AI responded.

“I’m proud of you, Dad,” Skye said softly. “You did the right thing.”

______________________________________________________________

Maria and Steve had argued, and won, with Coulson that Skye should stay with them another week. During that time, the Avengers were assigned to take down a HYDRA base in Japan. From the looks of heat sensors and satellites, there weren’t very many HYDRA agents assigned to the base and it was mainly going to be intel gathering, so Skye got to go along.

Skye had been on dozens of missions for SHIELD, but she supposed there was something particularly special about fighting alongside her family.

“Nervous?” Natasha said as they were both strapped in in the back of the Quinjet. “You’re going to be fine. We’ve been training with you for years.”

“Not nervous,” Skye said. “Just have a lot of… energy. I’ve done a lot of missions before, just never on this scale.”

“Clint usually keeps eyes on the situation,” Natasha said.

“From his bird’s-eye view?” she asked flippantly.

“Tony’s more the bird,” Clint snarked. “I just see better from a distance.”

“Thor’s our heaviest hitter,” Natasha said, rolling her eyes. “When he’s not here, we have Steve and, if we need him, Bruce.”

“I usually take the front of the pack. I’m the best at hand-to-hand,” Steve said. “Tony usually
provides cover fire, deals with any birds in the air.”

Skye nodded. “And me?”

“You’ll be on the ground with us, but if at all possible we’d like you to get into their security. Tell us where we need to go, what to expect,” Steve explained. “We’ll all be on comms, and though most of the group doesn’t take orders particularly well… guidance is appreciated.” He winked at her and Skye laughed softly.

“Got it. I think I can work with that.”

Everything started out according to plan; storming the base, taking out opposition, getting Skye inside so she could work her ‘magic’ on the computers. Once she got into the security system, it was a piece of cake to direct her teammates to where the pockets of resistance were. She was alone in the main control room, frantically compressing and copying data to analyze later, when an unfamiliar voice caught her attention.

“Daisy,” the voice said.

Skye grabbed up her gun and whirled, seeking the source of the voice. In one corner of the room stood an older man, a partially open concealed door behind him. He had brown hair, a beige sports coat, and callused hands. “Who are you?” she demanded, the gun unwavering in her hand.

He smiled at her, eyes darting around the room. “Raina told me you wouldn’t come. That you didn’t believe her. So I knew I had to come to you.”

“Raina,” she spat out, drawing his attention back to her, “is a liar and a manipulator. Of course I can’t believe a word she says. Now, who are you?”

“Me? Oh. Right. I’m Cal. Cal Johnson. And you’re Daisy Johnson,” he said with a bright smile, though his expression had an edge to it. Like he wasn’t entirely in control of himself.

“My name is Skye.”

“Well, no, I suppose you had no way to know. They told me you were dropped off at an orphanage with no identity at all,” Cal said, his tone conciliatory. “But your real name, the name I gave you when you were born, is Daisy.”

“How do you know I’m your Daisy?” Skye demanded. “I mean, I grew up in the foster system, but I was with you for nine months, right?”

“Oh, honey, you were so loved,” Cal said tenderly, but then his demeanor changed to one that was… scary. “But then SHIELD took you AWAY from us!”

“I’ve seen the reports,” Skye said softly. “A village destroyed, all the people dead, including a SHIELD team. Except for one baby girl, because an Agent got far enough away from the destruction
before dying. They couldn’t just leave me there, so they brought me back to the US. But then the retrieval team started dying, too.”

“They wouldn’t have been hurt if they hadn’t taken you away!” Cal cried out. “I couldn’t be there, had to save your mother. Those Nazi bastards butchered her, cut her to pieces, and then threw her away like garbage! I had to save her! And I did… I did… but they took you while we were away…”

Skye’s resolve wavered; Cal was too distraught for his grief to be feigned. Rather than hiding his eyes, they were bright and anguished and stared right into hers. Willing her to see the truth, to believe. “Why… why didn’t you just come talk to me? We could have a paternity test done, you didn’t have to resort to… to extremes, to murder… to get my attention…”

“They deserved it!” her father roared. Skye took another step back.

“Is my mother still alive?” she asked. “Does she… does she still want me?”

“Yes, Daisy,” Cal said, grabbing her wrist. “She definitely still wants you. But we can’t go to her until you fulfill your destiny. That’s why I’m here. To take you there.”

“I’m with my…” she stopped. She searched for what term to use. ‘Family’ was correct, but she was afraid of what he would do. ‘Friends’ was neither correct nor safe. “Team,” she finally said.

“They don’t matter,” Cal said brusquely. He saw her protest before she could say anything and waved his hand. “Their destiny isn’t the same as yours. They don’t have it in them. I’m sure they care, and you care about them. You have a caring heart, Daisy, I can see that. But your destiny is… dangerous… for them. No, you’ll need to come with me.”

“But…” Skye began.

“No, no. You’ll have to trust me, Daisy. I can’t explain it. I’m not special like you, like your mother.” He smiled sadly at her. “But maybe now isn’t the time. It’s definitely not the place. Your destiny can’t be found here.”

“What in the…” Daisy was confused. He wasn’t making any sense. Was he insane?

Before she could say anything further, Steve burst through the control room door. “Skye? Are you alright?” He paused to take in the situation and quickly placed himself between Skye and Cal, breaking Cal’s grip on her arm. “Stay right where you are,” he warned.

“No, now must not be the time,” Cal said, a little sadly. “But your destiny will find you, baby girl. I promise you it will.” Before Steve could react, Cal stepped backwards into the partially open door in the corner and shut it behind himself. Steve darted over to the wall but could find no sign of the mechanism to open it.

“Are you alright, Skye?” he asked, concerned when she just stood there as he checked the room. “You stopped responding to comms.”

“I… I’m not sure. That… he claimed…”

“Your father?” Steve asked in a low voice after muting his own comm unit. Skye nodded. “We still don’t know that for sure,” he reminded her. Skye nodded again. With a sigh, Steve pulled her into a tight hug. Skye gripped him tightly and he just let her, knew she needed to ground herself again. “It’ll be alright, Skye.”

After a moment, she pulled herself together again and stood on her own two feet. “I’m fine. Sorry.
Sorry.”

“No one was hurt and we’re about done here,” Steve told her lightly. “No harm done.”

Skye sighed. “Nat’s gonna kill me.”

“No, she won’t,” Steve replied with a smile. “She’s going to smother you in hugs until you feel better.”

“Shh,” Skye admonished, regaining a touch of her usual humor. “Can’t spoil her badass image.”

“My lips are sealed,” Steve replied, grinning. “Come on. Get your stuff and let’s get out of here.” He turned his comm back on. “She’s fine. We’ll be on our way out in a minute,” he reported in.

Skye gathered up her gear quietly. Her mind was still spinning with everything Cal had told her. She still wasn’t sure whether or not she believed he was her father, but he seemed so certain! But he knew her birthday; a date she only knew because of Maria. But he knew her birthday; a date she only knew because of Maria. It wasn’t in her records, not anywhere. Even her SHIELD record had the date the nuns used, not her real one.

Raina couldn’t have told him. They couldn’t have learned it from Coulson, when they had him; at the time, he didn’t know either. And the story he told, the details about her soulmarks… So… either he knew, really knew, or else… what? Psychic powers of some kind? That idea just didn’t fit. Even she had no idea about what the doctor might have said about her soulmarks.

Steve left her to her thoughts, understanding that sometimes she just needed time to process. He apparently even fended off curious questions when she was oblivious to the comms chatter. Skye was grateful and knew she would have to thank him later. When they rejoined the others at the jet, even Nat didn’t trouble her with questions. Just sat beside her, took her hand, and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

Skye fell asleep on the way back, reminded that she had family that loved her. DNA or no DNA. It was when they got back home that they started asking questions during the debrief. After she explained exactly what had happened, Avengers started arguing around her over what to do.

Tony, unsurprisingly, was the most vocally peeved by her so-called father. Natasha and Maria were quieter, while Steve, Bruce and Thor seemed more interested in protecting her than anything else.

“Guys,” Skye tried to break into the conversation, but Tony was yelling over most of the group by that point. “Dad!” she yelled suddenly. “Chill, everyone,” she said into the resulting silence. “Look, I love that you guys care so much. That you want me to be safe. I get that, I do. But what if this destiny thing is real? She traced her fingers over her soulmarks, pausing over the one for whom she had not met its speaker. “I was never big on fate or destiny until it brought me here. But I’ve learned better. What if this is something that needs to happen for us to find our missing fourth?”

Thor studied Skye intently. “It is indeed true that your quarter-mate has been missing from your lives. Destiny can often be a fickle mistress, but it is brave of you to meet it head on.”

“Alright, Skye,” Maria said calmly, sitting back and regarding her soulmate with a thoughtful expression. “What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know for sure, yet,” Skye replied. “I wouldn’t have thought it would take cosplaying outside the Tower to bring me to you two. I don’t know what we need to do to find our fourth. But I know it won’t get done by keeping me safely tucked away somewhere.”
“You’re saying that we need to let you keep on as you have been,” Natasha said slowly. “Exploring the world, taking on missions.”

Skye nodded. “Yes. Both because it’s the right thing to do and because… as much as I love you guys, and it’s great to spend time with you… it’s not much of a life if I don’t get to really live it. I can’t ask you to give up the good fight, to stop doing what you do. You can’t ask it of me, either.”

Even Tony couldn’t give voice to an objection, though he looked for a moment like he wanted to. Then he slumped into his chair, eyes studying Skye intently. “I suppose you’re right. Damn.” Then his eyes lit up. “But you called me ‘dad!’”

Skye laughed first, then the others joined in slowly as it broke the tension. “Yeah, I did. Had to get your attention somehow.”

“Well, you don’t have to stop,” Tony informed her. “I kinda like it.” The admission seemed to surprise even him, though Pepper looked on fondly with soft eyes.

Skye stopped. “Maybe I will,” she said. “I mean, not every day, but every once in a while I might. You know, if the timing’s right.”

“Whatever you want, kiddo,” Tony said. “Just promise me you’ll use that head of yours and stay safe?”

“Yeah,” Skye said.

Maria pulled Skye close and cuddled her. “Don’t die,” she whispered, tears cropping up in her eyes.

“Someday, maybe we won’t keep having to do this,” Skye said, tears streaming down her own cheeks.

“Some day, huh?” Maria said, wiping away Skye’s tears. “How about today?”

“I just have to see this thing with S.H.I.E.L.D through… and I owe my team going back and explaining to them exactly what’s wrong,” Skye argued. “And… some of them are family, too. Not like this,” she gestured around the group, taking in everyone present, “but family. There’s Trip. And May. And Coulson. They’re important to me. And some of the others are good friends. I don’t want to lose that.”

“We won’t make you choose between them and us, Skye,” Steve assured her gently. “Whether or not you actually owe them anything is debatable, but you care and that makes them important.”

“Just remember that we’ll always love you, no matter what,” Nat said. “And not just us. You even made Tony’s heart melt. You know how many people could do that?”

Skye laughed, tearfully but still a laugh.

“Not many people could do that,” Pepper agreed. “You’re in a select few. Though Phil once threatened to taze him.”

“Wait, what?” Skye blinked. “Coulson threatened Tony with a Tazer?”

“Not with one to hand, but yes,” Pepper clarified. Tony harumphed, but everyone else got a chuckle out of it.

“I know it’s going to be rough, but… I want a chance to resolve the dual S.H.I.E.L.D problem. I want
to be able to tell them the truth.” Skye sighed. “And if that means I come back here because Trip, May and Coulson are the only people still speaking to me… at least I will have tried, you know?”

“I think that’s unlikely,” Clint assured her. “They’re all agents. They’ve all been through missions of their own, and they absolutely all know that numbered agent protocols are there to protect important relationships. They’ll get it.”

“Maybe,” Skye agreed with a shrug. “We’ll see, I guess. But we need to see this through.”

“And not many orphans get a chance to confront their parents as adults,” Clint added in a softer voice. “I’m not advocating you do so alone, mind you, Skye, but if it’s something you want to do… I’ll do my best to help.”

“You know we’ll be there with you to talk to him, if that’s what you want,” Maria said for herself and Natasha. “Not sure I actually want to talk to him myself, but I’ll be there if you want to.”

“I know. Thanks, guys,” Skye said, sniffling again.

“Alright, everyone, it’s been a long day and I think we’ve discussed the mission to death. Maybe we should call it a night?” Steve suggested.

“You guys don’t have to, but I think I’m ready for some sleep,” Skye admitted in a low voice. Natasha and Maria immediately got to their feet, pulling her up to join them.

“Where you go, we go,” Nat said firmly. “Night, everybody.”

A chorus of ‘good nights’ followed them to the elevator.

“This is really bothering you, isn’t it?” Natasha asked in a low voice when the trio were ready for bed and curled up together.

“Yeah,” Skye admitted softly. “It’s partly the family thing. He said they loved me, Nat. They thought I was taken from them. And even if he’s crazy, surely he wasn’t always… He says my mom’s still alive.”

“You think he was telling the truth?” Nat said.

“I don’t know… he was… unstable. I want it to be true.” Skye admitted. “That maybe someone out there will be able to tell me what happened. Cal was… just rambling. He said I was born in a tiny hospital in Hunan.”

“Well that’s a place to start,” Nat said. “I promise I’ll work that angle while you’re at SHIELD. I’m guessing they might not have digitized their records.”

Skye stared at Maria and Nat. “How’d I get so lucky?” she asked.

“Hmmm,” Maria said. “Well how about how amazing you are? And how much you’ve been through? And what if it’s us that got lucky?”

“Okay, enough talk of all this,” Nat said. “We all had the right idea upstairs. Let’s drop this, order some dinner from that sushi place you guys like and watch a comedy. One of our top ten favorites?”

“Airplane?” Skye suggested.

“I could get behind that,” Maria said with a grin. “But only if we order the dragon roll.”
They feasted on sushi and laughed at the movie, forgetting that they were going to say goodbye the next day or that Skye’s father was a homicidal maniac or that Gonzalez was still a threat - that she’d been undercover for nearly two years. When she had agreed to go undercover back then, she hadn’t realized it would take so long. She wondered how long it could take before she was tired of the entire thing.

Nat kissed her temple. “Stop thinking. Worry about it tomorrow,” she whispered. Skye nuzzled deeper between them.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Skye returns to the Playground.

Chapter Notes

As always, many thanks to all our lovely readers. It's awesome to hear from you, and we're super happy that you're still enjoying the story!

Chapter 22

“Skye,” Jemma greeted with a huge smile and a hug when she saw her the next day. “You’re back! We were worried we would never see you again.”

“Yeah, you know… had to come back sometime, right?” Skye said with an easy grin and hugging back.

“I’m glad you did. It hasn’t been the same without you around.”

“Awww,” Skye said. “I missed you guys, too. Where is everyone?”

“Woah, hey… look who’s back!” Trip exclaimed from the doorway. He grinned at Skye as he approached for a hug and a fist bump. “How’s things in New York, girl?”
“Good,” Skye said, keeping it simple. “I did go on a mission with them; a HYDRA base in Japan.”

“Wow. Listen to you. Next you’ll tell us you’ve got an invitation to be an Avenger now,” Trip teased cheerfully.

Skye laughed. “Not quite yet,” she quipped back. “I suppose I should go see the Boss. Is he around?”

“Director Coulson is in his office,” Jemma responded readily. “He’s been researching something, I think, but he hasn’t said anything to anyone except perhaps Agent May.”

“Research? And he didn’t call me?” Skye fake-pouted, making her teammates laugh again. “I guess I’d better go see what’s up. I’ll see you later!” She let herself out of the lab area, heading for the offices. Her bag, she dumped in the lounge near the accommodation wing to retrieve later.

She arrived to find the office locked. She knocked and May answered. “Hey, I came up as soon as I heard,” Skye said breathlessly. May looked at Skye, obviously expecting a report, and went back to taking pictures. Trusting Skye to lock the door again once inside.

“Thor says the map is Kree and we think it’s of some place on Earth,” Skye said. She bit her lip trying to figure out how much of her own possible history she wanted to share. “He says the Kree tried to weaponize other races thousands of years ago but probably failed. But it’s not impossible they were here.”

“Weaponize? How?” May demanded, her tone sharp… but Skye knew her enough to know that it was worry, not anger.

“They tried to infuse other races with their DNA, at least that’s the best I can gather from what Thor said,” she explained. “Their population was decimated by continual wars, and they needed more soldiers… weapons. They may have been trying to give people powers.”

“Could these… experiments… have caused humans to develop powers over time?” May asked. “We certainly seem to have more around now than we have before.”

“Thor said all this happened before he was born,” Skye replied with a shrug. “In thousands of years, maybe? I don’t actually know.”

“Alright. So?”

“So, he’s also utilizing his resources to help us find this place. And… perhaps a way to determine if the Kree experiments were successful here.” Skye paused for a long moment. “It could explain why I’m an 0-8-4…”

“Skye,” May’s voice was firm. “It won’t change anything, you know.”

“But, May… what if that’s the reason I’m not having symptoms like he is?” Skye asked. “If I already have traces of that DNA inside me, it could prevent me from having a bad reaction to it…”

“It doesn’t matter,” May repeated firmly. “You are a part of this team. It doesn’t matter where you came from.”

“Then it won’t matter to you that I met my biological father?”

“Your what?!” May’s calm demeanor finally broke and she stared at Skye, shocked.
So Skye sat on Coulson’s desk and told May the whole story while May went back to taking photos of Coulson’s drawing. May just listened, not commenting until she was done.

“So you want to keep going out into the field, see if he’ll approach you again,” May concluded.

“Not alone, but yes,” Skye said with a shrug.

“And if we don’t clear you for field work?” May asked. Coulson blinked blearily as he began to come out of his trance. May helped him over to a chair where he sat and rubbed his head, sighing tiredly. May came over to Skye, “We could keep you here where you were safe. Your soulmates would kill us if anything were to happen to you.”

“Do you really think I’d be here if that were true? Nat and Maria and I all take risks, the way we live,” Skye said. “We can’t stop living our lives just because my bio dad is…” she trailed off, unsure of how to describe him.

“Scary?” May asked.

“I don’t think he’d intentionally hurt me,” Skye said softly. “He just… it’s like he expects for us to go back to where no time has passed. He doesn’t see that I’ve grown up and made my own family.”

“I can see that. So, how are the Avengers?” May said, returning to her regular volume. Skye looked around, checking that the door was still locked and no one was in the hallway.

“Same old, same old,” Skye said. “Thor’s been around more often, and so have Jane Foster and Darcy Lewis.”

Coulson grunted, moved over to his desk and took out an old iPod. “I really have to remember to send that to Miss Lewis,” he said.

“What if they came here…” Skye said slowly.

“What are you saying?”

“We pull almost everyone from active duty on Christmas anyway,” Skye said. “You could have me, May, you, and Trip be on active. And if anything happens, it’s not like we won’t have backup.”

Coulson blinked at her. “You know… that’s not a bad idea. You’ll have to pull some tricks with the security footage, though, before anyone else can get back.”

Skye shrugged. “Not that hard. And while Trip may be disappointed about not getting to go home for Christmas, he hasn’t pulled a holiday shift since I’ve known him. And at least he’ll be consoled with the fact that a lot of friends he doesn’t usually see will be here. I’d just loop some of the cameras at the entrance and disable a couple other internal ones. Between me, Nat, and Tony it shouldn’t be an issue.”

May frowned for a moment. “It would mean they all know the location of this base,” she began.

“Because Thor is going to tell anyone where our base is,” she scoffed.

“You think Thor would come?” May’s frown melted into her usual composed expression, though her eyes lit up briefly.

“Of course, as long as Jane can come. And Jane might want to bring Darcy, but then Coulson could return her iPod.”
“Besides, if Clint is flying the plane, most of the passengers aren’t going to see the coordinates of the base,” Coulson pointed out. “They won’t see enough between here and the landing pad to really identify the location.”

May and Coulson traded a glance, both looking thoughtful, then nodded. “Alright. We’ll arrange it.”

“All right!” Skye exclaimed. “Let me know when it’s all set and I’ll call Maria and Pepper to coordinate.”

“Those would be the right women for the job,” Coulson agreed with a wry grin.

In between a couple of more ordinary HYDRA-intel missions, Christmas break was arranged for the base’s occupants. Skye then wrangled the Avengers into a Christmas visit - all of them, plus a few guests. Jane and Darcy would definitely be joining them, and Tony wanted to invite Rhodey because he usually spent Christmas with Tony and Pepper. Skye checked in with Coulson, but provided that Rhodey was willing to keep his visit as personal and not professional, they decided it was alright.

“I’m so sorry you’ll be stuck here for Christmas,” Jemma told Skye sadly. The base would be more or less empty within the day, but Jemma and Fitz had promised to help Skye decorate the base before they left. At least the most-used common areas and the residence hallways.

“It’s okay,” Skye replied with a shrug as she tacked a string of fairy lights to the wall just below the ceiling. “It’s not like I’d have a bunch of family missing me if I didn’t get there. My soulmate understands.”

“It really is quite lovely of you to offer to stay so that others can go, Skye,” Fitz told her with a smile. “I know we appreciate it, don’t we Jemma?”

“Of course we do,” Jemma agreed. “Oh, Fitz, that’s not even with the rest of the garland. A bit higher, please.”

Skye hid a grin; decorating with a perfectionist like Jemma was entertaining, at least when it wasn’t her that Jemma was nitpicking over. It had taken them forever to find a tree with sufficient symmetry to please Simmons. Even Trip’s usually unending patience had been tried.

Coulson was one of those people who loved to cook and was helping Skye with a lot of the food prep to take pressure off of Laura. In fact, Laura wasn’t even cooking this year, something that Laura was having trouble with, according to Clint. So Skye asked her to make a couple of pies ahead of time, and promised they could still do cookies with the kids when they arrived.

Due to the fact that Thor, Steve, and over a dozen other people would be at Christmas dinner, Tony had funded the food purchase, which included three turkeys, two hams, twenty pounds of mashed potatoes, eight large acorn squash, a whole boatload of stuffing, cranberry sauce, six dozen rolls, and three dishes of green bean casserole. Just at the sheer multitude of ingredients Skye brought to the base shocked Coulson, May, and Trip, but she just smirked at them.

“Steve and Thor alone are going to eat a large portion of this,” Skye said. “Pepper and Maria sent me approximations of how much food we’d need.”

“Alright, girl, if you say so,” Trip replied, smiling at her grin. “Come on, let’s get this stuff put away. Good thing we’ve got a kitchen meant to supply hundreds.”

“No kidding,” May muttered as they helped Skye put foodstuffs where they belonged.

The day after the base was fully emptied, their guests began to arrive. Natasha and Maria got there
first, of course; any excuse to spend time with Skye, after all. Clint dropped off Steve, Bruce, Thor, Darcy and Jane the next day. Tony, Pepper and Rhodey arrived a few hours afterwards.

The real surprise was when Clint returned the next morning. With Laura, Cooper and Lila.

“ Auntie Skye!” Lila screamed excitedly. Trip, May and Coulson just stared when a little blur of motion beelined for Skye, who just laughed and scooped her up.

“Hi there, little butterfly,” Skye greeted her ‘niece’ with a grin. “Were you a good girl on the trip here?”

“Uh huh!” Lila nodded brightly. “I sat in my seat and we watched Frozen on the plane! Is Auntie Nat here?”

“Why don’t you turn around and find out?” Nat chimed in as she emerged from the kitchen. Lila wiggled out of Skye’s arms and ran to Nat, who picked her up in turn.

Cooper wasn’t far behind his sister, but was old enough to wait his turn for a hug from Skye. “Hey Coop!” Skye declared. “What’s up?” Cooper hugged her silently, overwhelmed by all the other adults in the room, then retreated to go greet Maria. Tony stared at Natasha in shock, more startled by Nat’s behavior than Skye’s. Steve looked surprised, but still smiled.

“Everyone,” Clint called out as he and Laura stood together, arms around each other. “I’d like you to meet my family. This is Laura, my wife. The kids are Cooper and Lila.” Cooper had attached himself to Maria in the meantime, but he shyly waved at the adults.

“Holy shit. You’re married, Legolas?” Tony stuttered. Pepper smacked him upside the head, glaring with a pointed look at the kids.

“Tony, language.”

Pulling himself together, Coulson approached with a smile and an open hand. “Mrs. Barton, it’s a pleasure. I’m Phil Coulson.”

Laura smiled and shook his hand. “I’ve heard so much about you. It’s nice to finally meet you. Please, call me Laura.” Introductions were made around the room; fortunately, Laura had heard about most of the people there so it was more a matter of putting faces to names.

“Auntie Nat?” Tony asked, starting to process what had been said.

Lila sucked her thumb and stared at Stark. “I always said Clint was my brother from another mother,” Skye quipped.

“Where did you think we went every year, Tony?” Maria said as she lifted Cooper onto her shoulders. He giggled a little as he was able to see the entire room, his head clearing even Thor’s.

“Some cabin in the middle of nowhere for… alone time,” Tony responded, cringing a little.

“Try a house with two rambunctious young ones and enough food to feed an army,” Nat said with a fond smile.

“You’ve been a part of SHIELD for this long and no one ever knew,” May said, sounding extremely impressed. “Now I understand where Skye gets her secret-keeping skills from.”

“Fury was the only one who knew,” Clint explained.
Suddenly, Sharon came into the room and Trip stopped all manner of conversation by exclaiming “Shar?!”

Sharon’s eyes went equally wide. “Ani?”

Trip facepalmed. “I hate that name,” he groaned, the sighed. “Shar, what are you doing here?”

Sharon shifted uncomfortably. “When was the last time you spoke with your mother?” Sharon asked quietly.

Trip then seemed to notice Sharon’s hand in Steve’s. “I mean, I had heard you’d found your soulmate and were engaged but that it was one of those things that was in-person kind of news…” he said. “Now I guess I can see why.”

“The press is starting to get an idea of what’s going on,” Sharon said. “At least the gossip rags are for now. They still don’t know who I’m related to, and we all know people are going to be judgmental and nasty about it when they do.”

“We’re prepared for that though,” Steve said, rubbing the pad of his thumb against the base of Sharon’s in comfort. “As long as we have our friends and family around us, we don’t care what anyone else thinks.”

“Anything you need, guys. You know that,” Trip replied in a heartfelt tone. Sharon pulled Steve with her and only released him at the last moment to give Trip a big hug. Trip returned it, not letting her go until she pulled away, both of them grinning. Then Trip held his hand out to Steve, who took it. “Welcome to the family, man,” he said, pulling Steve in for a manlier sort of hug. “You know, as if we needed more ties to hold us all together.”

“I love this,” Skye commented aloud, watching with a fond smile.

“Love what, Skye?” Coulson asked her quietly.

“I love having all of my family in one place for a big holiday like Christmas,” Skye replied, plenty loud enough for everyone to hear. She turned to Coulson and hugged him. “Thanks for letting everyone come, D.C.”

Tony blinked at Skye for a moment, finding something to focus on that didn’t quite blow his mind. “D.C.?” he asked.

“Yeah, for Director Coulson.”

Tony grinned. “See? You are so totally my kid!” He held up his fist and Skye bumped it, laughing. “Skye Stark, for the win!”

“Wait, what?” It was Coulson’s turn to stare with a bemused expression.

“Way to shock him, Dad,” Skye said with a roll of her eyes. She turned to Coulson. “Tony adopted me. Legally, I mean.”

“When?” Coulson demanded.

“Couple of weeks ago, when this whole thing about my bio-dad came up,” Skye admitted in a quiet voice.

“And you didn’t think to mention it in your debrief?” May asked, her tone cool in contrast to
Coulson’s shock.

“Not really?” Skye shrugged. “It was really more personal than business. I didn’t tell you about their engagement, either.” Skye nodded towards Steve and Sharon. May looked incredulous. “Look, these guys aren’t the Avengers to me. They’re my family. We work together, sure, but I’m not about to share everything that happens with my family when we’re off the clock. You don’t ask that of anyone else in SHIELD.”

“You don’t think that becoming the Stark Heiress makes you even more of a dangerous target than you already were?” May asked.

Skye just shrugged. “Maybe it will, but how much more can we do? I’ve been undercover for two years running, except when I get to go home. I’m already a numbered agent. I’m already the one of the major factors RealSHIELD is using against Coulson. At this point? I don’t think anything can up my risk factor. It is what it is.”

“Besides, I didn’t adopt her to be the Stark Heiress,” Tony chimed in. “I adopted her because everyone needs to know someone has their back, will always be there for them. Until her soulmates can be publicly known, this lets me do it for her legally. And while I may not have the best reputation, it’s better than SHIELD’s is lately.”

“Alright, guys,” Maria broke in finally. “Why don’t we table this until later. We have cookies to bake, stockings to hang, decorations to finish, and fun to have. It’s Christmas.”

“I think that’s for the best,” Coulson agreed as Skye shot Maria a grateful smile.

Before Skye could move, she had Lila attached to her leg. The little girl stood between her and May, staring up with big eyes. “Can’t be mad at Auntie Skye. It’s Christmas. Christmas is for forgiving.”

“You’re right, butterfly,” Skye said, resting her hands on the girl’s shoulders. “We won’t be mad anymore, right?” She looked up at the others and froze as she saw May’s gaze firmly on herself and Lila, a hint of anguish hidden in the dark depths. Then May met her gaze, nodded and tried to smile.

“You’re a very brave girl, defending your Auntie Skye,” May said, leaning down so she was closer to Lila’s level.

“Daddy says that Auntie Skye, Auntie Nat and Auntie Maria are ninjas who protect all the families that can’t defend themselves. I wanna be like them, when I get big! So no one has to be ‘fraid.” She studied Melinda for a moment, looking over the tight black SHIELD jumpsuit. “Are you a ninja too?”

May glanced at Skye, who nodded slightly. “Yes, I am,” May agreed.

“And you remember what that means, right?” Skye questioned, just to be sure.

“No sneakin’, no jumpin’ and knock first if the door is closed,” Lila recited promptly. “So no one gets hurt.”

“Good girl!” Skye praised her. “Come on, I’ll show you the kitchen and we can get things ready for making cookies.”

“Yay!”

“Ninja?” May asked Maria as Skye took the little girl off to the kitchen.
Maria smiled. “Being a ninja is cool to the kids, but it also helps them to remember that we all have
dangerous reflexes if surprised. It’s the easiest way to explain it so they understand.”

May nodded thoughtfully. “And the jumping thing?”

“Lila likes to wake people up by jumping into bed with them. She actually knows that she can jump
into someone’s arms if they see her first and are ready for it. She’s got pretty good instincts, for a
munchkin.”

May smiled. “With you, Clint and Natasha for examples, I’m not surprised.”

Coulson was looking at Tony, examining him carefully. “You’re a lot different than the last time we
worked together,” Coulson said.

“Yeah?” Tony said. “How so?”

“You’re… not you?” Coulson said.

Tony sighed. “Coulson, when we first met, I had just come back from being tortured by terrorists for
months only to find out that my dad’s best friend and business partner ordered the hit. The second
time we met I was dying… The third time we met I totally admit I was just being an asshole.”

Pepper squeezed his hand supportively. “I think what Tony’s trying to say is that he’s been hard to
get to know in the past. Particularly the last few years. Why do you think I stood by his side all these
years?”

“Because you’re a lovely woman with unlimited patience,” Coulson replied with a smile. “You must,
to do what you do.”

“Thank you, Phil.” Pepper smiled, accepting the compliment with good grace. “Perhaps you’d like to
show us around? I think cookie baking with the kids might be a little beyond us for the moment.”

Tony looked relieved at Pepper’s suggestion and smiled when Coulson nodded. “Of course,”
Coulson invited. “I’m afraid the accommodations may not be what you’re used to, but hopefully
you’ll at least be comfortable.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Pepper agreed before Tony could comment.

The afternoon and evening passed cheerfully, mostly in smaller bunches. Skye had thought ahead
and they had pre-made plenty of sandwiches, potato salad, pasta salad and several other options so
that people could eat dinner as they got hungry. It was Christmas Eve and they had both a large
brunch and a huge dinner planned, so no one felt the need to prepare a complex meal that first night.

It was most entertaining when Laura passed around a plate of her cookies that evening once they had
cooled down enough. Coulson took two, but after the first bite, his eyes widened in shock and he
nearly dropped them, his head whipping around to stare at Clint.

“Barton?” Coulson asked slowly. “Are these…?”

“The magic cookies that you’re always asking me where I bought them?” Clint asked with a shit-
eating grin. “I couldn’t exactly tell you my wife made them to bring into the office.”

“So this whole time…” Coulson said slowly. “Skye went to your house, wherever it is, last
Christmas when we were all on the bus.”
Maria nodded. “We try to go every year we can. Laura taught Skye the family recipe and she brought a few dozen back to the bus for you all to enjoy,” she said.

“I remember,” Coulson said, taking another bite. “She gave a dozen of them just for me. The others pretty much devoured the remainder. I never considered that these would be homemade.”

Laura was the first to retire, shortly after taking the kids to bed. Clint went along to help settle the kids but came back out to join the other adults. Around eleven Clint, Skye, Maria and Nat gleefully organized everyone into getting gifts under the tree; the pile was massive, both because of the kids and, unsurprisingly, because of Tony.

Skye felt conflicted as she was dragged outside by Nat and Maria and handed her two candles. “Guys, I- I’m not sure about this,” she said shakily.

“It’s tradition,” Nat said. “You do it every year. You shouldn’t feel compelled to stop just because-”

“My father’s insane?” Skye spat. “He’s tried to kidnap me twice? Or, well, at least tried to convince me to let him. I don’t know if I have anything to say to him.”

“Start with your mom,” Maria suggested. “I know you told us she may not be dead, but you don’t know anything about her other than that. So start with her. Talk to her.”

In the face of their resolve, Skye sighed and lit her first candle. “Hi, mom,” she began softly. “I… wow, this is so weird. Talking to you like this while knowing that you really might be out there, somewhere. I wonder if you know I’m thinking about you. I… I met Cal. He’s pretty much nuts. But he said you were special, and that I have your eyes. So I suppose that’s something. Even a crazy man can fall in love, I guess. Or maybe he wasn’t crazy when you met him… I don’t know…”

“I got adopted this year. I hope you don’t take it personally. Tony… he just wants to watch out for me… make sure that I belong somewhere, and that people never underestimate me again. I was afraid to tell Cal about it. But this year I’ve realized that I love you, but I can’t wait for you to become my family. I need to find my own.”

She set down the lit candle and stared at it for a minute before she lit the other one. “I wish I could have known you… I wish I could have known you before you became what you are now. I wish you could see how happy I am. How this life that I’ve built is better than anything I’ve ever hoped for…” Tears were streaming down her face. “How after my childhood there are people who love me…”

“Always have, always will,” Natasha confirmed, wrapping her arms around Skye’s waist from behind.

Maria joined them, setting her lit candles beside Skye’s before wiping Skye’s cheeks tenderly. “We have this wonderful, insane, giant, happy family. We were happy before, but with Skye in the mix… and the people she’s drawn into the extended family… well, she’s pretty amazing. You’d be proud of her; I know we are.”

“Not a day goes by that she doesn’t think about and hope for the best for you guys,” Natasha said quietly. “If you’re out there, please remember that she loves you and she wants to know you. Just let her know you. Unless you’re both unhinged… then stay away.”

“Somehow I have a feeling if I follow through with this ‘destiny’ thing, I may not have a choice but to deal with them,” Skye said softly, watching the flames flicker and dance. “But if it brings us to our fourth… it’s worth it.”
“Agreed,” Maria and Nat said at the same time.

“For what we share, for what will grow when our bond is completed,” Maria added softly, “it’s worth almost anything.”

“Come on,” Natasha said after several minutes of introspective quiet. “We should head back in, have a warm drink to dispel the chill, and get to bed. Goodness knows we’ll be woken early enough tomorrow.”

“If Lila can find us,” Maria joked, leading the way inside.

“Shouldn’t be too hard. We’re two doors down from them and across the hall,” Skye said. Her soulmates blinked at her, knowing that was not where her room was located. “We have one of the family suites for the holiday. More room for all of us,” she explained.

“Alright,” Natasha said, nodding. “Let’s go inside.” She stuck the candles in the snow and let her soulmates do the same.

They found Coulson, Trip, and May all drinking spiked eggnog. Trip looked up. “Hey girl,” he said with a smile. “Wanna stay up until Christmas?”

“Maybe for a few minutes,” Skye said.

“So you’re a Stark now. The sole heiress to an empire,” Trip said.

Skye laughed dryly. “Yeah, I try my best not to think too much,” Skye said. “Pepper’s a great CEO, so at least I won’t be responsible for that for a long while, if ever, I hope to God, but sometimes I do some work for them. Tony’s been trying to get me interested in doing some work for SI… maybe finish what I started when I was 18.”

Trip nodded. “You took that physics class from Dr. Banner. Something about curing cancer?”

Skye nodded. “Maybe curing cancer is simplifying it too much, but I want to make it extremely treatable. At this point, it’s proven that gamma radiation changes how cells replicate. Our final paper was this 100-page long thesis on a topic of our choosing. Dr. Banner’s class was actually where I came up with my one percent of the solution idea.”

Coulson looked at her over his eggnog. “Really? How so?”

Skye smiled. “Our first paper was on science in general. Dr. Banner assigned us with the topic, ‘If you could change one thing in science, what would you change, why, and how would you change it?’ I wrote about how, while collaboration in the science community is encouraged, scientists have a tendency to work with a few people that they know they work well with.”

“But doesn’t that make sense?” Trip asked. “Wouldn’t you want to work with people you work well with?”

Skye pondered the question and then countered it. “Why do you spar with people of different body types?” she asked.

“Because not everyone has the same body type,” Trip said. “You have to train with different people to get your body fighting against different body types.”

“It challenges your mind,” Skye said. “Similarly, I pointed out that if you work with the same people all the time, you get used to the way a person thinks. Which can be useful in a lot of ways, but when
solving the really big problems we face in this world... we shouldn’t have little groups of teams working on solutions and then sharing their findings after they have a solution. Instead there should be hundreds of people collaborating together to get it done.”

Trip stared at her. “You know girl, you freak me out when you do that,” he said.

“Do what?” Skye asked.

“When you stop hiding that intelligence of yours,” Trip said. “I know it’s because you’re undercover, but you make it easy to forget.”

“We have a deal,” Maria said. “To consider coming out with it in six months. And right now I’m inclined to just come out with it then, regardless of the status of the Other SHIELD.”

Trip nodded, glancing at his watch. “Merry Christmas, guys,” he said as the clock struck midnight. “I suppose we should all get to bed…”

“Yeah, the kids are gonna be up in five hours,” Nat said.
Chapter Summary

Holidays are fun!

Because I haven't used a picture of Wanda yet, despite the fact that she's been in the pairing lineup all along.

**Chapter 23**

Christmas morning was wonderful. Coulson had made cinnamon rolls and wrapping paper had been thrown everywhere in the excitement.

A highlight of the morning was Tony opening Skye’s ‘joke’ present which turned out to be not so
big of a joke as she originally planned. She had made him a clay ornament with her handprint imprinted on it, her name and the date carefully printed on the bottom.

Tony froze and stared at the gift, causing Skye to blush. “It was just a joke… you know… I was just thinking about the ornaments your kids make you when they’re in kindergarten… parents always seemed to really love the ones their bio-kids made.”

“I love it,” Tony said softly, giving Skye a quick hug.

Before the moment got too mushy, Clint took out his nerf-style bow and arrow that Tony had made him (with suction cup tipped arrows so they could practice fighting without harming each other) and shot Tony in the head. The rest of the hour was filled with an epic outdoor free-for-all between the Avengers, Trip, May, Skye, Maria, Cooper, and Lila as they all used their practice weapons to fight each other.

Skye panted as she came into the kitchen to warm up and Laura instantly set a mug of hot chocolate in front of her. The base could be a bit drafty considering how old it was, so Laura’s baggy sweatshirt was no big surprise, but when Laura moved slightly, Skye saw something that made her eyes go huge. “Uh, Laura?” Skye asked curiously.

Laura followed Skye’s eyeline and grinned. “We weren’t going to say anything in front of the others just yet. We wanted everyone in the family to know too, though I get the feeling that Thor might know. Did you know according to norse mythology he’s also the God of Fertility?”

“So you’re…” Skye said slowly.

“Pregnant, yeah,” Laura said, nodding. “Due at the end of May.”

“Laura, that’s awesome,” Skye said with bright eyes. She gave Laura a gentle hug; Laura held her tightly for a few minutes. “I’m so happy for you guys.”

“Thanks. Let us tell the others, though?”

“You got it,” Skye agreed. “But don’t wait too long, because if Nat finds out that I kept it secret for too long she might kill me,” she added, winking. Laura laughed and nodded.

“When did you find out?”

“Right after Thanksgiving, actually. I thought about calling, but it seemed better to just wait to see you all again,” Laura explained quietly. “If we didn’t know we’d see you for Christmas, we would have told you anyway, but…”

“I get it. It’s cool.” Skye smiled. “So, need any help getting dinner finished up? We did as much ahead of time as we could…”

The two got to work making sure that dinner would be ready on time. Others filtered in and out; Steve joined in the preparation once he realized where Skye disappeared to. He actually wasn’t a bad cook, so they were glad to have his help. A lot of it just needed to be warmed through, though, so it wasn’t actually as much work as it could have been.

The cookies made with the kids on Christmas Eve weren’t the only Christmas cookies available, either. Skye had gotten Jemma, Trip and, surprisingly, Mack involved in her baking sprees during free time for the past few weeks.

Skye recruited several of the guys when it was time to take the food out to the tables. The platters full
of sliced ham and turkey, huge bowls of mashed potatoes, and casserole dishes full of squash and 
green bean casserole were all heavy.

“Why should I have to strain myself hauling heavy platters when I have superheroes around to do it 
for me?” Skye quipped lightly. It also neatly covered the fact that Skye wouldn’t let Laura carry 
anything too heavy; she diverted Laura by handing her bottles of wine and sparkling juice to get to 
the table and distribute.

When everything was laid out on the huge conference room table and everyone was seated, they 
looked around at each other happily.

“Verily, this is a great feast!” Thor said with an enthusiastic grin. “I thought the Feast of Midgard last 
month was enjoyable, but this…”

Skye chuckled. “Thanksgiving is only an American holiday, actually. Some other countries have 
their own versions, but mostly on different days. Christmas isn’t a universal holiday, either, but it is 
more widely celebrated around the world. Merry Christmas, everybody!”

“Merry Christmas!” The chorus went around the table.

Dinner was a noisy affair, and not just because of the small children. Because their group was so 
large, there were multiple conversations happening at once, Thor and Steve leading a particularly 
rousing conversation of feasts of yesteryear. Thor spoke of feasts that lasted for days while Steve 
spoke about Thanksgivings and Christmases during the Roaring 20s, the Depression, and during the 
war. Coulson was riveted.

Meanwhile Skye, May, and Natasha were all debating about the benefits of taking weapons into 
combat. Natasha never went into battle without her Bites, May preferred to take what she needed, 
and Skye preferred using non-lethal solutions.

All too soon the meal passed and Avengers were piling back into the jet, first to drop off Laura and 
the kids, then on to the tower. Maria and Nat had elected to stay behind for a couple days to spend 
more time with Skye, though their cover was that Nat was doing a refresher course with May, Trip, 
and Skye.

Skye stood with Trip and Nat, waving as the jet took off. She sighed softly, but there was a small 
smile on her face.

“What’s up, girl?” Trip asked.

“Nothing, really. Just… it was awesome to have them here for Christmas, but I kinda wish we’d had 
more time. You know?”

“Yeah, I get that. I don’t spend as much time with Sharon or our other family anymore as I’d like,” 
Trip agreed softly.

“I’m glad you stayed, though. I’m sorry to make you miss going to your mom’s, but…”

“Naw. It was worth it, both to get to see you with your family and to see Sharon and Steve. Don’t 
worry about me,” Trip assured her. “Plus I’ll probably see everyone at the wedding next year.”

Skye smiled brighter. “Okay. Merry Christmas, everybody.”

“Merry Christmas, Skye,” Natasha said, wrapping an arm around her soulmate and pulling her close.
“Come on, DC,” Skye wheedled. “It’s New Year’s Eve, we haven’t got a single sign of activity anywhere. Everybody’s restless, and it’s not like anything’s going to happen to us in a crowded club when half of us are spies…”


“Yes, really. It’ll be fun!”

“Have you talked to anyone else to see if they’re interested?”

“Of course!” Skye looked offended. “Hunter and Bobbi are totally down, Izzy’s cool with it though Idaho may not want to come. Mack is tentative, Trip’s pretty sure he can talk Jemma and Fitz away from the lab for a while… And if you and May want to come keep an eye on all us ‘kids’ I don’t think anyone will object.”

“We can’t just leave the base unattended…”

“Like it would be. There are dozens of people back from their holiday leave.” Skye rolled her eyes. Coulson sighed. “Alright, fine. Go. I’ll talk to May, see if one of us should go along.”

“Thanks DC! You’re the best!” Skye bounced off the edge of the table she was sitting on, gave him a quick hug and dashed out the door.

Two hours later, after a quick dinner and time to get changed, the group loaded into several vehicles and headed into town. Coulson and May had decided to stay behind, but they were on call if something came up. The group was supposed to be back at the base by 1am.

The group claimed a handful of tables tucked into a corner across from the main bar; the group of dancers rotated so there were always at least two people at the tables to watch over drinks, jackets and other belongings. Trip danced gleefully, which surprised Skye not at all. What did surprise her was that Mack could dance, too, and did so willingly as long as he had a partner; he was quite lithe for a man of his size, and he was much in demand as a dance partner.

The only actual couple in the group was Bobbi and Hunter, but they were all friends and neither seemed unwilling to trade off partners with the rest of the group.

About quarter to twelve, Skye excused herself to the restroom so she wouldn’t miss the ball dropping at midnight. She was just stopping at the sink to wash her hands when the lights in the bathroom went out. “Shit,” she swore softly. She could barely see, the only light a dim glow coming through the one small, high window on the wall.

Then she felt something sharp against her arm. “Ow!” She grabbed for her arm and felt the slide of a needle as it withdrew. Then the lights came back on.

She blinked blearily at the figure standing in front of her. “Raina,” she spat the name like a curse, and the other woman just smiled serenely as she tucked a small case into a bag over her shoulder.

“Hello, Skye. It’s time for you to come with us. It’s time to meet your destiny.” Skye blinked, suddenly having trouble focusing. She fumbled at her wrist for her panic button and just about got her fingers onto it when it was wrenched away. “Oh, no, none of that. They’d only be harmed by this. It’s not for them.”

Raina looped Skye’s arm over her shoulder and Skye could only stumble along, her mind blurred and her reflexes almost nonexistent from whatever drug Raina had given her. “I suppose you have
some sort of tracker, too,” Raina continued smoothly. “We’ll deal with that in a minute.”

Raina pulled Skye out of the restroom and down the hall, towards the club’s emergency exit where Cal waited for them.

“Daisy,” Cal said soothingly. “Come on, baby girl, it’s time to get you out of here.” Between Cal and Raina, they led her stumbling form from the back exit to the front of the building. The bouncer looked like he might stop them, but Cal gave him a smile. “My daughter has had a bit too much to drink. I’m just going to take her home.”

The bouncer studied them for a moment, then nodded.

“Not drunk,” Skye managed to say, though her voice was slurred and her vision was getting hazy.

“Of course you’re not, honey,” Raina soothed gently with a shake of her head and a smile for the bouncer. “Come on, into the car, now.”

Unable to fight them, Skye was manhandled into the back seat of the car. Cal got into the driver’s seat and they began to pull away. Skye wasn’t conscious to feel Raina rip the anklet off of her and throw it out the car window as they passed over a bridge. Luck wasn’t in Skye’s favor as it landed into dump truck. In less than five minutes, Skye had been taken and the three of them slipped into the night.

Maria and Natasha were spending New Year’s Eve at the Bartons’ and reached out in silence at eleven when the clock struck midnight on the East coast. Feeling nothing, they assumed Skye had already been to bed (or passed out from alcohol consumption) and re-joined the festivities of the household. They’d catch up with her in the morning.

Jemma and Fitz were waiting impatiently, with ten minutes until midnight, a champagne glass full and waiting for Skye.

“That’s it, I’m checking the bathroom,” Jemma said, setting her own flute down.

She came back looking worried, Skye’s panic button in her hands. “She wasn’t there,” Jemma said. “But this was on the floor.”

“Skye’s panic button?” Fitz said, taking it. “Go get Bobbi.” Jemma took off. Fitz debated pressing the button. He had always gotten the feeling when Skye talked about her soulmate that there was something Skye wasn’t telling them. Something big. Now that Fitz had the panic button in his hands, his suspicions doubled. Fitz knew Stark tech when he saw it. More than ever, Fitz was getting the feeling that there was a lot more to Skye then she had ever said.

But before Fitz could think about it any more, Bobbi and Hunter came running up to him.

“Jemma told us everything,” Bobbi said as Hunter opened his phone.

“Coulson, aye, we’ve got a problem,” he said. “Skye went missing.” Everyone could hear Coulson loudly swear over the line.

“What’s the timeline on this?” May asked after Hunter put the phone on speaker.

“Maybe five minutes?” Jemma said, distressed. “She wanted to go to the ladies’ before the clock struck twelve.”
“Can you check Skye’s GPS?” Coulson asked someone in the background. “No… no we’re not sure. We’re going to look for her... Right, we’ll let you know if we do.”

Izzy and the others who had come up behind them, all of them looking concerned. “Here’s the deal, we think Skye’s father took her about fifteen minutes ago. Her GPS shows her going up I-95 at this moment, but I’ve got another team on that because I think it’s a red herring. There’s another possibility that I think we should check.” Bobbi led them out and they all piled into the 12 passenger van they had taken, which Mack had retrofitted with benches along the sides so they could debrief and so there was space in the middle to give someone medical aid.

Mack drove while Coulson sent the images of his and Garrett’s drawings to the van’s briefing screen. “All of you know that I was injected by a drug to resurrect me,” Coulson started.

Hunter’s eyes went wide and opened his mouth, clearing having not known that, but Bobbi shushed him before he could say anything.

“What you don’t know is there was a side-effect of the drug - a compulsion to draw these images. Garrett showed signs of this hypergraphia immediately and I showed signs not long after seeing Garrett’s drawings. Skye researched it and found it was a map to the Underground in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Since finding the exact location of the city, I haven’t shown any signs of the compulsion.” Everyone looked worriedly at the screen, but remained quiet.

“But Sir,” Jemma piped up. “Why would he take her there?”

Coulson hesitated. “It’s unconfirmed that Cal is her father, but he seems to think it’s her destiny to change somehow. I believe that he’d take her here, if given the chance.” Izzy, Idaho, Bobbi, and Mack all exchanged glances. Once the van arrived at the base (in record time), they transferred to the quinjet. Fitz couldn’t help but feel like everything was about to change.

Someone’s watch alarm rang as the clock struck midnight. It was New Year’s Day, but no one felt much like celebrating. Fitz gave Jemma a squeeze of her hand while Hunter gave Bobbi a quick kiss.

Skye’s head felt full of cotton as she woke. She wondered how much she had had to drink the night before, then she remembered Raina and the needle. She moved and found she was tightly bound. She managed to move her feet just enough to see that her GPS was missing too. How could they find her if they didn’t know where she was?

“None, of that now, Skye,” Raina said silkily grabbing her wrist and pulling it away from the hidden knife before taking it from her. “You’re about to find out who you truly are, after all.”

She felt physically sick. Probably from whatever Raina had given her. She was cold and lying on something hard and she wished more than anything she was home at the tower in her warm, soft mattress and surrounded by her soulmates. Her cheeks felt wet and she realized she had started to
cry.

“My grandmother talked about this… about the blue angels that came down from the sky and gave us our gifts - made us beautiful,” Raina continued.

“They’re called the Kree,” Skye said, slurring a little less and trying to sit up. “And they didn’t give us gifts. They experimented on our ancestors. They were trying to weaponize the human race so we could be cannon fodder.”

Raina shook her head. “They gave us gifts,” Raina said, denying Skye’s words. “And now they’re going to bless us. Your father’s waiting for us, once we transform into who we truly are.”

Raina walked over to a stone table structure at the center of the room and Skye struggled even harder against her bonds. Her soulmates were coming, she knew almost instinctively, but depending on how far away they were, they could still be hours away. The metal thing in Raina’s hand made contact with the table and started to glow. It opened, and Skye saw blue crystals coming out of it. A rock wall closed, sealing them in. Something hard started encasing Skye, causing her to struggle more.

She managed to slip her hands from the bindings, but only just managed to get them in front of her when the stone-stuff crept down her arms, freezing her there. She closed her eyes, focusing instead on her soulmates; if she was going to be trapped here, she wanted them to know she loved them.

And then everything went dark.

Wanda let Pietro help her down the entry shaft, into the dark stone tunnels where she kept seeing her soulmate. Her Skye; she had the name, now, as she began to see more and more. Her poor soulmate, trapped in a transformation she’d never asked for or wanted.

This place, this city-within-a-cavern, felt wrong to her. The people who built it were very strange, not of this world. And they brought people here, did terrible things to them. Echoes of that terror filled the still air. But Wanda shut it out as best she could; they had to get to her soulmate.

“I do not like this place, sister,” Pietro told her as he stood close by her side. She held up a glowing hand, giving them just enough light to see by as they made their way down the tunnel. They wound their way deeper into the complex, following Wanda’s sense of Skye.

Suddenly her eyes went wide. “It’s happening. I feel her… so much pain, Pietro,” she whispered.

“Come on,” Pietro said, grabbing her hand and pulling her along. “We’d best hurry.”

“There are other people here,” Wanda told him after a moment. “I do not like the feel of them. One is very vain, self-centered, and she wants something she will never have. The other is… lost. Dark. His mind is no longer whole. He wants to help, but he doesn’t know he is doing it wrong.”

“How will I know your soulmate?” Pietro asked.

Wanda smiled. “She is beautiful. Small, dark… powerful. Very powerful. But kind. You will know her; she will be easy to tell.”

Pietro scoffed but nodded. If Wanda didn’t feel the need to tell him more, then he probably wouldn’t actually need a better description.

He urged Wanda along, and they began to move quicker as the tunnels straightened out. They were moving unbearably slowly, from his perspective, but he had no idea where they needed to be and
could only follow Wanda at her pace.

He hoped they would make it in time.
Chapter Summary

Skye's transformation... and other things.

Chapter Notes

You guys are absolutely amazing. We have over 600 Kudos, and an awful lot of great comments. Thank you all so much, and we hope to continue to live up to your expectations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The first thing that Skye was aware of was her soulmates reaching out for her, wrapping her in the fearful love that came when a soulmate was in trouble. She sent love back and tried her best to quell the undertow of self-blame coming from Maria and Natasha. In the next moment, her own fear set in as the room began to shake, destroying whatever the rock-like structure was that surrounded her and Raina. Skye lifted in mid-air for a moment, then crashed to the ground.

She landed next to the knife that Raina had taken off her and cast aside, and she grabbed it reflexively as the earth started shaking. Then she looked up and saw Raina and her fear increased. It seemed that if what Raina said was true and they had become who they truly were meant to be, Raina was now as ugly on the outside as she was on the inside. Every inch of her was covered in thorns. Somehow, the ropes that were binding her became undone. Raina blinked, then looked at the backs of her hands.

“What?” Raina said. “No. No. This is wrong!” The door started opening and Skye scrambled to her feet, the earth shaking harder.

“It’s what you were meant to become,” Skye said tiredly. It occurred to her that she needed to look at her own skin. It took her a moment to get up the nerve and then she sighed as she realized her skin looked like it always had. She didn’t look or feel any different externally. Internally, she could feel the earthquake shaking her to her very core.

“I was supposed to be beautiful. Not you!” Raina shouted, stalking over to Skye. Raina lifted her up with one hand, effectively choking her. Without thinking, Skye struck out at Raina’s arms the way Natasha had taught her; it was less effective than she liked, though, as Raina seemed to be somewhat stronger in this form. Still, she managed to break Raina’s hold enough to hit the ground and get her breath back.

Then a bolt of blazing red came from one side, knocking Raina away from Skye. A young woman, around her size, stopped right at her side, still facing Raina. Her hands glowed with red energy, though when she reached down to help Skye to her feet the power only tingled against her skin.

“Are you alright, my heart?” Wanda asked, her soft voice concerned.

Skye paused a moment, hearing the final set of words etched on her skin. In that moment, regardless of what had just happened and how crappy she was feeling… the world turned a bit brighter. “I’m alright now, thanks to you,” Skye said with what she was sure was a sappy smile.

“Daisy!” Cal’s voice called out and Skye turned to face him, just in time to see a blur of motion and her so-called father’s form fall to the ground, unconscious. Pietro grinned at the girls, unabashed.

“I do believe introductions can wait until we get out of here,” Pietro said with a glance up at the walls shaking around them.

“It’s me,” Skye whispered. “I’m causing… this…”

“Hush, now,” Wanda replied gently. She touched her fingertips to Skye’s temple and, for the moment, the shaking eased off. “We will help you.”

She could still feel a humming beneath her skin, but if it was contained for the moment, that was all she really needed. “Thank you. Let’s get out of here, then.”

Pietro grabbed both women by the hands and started pulling them towards the exit he and Wanda had come in through. He had to hold back from his full speed, not wanting to harm this new woman in any way. But he wanted them out of there, now. Before the shaking began again; if Wanda’s
soulmate was causing it, it was only a matter of time before it returned.

By the time they made it out of the ruins, the strain of whatever happened to Skye down in the city seemed to have taken it’s toll. She gasped for breath, coughing a few times as she tried to breathe normally. Wanda sat Skye down and stroked her temple, which calmed her further. Skye could tell that the adrenaline was wearing off. “I am Wanda,” Wanda said. “This is Pietro.”

“Skye,” Skye said, closing her eyes, Wanda’s hands felt amazing. “We should get moving… Cal…” she refused to refer to him as her father. Tony was her father. She didn’t need her biological one. “…Cal’s dangerous.”

“Cal’s path does not meet up with ours for a long while,” Wanda said cryptically. “But both help and danger race toward us. One lands as we speak.”

Skye looked up and spotted the two Quinjets landing. She tensed, slightly, and the earth trembled beneath her. Aftershocks, her brain supplied. Pietro grabbed them both, ready to run if they needed to. Skye calmed down once she spotted Coulson as part of the group running towards them.

“Sit rep,” Coulson barked, all business. But his face was kind when he knelt down next to them.

“Cal and Raina dragged me down into some kind of cavern below,” Skye said, careful what to say until she knew all of it. “Cal waited outside while Raina brought me in. She transformed into… I’m not even sure what. She had spines all over her body, and her eyes…,” Skye shuddered.

Thankfully, Coulson and May picked up on what Skye wasn’t saying. What Thor had described - the Kree weaponizing human beings - had succeeded. “Where’s Raina now?” Coulson asked.

“I don’t know. She got angry when she saw what happened to her. She… “ Skye rubbed her throat, remembering Raina’s hand. Coulson looked wide-eyed. “I broke the hold, like I was taught and the next minute Wanda and Pietro come flying out of nowhere. I know they knocked out Cal but I’m not sure if Raina…”

“She will not harm Skye again,” Wanda said with finality. “Some of the places we hit are unstable. The underground passageways will soon flood.”

Fitz and Simmons looked like they wanted to object to this, but May silenced them with a single glance. Mack, Bobbi, Izzy, and Idaho all looked suspicious of Skye and Wanda.

“Were you down there as well?” Jemma asked.

“We went down to retrieve Skye, were not present for any changes.”

Another plane was descending and Coulson set his jaw. “Jemma, Trip,” he said firmly. “Take Skye and her rescuers back to base. Make sure you clear Skye medically.”

Jemma nodded as Wanda helped Skye up. Noticing that Skye was unsteady on her feet, Trip scooped her into his arms and headed for the Quinjet. Pietro looked about to object, but Skye smiled at Trip as he approached, so Wanda waved off her brother’s objections.

“You alright, girl?” Trip asked softly as they moved quickly away.

Skye shrugged. “Not sure, yet. Guess we’ll see. Trip… do you have your phone?”

“Yeah, you can have it when we get to the plane,” he told her. “Your ‘mate relaxing finally?”
She nodded. “Yeah… or, at least not freaking out anymore.”

“Good.”

They reached the plane and Trip dropped Skye into one of the jump seats, knowing the others would settle her in while he got the jet in the air. Jemma bustled over to the first aid kit, grabbing it while Wanda and Pietro got Skye settled and buckled in. Wanda sat beside Skye, with Pietro on her other side. Jemma moved to Skye’s other side and buckled in before starting to dab at Skye’s scrapes with an antiseptic pad.

“Oh, Skye, your neck looks awful,” Jemma said softly. “Does it hurt much? I can give you a painkiller…”

“I’m alright,” Skye replied, though her voice was a bit raspy from the bruising at her throat. “Raina was pissed when the mist from that thing made her horrible instead of beautiful. She was angry that I still look the same.”

“That one was not beautiful within,” Wanda spoke up in her lilting voice. “Not like you are.”

Jemma gave Wanda a dubious look but shrugged away the woman’s comment. Instead she focused on Skye. “Mist? What sort of mist? Did you breathe it?”

Skye silently swore, realizing that her stress and fatigue, not to mention whatever remnants of drugs were still in her system, were compromising her ability to keep her secrets. “I don’t know what it was, Jemma. It came out of the object that Raina had; I think it was that 0-8-4 we were looking for a few months ago. Anyway, it kinda washed over me in a wave, and there wasn’t much I could do to stop it.”

“We’ll have to give you a full scan back at the base. It could have been some kind of bio-metabolic or maybe a contact catalyst…” Jemma trailed off, her tone and expression concerned. “We might have to quarantine you until we know you’re alright…”

Skye shrugged, too tired to care at the moment. She knew perfectly well that her soulmates wouldn’t leave her alone in quarantine for long. She could deal until then.

“I’ll call ahead and set the tests up,” Jemma said. The jet stabilized in the air, so Jemma pulled out her phone and called the base. Skye sighed, realizing she’d forgotten to get Trip’s phone and she didn’t have hers anymore.

“What is the matter?” Wanda asked quietly.

“I don’t have my phone,” Skye answered lowly, hoping Jemma’s call would keep her from hearing. “My soulmates will want to get to me as quickly as possible, and I can’t call them.”

Wanda gave her a small, secretive small. “I knew you would know them already. Can you not feel them through the bond?”

“I can, but we communicate more in feelings than words,” Skye tried to explain, but there really just weren’t good words to describe a soul bond.

“Wait, them?” Jemma asked. “I thought you only had one.”

Skye sighed heavily. She was so tired. “Jemma, I swear I’ll explain later, but for now… just let it go.”
Skye felt Jemma stare at her for a moment, then she said. “Okay, Skye. You can explain it later.”

She could hear Jemma speaking over the phone, ordering tests. Wanda and Pietro were murmuring to each other in Romanian. Skye must have drifted off because she blinked and they had landed. She was fine until she saw three separate quarantine rooms. She pulled back and Wanda grabbed her hand, calming her. Wanda brushed her temple and nodded. “Would you feel better if we were together?”

“I can handle it,” Skye said, her breathing a little shaky.

“As I’m sure I will say to you many times, you do not have to,” Wanda said. She reached out and brushed Jemma’s shoulder.

“We can set you up in just the one quarantine. You were all exposed to the same mist?” Jemma asked.

“Yes,” Wanda said, before Skye could say anything.

“Alright,” Jemma said. “I don’t think we can get three beds in there.”

“We can sit,” Pietro said. “We will not be in there too long.”

Jemma muttered something that Skye couldn’t quite make out, but it sounded like ‘not if I can help it.’

Jemma took blood from all three of them. And more tests were done for Skye. X-Rays, scans, and even a portable MRI. While this was going on, Trip took the jet back out to Puerto Rico to pick up the rest of the team. They hadn’t called for backup, so they assumed everything had settled okay.

Trip came to see Skye as soon as he got back. He stood outside the quarantine unit and gave them a smile. “Hey, girl. Came to see how you’re doing. And to meet your friends properly.”

Skye got up and crossed over to the clear plastic wall. She rested her hand on it, and Trip rested his on the opposite side for a moment. “I’m alright, Trip. Proper introductions will have to wait until we’re out of here, but my companions are Wanda Maximoff and her brother Pietro.” She gave Trip a pointed look, and he just nodded acceptance. Then she turned to step out of the way, looking back at the twins. “This is my friend and teammate, Antoine Triplett. Most of us call him Trip.”

Thankfully, Skye had managed to explain to Wanda and Pietro that there were only a few here who knew her truly; Wanda apparently had foreseen some of her undercover behavior and they both agreed to follow her lead. “It is nice to meet you, Trip,” Wanda said lightly, smiling. “Any friend of Skye’s…”

“We’re happy to get to know,” Pietro finished, cutting Wanda off, but also smiling.

“Glad to hear it. Look, guys, the boss is gonna want to talk to you. But we’ll get you outta here as soon as possible,” Trip said, his expression serious.

“We understand,” Wanda said. “In truth, I did not want Skye to be alone. My brother and I were not there when Skye was… changed.”

“That’s quite the sacrifice to make for someone you just met,” Trip said. Then he smiled. “But thank you. I wouldn’t have wanted her in there all alone, either.” His eyes moved from Wanda’s to Skye’s, and Skye was touched by the sincerity in them.
“Trip, call the Tower if no one else has yet,” she asked in a whisper that barely crossed the barrier.
“Please.”

“Already handled, girlfriend,” Trip promised her in a low voice. Skye smiled in relief. “They’re about two hours away. Apparently they had split up for New Year’s?”

Skye sighed, remembering. Clint, Maria, and Nat were at the Bartons’; Pepper and Tony were in Paris; Bruce was in some tiny town in Canada in a cabin; Thor was off-world, but reachable; and Steve was with the Carters. “Yeah, I remember that,” she said.

“Because I know you-know-who was at my cousin’s,” Trip said.

“They set a date?” Skye asked.

“Like you-know-who wouldn’t tell his best friend. I wouldn’t be surprised if someone gets asked to be a bridesmaid.”

Skye blushed heavily. “I’d be honored if I were asked,” Skye said softly.

Trip grinned at her. “Maybe I’ll see if I can talk my cousin into letting me be your escort, if that’s the case.”

Skye laughed; a weak, tense laugh, but at least a laugh. “That could be fun. We can write our embarrassing speeches together,” she joked.

“Hang in there, girl,” Trip said, even as Wanda stepped closer and wrapped an arm around Skye. “You’re not alone, I promise. Whatever happened, we’ll make it okay.”

“I know we will,” Skye said, leaning into Wanda gratefully. “Go ahead, go see the others. We’ll be alright a bit longer.”

“You would not believe the show you’re missing,” Trip said, low. “Gonzalez is screaming bloody murder out there, May’s about to throw a chair and honest to god, Hunter’s about two seconds away from walking away from all of this.”

“Send Hunter my way,” Skye said, teasingly. “I’ll make his head explode.”

“I’m starting to get the feeling that once your friends get here, everyone’s heads are gonna do that anyway. Particularly if certain more hot-headed individuals see you behind quarantine glass,” Trip noted.

Skye nodded when she caught sight of Hunter over Trip’s shoulder; he looked pissed, stalking by. “Hey, Hunter?” she called out. The man paused at the sound of his name, looking up; his expression was stony, hurt, but softened when he saw Skye calling from the quarantine box.

“Skye, love,” he said quickly, changing directions to stand beside Trip. “How are you holdin’ up?”

Skye shrugged slightly. “All in all, been a lousy day. Got kidnapped by Cal and Raina, hauled to… you said Puerto Rico?” She paused and Trip nodded. “Shoved into some kind of building in an ancient, alien city, and… God only knows what else before getting shoved onto a jet and dropped into quarantine.” Wanda’s arm tightened briefly around Skye’s waist. “Still, it wasn’t all bad. So I’m hanging in. You?”

“Did you hear there’s some blokes here, claimin’ they’re from the ‘Real SHIELD’ or some bloody thing?” Hunter asked, clearly still irritated.
Skye shook her head. “Trip was just saying something about an Agent Gonzalez having fits at Coulson?”

“Yeah. It’s bloody insane!” Hunter ran his hands through his hair in agitation. “And even worse is who’s on their side… from our team!”

Skye braced herself, reaching out a hand to the glass. “I’m not sure I want to know… but tell me, please?”

Hunter grumbled for a moment, then looked at Skye with an expression of betrayal. “Bob’s on their side,” he told her. “And Mack, and… and Izzy.”

“Oh, Hunter, I’m so sorry,” Skye said softly. “And they didn’t tell you, obviously. That’s… that’s awful, Hunter. You deserve better than that.”

“Thanks, lovely,” Hunter said, a flicker of a smile touching his lips. “Nice to know someone cares.”

“As soon as we get out of here, we’ll go have a drink,” Skye promised. “No kidnappings this time.”

Now Hunter did smile, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I may hold you to that. I’m gonna need one, this keeps up much longer.”

Skye snorted. “Trust me. I already need one, and I haven’t even gone in there yet.”

“You want one? Because you have that door thing. I could pass you a beer if you really want one,” Hunter offered.

Skye sighed. “After,” Skye said. “After all this… gets processed.” She didn’t know what friends she’d have after all this. She’d have her family, she knew that, but she’d spent the last two years with her friends, which is longer than she’d been anywhere.

Hunter looked at her intently. “What aren’t you saying, Skye?” he asked dangerously.

Skye looked at him seriously for a moment. “That somehow I get the feeling that we’re not done with revelations today, and this thing with Gonzalez is only the beginning.” She sighed. “On the plus side, reinforcements are coming. On the down side… I think there might be a few more bombs, figuratively speaking, headed our way.”

“Lovely,” Hunter groaned, sighing as well. “I don’t suppose you can give me a clue…”

Skye gave him a smile, a genuine one. “The Avengers are coming.”

Hunter boggled a moment, then looked at her suspiciously. “How do you know that?”

Her smile dimmed slightly, but she shrugged. “Maybe because I arranged to have them called?”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because we need the backup,” Skye explained seriously. “In more ways than one.”

“And there you go being mysterious, again. Alright, I’ll hang tight until the reinforcements get here. And maybe I’ll find us a couple of good brews while I wait.” Hunter gave her a nod and a tight smile and wandered off again, though this time with less anger in his stride.

Time passed slowly, in quarantine. Wanda, Skye and Pietro talked a little, the twins telling her more about their lives in Sokovia; Wanda already knew a fair bit about Skye, she said, but they could
discuss that later when they were less likely to be overheard.

Towards the end of the second hour, Jemma bustled in wearing a hazmat suit to take another set of blood samples from Skye. She looked upset and wouldn’t talk to Skye while she was there, just hurrying off again. Skye’s eyes followed her from inside the quarantine box, her expression pained.

“And so it begins,” she whispered to herself.

“It will be alright,” Wanda whispered encouragingly.

Skye smiled, but inwardly she wondered if this was the beginning of the end of her time with SHIELD. Especially when she caught sight of Jemma and Coulson in the hallway.

Skye caught the look on Jemma’s face when Jemma looked at her, and she was shocked to find that Jemma looked scared of her. Skye knew then that the change was in her very DNA. She also knew that that look would haunt her for a while. Jemma was saying something that Skye couldn’t make out, but Coulson frowned. There was then a huge crashing sound and Coulson looked up and paled significantly.

“Skye!” Maria called.

“Trip, tell them I’m in here. I’m not going to be heard…” Skye said quickly. Trip started out. “Trip,” Skye called out again. Trip turned around. “Warn them about Quarantine.” Trip nodded and headed quickly for the hall.

“Sorry, sorry, don’t want to interrupt. Skye’s in there,” he pointed back the way he’d come, but he continued before anyone could move. “She’s in medical quarantine; she can hear you, but you probably can’t hear her well from out here. She knows you’re here.”

“Medical quarantine?” Maria demanded. “Coulson, what the hell is going on here?”

“And why is she…” Steve glared at Jemma, who shrank back from the anger being directed at her.

“…suggesting ‘eradication’ before a contamination can spread?” Skye raised her eyebrows at that. Was that what Jemma had said?

Coulson held up his hands peaceably. “I’m not considering any sort of eradication at the moment unless we find a virus or other pathogen to focus on,” he stated clearly. “Skye was exposed to some kind of biological weapon or artifact that has apparently changed her DNA in significant ways. We’ve only just discovered it, and we don’t know what caused it or why. Skye’s in quarantine until we can figure it out. Unfortunately, we’ve also had other problems. A group calling themselves RealSHIELD showed up at about the same time we did, also wanting to retrieve Skye and anyone else down in those tunnels with her. We could really use your support, if we’re going to have to deal with them too.”

Maria’s expression hardened. “They’re here now?”

“Yes.”

She sighed. “I’m going to see Skye. I want ten minutes and no cameras or audio devices, Coulson,” she said firmly. “We’ll observe your quarantine… for the moment.”

Coulson nodded and Trip went to the security station, disabling the cameras in the quarantine area. “You’re clear,” he confirmed when the lights blinked out.

“Thank you.” Maria stalked through the door, Natasha, Steve and Tony right behind her. To their
surprise, Bruce was already inside by the quarantine unit, talking to Skye.

“We’ll find an answer, Skye,” Bruce promised her, and she smiled appreciatively as he turned to walk away.

“Where’s he going?” Tony demanded, watching Bruce go.

“He’s going to go work with Simmons and the other scientists to try to determine what happened and if it can be undone,” Skye explained in a low voice.

“Forget about that, we don’t have long with no cameras,” Natasha interrupted, stepping up to the glass and putting both hands against it. “Are you alright, Skye?”

Skye moved closer and placed her hands on the glass, as close to touching Natasha as she could get. “Honestly? I’m terrified. I don’t know what happened to me, but something’s different. Something’s wrong with me, I changed somehow. And I don’t know how to control it, whatever it is. But… I haven’t been alone, so I’m not as bad as I could be.”

“You made some new friends, Skye?” Maria asked, stepping closer and placing her hands on top of Natasha’s.

“I know we don’t have much time, and it’s probably better for you to talk later, but… this is Wanda. She’s our missing fourth,” Skye told them gently. “It’s complicated, and I wish we had more time to deal with personal things… but you have to go help Coulson, too.”

“Fuck that,” Tony denied. “We need to get you out of there, SkyeNet,” he continued. “You don’t deserve to be locked up for something you couldn’t control.” Skye studied him; Tony seemed to be dealing very badly with seeing her in the quarantine unit. Even if she wasn’t alone.

“It’s alright, Dad,” Skye said, shifting closer to Tony. She left one hand in “contact” with Maria and Natasha while reaching the other out to Tony. “I’ll be okay. We need to make sure whatever changed me can’t hurt anyone else.”

“It hasn’t hurt us, though,” Pietro spoke up. “And we’ve been with you for several hours, now. Nothing like what you described has happened to us.”

Skye nodded. “I know. I don’t think it’s contagious, and I don’t think it can happen to just anyone. Don’t ask me how I know, I just do. But the scientists won’t just take my word for it.”

Time passed. The clock said twenty minutes, but Skye felt like that had to be a lie. Avengers walked in and out, conversing with Coulson. Steve came in and said nothing since the cameras were on. Wanda spent much of her time stroking Skye’s hair and helping her keep calm.

Thor and Bruce came back in followed by Simmons who was protesting loudly. “- don’t know that it won’t expose the entire base to whatever’s infecting Skye.”

“As I have said, Lady Simmons,” Thor said. “I was trained in elementary science when I was a youth. A virus does not make one change so instantaneously.”

“It’s been six hours since we hypothesize the process was at least triggered,” Bruce said. “None of them show anything but normal antibody response. I don’t think this is a virus. Especially since the results were instantaneous for Skye while the other two show no signs of change.”

“But shouldn’t we cure Skye first?” Jemma asked.
Bruce took a breath as Skye whimpered. The Avengers all shot Jemma dirty looks. “As much as I understand your good intentions, things like this can’t always be ‘cured’,” Bruce said gently. “Also, it’s up to Skye if she would want something like that to happen. Have you asked her?”

“No,” Jemma said, shamefaced, “but -”

“No matter what your opinion on any matter,” Bruce continued, “it’s always the patient’s choice first and foremost.”

“As touching as all this is,” came a voice. Skye looked and saw an older, Hispanic male walking with a cane come in followed by Bobbi, Weaver, Mack, Izzy, and others. Skye assumed this was Gonzalez. “I want to know why an internal dispute warrants Coulson calling the Avengers.”

Coulson looked uncomfortable and Skye looked down at her feet. “He didn’t call them,” she said. “I did.” All the SHIELD and RealSHIELD agents looked at her in surprise “But not for the reason you think.”

“Then why,” Gonzalez spat out.

Skye glanced at the Avengers and Nat subtly nodded. She felt their love and support through the bond, but Skye couldn’t do this in a glass box. “Let me get processed out of quarantine and I’ll meet you in the conference room,” she said. “This is going to take a while to explain.”

None of them looked happy with that answer, but Coulson got them to file out. “Skye, are you sure?” Maria whispered.

Skye nodded. “It’s time. Whatever power I gained from this… I don’t know if I’ll ever be a SHIELD agent again, or if they’d even accept me now that I’ve changed. So we might as well come out with all of it.”

Despite everything, it still took half an hour for Bruce to clear them out of Quarantine and for her to gather her stuff. Steve offered to take her things to the Quinjet, just in case. Then she grabbed a stool from the kitchen and made her way to the very-full conference room. She set the stool at the front of the room, perching on top of it so everyone could see her.

She sighed. Some part of her had been hoping this day would never come. Then she felt Wanda, Maria, and Nat by her side, and saw the Avengers flanking the four of them. She also saw the members of RealSHIELD coming to the realization that she was part of a force to be reckoned with.

“I guess I should start at the very beginning,” Skye said. “Most of you know I was abandoned at an orphanage in New York when I was a baby. What most of you don’t know is that a SHIELD document was left with me. One that was almost completely redacted. Level 8.” Gonzalez’s eyes narrowed. Fitz and Simmons’ eyes went wide.

“It’s why I taught myself how to hack,” Skye continued. “I had no family, no one to rely on for that part of my life. I needed to know what happened, at the very least. By 14, I could hack into almost anywhere, except SHIELD. So I pushed myself to learn more, and found the Rising Tide. When I was 16, I ran away from the foster system, erased myself from every database on the planet, and started my journey to find where I came from.”

Maria squeezed the hand that Wanda wasn’t holding and the other Avengers gave her little touches, reminding her where she was and that she wasn’t alone. “Over the next decade, I moved from place to place, faking records as I needed them. I lived on as little as possible, with one goal in mind - find out what SHIELD was hiding about my past and why they were hiding it. Other than that, I did what
I wanted. I enjoyed my freedom. But there was always something missing. Some hole I had that kept me searching.” She sent warmth over the soulbond, unsurprised when Wanda responded to it as readily as Natasha and Maria. Less than a day, but their circumstances were… unique. The bond had begun to build already.

“I made a lot of friends over the years, and I happened to be visiting one of my oldest friends while he was in Law School in May 2012. The next day, the Chitauri tried to invade. When the dust settled I noticed that there were a lot of cosplayers around Stark Tower, but no one cosplayed as the Black Widow, so I decided to. Figured someone that sexy deserved a little credence for her badassery.” The SHIELD agents from both sides stiffened and looked at Natasha, waiting for her to react. She didn’t. “Little did I know that going to the tower would lead me to two of my soulmates - Maria Hill and Natasha Romanov.”

Weaver let out a little “oh!” as her eyes went wide, the final piece to the puzzle sliding into place for her.

“You see, I was born with two soulmarks and received a third at ten months old,” Skye said. “And let me tell you, the nuns at the orphanage were not thrilled to have a charge with multiple soulmarks,” she added wryly.

“There hasn’t been a legitimate record of a Quad pairing in over a hundred years,” Mack said skeptically. “How do we know you’re telling the truth?”

Thor looked scandalized. “Why would one falsify a holy bond?” There was a pause while people considered the ramifications of Asgardian views on soulbonds.

“Not all countries record soulmarks, you know,” Natasha pointed out, returning to Mack’s question. “Skye wasn’t born here. Neither was I, for that matter. Nor was Wanda, our fourth. Maria was, but she wasn’t born with any, since she’s the oldest.”

“Besides, Fury did record it,” Coulson said. “Agent Hill reported her status as a member of a Quad pairing back when Agent Romanov first joined SHIELD in 2007. He kept it off of official books due to the notoriety of both of them. The fear was that someone would take advantage of the situation, either inside or outside of SHIELD.”

“Of course, my hacker status came up fairly quickly,” Skye said, “and Maria was able to access the unredacted version of the file. It told a story of an entire village slaughtered in Hunan and a baby being the only survivor. It was reported that the baby was a 0-8-4.”

“A human 0-8-4?” Izzy asked. “How did no one hear about this before?” Fitz’s face fell when he made the connection between Skye’s status and her questions about 0-8-4s, back in Italy; he felt horrible all of a sudden, even if he hadn’t known why she was asking at the time.

“The SHIELD team who rescued me… they started dying after that mission. Finally, an Agent named Linda Avery dropped me off at the orphanage with a hidden protocol to keep me moving around. It gave me the worst childhood ever, since I never stayed in one place more than six months at a time and I went to about 20 different schools in ten years, but I lived.”

No one else had any follow-up questions after that so Skye continued. She sighed, realizing that she would have to tell them about becoming a SHIELD agent, and everything that entailed. “I’m sorry. I lied. To all of you. Since the day I met you I’ve acted… not like myself, the current me. I acted like the person I used to be, before I met Nat and Maria.”

“Skye, what-“ Fitz started, concerned, but Coulson put a hand on his shoulder, silencing him.
“I didn’t become a Level 1 Agent the day before the Triskellion fell,” Skye began shakily. “I was an Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. the entire time I was on the plane. A level 9 Comms agent. But I was also a Level 6 SciTech Agent and a Level 4 Ops Agent.” Skye took a deep breath as she looked around the room. Feeling the support of her soulmates and the rest of her family, she lifted her chin resolutely. “I’m Agent 42.”

Chapter End Notes

Aand... the secrets start to come out. Dun dun duun!
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

In which people react to Skye's revelation.

Chapter Notes

So, we're not really sorry for the cliffhanger last chapter, but at least we're not making you wait too long to see what happens? Regular updates will continue until we run out of story. Promise.

As always, thank you to everyone who shares, reblogs, comments, leaves kudos or likes or whatever. You guys are awesome! We're super amazed by just how many people respond to our updates in some way, and we love to hear from everyone!
Chapter 25

The entire room went drop-dead quiet. Then Jemma scowled. “Skye, this is a serious matter. It’s no time for jokes.”

“She isn’t.” Bruce said. “Agent 42 is a triple-department agent whose status was classified Level 10. It was basically need-to-know.”
“But Skye can’t be Agent 42,” Jemma said. “Agent 42 is…”

“Smarter than you?” Skye suggested quietly; Jemma looked like she’d been slapped. “To your credit, every teacher I’ve ever had thought what you thought. They thought I wasn’t applying myself, or didn’t care, or they didn’t care. I was just an orphan who moved schools every six months or so. Do you honestly think there was anyone who ever gave a damn about how smart I was when I was growing up? By the time I was 13, I figured out it was easier for me to just cut class, go to the library and teach myself. When I dropped out of High School and got my GED, I started auditing college classes, mostly in Physics or computers, at schools around the country, I’d move every semester and audit a class or two, and learn to hack in my down time. It’s how I met Dr. Banner. I took his Introduction to Applied Nuclear Physics class when I was 18.”

“She was one of my favorite students,” Bruce said with a fond smile. “A little naive, but always pushing the envelope. Always looking for answers.”

“Her IQ is 172,” Tony said proudly. “She actually broke the Comms test. Highest score ever recorded.”

“She also finished all three Academy tests in one day,” Clint added. “Well, except for the Ops physical assessment, but still. No one’s ever done that before, either.” The room went quiet for a moment as every single agent in the room considered the ramifications of a person able to pass all three entrance exams.

“I can confirm her Agent status,” Weaver spoke up, to Skye’s shock. Skye was going to leave her out of this as much as possible.

“Weaver?” Gonzalez asked, looking both angry and betrayed.

“I was her SciTech SO,” Weaver said. “If not for SHIELD’s protocol, she could have been the youngest SHIELD recruit by a good bit. I would have loved to introduce her to some of the other students; as it was, she consulted for a good many long-distance.”

Skye looked at Jemma, who looked a little betrayed and a lot hurt. But Skye knew a far bigger hurt was coming. “So I joined SHIELD, and obviously started training. Most of my physical training was done in New York or D.C., with Natasha, Maria and Clint. I was given free access to the Comms department and found the firewall had a bunch of holes, which we found out later was HYDRA. I patched the holes and once I had a firm footing in the other departments, I was given my first undercover assignment - take down the Rising Tide.”

Fitz gasped. “That’s why you geotagged yourself. I always wondered who’d be stupid enough to do that.” Skye smiled. Fitz really was the best of humanity. He tried his best to see the best in people, loved unconditionally and where he loved, he forgave instantly.

She nodded. “I was picked up by a SHIELD team run by Coulson and was told to keep my cover. As you all know, Coulson was resurrected by Fury and Fury assigned May to watch Coulson. But a concern was raised that there was no one watching the team.”

Jemma stood up, her fist clenched. “So none of it was true,” she said, clearly hurt.

“It was,” Skye said. “All of it was true. My cover was just… who I was before Maria and Nat. I was angry and lost, I had nothing and no one. Maria and Nat… they believed in me, long before I believed in myself.”

Jemma shook her head and stormed out. Skye let her; she knew that relationship might not be
repairable. Trip caught Skye’s eye and gave her a smile before following Jemma out. Skye never wanted to make her friends choose between her and the team, so she was glad Trip felt able to be there for Jemma as well as for her. Besides, Trip knew her, or at least as much as he could given the relatively short span of time he’d been in on the cover-up. He wouldn’t be missing much, and someone would fill him in regardless.

After a long, awkward pause, Gonzalez spoke. “Regardless of your Agent status, that does not change the fact that I’ve received reports from a Level 9 Agent that you aren’t trustworthy, unqualified, and Coulson seems to have taken an unnatural shine to you. There’s questions about whether or not you should even be an Agent of SHIELD and now given reports that this ‘Raina’ has changed, one can only guess how you have changed as well.” The buzzing became almost unbearable for a moment before Wanda reached out and wrapped a hand around Skye’s. Natasha caught on and did so on Skye’s other side. The buzzing immediately died away.

There was a rousing objection from the Avengers and Skye spoke up, quietly. “I’m assuming Agent Hartley was the one who told you about me as my cover?” She didn’t need to look at their faces for confirmation. She nodded. “I was taught by old-school nuns, so I don’t speak ill of the dead, but Agent Hand bought into my cover with particular gusto. The first chance she had she kicked me off the Bus and locked restrictions down around me so tight that I couldn’t step near a computer. You want my qualifications, read my Agent 42 file. I worked hard for my status and not too many deserve to be here more than me. I lost my parents and my childhood to SHIELD. I was shot while working for SHIELD, and I spent two and a half freaking years without my family to protect the outside world from the weirder world that they’re not ready for.” Wanda put a hand on her shoulder, calming her with her powers.

“You lied to your own team,” Gonzalez said icily. “How can they trust you after this?”

Skye looked downcast. “Oh come on, Gonzalez,” Hunter shouted. “If she were anyone else, if you’d sent her in like you did the others, you’d be proud of her for keeping her cover for so long. You’re just jealous you didn’t get to her first.”

“She’s not the only one keeping a secret, Uncle Robert,” Kara said, coming forward. “And you’re hardly one to talk about trust after trying to stage this coup.”

The blood in Gonzalez’s face drained out when he saw Kara. “Kara? When did you come in to SHIELD? Why are you on his side?”

“They asked for help! I had to go to ground for a while. By the time I got back, you disconnected your phone. Coulson asked if I wanted a shot at taking down HYDRA. I took it. You know, I went to Skye, after your agents approached me about joining up. She explained the situation. Coulson talked to me at length about what was happening. I, for one, trust her.”

“So do I,” Fitz said immediately.

“May and I already knew about this…” Coulson said. “How could I not trust her?” Skye blushed.

“So I guess I’m not going to win this one. I’m forced to accept Skye as an Agent?” Gonzalez said.

“No,” Steve piped up, speaking as team leader. He had been standing menacingly for a long time, clearly unhappy at SHIELD’s attitudes towards Skye. “The Avengers need to decide how to proceed, Skye included.”

“Skye’s gained power,” Maria added. “I can’t lie about that - I can feel it through the bond. This might be beyond SHIELD’s capabilities.”
Gonzalez looked like he was about to object when Tony piped up. “And if that’s not enough of an argument, everyone with a legal right to make decisions for Skye if she were legally rendered incapable of making a decision for herself, which she sure as hell is right now, is on this side of the room.”

“Calm down, Dad, I’m fairly sure he’s not stupid enough to go up against the Avengers,” Skye quipped, a very small smile returning to her lips.

“What the hell?” Mack yelled, as commotion broke out. His voice was loud enough to draw most of the eyes in the room. “I get that her soulmates have legal jurisdiction, married or not, but she can’t seriously have…” Mack trailed off, unsure of how to word what he was getting at.

Skye’s smile took on a hint of serenity. “After twenty-four years of searching, I gained the family I always wanted,” Skye said calmly. “Not only did I find my soulmates, but I was accepted by their team - their family. Nat’s ‘brother’ Clint became my brother too. Bruce has been my mentor and friend for years. Steve and I became best friends, almost like siblings, when we trained together and I helped him find a better way to integrate into the modern era. And… though none of us are related by blood, we’ve all been family for a very long time. And then last year… Tony adopted me. Legally, I’m Skye Stark.” The silence was deafening.

She gave Coulson a smile and he smiled softly back, shrugging. So she continued. “I don’t need to work for SHIELD. I haven’t for a long time. If I didn’t want to work, I could kick back and write computer programs for SI or do nothing at all. I stayed with SHIELD because it was the right place to be. Because my team needed me. Because HYDRA needed taking down, and I was in a position to help and to provide skills no one else in this room has - no offense intended to any of you.”

“And yet when we arrived, you were in Quarantine,” Gonzalez pointed out. “After exposing yourself to a device that you now claim gave you powers.”

Skye sighed and Natasha bristled. But it was Fitz who spoke up. “She didn’t expose herself. Skye was kidnapped, out of a bar - a relatively public place where she should have been safe. And no one saw it happen, including the staff.”

“Which proves that she clearly isn’t as good an agent as she should be,” Gonzalez said.

Skye actually started laughing. “You can’t have it both ways, Gonzalez,” Skye said. “I can’t be a dangerous factor and be inept at the same time. For the record, the lights went out while I was in the bathroom and I was stabbed in the arm with a hypodermic needle full of some kind of drug. They knew about my panic button and that I wore a GPS tracker, though they took all my jewelry and threw it out of the car window because they didn’t know what was tagged.” Skye spared a moment of regret for that; her charm bracelet from her soulmates was gone, and that hurt.

Deciding that she may as well give her full debrief while everyone was assembled to hear it, she went on. “I woke up in a cavern, tied up and with no way out. I heard the grating of stone on stone, and saw afterward that the room was completely sealed. Raina had the 0-8-4 we tried to retrieve months ago and lost track of; she put it down on a column in the middle of the room, and it opened up to reveal a cluster of crystals. A wave of mist, or something, shot out from it and a moment later we both began to develop a… shell, I suppose. Of stone-like stuff.”

Skye met Izzy’s eyes, knowing that just touching the Diviner had started to actually turn her hand to stone, that she’d gained great ground with the prosthetic but she’d never fully be the same. “I don’t know why it affected us differently than other people. Maybe there’s something in our genes. Maybe it really is fate or destiny. But I do know that for us, the stone was more like a cocoon. When it crumbled away, I looked the same - though Raina didn’t. But I could tell something was different.
inside. There’s this… buzzing under my skin. Like a thousand bees all buzzing around, trying to get out.”

Looks of concern and alarm spread through the room, except for the people beside and behind her. “Whatever it is, Skye, you can learn to control it,” Bruce said gently. “Stranger things have happened.”

“We are helping her,” Wanda spoke up in her soft voice. “Through the soulbond, we can help her stay calm. Help her keep control until she can do it for herself.”

“We which is why she might be better off with us,” Maria said. “The Avengers have all had to learn how to control and use their abilities to do the best good. I know Skye can, too.”

“And, really… if I’m going to be doing more harm here than good,” Skye began hesitantly, “then maybe my time with SHIELD is done.” She hated it, hated this. That every time something changed, she lost everything she’d worked for. She looked down at her lap, even as she felt her soulmates drawing closer in comfort, when Coulson spoke up.

“No,” he said, simply and clearly. Skye’s eyes raised and met his; Coulson smiled at her gently. “You will always be a part of this team, Skye, no matter where else life takes you. Go with your family, learn to control your powers. Spend some time and enjoy having a family, if you like. But know that you will always have a place here, whenever you’re ready to take it again.”

“DC…” Skye whispered.

“Coulson’s right,” May spoke up. “You’ve given just as much to this team and to SHIELD as anyone else in this room. Maybe even more than some.” Her stony glare dared anyone in the room to disagree with her.

“There are several projects that would not have been completed without your input, Skye,” Weaver seconded. “You were the first to discover and point out signs of HYDRA right under our noses, and whatever other people say you also managed to do a great deal of this without compromising your cover. If we one day have Academies again and I have anything to say about it, Agent 42 will be held up as a shining example of what being an Agent is.”

Skye felt herself getting teary, but she smiled and blinked her vision clear. “You guys are amazing,” she said softly, her eyes moving from Coulson to May to Weaver, to Fitz, and even to Hunter. The people who’d stood behind her, despite the revelations.

Gonzalez turned hard eyes on Agent Weaver. “You knew about this the whole time,” he accused her in a frosty tone.

“I did,” Weaver acknowledged. “I was Agent 42’s… Skye’s SO. She reached out to me as they were regrouping, both wanting to know that I was safe and to let me know that she was. That… alliance, of sorts, is part of the reason we have all been so successful at finding and removing the remainder of the HYDRA threat.”

“It didn’t help the rest of the world for us to be working at cross-purposes,” Coulson pointed out. “And I would really like to know what the hell you thought you were doing, Robert. Sending high level agents undercover among my division when you knew HYDRA was the greater threat! Fortunately for everyone, I was able to make use of their abilities given the kinds of obstacles we were working with. But it would’ve been much more effective if we could have been open with them, as well as if they’d had the best interests of SHIELD in mind.” His look was cool, but he pinned Mack and Bobbi and Izzy with hard looks to each in turn.
“We did have the best interests of SHIELD in mind. Just not your SHIELD,” Bobbi spat back, angry at the unspoken chastisement.

“There is only one SHIELD!” Coulson retorted.

“That’s not true!” Bobbi snapped back. “Fury would never have condoned trusting an unidentified hacker with high level SHIELD secrets. He wouldn’t have allowed your obsession with those bizarre drawings… to put the team at risk on mission of after mission!”

“I hate to break it to you, but Fury did do all those things,” Maria shot back in Coulson’s defense. “Who do you think set her up as Agent 42, gave her all the special designations?”

“Also, spoiler alert,” Tony broke in with a grin. “Captain Eyepatch survived the Kraken’s attack. And if you think he’s unaware of what’s been going on here, then I’m pretty sure you’re dead wrong… if you’ll forgive the pun.” Tony laughed gleefully at all the shocked expressions from among the RealSHIELD people; only Weaver appeared to have known that little truth as well.

“Way to drop the bombshell, Dad,” Skye said sarcastically. “We’ll be sure to blame you when Fury comes knocking on the door.”

“Eh. He doesn’t scare me,” Tony replied, still grinning.

“I’ll tell him you said that,” Natasha said dryly, and the Avengers all grinned.

“And on that note, I think we should leave your two groups to sort out your leadership issues,” Clint broke in. “It’s up to Skye, what she wants to do, but I think at this point most of us are fine being Avengers rather than Agents.”

“And wouldn’t it be cool if we could collect all the numbered Agents?” Tony joked, winking at Skye. “I keep trying to hire Sharon away from the CIA… hey, Kara, you want to come work for SI?” he called out. “Hill’d be your boss.”

With a wary glance around the room, Kara shrugged. “We’ll see what happens as a result of today. But if I need a better option, I’ll keep it in mind.” Coulson looked resigned and Gonzalez looked offended.

“Privatizing world security,” Tony quipped. “Peace in our time.”

“Oh, God, don’t start that again,” Skye said with a laugh, feeling the pressure ease off of her.

“I’ve got a kid to look out for now,” Tony snarked. “You know, the whole ‘make the world better for our children’?”

“I think, at this point, that’s up to them,” Skye replied, nodding towards the collection of SHIELD agents. “And hopefully they’ll decide to do what’s best for the organization and the world, and not just for themselves. In the meantime… I think I have some people to talk to privately. And my soulmates deserve some quiet time to make introductions; we’ve put off our personal lives for as long as I intend to.”

“Your people are welcome to the main lounge,” Coulson offered to Maria and Steve. They nodded their acceptance. People began to leave the conference room slowly, leaving Coulson and May to deal with RealSHIELD’s council… for better or worse.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

More interactions at SHIELD

Chapter Notes

Holy cats, you guys! 700 kudos as of this morning! 700! Amazing... and a little overwhelming, honestly. We have the best readers, clearly. Much love and many thanks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I figured it was time we saw them together

Chapter 26

As the group dispersed, Fitz latched onto Tony and the two began talking tech almost immediately. Hunter shot a venomous look at Bobbi and Izzy and stalked out of the room; Skye hurried after him after taking a moment to whisper to Nat that they were welcome to take Wanda to her room for a little privacy.

“Hunter... wait, please,” Skye called out. Hunter paused, half-turning back to her.

“What is it, love?” he asked in a tone combining anger and defeat.

“I just wanted to say that I’m sorry. I did know about Bobbi and Izzy... but I was never sure if you did or not,” Skye said softly. “I’m sorry if my part in this hurt you.”
Hunter shook his head. “You did an amazing job of keeping your cover while trying to keep everybody safe, Skye.” He gave her a tired smile. “I meant what I said; they should be proud of you.”

“Still friends?” Skye ventured.

Hunter nodded. “Of course. I just need a little time to cool down.”

“Okay. We’ll find a couple of beers tonight, maybe? Even if we have to go to the roof for some quiet,” Skye said.

“Deal. And no leaving without saying goodbye, hear?”

“Deal,” Skye replied, smiling. Hunter clapped her on the shoulder and continued down the hallway, alone.

“That was well done,” Steve told her quietly, coming up to stand at her shoulder. She smiled at him as they followed the rest of the team down to the lounge.

“Thanks. I think… I think maybe next, I need to talk to Jemma.” Skye sighed. “Our friendship may never recover… but I think I have to try.”

Steve’s expression froze for a moment, but then he nodded. “I’m going with you, though,” he said. Skye raised an eyebrow. “I’m willing to let you have your talk and not get involved if that’s how it goes. But Skye… she was sounding a lot like the HYDRA fanatics I dealt with during the war. The rest of the family would never forgive me if I let you go alone and you got hurt.”

Skye considered, then nodded. “I suppose that’s reasonable.”

As the group began to split, Maria and Nat headed for Wanda and led her away from the others. None of them spoke yet, by mutual agreement, wanting privacy for the first time all day; not until Nat keyed in the lock code to Skye’s room and they were all safely inside.

Despite having had time to consider what they would like to say to each other, all three were at a loss for words briefly. They all knew whatever they said, it would be the right thing… but how did one decide what they wanted their soulmate’s mark to say?

Until Wanda decided that a reference to Skye would always be safe. “She was right,” Wanda said after a moment. “You are both wonderful, beautiful people.”

Maria was the first to respond; Natasha still occasionally had moments where her self-image warred with what her soulmates thought, and she absolutely didn’t want to make one of those comments Wanda’s soulmark. “So are you. We’re so glad to have you here at last,” Maria said gently.

Wanda smiled. “Thank you. Skye assured me that you would not be… put off… by my powers. But still, I worried.”

“No matter what happens, you will always be a part of us,” Natasha said softly, finally deciding on words that she was content with. When Wanda’s smile brightened, she knew she’d found the right thing to say.

“I believe you,” Wanda said solemnly.

“What is it that you do?” Maria asked curiously.
“I… manipulate chaos, I suppose. Sometimes I see the future, or the past, or what is happening elsewhere. I can use my power to affect other people, particularly their minds,” she explained. “I can cause them to see what they most desire or what they most fear. I was able to calm Skye’s emotions, so her power did not bring the underground city down on our heads.”

“And I’m sure we’re all grateful for that!” Natasha said. “Do you know what Skye’s power is?”

Wanda nodded. “She can manipulate vibrations. In the ground, in the air… in the people around her. It is a very versatile thing.”

“You said you can see the future?” Maria asked. “Is that how you found Skye?”

“I knew she would need me. In that moment, she needed my help. So my brother helped me to get to her,” Wanda said softly. “And I knew she would lead me to you, so I was glad to go anyway.”

“Did you use your power to convince the doctors to quarantine you with Skye?” Natasha asked after a moment.

“I did,” Wanda answered forthrightly. “And I would do it again; leaving her all alone, even for those few hours, would have hurt her greatly. I would not allow that.”

“We understand,” Maria assured her. “We were minutes away from breaking her out of quarantine, anyway; we might have, if you hadn’t been there with her.”

“Where are you and your brother from?” Natasha asked, changing the subject.

“Sokovia. Though we do also have Romani in our bloodline, and we speak the language as well.”

“There has been a lot of… unrest… in Sokovia,” Natasha said thoughtfully.

“Yes,” Wanda agreed. “And there was a time when we were part of it. Pietro and I volunteered when the Baron asked for people to aid their cause to strike back at the Americans and other people who had harmed us. It is how we gained our powers, but also why we left… they cared not for our people or their plights, but only for their own power and prestige. So we escaped.”

Natasha frowned. “Do you know what organization they were part of?”

“It is one spoken of earlier today; HYDRA.”

“That’s definitely alarming,” Maria said. “We must have missed one of their bases…”

“The Baron always seemed to be several steps ahead of most people,” Wanda explained. “But he did not truly understand our powers. That is how we were able to leave.”

Maria nodded. “Is it alright if we tell the others about this? If they’re experimenting on people, volunteers or not… they should be investigated, possibly stopped.”

“We will help, if we can,” Wanda agreed. “We were mistaken to trust them; it was only by fate that we were not also killed.”

“You’re safe now,” Natasha assured her, approaching slowly.

Wanda smiled and took the last few steps to hug Natasha. Then she hugged Maria. “I have seen you in my dreams,” she murmured to them both. “I’ve seen you care for each other and for Skye, and she for you. I have seen the joy you bring your family. You do not need to hide from me; I will not tell.”
“We believe you, Wanda,” Maria whispered back. Then she paused. “So… you know about me?”

“That your joy comes from the emotional, not the physical?” Wanda asked curiously. “You are not the first such I have met,” she answered gravely. “If you can come to love me as much as you love Skye, I shall be content and not ask for what you do not wish to share in.”

Maria felt a mental ‘I told you so’ from both Skye and Nat through the soulbond as she hugged Wanda close again. “I’m glad to hear it. Thank you.”

Though Skye knew she would be welcome joining her soulmates for some quiet, private time she was content to give them a chance to get to know each other apart from herself. She also knew that she wouldn’t really be able to relax until she at least made an attempt to clear the air with Jemma.

She headed for the science labs, Steve trailing behind her, because she knew quite well that an upset Simmons was one who tried to distract herself with work. She hesitated for a moment outside the lab when she saw Simmons and Trip both within; it looked like Trip was talking and Simmons was stubbornly punching buttons on an analyzer. Probably listening in spite of herself, though; Simmons was mostly too polite to outright ignore anyone.

“You won’t know until you try,” Steve said encouragingly when Skye stood there for a long moment, her hand on the door without opening it.

“Right,” Skye agreed. Bracing herself, she pushed open the door to the lab and stepped inside. Trip smiled at her but Jemma didn’t so much as look her way.

“Jemma?” Skye asked shakily. She waited for a response and after getting none, she finally tried again. “Jemma, I know you can hear me.” She was met with nothing but silence and Trip looked at her sympathetically. “Jemma, I’m sorry.”

*That* got a response. “What,” Jemma demanded. “What are you sorry for Skye?” Jemma’s face was an open book. Jealousy, anger, fear, betrayal … it was like every negative emotion Skye had ever read off of a foster sibling in one tiny package. “Because unless you’re here to tell me that you’re sorry you lied and you’d do it all different if you could, I don’t want to hear it. I don’t understand how you could lie to Fitz and I after what happened with Ward.”

Skye nodded and started to turn to leave, then paused. “Let's say I did,” Skye said. “What would it have changed?”

“My friend wouldn't have lied to me when she didn't have to,” Jemma spat.

“And what about the rest of it. Could you have kept it from Mack or Bobbi? Could Fitz? Could you have lied to them?”

“I could have for you!” Jemma shouted, blinded to her own failings by her rage.

“Then,” Skye said softly, “I suppose what I’m really sorry for was being afraid. Afraid to trust anyone, even my closest friends, with not just my life but also my soulmates’ lives. Because as hard as it is to face losing my friends over protecting my soulmates… If I were to ever lose my soulmates, I don’t know if I could face the rest of my life without them.”

“You… what?” That admission startled Simmons out of her outpouring of fury. “But your soulmates are superheroes!”

“Very technically, Maria and Natasha are just highly skilled agents,” Skye countered softly, though
she silently apologized to them for calling them “just” anything. “They have no super-serum, no Asgardian blood, no battle suits and no special powers. They’re just people with incredible skills and a willingness to dedicate their lives to protecting other people. They’re not invincible. They can be hurt; they could even be killed. And I would give up anything in order to keep that from happening.”

Jemma was silent, and Skye stayed quiet for a few minutes, letting her process the truth of what she was saying. That as much as Jemma was willing to believe that she could have lied to protect Skye, what she was now hearing was that Skye was willing to lie to protect her soulmates.

Because Skye knew that if she had it to do all over again, she wouldn’t change anything.

“It might help you to know…” Steve offered gently when neither woman spoke for quite a while. “Skye fought with us to be allowed to come back to your team. We would have been perfectly happy to keep her with us, keep her safe, after she almost died. And again when… when Cal was after her. But she believed that your team needed her, and she wouldn’t stay home safely when that was true. You mattered to her, too. You still do.”

The silence stretched on after Steve spoke. Finally Skye sighed and headed for the door again. She couldn’t in conscience say what Jemma wanted to hear, and if that lack meant their friendship was over… at least Jemma couldn’t say Skye had lied to her again.

Trip watched Jemma let Skye leave with a frown on his face. He considered staying with her in the lab, but at the moment he was too irritated with her to really do any good. And Jemma wasn’t listening to anyone but herself anyway. After another moment’s consideration, Trip followed Steve out of the lab.

Skye managed to turn the corner in the hallway before breaking down in tears. Steve followed her out of the room and quickly pulled her into his arms. She leaned into his chest, sobbing her heart out. Another large, warm hand found its way into her hair and she heard Trip’s voice murmuring soothing things to her as she cried.

Thank goodness for her family.

“I’m sorry,” she said after the tears trailed off; she wiped at her eyes with her sleeve until Steve handed her a handkerchief from his pocket.

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for,” Steve hushed her as she wiped the tears off her face. “You tried. Now it’s up to her.”

“You did what you had to do, Skye,” Trip assured her. “Most of us get that. And if she doesn’t… well, I know it hurts, but sometimes these things happen.”

“Should we go get Nat or someone for you?” Steve offered.

Skye shook her head. “No. They’re with Wanda, and I want them to have that time. I’ll be alright.”

“Then let’s get you back to the others,” Trip suggested. “You really shouldn’t be alone right now.” Skye nodded.

She spotted Mack talking to one of the agents that Gonzalez had brought with him and both of them gave her menacing looks. Steve very subtly placed himself between her and them as they walked past.

“I’m fine,” Skye said. “Nothing a little ice cream won’t fix.”

“I think we still have some rocky road left,” Bobbi offered. “And I know where May hid the hot fudge.”

“Rocky road’ sounds like a perfect description of the last twenty four hours,” Skye quipped dryly. “You guys want some?”

“Sure,” Bobbi agreed. “If you don’t mind…”

Skye sighed and shrugged. “At the moment, I’m too tired to hold grudges. If you’re okay with me, I’m okay with you.”

“Quarantine sucks,” Bobbi agreed, not responding directly to Skye’s not-question but rather leaving it implied. “But, whatever else happened, you came through like a rockstar. I think I can help with a pick-me-up, if you want…” Skye looked at her questioningly. “I have a special stash of my favorite soda. Can only get them in southern California. Less caffeine than a coffee at this time of day.”

Clint and Trip both snorted. “Have you not seen this girl drinking coffee at nine at night?” Trip asked, chuckling. “I think she’s half immune to caffeine.”

“I appreciate the thought, Bobbi, and I may take you up on one at some point. You talking about Cactus Coolers? I haven’t had one since Coulson picked me up,” Skye said. “But I think ice cream sounds better right now.”

“You got it,” Bobbi agreed cheerfully, though they could all tell that cheerfulness was at least a little forced. “I forgot they picked you up in LA.”

“Yeah, I really liked it there, though I lived in New York most of my life,” Skye said awkwardly as the five of them walked to the kitchen.

“And you’re actually smart, right? Like crazy smart?” Bobbi asked, pulling out tubs of ice cream.

“Yeah?” Skye said, not sure where this was going.

Bobbi’s face softened. “I’m sorry. It must have been hard… pretending,” she said. Skye raised an eyebrow at her.

“You know what I mean,” Bobbi continued. “I never had to hide who I was to all my friends.”

“I bet you’ve been worried whether or not you’d have any friends after it all came out that you were lying to them,” Skye mumbled, serving herself a bowl. “I know I was.”

“Girl, you know that people still love you here, right?” Trip asked.

“That’s not fair,” Skye said. “I mean, I know you and Coulson love me and May… appreciates me, but you three already knew about this. It’s not a surprise.”

“That reminds me,” Bobbi interrupted. “I mean, I get Coulson and May knowing, but why does Trip know?”

“Accident,” Skye admitted. “He walked into the gym while Nat and I were going all out.”

“It was pretty amazing to watch, though I admit that I was definitely both amazed to see it and wondering why the hell no one knew Skye could kick asses and take names,” Trip added.
“Makes sense. I don’t get why he got the full read-in, though?” Bobbi asked.

“Two reasons, I suppose. First, we knew he had enough Specialist training to keep the secret; it was never that we didn’t trust the core of our original team, only that they didn’t have the skills to keep it from people with the right skills,” Skye explained. “And second, by reading him in he became both another trainer for me as well as support when keeping secrets got really hard. And occasionally my ride home, since he knew anyway.”

“Also you did that thigh move that only Romanov does,” Trip added. “I knew something hinky was up when you did that. She never teaches that to anyone.”

Bobbi stared at her and Skye shrugged. “I did nothing but train for two and a half years, though my Ops was a little lacking before we got here - Ward wasn’t exactly the best SO.”

Bobbi snorted as the microwave dinged, indicating the hot fudge was ready. “No kidding. Can you imagine his face if he ever found out who you were?”

“That’s something that we never want to find out,” came Coulson’s voice. They all turned around. Gonzalez and the other ‘RealSHIELD’ people she didn’t know were standing there “Skye, we need to talk to you. We need a full debriefing of your time UC.”

Skye stiffened but nodded. She had been UC for SHIELD. It was only fair that they got to ask questions. Steve started to follow her and Gonzalez gave him a look.

“Captain America or not, you’re not welcome in this meeting,” Gonzalez said.

“That’s fine,” Steve said. “Welcome or not, I’m coming in anyway.”

“We really prefer to keep this as confidential as possible,” Gonzalez began gruffly, but was cut off by Skye’s snort.

“I have three soulmates; exactly how private do you think anything having to do with me could possibly be?” she demanded.

“We could order you to keep it to yourself,” one of the other men pointed out.

Skye lifted her chin and gave him her best Natasha glare. “You could try, but since I have only ever answered to the Director’s office, and the Directors I know have largely been reasonable men, that rather lets me off the hook regarding your orders, doesn’t it?”

“Let him come,” Weaver broke in before anyone else could respond. “Agent 42 has been through a great deal in the past thirty hours. If her team feels safer having her accompanied, I don’t have a problem with it.”

“He has my approval, and May’s, if that counts for anything,” Coulson chimed in.

“I think you should let him accompany her, too,” Bobbi stated firmly. “Either that or you may as well have your debrief out here because I have a feeling the Avengers aren’t letting her go anywhere alone for a while.”

There was a general grumbling from parts of the RealSHIELD council, but Gonzalez nodded brusquely and turned to walk back to the conference room.

“We should go with them,” Bobbi said softly to Skye. When Skye picked up her bowl and slid off the countertop she’d been perched on, she was a little surprised to see Bobbi following her and
She slanted a questioning glance at her, and Bobbi shrugged. “Technically, I’m on the Council too. So is Mack. We just… lack a bit of seniority, not that it’s supposed to matter.”

When Skye, Steve and Bobbi arrived with their half-finished bowls of ice cream, the agents around the table raised a few eyebrows but didn’t comment. They just gestured the arrivals to seats.

Skye sat at one end of the conference table, Steve right beside her as he shifted a chair into place. RealSHIELD clustered around the other end, with Coulson and May a little closer to Skye.

“Agent Skye,” Gonzalez said, clear dislike in his voice. “By your own admission, you only joined SHIELD due to your soulmate’s agent statuses. Before that you say you were a hacker for the Rising Tide - a group that was on the terrorist watch list until we eliminated them as a threat.”

Skye leaned back in her chair and eyed Gonzalez suspiciously. “What are you saying?” she asked.

“I’m saying that you can’t be trusted,” Gonzalez spat. “I’m saying you shouldn’t even be an agent.”

The buzzing started again as her old insecurities that she didn’t belong came back up as Gonzalez kept picking apart her work, her credibility. Skye clenched her hands into fists under the table, trying to keep the buzzing contained. “I think I’ve proven myself by now,” Skye said. But Gonzalez ignored her to continue on.

“You were spying on your own team for the last two years for your soulmates,” Gonzales accused finally. “Not SHIELD, which proves your disloyalty. But regardless, let’s move on to the incident with Mr. Miles Lydon...”

The buzzing got louder. Skye tried some meditative breathing to keep everything under wraps, but an empty glass in the corner started to shake slightly. Steve reached out a hand to her, resting it on her shoulder, but it was only a small comfort.

“Miles wanted to get into my pants,” Skye said, barely holding on to her control over her anger at her loyalty being questioned. “I used that to extract the information my team needed to gain intel on Project Centipede and try to locate Chin-Ho Yin.”

“And did you follow through?” Gonzalez shot back.

Skye closed her eyes at the line of questioning. “Per the report that I submitted, no. I’d never cheat on Maria and Nat for any reason.”

“It’s been done before,” murmured Gonzalez.

“How does that even work?” the Agent who had been introduced as Calderon asked. “I mean… four women? Who’s the man of the relationship?”

The glass shattered and the room started shaking. “What the hell? What’s doing this?” Agent Oliver asked in alarm. First Skye’s, then Steve’s ice cream bowls burst into pieces, splattering the table with melted remnants of chocolate. Mugs that didn’t shake off the table cracked instead, spilling or dripping coffee onto the table and floor. Skye pressed her hands to her head, struggling for control.

Maria, Wanda, and Nat burst into the room. “What the hell are you guys doing in here?” Maria demanded. Wanda was immediately at Skye’s side, her fingertips glowing red as she brushed Skye’s temple.

“What the hell kind of freak show are you running here?” Calderon demanded, going for his gun and aiming it at Wanda and Skye.
“No! Skye!” Bobbi yelled, yanking at Calderon’s arm to point the gun at the floor. Coulson, May and Weaver jumped to their feet, while Steve, Maria and Natasha closed ranks in front of Skye and Wanda.

“I think it’s time for us to go,” Steve said, his tone icy, as other Avengers and some of Coulson’s team were drawn in by the commotion.

“What in the hell do you people think you’re doing?” Natasha snarled at the assembled agents. “Whose brilliant idea was it to verbally attack and level unfounded accusations against an agent who has been kidnapped, subjected to a transformation that gave her powers, recovered, isolated in quarantine while her teammates suggested eradicating her for her transformation, and all this without giving her a fucking meal or letting her get some goddamned sleep?!”

“Great plan, attacking my daughter like that,” Tony growled.

“She’s not your daughter,” Gonzalez shot back. “Reports show that she’s the daughter of a psychopath. She has my sympathies on that, but that’s just the way things are. You can’t choose your family.”

“Oh, but that’s where you’re wrong,” Tony sniped. “Legally, she was an orphan. So I adopted her, which makes her my daughter, you asshole.” Glaring at Gonzalez, Tony diverted his attention to Clint. “Hawk, get the Jet prepped. We’ve overstayed our welcome.”

“Clearly,” Clint responded, departing with a quick nod.

“And unless attitudes change around here, you can guarantee that the Avengers aren’t going come help you when you’re in a jam, unless the motherfucking world is ending,” Maria said, channeling Fury for just a moment as Wanda and Nat started to walk Skye out of the room. What worried them most was that Skye didn’t resist or say anything.

“If we can convince her, she’ll pull her funding too,” Tony said smugly on the way out the door.

“Funding?” Gonzalez asked, confused.

“Skye has been funding SHIELD operations since the fall,” May deadpanned. “She ‘inherited’ all of Ian Quinn’s frozen assets as reparations for him nearly murdering her.”

“What’s going on?” Bruce said, coming in and looking confused.

“We’re leaving,” Steve said.

“What?” Fitz said, coming up behind Bruce.

“Skye?” Hunter asked.

“Is fine,” Steve confirmed grimly. “Though if I ever see another agent pulling a gun on her, he’ll live to regret it.”

“What the bloody hell?” Hunter demanded. “Skye, darlin!” he yelled, looking for her.

“She’s here,” Wanda called back when Skye didn’t respond. Hunter darted over, worry plain on his face. Skye’s eyes were full of betrayal and hurt, glazed over as she limply cooperated with her soulmates leading her down the hall.
“You’re taking her away?” Hunter asked, just confirming. When Natasha nodded, Hunter braced himself and looked her in the eyes. “Can I go with you?” Natasha looked back, seeing similar hurt and betrayal in Hunter’s expression.

Natasha glanced at Tony and Steve, who both nodded. She gave Hunter just a hint of a smile and said softly, “You have five minutes to get whatever you want to bring along. Meet us at the Stark jet.”

“Got it,” Hunter replied, giving her a ghost of a smile in return before heading back up the hallway at a fast walk.

“If we are leaving, someone please find my brother,” Wanda requested.

“I am here, sestra,” Pietro spoke up, zipping over to her side faster than anyone else could see. He stayed by her side as she helped guide her soulmate.

Fitz watched the scene, wide-eyed and bemused. Then he turned to Bruce. “I’ll make sure your test results are forwarded to you, Dr. Banner. I promise, even if I have to make a hard copy and mail it.”

“Thank you, Fitz,” Bruce said wearily before following his team down the hallway. “I appreciate it,” he added over his shoulder. Fitz nodded back.

Trip fell in beside Steve, having picked up the gist of the situation from listening to the general chaos. “I’ll keep you posted as best I can, man,” he offered in a low voice. “Even if it has to go by way of my cousin.”

Steve nodded. “Be safe, Trip. We’ll see you at the next family gathering, I’m sure.”

“Maybe it’ll be your wedding. You need to set a freaking date already man.”

Steve nodded. “We did,” Steve said. “Sharon’s going to reach out and let you know.”

Trip grinned. “Congrats, man!” he said softly.

“Anyway, I’ll see you the next time you’re in New York,” Steve said.

Chapter End Notes

And so, the other shoe has dropped. And the Avengers are leaving. What did you think?
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

The Avengers return home.

Chapter 27

By the time they reached New York, Skye was asleep. Rather than wake her, Steve just carefully picked her up and exited the plane. Wanda followed along, a little shyly, as Steve, Maria and Natasha led the way through the soulmates' apartment to the bedroom.

“Call if you need anything,” Steve said very softly after settling Skye into the huge bed in the main bedroom. “We’ll leave you alone until tomorrow, otherwise.”

“Thank you, Steve,” Maria answered just as quietly. Steve waved them off when they would have followed him out, and the trio of women smiled gratefully as he closed the door to see himself out.

Rather than resume their interrupted discussion, though, Wanda asked about borrowing a nightshirt. She was fighting exhaustion as well, having pushed herself to get to Skye and then spending a fair bit of power and concentration to keep her soulmate calm and in control of her powers.

Wanda had no problems curling up to sleep on the big bed with her soulmates, though. It wasn’t even a question for her; she knew they wanted her there and that they were all safe together. Besides, she didn’t want Skye out of reach any more than the other two.

“JARVIS, make sure you scan the firewalls routinely,” Tony said. “Make sure SHIELD doesn’t come sniffing around.”

“Yes sir,” JARVIS said.

Clint collapsed onto a nearby couch. “Can I be the first to say ‘holy fuck?’”
Steve groaned, leaning against a counter. “You said it. I thought my heart stopped when that agent leveled a gun at Skye’s head.”


“Those bloody bastards,” Hunter spat, venom heavy in his tone and eyes dark and dangerous. He tossed his duffel towards the wall. “You mentioned the gun earlier. What happened?”

Steve explained the inquisition against Skye, how she seemed to get more stressed out before the shaking started. Bruce looked a little green before he abruptly left the room without saying a word; no one stopped him. Anger colored expressions around the room as the team listened to Steve’s explanation.

“I’m with Maria,” Clint said after a long moment. “I’m not saving their asses from a fire unless it’s gonna burn the world down.”

“I believe we are all in agreement with you, my friend,” Thor said in a serious tone.

“How the bloody hell did all this even happen?” Hunter asked rhetorically.

“I don’t think any of us have the answer to that,” Steve said lowly. “I don’t think Coulson and May will, either. If Trip finds out, though, I’m sure he’ll tell us.”

“We may find out eventually,” Clint pointed out. “We do appear to have some sympathies from that group, or Skye does anyway. Weaver, for one. She was a good agent, a better head of the SciOps Academy, and now openly was Skye’s SO. I don’t think she’ll be taking this lightly, either.”

“I’m not sure I care,” Tony grumbled. “I’m thinking I’m pretty done with SHIELD. Any of their people that we trust who want to come work with the Avengers, I’ll hire. Maybe we should build a training facility, something out of the city. We can staff it with former agents.”

“Would a former-SAS merc be of interest to you?” Hunter asked. “I was never really SHIELD, just… just worked with a few who were.”

“You stuck up for my girl and would rather be here than there, so I’m cool with it,” Tony answered with a shrug.

“I think… the only thing we can do is be grateful that it was not worse,” Pietro said thickly.

“I meant to thank you,” Tony said. “For looking out for Skye, both in San Juan and at SHIELD.”

“She is a soulmate to my sister,” Pietro said. “She is family. That means a lot to us.”

“And you two both have powers?”

Pietro nodded. “Powered by HYDRA,” Pietro said. “Before we knew who they were. There is… much unrest in Sokovia. They said they could help. My sister can manipulate chaos while I…”

In the blink of an eye, Pietro was gone from their eyes and a second later he was back with a couch cushion from the common floor one floor up. “You’re fast!” Tony said in surprise.

Pietro shrugged. “Da, but I am still… human-fragile, mostly. Can break bones, assume I can be shot if I don’t see bullets coming.”

“Still, that could come in handy,” Steve said thoughtfully.
“HYDRA would have had us harm many,” Pietro said quietly. “We would like the chance to do better instead.”

“Then I think you’re in the right place,” Clint said lightly.

“Let’s sort you two out some rooms,” Tony said to Pietro and Hunter. “We’ve got a guest floor that will do until you decide if you really want to stay here or live on your own. Come on, I’ll take you there.” It wasn’t the sort of task Tony usually took upon himself, but anything to distract himself from thinking about Skye with a gun pointed at her face.

“Thank you, Mr. Stark,” Pietro said, though he looked as if it were the last thing he’d ever expected to hear himself saying. No one asked why; they were all too worn out.

“Just Tony, please,” Tony said, waving off the thanks as he stepped into the elevator.

Skye whimpered in her sleep and Wanda sleepily reached out and stroked her hair. There had been a silent argument about sleeping positions since all three of them wanted to be within arms-length. Natasha ended up curled at Skye’s head, and Maria and Wanda were on either side of her.

Skye shot up, wide-eyed and the room shook for a moment before Wanda could calm her down.

“I’m gonna kill him,” Maria said.

Skye blinked sleepily. “Who?”

“Calderon. The bastard that leveled a gun to your head yesterday.”

Skye sighed. “Oh… I wasn’t dreaming about that.”

“Really?” Maria asked. “Who did you dream about?”

“Jemma,” Skye said. “We… argued… yesterday. Jemma wasn’t happy about the lying thing.”

“You know,” Maria said. “I hate to say it, but if she ever cared about you, she’ll get over the fact that you were undercover and she didn’t know.”

“I have to figure out how to get word to Fitz,” Skye said. “There wasn’t much time for us to say goodbye or to let Fitz be mad at me.”

“I’m sure between us and Trip we can work it out, but I don’t think he’s angry,” Nat said. “He seemed pretty upset when we were leaving.”

“He will not be angered by your actions,” Wanda said.

“Excuse me, Ms. Hill, I was instructed to inform you if you were all awake that the others are in the kitchen,” JARVIS announced.

“Thank you,” Maria said.

“It’s 3am,” Skye said. “What’s everyone doing up?”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Natasha said.

Skye shook her head, but then bit her lip with a sheepish expression as she actually thought about it. “Oh,” she said softly. “I suppose I should probably clean up and change so we can go reassure
everyone that I’m not seriously hurt or dying or something…”

“Probably a good idea,” Wanda agreed. “I do not have much, but perhaps I may borrow something while I wash my dress?”

“Help yourself to anything in the closet that fits,” Natasha offered readily. “None of us minds sharing, though none of Maria’s pants fit the rest of us.”

“We can go shopping tomorrow, maybe,” Skye suggested gently. “If we make it a girls’ afternoon, none of the guys will object I don’t think.”

“Why would they object?” Wanda asked, confused.

Maria chuckled. “Welcome to the family and be prepared to have overprotective males hovering around. Even if we can all take care of ourselves perfectly well.”

Wanda’s eyes lit as comprehension dawned. “I understand. Well, we shall just have to… how do you say it? Deal with it as it comes?”

“Just right,” Natasha nodded. “Though I speak several of the slavic languages, if you find yourself unable to translate something.”


Half an hour later, the quad got into the elevator and headed up to the common floor. Skye distributed smiles around the room, though her jaw dropped when her eyes landed on Hunter. “Wait, what?” she asked, confused for a moment.

‘Ello, love. You miss me?” Hunter asked with a small grin.

Skye dashed across the room to hug him, aware peripherally that Wanda had moved to give her brother a hug as well. “I didn’t expect to see you here!” Skye exclaimed as she pulled away from Hunter.

“Eh,” he replied with a shrug. “Not a lot of reasons to stay; seemed like coming here was the better plan.”

Skye studied his expression before accepting his explanation with a nod. “Well, since you’re here I assume you’ve been made welcome.”

“More or less, yeah,” Hunter agreed.

“Good.” Skye smiled, then made the rounds of the room to distribute hugs. Steve held her like he didn’t want to let go, but that was hardly a surprise. More surprising was that Tony did the same, when his turn came.

“Morning, sweetheart,” Tony murmured into her hair.

“Morning, Dad,” she replied softly.

When she got to Clint, he hugged her just as tightly. When he finally let go, he handed her his cell phone. When she looked at him curiously, he said, “Call Laura. She worries, even though I called her last night.”

“Clint, it’s like 2am there,” Skye protested.
“And if you wait until morning and she finds out, do you really want to listen to her yell?” Clint asked skeptically.

Skye sighed and took the phone, heading for the far side of the room to make her call with some privacy.

Skye dialed and after one ring, the phone was picked up. “Hello?” Laura asked. Skye noted it didn’t sound like she had been asleep.

“Hey Laura,” Skye said softly.

“Skye, oh God… you’re okay, right? Clint said you were okay, but I need to hear it from you,” Laura rambled.

“I’m … alive…” she said, feeling more unsure of herself by the second.

“Clint told me what happened, if you want, you guys are welcome to stay here for as long as you need. Nobody’s found this place in the fifteen years Clint was a part of SHIELD.”

“Laura, I don’t know what Clint told you…”

“About the new soulmate and the powers and all that? Yeah, Clint told me. I don’t care,” Laura said.

“Laura, I shattered glasses and nearly brought a cavern down on our heads,” Skye admitted softly, her voice cracking a bit. “I don’t want to be responsible for wrecking the house accidentally!”

“You won’t, honey. I promise.”

“You don’t know that,” Skye protested.

“But I do,” Laura insisted softly. “Everyone we’ve ever heard of with powers has problems when they’re feeling afraid, angry or threatened. What Clint told me about justifies all three for you. You feel safe here, so it shouldn’t be a problem. We won’t let it be a problem.”

Skye sighed. “I’m not sure the rest of the ‘family’ will let us go that easily.”

“They know about us. Bring them along,” Laura suggested.

“That’s about a dozen people…”

“I don’t care, Skye. It’ll be fine. People can sleep in the barn loft if they have to.”

“I’ll talk to them,” Skye said, giving in with a huff of breath.

“Good. Take care of yourself, honey, and promise me you’ll call if you need to.”

“I’ll do my best, and I promise. Go get some sleep; it’s late by you.”

“And it’s early by you,” Laura laughed. “But I’ll try. I should sleep better, now I know you’re okay.”

“If you need us,” Skye began.

“What I need is to hug you and make sure we can give you the help you need to stabilize,” Laura said softly. “That’s all.”
Skye swallowed past the lump in her throat and nodded, even though Laura couldn’t see her. “Alright. Soon.”

“Good. Night, hon.”

“Good night, Laura.” Skye disconnected the call and stared at the phone for several long, silent minutes.

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Skye turned back towards the kitchen. She handed Clint back his phone, and everyone just looked at her expectantly. “Laura wants us to come home,” she said in a soft voice.

“It’s not a bad idea,” Maria said thoughtfully. “Fewer stresses, and also less chance of property damage while you get a handle on your powers.”

“No,” Tony said, crossing his arms and frowning. “This is her home.” Unspoken was the fact that he wasn’t ready for her to leave it just yet.

“It’s one of my homes,” Skye said, her voice just above a whisper. “But the Bartons’ is home, too. But…” Noticing that Skye wasn’t done, Steve held up his hand to keep anyone from interrupting her. She shot him a watery smile in thanks. “She said that if you guys all want to come, you’re welcome. She understands that we all want to be together right now.”

“All of us?” Hunter asked skeptically. He transferred his quizzical gaze to Clint. “What, you guys own a condo complex?”

“Nope,” Clint answered with a grin. “Hundred year old, two-story farmhouse. Plus the basement has been renovated for living space. Plenty of room for everyone, especially because those four,” he nodded towards Skye and her soulmates, “only need one bed.”

“And even better, it’s completely off SHIELD’s radar,” Natasha added. “They don’t even know it exists.”

“So if Gonzalez gets a funny idea about coming looking for us, he can’t track us?” Hunter said. Natasha nodded. “Perfect.”

“I need to get a new phone,” Skye said, suddenly realizing that everything she’d had on her at New Year’s was gone. “On the plus side, new number. Harder to track. On the down side, I need to restore all my contacts.”

“You don’t need to be working right now, Skye,” Steve protested.

She shook her head. “It’s not about that. But… Trip. And… and Sharon, and Kara… Pepper…” she paused, taking a deep breath. “I’ll rework all my encryptions, so it can’t be tracked. I just…”

Surprisingly, Tony got it and nodded. “I’ll have one for you in an hour, sweetheart. Promise.”

“Thank you.” Skye gave him a smile. It was shaky, but it was a real smile, and Tony smiled back.

“Come on,” Tony said suddenly, taking Skye’s arm and heading towards the door. “I doubt any of us is really going to sleep anymore tonight, so… brainless movie, giant pillows and low lights, anyone?”

Everyone was in agreement. When they reached the media room, all the furniture was shoved to the walls, all the cushions thrown into the middle of the floor, and the group piled in, with Skye
comfortably in the middle. Before the movie started, though, Bruce pulled a flash drive out of his pocket and handed it to Skye.

“What’s this?” she asked him curiously.

“Guided meditation tracks. Binaural rhythms to help slow your brainwave frequency. There’s one on there for dreamless sleep, and a couple for stressful situations,” Bruce explained in a sympathetic voice. “I thought it might help.”

“Thank you,” Skye said softly.

“We should begin working on control soon, Lady Skye,” Thor rumbled softly from his place a couple of people to Skye’s left.

“Not here,” Skye denied quickly. “It’s too dangerous… for other people. I could wreck the city…” Thor frowned, but then nodded. “I understand. But this… farmhouse… it is in a remote area?”

“Yes,” Clint confirmed.

“Then when we arrive there, we can practice without risk of harm.” Thor nodded confidently.

“Alright,” Skye agreed. “After I’ve seen Laura and the kids.”

“Of course. You must always greet your hostess and family first,” Thor agreed readily.

“Can we start the movie now, guys?” Tony asked impatiently.

They somehow managed to pack themselves all in one Quinjet the next morning, after a quick shopping trip to get Wanda and Pietro a few more clothes, and were soon on the way to the Homestead. Skye tried to explain farm country in the United States to Wanda, Pietro, and Thor. Wanda and Pietro understood it a little. There was farm country in Sokovia, but it was a far different experience. Skye was pretty sure Thor was a lost cause.

The other Avengers debated whether it was a security risk that May and Coulson knew about the Barton family (since Trip was the grandson of a Howling Commando, he was automatically ruled out as a risk). As Clint landed, Skye got excited. She liked the Homestead. She had grown up in foster homes and the orphanage with kids running all over the place. There was a reason why Skye lived alone in a van for a decade, she enjoyed the silence that it brought. At least with the Homestead it was full of people and noise and life, but there was plenty of space for silence.

When the door opened, Skye felt the urge to bolt out, but hesitated when she remembered why they were there. She watched silently as the others began to deplane, stretching in the fresh air after the cramped jet, but… she didn’t want to move, yet.

God, she hadn’t been this nervous the first time Maria and Nat brought her here!

It was even worse when she saw two small bodies fling themselves off the porch and run for the group gathering outside the jet. Why had they come here? She could hurt them. So far, no one had noticed that she was still inside the plane… maybe that was for the best. Maybe she should ask Thor to take her somewhere far, far away so she could maybe try to get a handle on her powers before exposing the people she loved to it… maybe there was a realm that she could go to without any solid ground.
Her train of thought was broken when Laura stepped into the plane, headed straight for her. “Skye,” she breathed in a sigh of relief as she dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around Skye. The seat restraints got in her way, but she ignored them for the moment.

“Hi,” Skye whispered back, letting her head fall against Laura’s shoulder.

“Come inside, sweetie,” Laura urged gently.

Skye shook her head. “I can’t... the kids... I don’t want to hurt anybody, Laura.” Skye looked up at her friend with dark eyes full of anguish.

“You won’t,” Laura soothed, stroking Skye’s hair gently before deftly beginning to unfasten the safety harness.

“I could,” Skye protested.

“But you won’t,” Laura insisted. “Skye, beautiful Skye, every single one of those people out there is dangerous in their own way. Nat was an assassin at one point in her life.”

“But none of them can level the house in ten seconds,” Skye retorted. Then she paused. “Except maybe the Hulk. And probably Thor. But...”

“But nothing,” Laura interrupted, gently urging Skye to her feet. “Listen to me, honey. There are two children out there who know you were hurt but now you’re home to get better. You have a family out there with them who will help you get this thing under control. You won’t hurt them. You won’t hurt me. You won’t, I believe in you.”

Skye crumpled and Laura caught her, rocking Skye lightly in her arms as the younger woman cried out he fear. The plane trembled around them just a little, but not enough to do any real harm. Laura did notice that though the plane shook, Skye was a stable point; as long as she held onto Skye, Laura was in no danger of falling.

Laura saw the people outside move a little further from the plane, but though Wanda looked as though she were headed inside, Clint held her back. Laura was grateful; Skye needed to get this out of her system, and it would help convince her that her power wasn’t as out of control as she thought.

Skye’s tears turned into panic briefly when she realized the plane was shaking, and the vibration increased briefly. Then she felt Laura’s arms around her, gentle hands in her hair, and she forced herself to calm again. It didn’t happen quickly, but the trembling did ease off until eventually all was still except for Skye’s labored breathing.

“There,” Laura said gently. “You see? You can control it. No one was hurt, and nothing was damaged.”

“It wasn’t?” Skye asked softly.

“Nope. Not a thing,” Laura confirmed.

“O... okay,” Skye conceded. She stayed close as Laura wrapped an arm around her waist and led her outside.

“Auntie Skye!” Lila yelled as soon as they were visible. She broke away from Clint and ran to Skye, flinging her arms around her auntie’s legs. “Oh! You’re crying! Are you hurting again, Auntie Skye?”
“I was,” Skye told the little girl softly. “But your hug’s made it better.”

“Then I’ll hug you more, ‘til you’re all better!” Lila promised. She held up her arms and Skye lifted her up, hiding her eyes against the little girl’s shoulder as Lila’s arms wrapped around her neck. Lila’s eyes went wide and Skye remembered that her neck was purpled with bruises.

“Let me get some arnica cream for those bruises,” Laura said. “It looks nasty.”

“You have to give it kisses, mommy,” Lila insisted. “Kisses make it better.”

Laura laughed. “I think I’ll leave that to your other Aunts, Lila. They can give her kisses to make it better.”

Skye let herself get dragged out by Lila and Skye spotted Cooper sitting on Thor’s shoulders with glee.

Children were another thing that were very precious to Asgardians, based on Thor’s reaction to them. According to Thor, Asgardians lived for so long that children were extremely rare and were considered just as blessed as soulmates were. It wasn’t until Laura shoved a smoothie into Skye’s hands that she realized how hungry she was. The Avengers had offered her food at the Tower, but her throat had been so sore she had resisted.

Lila and Cooper only had one more weekend of Winter Break before they went back to school and had been invited to go sledding with friends. Before they went, Laura and Clint had a long discussion with them, reminding them that the Avengers’ presence was a family secret and not to go bragging about who was staying at their house. With no other global disasters since New York, Clint was still just the head of household in a tiny town in Iowa, not a superhero, and that’s the way he preferred it.

Maria, Nat, and Wanda all wanted Skye to stay in their bed, staying as safe as possible, but after a few hours of Laura mothering the life out of her, Skye was fed up. She, Thor, and Bruce managed to sneak out to a field, far away from the house. Thor and Bruce, at least, seemed pleased that she was taking the need for training seriously.

Skye was a little surprised when training wasn’t about controlling her emotions so much as channeling them. To be fair, she’d been working on emotional control all along… and while she’d made some headway, there were some things she just couldn’t help. And the soulbond meant that emotions any of them felt were shared and sometimes amplified.

“Everything moves, Lady Skye,” Thor told her seriously. “And your power allows you to sense and manipulate that motion. So perhaps to begin with, you should focus on that sense of motion. Feel it in the earth beneath your feet, in the snow, in the trees, even in the air. Because what can be perceived can be affected.”


So she tried. And it worked.

She discovered that everything had a “sound” of sorts, a sense in her mind. Some low and slow, some high and quick, some soft and some loud.

She became aware of a “sound” that, once she noticed it, very quickly became the loudest thing in the area. It hummed with what almost was a tune of its own, and when she followed the sound to its source, she found herself standing right beside Thor.
“What is it?” Thor asked gently.

“Your hammer,” she responded with a breath of awe. “It almost sings….”

“Mjolnir is a very powerful artifact, it is true,” Thor told her with a proud smile. “I would not attempt to disturb it, were I you, but it is good for you to be aware of it. You may also need to learn how to tune it out.”

Skye nodded and closed her eyes again, trying to push the song to the back of her mind and listen for other things. Though winter-dormant, the hedge rows between the fields probably had the next loudest combined sensation; they all hummed at the same frequency, she thought, because they were all the same sort of bush-thing, so the combined “sound” was “louder.”

“Reach out to it,” Bruce encouraged her when she tried to describe it. “Touch it. Nudge it, just a little.”

Skye opened her eyes and looked at him. “I don’t want to hurt or break anything.”

Thor chuckled. “You are highly unlikely to hurt the ground, or the snow. Begin there. You feel the hedge. Now feel the snow on the branches. Touch it.”

Skye tried, and a few moments later there was water dripping from the branch, rather than the snow that had covered it before.

“Woah,” Skye breathed softly.

It took them several days of practice, but Skye eventually learned to detect the differences in objects all around them. She learned to discern the difference between objects and people, too; every body was composed of the same elements in motion, and Thor believed eventually she could determine individuals by the feel of their personal energy.

Thor himself was actually easier, as were Bruce and Steve. Their bodies didn’t function on the normal human scale. But Skye refused to even attempt to touch what she felt from them until she had a better idea of what she was doing.

Bruce had some ingenious ideas about helping Skye work on control, too. He made a trip into town and picked up a couple of sets of wind chimes, as well as a second hand guitar. They started with the chimes. “Make them ring, Skye. Each one has its own tone that sounds when they vibrate. So make them ring.”

It was harder than it had sounded. Metal’s vibration, particularly outside at near freezing temperatures, was hard to change. Even after days of practice, it took effort to do it. Thor had gotten a message from Lady Sif (by way of messenger hawk of all things) that he was needed in Europe, but wouldn’t say why. Thor took off, and Laura had allowed the children to provide the hawk with some water and a mouse that they got from a neighbor kid, who had them for his snakes, before the hawk took off as well. Watching the hawk ride warm thermals and gain altitude gave Skye an idea, so one afternoon, she went into the barn. She decided that if what she wanted to try worked too well, hitting the barn roof would hurt, but she wouldn’t end up seriously hurt several miles away.

She knelt down and placed her hands flat, a couple inches from the earth and pushed the air between her hands and the ground. She laughed to herself as her hands felt the resistance as she struggled to keep her hands level. Next she stood, hands still level to the ground and pushed ever so slightly. While she didn’t lift off the ground entirely, her heels definitely rose.

She pushed harder against the floor and that’s when she lifted entirely off the ground. She only held
it for half a minute before she came back down, and it was a foot, if that, but she couldn’t help but grin to herself. “The sky’s the limit,” she said to herself, then started laughing hysterically, both at the pun and the reality that she could fly.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

More practice and a little fun at the farm.

Chapter Notes

Comments and questions just keep rolling in. You guys are amazing!

Also, we've been given more artwork inspired by our story. We can't tell you how amazing that feels, to know that other people were inspired to create by something we've written. One is here, and we will continue to include gift art in future updates. Thank you SO much!
Skye’s days quickly became packed between combat training, practicing her powers, and running team drills that apparently came with being part of the Avenger’s team. It also quickly became apparent that Skye’s new powers came with a cost; she ate more like Steve and Thor than like Maria and Laura. Bruce’s opinion was that the energy for her power had to come from somewhere, and in a human body that came from food.

A few days after they began team training, Skye’s breakfast was interrupted by an alert from her phone. She quickly shoveled another bite of pancakes into her mouth before pulling it out to check the alert.

“What’s up?” Clint asked.

Skye read the message and looked up at Bruce with a grin. “Trip and Fitz have the data from the tests you were running at the base,” she told him. “They made a copy of all the results and Billy helped them transfer it to my personal section of the secure server. I can get at it for you anytime you
“That’s great, Skye. Thank them for me, please,” Bruce replied with a smile of his own. “I don’t suppose there’s a lab here where I can keep working, but I would like to at least see the results.”

“Sure,” Skye said agreeably. After breakfast, she retrieved one of the tablets Tony had brought along so he could keep tinkering with his designs while they were in Iowa. She used it to access the data as well as relaying it to the tower so a copy would be in Bruce’s lab when they got back. “Here you go,” she said, handing over the tablet.

“Thank you,” he said again as he began scanning the data. “Fascinating.”

“What?” Skye asked, curious.

“Your DNA has changed dramatically,” Bruce said, showing her the display. “It’s completely stable, but you have extra macromolecules that you didn’t have before.”

“So a genetic scanner won’t even read me as human anymore,” Skye said, drawing the same conclusion as Bruce thanks to all his training.

“Not entirely, no. We never found anything strange in your DNA, but this has me wondering if there are simply enough people like you and Raina that our information on the human genome just includes whatever makes you special as part of the variation on human norms. Because you did read as completely human before your… change.”

“If Thor is correct about how long ago the Kree would have been here - and I don’t doubt his word - there would have been plenty of time for the genes to spread across segments of the population,” Skye continued, thinking aloud. “Thousands of years. And it’s likely that the trigger for these… transformations… is unique to the Diviner. So generations upon generations of people who never changed, to the point that most of them don’t even know they can.”

“Very true,” Bruce agreed. “And yet… you said Raina and… Cal… knew you would. Which suggests that someone has retained the knowledge of the transformations and how they occur, as well as who has the potential.”

Skye shrugged. “It’s possible. But if they let… Cal… come after me, I’m not sure we want to associate with them anyway. Even if we could track them down.”

“It isn’t a priority,” Bruce agreed. “But something to keep in mind.”

“Sure, we can do that. Anyway, I’d better get outside before Thor comes to haul me out for practice.”

“Have fun, and good luck.” Bruce often excused himself from team training sessions, simply because the other guy wasn’t a precision tool. And Skye knew he’d be more productive with his research, anyway.

Tony had actually left after the first week or so in Iowa, though he did visit from time to time. Not only did he have SI work to deal with but he had also decided that the Avengers really did need a training facility. The Tower couldn’t really handle Bruce and Thor well, then when Skye and Wanda were added in… they just needed more space. And better shielding. Possibly also fewer bystanders and lower chances of collateral damage.

SI had an old storage facility in upstate New York that he was having completely redone for their use, though. So the Tower could be “home” and the facility could be “work” and they could actually
divide their time a little more appropriately. It might even be good for them.

She worked in secret a little every day on ‘flying,’ which was really more like hovering. She hadn’t yet figured out how to move in a direction that wasn’t up and down, because when she tried to angle the force keeping her in the air, she dropped down again. Still… if it meant she’d never fall from a building, it was worth it. Worth more that she could tell Ward that he could take his pull-ups and shove ‘em. Or at least imagine telling him, because she still had no intention of seeing him again, ever.

But she’d keep working at it. There had to be a way to make it work and actually fly. She just had to figure out how.

Maybe the problem was that, so far, she seemed to do most of her channeling through her hands. Thor said that was common, and could be difficult to change. So to get into the air, she had to point her hands down and focus her power that way. Trying to then push herself forward was… not working.

Maybe she could channel her power differently through her separate hands? She put one hand in front of her, at about the midline of her body, palm down, and tried to focus her power in that direction. She could lift, but not as far and she was a little shaky. Still, she tried to hold herself up and use her other hand to push crosswise.

She ended up spinning around and landing face down in a pile of straw as she lost control of both directions at once. She needed better control, and probably more practice. But she wasn’t going to let that deter her. Not at all.

Weeks passed. Sharon came out to stay after a couple weeks so that they could make decisions on the wedding, which was going to be October 9th. A huge blizzard added an extra foot of snow on the ground and knocked out the power and the internet, which meant Maria couldn’t get her work done and the Avengers were out of contact, except by cell phone. Tony had someone within the hour to fix the Internet, while Steve kept them all distracted with a snowball fight.

Clint and Skye were automatically put on different teams as “snowball snipers” while the others were divided up evenly. Wanda could use her powers to manipulate the snowballs to go any direction she pleased, Nat took Steve’s orders to heart and played dirty during the fight, while Steve’s throws could knock anyone over.

Skye was doing a pretty good job of getting hits in when Clint hit her and caught her off-guard, which knocked her off balance. She scrambled to get her grip back on the icy tree but ended up grabbing air as she tumbled forward.

“Skye!” Pietro shouted rushing under her to catch her. Skye threw her hands out and her powers reacted on instinct as she sent vibrations down. Pietro was thrown away from her landing area and after a millisecond, she got her bearings and in the next moment she was hovering upright slowly down to the ground.

“God, Pietro, I’m so sorry,” Skye said contritely. “Are you alright?”

Pietro grinned at her, getting up and brushing the snow off of himself. “No harm done, sestra. Guess you can save yourself!”

“Shit,” Steve said as they all stared at her. “That’s gonna be useful when you become a field-Avenger.”
Sharon laughed. “You made Steve swear,” she crowed. “I’ve been trying to do that since I met him! Awesome trick.”

“Oh, thank God,” Skye breathed out, ignoring Steve and Sharon. Then she saw the others all staring at her. “Um… surprise, I guess?”

“Surprise?” Maria asked in a tone of disbelief. “You mean you’ve been working on… on that?”

“Um… kinda,” Skye admitted sheepishly. “I just thought it would be cool if I could, you know, fly. But… well, mostly right now I can hover… But I’m so never doing another pull-up again!” Natasha laughed, remembering Skye’s complaints about Ward making her do pull-ups.

“So this is where you’ve been sneaking off to, huh?” Steve asked with a grin.

Wanda stepped forward and brushed back Skye’s hair away from her eyes. “You are on the path to doing great things, Skye Stark.”

Clint hopped down from his perch and made his way over. “That’s gonna take some explaining to the kids,” he said. “I don’t think they’re gonna understand Bruce’s explanation about string theory.”

“What, that Auntie Skye can fly?” Skye snarked with a smile.

“Maybe I can give you lessons?” Wanda offered.

“You can fly?” Skye asked, her eyebrows raised.

Wanda smiled. “I manipulate chaos,” she said. “What can be more chaotic than manipulating gravity?”

“More than happy to play with you and your powers anytime you want, babe,” Skye quipped. Then when Clint, Natasha and Sharon started snickering and Steve’s face went flame red, she sighed. “That didn’t quite come out right.”

“It is alright, I understand,” Wanda replied, smiling serenely. “Though I would not mind in either context, as well.”

Skye laughed happily. “Duly noted, and I will keep that in mind for a time when we’re not surrounded by children.” Wanda laughed with her, though they both received mock-glares from Clint and Sharon. Natasha just smiled sweetly at them; of course, Natasha was always invited to Skye’s sexytimes as well, so it wasn’t like she’d be missing anything. And even if the three of them had assorted one-on-one encounters, they wouldn’t block the soulbond or keep the others from knowing.

“Hey, if you’re done out there, come in for some cocoa!” Laura called out from the porch.

“Cocoa!” Lila echoed, then dashed for the house.

“It’s amazing,” Skye said in a stage whisper to Wanda and Pietro, though the others could mostly hear. “She makes it fresh, not from a mix. Milk and sugar and chocolate and real whipped cream…”


So Maria and Natasha explained how the US had fallen into the trap of instant gratification and easy mixes for people who didn’t actually have either the time or the ability to cook. Skye added in a few bits about the orphanage kids being lucky to even get instant cocoa in the winter, and mostly only did
because they could buy cheap mixes in giant tins. And even then, the nuns would make it weak so it would last longer and feed more kids. Wanda looked like she wasn’t sure whether to be horrified by American culture of sad for the poor kids who might never experience the bliss of homemade hot cocoa.

Then Steve told a story about how his mother used to make him and Bucky hot cocoa when they were kids, back in the early 20s, and how chocolate and cocoa powder became scarce during the Depression and the War. This would be his first encounter with non-powdered hot cocoa since his childhood.

After hearing that, when Skye helped Laura distribute mugs of cocoa, Steve got his first. He chuckled and kissed Skye’s forehead, thanking both her and Laura. Skye and Laura got the last two mugs poured and joined the others in the living room to sit by the fire until everyone was warmed up and dry after playing in the snow.

“I have a question for Bruce and Thor,” Clint said as they all nursed their steaming mugs. Everyone looked up. “Is there any limit to what Skye can do?”

Bruce and Thor exchanged a glance. “There is little matter that the Lady Skye could not touch with enough practice,” Thor said finally. “Had I not known her prior to her obtaining her powers I may have insisted on moving her to a realm where she could not harm herself or others. Such powers could rip apart continents in the wrong hands.”

“But I won’t,” Skye said with a confidence that Thor and Bruce had worked on with her steadily over the last few weeks, supported by everyone’s steadfast faith in Skye and her ability to stay in control. “Even in the worst case scenario, the bond can restrain my powers for brief periods. Long enough for someone to knock me out.”

“Which we’re hoping it won’t come to,” Bruce said, putting up his hands to stop the protests he got from the others. “But we have to plan for the worst case scenario. We’ve been practicing how to contain the Other Guy, why wouldn’t we with Skye’s powers?”

“You know what I realized?” Steve said. “We never formally asked Skye if she wanted to join the Avengers.”

“She was already a team member,” Tony argued. “She’s the glue that’s held us together for so long. She made the Avengers a family. As Team Dad, I say that it’s only right that she finally get to join the family business full time.”

“It should still be her choice,” Steve insisted. “We’ll always be your family, Skye. You don’t have to fight with us if you don’t want to.”

Skye nodded, feeling a sudden wave of love and support from her soulmates. “I know,” she said. “But I committed myself to SHIELD’s mantra of protection a long time ago. If I can’t fight with SHIELD… I’d be honored to fight with the Avengers.”

“Good,” Steve affirmed. “Now, I think there are three things that we need to address once we’re back in New York. The HYDRA base that Wanda told us about in Sokovia, SHIELD, and Skye’s parents.”

“Cal is scary, but I don’t think he’s an immediate threat,” Skye said. “He’s never intentionally harmed me.”

The others strongly objected to this. “He kidnapped you, Skye,” Clint pointed out, sitting down next
“I’m not saying he’s not dangerous,” Skye said. “He does have to be dealt with at some point. But he’s never intentionally tried to hurt me, and he does seem to mostly be focused on me. Not on other people, not on destruction or anything like that. The way he was talking… it was almost like this power was my inheritance. Which makes sense if my mother and/or father have a power. But my father did mention he wanted to take me to my mother.”

“And if the people of Sokovia are being victimized by this HYDRA faction, I say they need to be prioritized,” Bruce said. He looked down at his hands, then back up again. “When I needed to get away, I spent a lot of time in countries like Sokovia. War torn, without proper medical care or in some cases even what we’d consider to be basic amenities. I did what I could, but I was only one doctor… and I’m not really even that kind of doctor.”

Pietro and Wanda looked a little surprised at that, but then, Bruce didn’t look a whole lot like the Hulk so even if she saw him - or saw him - she wouldn’t necessarily have made the connection. But Bruce still felt for the people in those poorer parts of the world that needed help and protecting too.

Skye nodded her agreement. “People being used as living experiments - whether they actually volunteered or were pressed into service - is definitely a priority to stop.”

Steve looked abashed. “I didn’t mean we had to figure this out now. Just that we need to make some decisions when we get back into business.”

Natasha shrugged. “We’re not really quite on vacation, despite being in the middle of nowhere and visiting with family. We came here to reassure everyone that Skye is alright, to give her time to heal and to give her space to start training without risking anyone else. We’ve done those things, or started on them, so we can start putting our time towards other things that need our attention.”

“We have all had to learn to accept that sometimes we need to take time for ourselves, because we’re no good to people hurt, sick or half-dead,” Skye said softly. “But as long as we’re all capable, then we should be putting our focus back on the rest of the world. And I get that maybe you don’t want me and my powers on the front line just yet… but I can still help.”

“We’re not doubting your skill or your control at this point, Skye,” Tony assured her. “And while we may wish we could prioritize your safety - God, sweetheart, you know I’d send you away somewhere safe if I could, if you’d let me - you do have a point. We have a job to do, and we should focus on that. I don’t think you should be anywhere alone,” he said, and held up his hand to forestall argument, “but I often don’t think any of us should be out there alone except maybe me. So that’s not a hit on you, it’s just a general thing.”

“And between Tony, Thor, War Machine when he’s able to help and Falcon… we can still have a team in the air if needed,” Maria added. “So we can do the flight partners too; no one has to be up there alone.”

“I’m fine if we plan missions in pairs,” Skye said with a shrug. “I’m used to it… but, damn, I’m gonna miss Trip…” She sighed.

“Why?” Clint asked, genuinely curious.

“He and I work together so well,” Skye explained. “He was happy to watch my back or to have me watching his, and he knew how to make me laugh or help me focus… he was a really good partner to have. I don’t doubt our abilities to work as a team, goodness knows we’re plenty close enough for all that. Just… I dunno.”
“No, I get it,” Steve said. “It’s always difficult to adapt to someone new by your side.”

“Why don’t you work with Steve on this one,” Clint suggested. “You’ve been training with him long enough that you know each other’s moves well enough.”

“As much as I’d love to partner up with Skye, Clint’s right.” Natasha said.

“Besides, you and Clint have been working together for years,” Skye said with a smile. “Why mess with a good thing?”

Clint chuckled. “I appreciate the thought, but I was actually going more for pairing newer members with more experienced. There’s not much point in tying Tony to the ground, but he and Falcon can work pretty well together.”

“Do we not get any say in this?” Pietro asked, his tone surly and his arms crossed over his chest.

“Of course you do,” Steve said. “If you have an idea, speak up. We’ll always listen.”

“If we are to work in pairs… I think perhaps I might work well with the Hulk,” Pietro said, mollified for the moment.

Skye looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. “I think that could work. You’re in far less danger from collateral damage because you can get out of the way before things hit you.”

Pietro nodded. “And I can perhaps… how does it go… set them up so you can knock them down?”

Even Bruce chuckled at the expression, but nodded. “I usually work alone because the Other Guy doesn’t really play well with others. But… it might work.”

“I kinda think you don’t give yourself enough credit, Bruce,” Skye said gently. “I get that the Other Guy is all about rage, but even the berserkers of Viking legend seldom turned against their own side. And I think anyone you cared deeply about, the Hulk would hesitate to hurt.”

Bruce frowned. “You don’t know that, Skye,” he said.

“But you don’t know that I’m wrong, either.”

“He went after Natasha on the helicarrier,” Clint pointed out.

“Yeah, but you guys weren’t a team then. You’d mostly all just met, you weren’t even a group of friends let alone a team or a family,” Skye insisted. “Didn’t she also pull a gun on you hours earlier? You understood it, but the Other Guy might not have.”

“Skye, I don’t…” Bruce hesitated, clearly torn.

Skye got up and moved to sit on the coffee table in front of Bruce’s place on the couch, looking at him earnestly. “You trusted me. You put yourself at risk to help me learn to use my powers instead of letting them act out of control. You had some awesome ideas, and one of these days I will stop snapping guitar strings.” She smiled wryly and a few of the others laughed; fine-tuning her vibrational control enough to actually play music on a guitar had been one of Bruce’s ideas. But that kind of control was tough, and while Skye hadn’t yet broken the guitar she was going through strings at an alarming rate. “What I’m saying is that I’m willing to return that trust. I’m willing to take that risk and help you prove that it can be done. And I think I’m capable of defending myself if it takes us a few tries to make it work.”
“I believe this is a good idea, my friend,” Thor spoke up, backing Skye. “Both from a practical standpoint and for your peace of mind.”

“Just think of Big Green like we do, Brucie,” Tony said. “He’s like a really big two-year-old with rage issues.”

“One whose mother fed him a lot of leafy greens,” Clint quipped with a smile. “Maybe we should get some practice in first. Find a place where we could let the Hulk out?”

“Training Room #1 at the new facility is designed with Skye, Wanda, and Bruce in mind,” Tony said. “It’s designed to withstand an 8.0 magnitude earthquake and Bruce. I’m not entirely sure how to safeguard against Wanda’s witchy ways, but she seems to have pretty good control over it.”

“As much as I hate to leave the Homestead,” Skye said slowly. “It sounds like a good idea for a trial run.”

“We’ll be sad to see you go,” Laura chimed in, “but at the same time, it will be good for the kids to get their normal routine back. It’s great to have you here, and you’re always welcome, I mean that, but routines are good too.”

“I should set you guys up with a video screen and comms connection,” Skye mused thoughtfully. “Secure connections to the Tower and the new place, too. That way even when we can’t get here, we can at least see each other to talk. You know, like Skype, only actually secure.”

“I’m sure the kids would love that. But be warned that you might start getting calls for bedtime stories if I don’t keep a rein on it,” Laura said, laughing.

“I’m not sure we’d actually mind that,” Maria answered. “We’ll see how it goes.”

“It’s really just a matter of getting the equipment here,” Tony said with a shrug. “I’ll send it over with a tech, if you want.”

Clint shook his head. “We’ll bring it out when it’s ready. I really do want to keep this place off the radar, Tony. It’s safer that way.”

“Because landing a quinjet in your cornfield is subtle?” Tony snarked back, but he didn’t push the issue.

“Well, how about this? Tomorrow’s Friday. Stay through the weekend. Have some time with the kids. You can head out on Sunday after dinner,” Laura suggested. “Start fresh on Monday morning.”

“I can get behind that,” Natasha said. The others nodded agreement.

“Friend Stark, are you planning research facilities at this new location?” Thor inquired.

“For your lady, big guy?” Tony asked with a smirk. Thor nodded. “Yes, I actually am. A full medical center, too; I’ve been speaking with a lovely doctor named Helen Cho. She’s willing to head up our medical center with the understanding that we’re backing her research. She’s working on regenerative healing and a device that, if successful, may even be able to regrow missing limbs and such.”

“Dr. Cho? I’ve heard of her. She’s been collaborating with a university in Korea, I believe,” Bruce commented. “I look forward to meeting her.”

“I’m sure we all do,” Skye agreed.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Heading back to New York.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
This lovely image, titled *Angry Maria and the Babes* was made for us by Mockingbirdsquake on Tumblr. Many thanks!

**Chapter 29**

Skye stared wistfully at her tablet Sunday afternoon, chewing her lip indecisively. Maria was on the couch, working on organizing the specific plan to infiltrate Sokovia with Hunter. Steve was a great team leader, but he didn’t think about much beyond ‘destroy the base, move on’, so Maria had a tendency to plan everything out to determine if any intel should be gathered, if anyone should be captured for questioning, etc. Hunter was unsurprisingly good at that sort of thing after all his years
in SAS and as a merc, so it was a natural partnership.

“What’s bothering you Skye?” Natasha said, looking over from where she was teaching Wanda how to make cookies.

Skye glanced at Hunter. “It’s nothing,” she said quickly. Of course, that got everyone’s attention.

“Skye?” Maria asked.

Skye sighed. “You know the personal email I set up in case my team wanted to contact me when I first joined?”

“Yeah…” Natasha said slowly, her body language shifting into a Black Widow stance, ready for a fight.

“It’s nothing like that, it’s just… Bobbi sort of sent me an email,” Skye said. “Asking me to pass it on to Hunter…”

Hunter stiffened. “Do I want to know, love?”

“She wants to talk to you, explain her side of things,” Skye summarized. “If you want to talk to her, we won’t stop you. If you’d rather not go alone, I would go with… you know, if you want company or something.”

“I… I’d like to think about it, if that’s alright,” Hunter hedged, clearly uncertain. Skye just nodded.

“Do you want to take a break?” Maria offered. “We have time to iron out the details of this plan while the team does some training anyway.”


“If you want to read the email for yourself…” Skye held out the tablet to Hunter. He took it gingerly, noting that she didn’t bother to lock anything, so either she wasn’t doing anything sensitive… or she was demonstrating that she trusted him.

Hunter decided he would rather think it the latter, and didn’t even look at anything else to see if he was right or wrong.

Packing up the Quinjet was harder than Skye imagined it would be. “Don’t go!” Lila had cried, jumping into her Auntie Wanda’s arms

“I must, kamel,” Wanda said, stroking the child’s hair. “I must fight.”

“Because you’re a magic ninja?” Lila said, sniffing.

“Yes,” Wanda said, wiping the tears away from Lila’s cheeks.

Maria was cuddling with Cooper herself while Laura had gotten a hold of Skye and wouldn’t let go. Skye held her tightly back, her face pressed into Laura’s shoulder. “I’ll be alright, Laura,” she whispered. “We’ll take care of each other, you know that.”

“I know,” Laura murmured back, “I know. And you’re strong and you’re beautiful and you can do this. But…”

“I know,” Skye whispered. It was hard. It would always be hard. Being the one left at home, left
behind, sucked. Silently, through the soulbond, Skye urged everyone closer. Wanda came first, and Lila tried her hardest to fling her little arms around everyone. Maria followed with Cooper, on the other side. At Skye’s urging, Natasha grabbed Clint and pulled him over to the huddle as well. Slowly, one by one, the others joined in, creating one giant group hug with Laura, Skye and the kids wrapped into the middle.

They stayed until the kids started getting squirmy and the group broke apart again. When finally it was back to just Laura and Skye, Laura made herself let go when Skye shifted backwards gently. “Thank you,” Laura whispered.

“If you’re ready,” Skye answered with a smile. Wanda handed Lila off to Laura, giving both of them someone to cling to as she took Skye’s hand and they backed towards the jet while waving and smiling.

“Little ones are blessed,” Wanda said softly. “It is hard to leave such a place.” She turned to Clint. “Thank you for sharing such a place with us.”

“Indeed they are, Lady Wanda,” Thor said with a smile.

“You’re welcome, Wanda. I hope someday you’ll think of it as your second home, too, the way your soulmates do,” Clint responded.

Skye wiped her eyes surreptitiously, but nodded. “I have a home in the tower and a home here. Anytime I want it,” she confirmed. “And they’re yours now, too, if you want them to be. Anywhere we call home, you’re welcome.”

“I don’t know…” Wanda hesitated.

“You don’t have to,” Natasha said softly as she joined them. “It’s your choice. You know we all came from fractured homes, at best. Sometimes it’s just really amazing to know that one place will always be there if you need it.”

“It’s a lot to take in. We get it. Trust me, do we get it,” Clint said with a smile for Wanda. “Take your time. We’re not going anywhere.”

“Alright,” Wanda said. They shared another smile before getting into their seats for the flight back. Fortunately, it wasn’t long; there were a lot of people on one little jet.

They settled into work after an overnight at the tower. Despite all her work on the farm, Skye was still a tad nervous to be in a confined space, so she concentrating on breathing instead. She nudged Bruce and smiled. “I get it,” she said quietly. “Confined spaces, populated areas… I get it.”

“You okay?” Bruce asked.

Skye nodded. “I’ve got everything under control, but it’s always there, under my skin.”

Bruce nodded. “And you get it now.” He sighed heavily. “I wish more than anything that you didn’t.”

“I know. But maybe we can help each other. You believe in me, in my ability to keep control. Because you believed it, I started to as well. Now it’s your turn,” she replied, smiling at him. “We’ll work it out. I have faith in us.”

Bruce snorted. “Oh, to be young again…”
“Hey!” Skye stuck her tongue out at Bruce. “I’m not just being young and idealistic here. I believe in you. Seriously. And you should too.”

Bruce took a deep breath, in and out. Then he looked at Skye, took in her calmness and her easy confidence and nodded. “Alright. Let’s give it a try.”

“Ladies and Gentleman,” Clint announced from the pilot seat. “We thank you for flying Avenger Air. We hope that you choose flying with us on your next mission. If you bring your attention port, you can see the newest base, nicknamed ‘The Warehouse.’”

“We’re not calling it that!” Tony called from the back of the plane.

“We’re so calling it that,” Clint shot back.

“It does seem aptly named,” Thor observed, looking out the window.

Skye looked out the window. “It’s an old SI warehouse I cleared out and retrofitted it for us. We’ve got everything we could ever need here. Training gyms, tactical headquarters, medical and rehab facilities, high tech communications and monitoring equipment,” Tony paused, winking at Skye, who grinned back, “living space as needed, a large outdoor site for landing vehicles and/or Asgardian bridges… the works.”

“Sounds like a great base,” Steve said. Tony looked at him, surprised at the approval. “I mean, the Tower’s more of a home than a base. The Tower is 30 minutes away by Quinjet. It takes the target away from New York City and puts our enemies’ focus in the middle of nowhere. With all that we do, we should make sure that no one dies because they live where we do.”

Tony nodded. “All I want is to make sure we’re safe,” Tony said softly as the Quinjet landed.

“That’s why we’re Avengers,” Steve said with a grin. “Wanna show us our new digs?”

“Well look at that, Cap used slang,” Tony said, grinning.

“Yup,” Sharon piped up. “I taught him that one.”

Skye laughed and hip-bumped Sharon playfully as they piled out of the jet. There was clearly still some construction going on at the facility, but everyone was impressed as Tony gave them the grand tour. They peeked into labs, made note of the kitchen and lounge areas, and wrapped up at the area Tony called “gear storage.”

Inside were different cabinets for each of them. A couple models of Tony’s suit were stored there, as well as the flight suit he wore underneath the armor. He couldn’t match Thor’s Asgardian armor, but there were several changes of civvies available for Thor as well as an armor stand and a heavy-duty shield in case Thor ever wanted one.

Several copies of Steve’s Cap uniform hung in another cabinet, as did duplicates of Natasha’s and Clint’s usual tactical gear in their own areas. Then Tony gleefully opened the doors of another cabinet. Inside was a set of outfits similar in cut to Nat’s tac gear, but not quite the same, either. “This one’s yours, Skye,” Tony told her, his eyes turning serious. “You fight a lot like Natasha, but there’s some reinforcement in the material that acts a lot like Kevlar. So no more gunshots to the gut.” Skye bit her lip, nodding. “And… I thought you might like to try these.” He retrieved something from a shelf and handed them to her.

Skye looked over the item in her hands; it was a pair of heavy gauntlets, with extra wrist support. She examined them closely before looking up at Tony. “They’re designed to help channel your
power, direct it to where you want it. There’s also some shock-absorbing capability, so that you
don’t get kickback or anything if you need to pull it back towards yourself. I know your vibrations
don’t affect you directly, but, well, I hoped that if we planned for an accident it would never happen.
You know?”

“Thank you,” Skye said with a smile. “They’re awesome. I’ll try them out later.”

“And!” Tony went on, brightening again. “No one got left out. I had to make some estimates on
sizes, but…” The last two cabinets held tactical gear for Wanda and Pietro. “Same sort of not-Kevlar
stuff as Skye’s uses, but tailored more to your own tastes I hope. Lightweight, flexible, and near-
frictionless. It shouldn’t hamper you in a speed-run… boots should hold up to a lot of wear and tear,
too.”

Pietro’s eyes went wide and started speaking rapidly in Romani. Wanda answered him and Pietro
nodded. “Thank you… Tony,” he said a little uncomfortably.

“It’s not about the money for him,” Skye told Pietro and Wanda softly when Tony was distracted by
Clint and his specialty arrows. “He’s just trying to show you he cares.”

“This was custom-made,” Pietro said softly. “I’ve never had anything that was custom-made
before…”

“Hey, I was homeless before I got swept up in all this,” Skye said. ”I had a bag, a box, and a van.
Nothing else. Trust me, I do get it.”

Wanda nodded. “To have nothing, and to be given everything… is terrifying,” she said evenly.

“So… think of it this way,” Skye suggested. “By joining the Avengers, you’re going to be in
dangerous situations, possibly risking your lives. The team all have our own protective gear and
equipment, but you’re new to the job. So we provided you with the things you will need so that we
don’t risk your safety unnecessarily.”

Skye tugged up her shirt just enough to show Pietro her scars; Wanda had already seen them but
seeing them again helped make Skye’s point. “I didn’t have the right gear for the job once, and I very
nearly died.” Pietro’s breath hissed between his teeth. “We don’t want that to happen to you. Either
of you. So if you can’t think of it as yours, think of it as the team’s. Designed to keep you safe so
you can keep doing your jobs… helping us to protect our people. The people of Earth.”

After a long moment of consideration, Pietro nodded. “You help because it is needed. The team
works together to keep people safe, including the others on the team. I can… make use of what the
team provides.”

Wanda nodded. “It is made for us for the same reason military uniforms come in sizes; so it fits
properly and protects the way it should. This… we can accept.”

“Good,” Skye said with a soft smile. “I’m glad. Every near death, every time we have to ask
ourselves, ‘what if?’ it makes our jobs a little harder. Losing a part of our family would hurt us
deeply. So we take the precautions that are possible and work together for the best outcomes. That’s
all.”

Pietro nodded slowly. “This whole place… the facility, the clothing, the equipment… it is
overwhelming.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to get used to that,” Skye said with a note of apology in her voice. “Tony
does everything big. The night I first met Maria and Natasha, Tony had this charity gala going on to
help with the rebuilding of New York after the Chitauri invasion. It was… it was crazy. But meeting my soulmates was worth it.”

“I think when time has passed, this will also be… worth it,” Wanda agreed gently, her fingertips brushing over Skye’s hair.

“I hope so,” Skye answered. “For both of you.”

Most of the Avengers went back to the Tower while Skye and her soulmates stayed at the Warehouse. Pietro had seemed hesitant to go with the other Avengers, but apparently decided it would be good for the soulmates to have some time truly to themselves. Once everyone left, they settled into their room with dinner from the semi-stocked kitchen. The bed was two queens shoved together, but it worked as a temporary option.

“Alone at last,” Skye said with a grin.

“It is nice to have some quiet,” Wanda agreed lightly. “They are wonderful people, your family, but they are…” She trailed off, uncertain of the appropriate word.


“Sometimes. But also… always around!” Wanda agreed.

“Well, we did have a good scare when Skye went missing,” Maria tried to explain, but Wanda shook her head.

“Their presence comes out of love, I can see that,” Wanda said. “I understand. But…”

“But sometimes it’s best to kick them out. Tell them ‘you don’t have to go home but you can’t stay here!”’ Skye exclaimed, and Maria chuckled as she recognized the song lyric Skye quoted.

Wanda giggle at the thought, though the she didn’t catch the quote. “And what shall we do with our evening alone?” she asked instead.

“We usually like to watch movies. Relax, spend time together, just generally connect. The more time we can spend like that, the stronger our bonds become,” Maria answered.

“I think that could be enjoyable,” Wanda agreed. “Though I have not often gotten to watch movies, unless they were on television.”

“Oh, then we have so many great ones to share with you…” Skye offered, grinning. “We mostly tend to watch comedies. We have enough action and adventure in our lives that we don’t frequent those, though some of the classics are still a lot of fun. But if we let Maria get started on Indiana Jones, we won’t get to watch a movie tonight.” She added, winking at Natasha.

“Hey!” Maria threw a pillow at Skye, but she batted it aside automatically.

Wanda blinked. “Is that why they call them ‘throw pillows’ in English?” she asked Natasha quietly.

“Nope,” Natasha replied, trying hard not to laugh at Wanda’s honest confusion. “But it might as well be.”

“So, what should we start with?” Skye interrupted their side conversation. “Men In Tights or Holy Grail?”

“I have seen neither,” Wanda said.
“Holy Grail,” the other three responded immediately.

“I’ll get the popcorn,” Skye said with glee.

“I’ll get the champagne,” Nat said.

“There’s champagne around here?” Maria said in surprise.

“It’s Tony. Of course there’s champagne,” Skye said with a smile.

“Particularly in our room,” Natasha added with a wink. “If he didn’t think of Skye like a daughter, I’d be worried about him wanting to watch what we get up to when we’re alone…”

“He wouldn’t…?” Wanda began, scandalized.

Skye smiled reassuringly. “No, he really wouldn’t. Aside from the fact that Pepper would kick his ass, let alone the rest of us… he really is actually quite respectful of our privacy. While the idea of three - or now four - of us together may have fueled a few fantasies… a long time ago, I don’t think he’s seriously interested in being the voyeur. Not with us. And to be honest, the idea of a quad all of women is probably fantasy fodder for a lot of guys, and not just Tony.”

“True,” Maria conceded with a small smile. “In any case, nothing we have to worry about. The guys in our lives mostly have better sense than to ever say anything about it. Even Tony.”

“You know with three Avengers in this group, if it ever hits the news the press is going to have a field day. Jemma and Mack weren’t wrong - there hasn’t been a confirmed bonded quad in a very long time. It’s bound to catch some attention.”

“That’s one thing I’d rather not worry about until it happens,” Natasha said.

“It will be a big deal, but we have Pepper and SI’s PR team to help us handle it,” Maria added. “Not to mention the support of the rest of the team. We’ll make it through. It’ll cause a stir, but we won’t have to deal with it alone.”

“Oh, I know,” Skye said, shaking her head. “But… yeah, it’ll be big.”

“We have time to worry about such things later.” Wanda smiled. “Why don’t we start the movie?”

“Good idea,” Natasha seconded. They piled onto their large couch, champagne, popcorn and snacks readily available as the intro started.

Skye cuddled with her three soulmates happily. Despite the past several weeks, despite her father kidnapping her and her gaining powers and Raina trying to kill her… she was happy. She had found all three of her soulmates. The nuns had been wrong. Her teachers had been wrong. They said she’d never amount to anything and now… Skye couldn’t help but feel the tears well up in her eyes as she realized the hole she’d been trying to fill since before she could remember was full up.

Sensing Skye’s introspection first, Natasha pressed closer and cradled Skye’s body against her own. Maria absently found Skye’s hand and squeezed it gently, only then realizing what she was doing. But Skye’s emotions just sent an outpouring of love and joy through the bond, so no one tried to dissuade her from just experiencing what she was feeling.

Though just as perceptive as the others, the bond hadn’t yet fully formed for Wanda, so it took her longer to realize that the emotions were Skye’s and not just her own. But when she realized, she too reached out for physical contact. All four of them, just comfortably snuggled together, touching skin
to skin without and need to make it sexual.

Chapter End Notes

Our Romani came from here: https://glosbe.com/en/rom/love
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Avengers training

Chapter Notes

We didn't hear from too many people this week, and those we did hear from indicated that they weren't getting their notices about the update. Hopefully everyone is caught up at this point! I suppose worst case, you have two chapters to read today?

I didn't have time to make a manip this week, but have a Bruce pic because Hulk!

Chapter 30

The next morning, the rest of the team returned so they could work on their team training with the better facility. Before they got started, though, Tony approached Skye with a new anklet. “Here, sweetheart,” he said lightly. “We know your old stuff was taken when Cal kidnapped you, but I made you a new GPS.”

Skye took the anklet automatically, then paused with it in her hand. She looked around the room and shook her head. “Thank you, but no.”

Silence reigned as everyone took in what she had to say. “Skye…” Steve began, but she shook her head again.
“No,” she repeated. “I’m not going to be the only one tagged, like a puppy that’s frequently lost.” She frowned at the piece of jewelry again and set it down on the bench. “It sucked just as badly for me during the HYDRA reveal, knowing Nat was hurt but not where she was or how I could help. Seeing you guys on the news after the fact, with shots of people falling or jumping out of the crashing helicarriers. Or how about when Dad went missing for days going after the Mandarin.”

She saw frowns around the room and glared back, crossing her arms stubbornly. “If I’m going to be really, truly part of this team, then I have to be an equal. No taking care of Skye because she’s the newbie - which I’m not anymore, by the way. No extra measures just for me. Either we all wear them, or no one does, but I’m not going to be the special case. I’m not a helpless newbie agent anymore, and I refuse to let you treat me like one.”

“You know, she’s right,” Clint said slowly. Steve nodded his agreement, accepting her points as valid. “None of the rest of us have ever worn GPS trackers, emergency tags, or carried panic buttons. It made sense when she was training, and while she was undercover, but…”

“But at this point, we can’t treat her as less than any of the rest of us,” Steve finished. Natasha looked unhappy, but couldn’t actually argue the point. “She also has a good point with Tony, too - something could have really gone wrong and he had no backup. We’re a team or we aren’t one. We can’t go off on missions alone just because we don’t think it should involve the others.”

“I had the situation under control,” grumbled Tony.

“We know you came out ahead, Tony, but that’s not necessarily the same as having it under control,” Maria spoke up. “It’s actually not a bad idea. There’s no reason we should be tracking each other all the time, but being able to find each other in an emergency is a good idea.”

Bruce frowned, then sighed. “Alright, I’d be willing… as long as if I tell you that I need to go away for some time to myself, you respect that and only contact me in an emergency.”

“We’re all adults, entitled to private time when we want it,” Steve agreed. “And we’re all capable of taking care of ourselves under most circumstances. We shouldn’t, any of us, need constant monitoring.”

Skye looked at Tony. “What if we rigged a chip that pings HQ with weekly check-ins, to be sure it’s still working, but otherwise only actively transmits when being traced?”

“Should be possible,” Tony mused. “Though if we’re all going to be wearing them… well, I don’t think an ankle bracelet goes well with my usual outfits.”

“What about something subcutaneous?” Bruce suggested. “If it’s small enough to hide in a piece of jewelry, it should be small enough to insert just under the skin, where it’s less likely to be found and far more difficult to remove.”

“It would need some sort of casing, so it doesn’t irritate the person wearing it,” Skye said thoughtfully. “But I think it should be fairly simple to add an inert coating to the chip.” Tony and Bruce nodded.

“Then I think we have a workable solution,” Steve said. “You three can work on it this afternoon. For now, we have some training to focus on.”

Training started with just Skye and Bruce. Bruce was unwilling to risk the team with the Hulk, and Skye was equally determined to convince him that it wasn’t a risk.

“You’re sure about this, Skye?” Bruce asked again, hesitating.
“I’m sure,” she agreed. “I have faith in you. Just try it.”

With another sigh, Bruce nodded and closed his eyes. Skye watched, fascinated, as Bruce transformed. Fortunately, Tony had managed to make Bruce’s combat pants out of a material that stretched with the transformation, so Bruce didn’t end up naked when he reverted back to himself.

Skye watched carefully as the Hulk stood over her, staring at her curiously. Skye sent a gentle breeze towards the Hulk and he laughed deeply for a few moments as the breeze rustled his hair.

Since he didn’t react negatively, Skye took it up a notch. “Okay, Hulk. We’re gonna give training with your team a try.” The Hulk nodded, serious now. “How about I try and knock you over?”

Skye sent a strong quake to the Hulk’s feet, trying to knock him down. The Hulk slammed his foot down on the spot that was shaking a couple of times, then figured out that the rest of the room wasn’t shaking. He moved away from the shaking area.

Skye moved the spot and increased the power of the quake. A couple of times the Hulk teetered over, but managed to keep his balance. Once, he managed to get his feet underneath himself enough to jump aside. Then it occurred to him to jump when he felt the subtle waves of her power coming at him, and he evaded her blasts a couple of times before she surprised him again by starting a second burst at the point where she could tell he was going to land. The Hulk managed to nail his landing, but fell to one knee as she upset his balance again immediately.

The Hulk glared at her and bashed a fist into the ground, shaking the floor of the room but Skye kept her feet. Still, she let up for a moment, giving Hulk a chance to regain his balance. “Good. See, we can practice together.” She grinned at the Hulk and he grinned back; when he seemed mostly stabilized again, she walked over and held up her hand. Hulk held his huge hand up and waited for her to high five him instead of hitting out at her. “Cool. Think we can invite the others in?” she asked.

The Hulk considered for a moment, then nodded again. Skye waved towards the door, and the first one in was Pietro. “This is Pietro; he wants to be your partner, so you can work together when we fight bad guys. Think you can try?”

The Hulk grumbled something unintelligible under his breath but nodded again. This time, Skye stood out of the way while Pietro raced around the room, setting up padded dummy targets in clusters, which Hulk knocked over with casual swipes of his hands. Still, he seemed to be impressed with how quickly Pietro could present him with a number of targets; Skye couldn’t even see her soulmate’s brother move, just a blur of color and motion.

Closing her eyes, Skye tried using her power to track him instead and found that she could. He moved unbelievably fast, and his body vibrated at a frequency that would be deafeningly high-pitched, if she were actually hearing it with her ears. It was almost a little disorienting, but Skye did her best to follow him with her other senses, as practice for herself while he and Hulk worked together.

Since she was following Pietro as best she could, Skye was only a little startled when she suddenly felt herself being moved at a pace she herself couldn’t achieve. A moment later, she heard a grumble and felt the wind of swift passage beside her. Opening her eyes, she saw Hulk knocking dummies more carefully from around her before carefully scooping her up into a huge hand and depositing her safely aside while his other hand bashed the remaining dummies in a single annoyed swipe.

Skye closed her eyes and tested a theory, having heard Pietro’s ‘sound’, she concentrated on finding the biggest thing in the room and was surprised to find that there were two vibrations coming from
the Hulk. One was huge and angry in its insistant vibration while the other was quieter and more of a decisive ‘sound’. Skye opened her eyes wide. “Woah,” she said to herself.

Tony came in next, since the Hulk had seemed to have a good relationship with him.

“What’s up?” Tony asked.

“I can feel the Hulk’s vibrations,” Skye said. “But I can also feel Bruce’s.”

“Woah,” Tony said. “You can sense that?”

“Now that I’m looking for it, yeah, I can,” Skye answered with a slight shrug. “It just kind of occurred to me to try. I was using those senses to track Pietro, too, because I can’t actually see him move. He’s too fast.”

“I know. JARVIS and the suit can detect him, but I can’t see him either,” Tony admitted. Then he cracked a grin. “And here I thought I might just be getting old,” he joked.

Skye shook her head, laughing. “Nope. He’s literally too fast for the naked eye.”

Tony took to the air in his suit, teaming up with Bruce initially as Pietro and Skye tossed dummies and powers in their direction, simulating combat without engaging directly. While getting Hulk accustomed to working with and practicing against teammates was not the time to indulge their curiosity about Skye’s power versus Tony’s suit, so they stuck to indirect attacks.

They found out that Wanda could throw pretty much every team member, save for Thor and the Hulk, into the air, and Skye could keep them hovering for a limited amount of time so they could deliver a quick attack to Hulk’s upper body before Wanda pulled them away, which Thor pointed out could be useful for larger targets. Thor also pointed out that both Wanda and Skye eventually would be able to assist their teammates with one hand while attacking themselves with the other.

Skye had JARVIS take video of the session so she could send a copy to May later of her fighting as an Avenger. She wanted to send it to Fitz, but didn’t want to force him to choose between herself and Jemma. Skye hadn’t been present for all of it, but none of the other Avengers were very happy with the biochemist, either. So she decided to send it to May, and trust May’s judgment of who could or should see it.

She hoped Coulson and Trip would enjoy it, if nothing else.

As the afternoon wore on and everyone grew tired, they gave their powers a break and focused on more purely physical training. Steve and Natasha worked with Wanda and Pietro on physical sparring while Clint worked with Skye on further improving her marksmanship. Tony and Bruce headed down to the labs to work on the tracker chip, and Skye joined them when Clint was satisfied with her progress for the day.

By the end of the day, Skye was exhausted and happy to be flying back to the tower for dinner. It was only going to be pizza, but Skye was hungry enough that she was willing to deal with the inevitable argument between herself, Tony, and Steve about which pizzeria made the best pizza as long as they remembered to order hot wings and that it would be there when they arrived.

Given the display of power that Skye showed in the training arena, Bruce, Thor, Steve, and Skye all conferenced together and agreed that it was safe for her to return to the tower. Skye knew that the true proof of how they felt about her that she was still included in the conversation about keeping people safe from her powers.
Skye lay in bed, snuggled between her sleeping soulmates, happy even though sleep eluded her. Then she spotted twin pairs of red eyes in the dark. “Daisy…” the voice called to her. A familiar voice - one that Skye never hoped to hear again. Her father. “Daaaisy…”

Skye shook the shoulders of Maria and Natasha, but they didn’t respond. Then something grabbed her and dragged her out of bed. She screamed bloody murder, but she still heard nothing from them.

Skye held up her hands and tried to use her powers to shove them off of her, but nothing happened. “You can’t hurt me, Daisy. You can’t hurt your own blood,” said a woman. “You can’t hurt your mother.”

Skye woke up screaming, their bed shaking. Her soulmates were shouting, calling her name. Once Skye realized where she was, she took a deep breath and was able to dial back the vibrations before things got out of hand.

Maria pulled Skye into her lap and Wanda and Natasha flanked her as Skye allowed herself to cry. She listened to their soothing murmurs as she cried out her fear and pain. After her tears subsided, she gratefully took the tissue Wanda handed her.

“Want to talk about it?” Natasha asked softly.

Skye sighed and shrugged. “My… Cal… and… and a woman who claimed to be my mother. And I couldn’t wake you up; you were with me, but you couldn’t wake and I couldn’t hurt them. My powers didn’t work, somehow…” She trailed off, knowing it wasn’t much to describe. It was the emotions, the intensity of her fear, the spike of terror that if her screams didn’t wake her soulmates, something must really be wrong… “If my parents are monsters, what does that make me? We never did find out what destroyed that village… what if my parents killed all those people?”

“We aren’t our parents,” Wanda said wisely. “You are still just as kind and thoughtful and loving as you were before you gained your powers. Nothing can be done to change that.”

“Wanda’s right,” Natasha said. “You go out of your way to make sure no one gets harmed. You even prefer non-lethal weapons over lethal ones, much to Maria’s and my discomfort.”

Between Maria gently rubbing her shoulders, Wanda rubbing her feet, and Natasha rubbing her temples, Skye felt herself relaxing despite herself. “… could destroy everyone,” Skye murmured.

“We all could,” Natasha said. “That doesn’t mean we will.”

“Should stay away…” Skye said again.

“Not a chance,” Maria said.

Finally, Skye’s breathing eased again, though her soulmates remained awake. “That was… unsettling,” Wanda said quietly. All three of them had woken when Skye had started mumbling in her sleep, and tried waking her when she started tossing and turning, but she couldn’t be woken.

“I think we need to do something special for her,” Natasha said. “Maybe go away somewhere relaxing after we deal with Von Strucker.”

“Pepper’s been bugging me for a girl’s weekend,” Maria suggested. “You know, one of those spa places?”

“For Valentine’s Day?” Natasha suggested.
“We’ll talk to Pepper in the morning,” Maria said, yawning. “Let’s see if we can get some sleep before training.”

Two of them drifted off, but Natasha stayed up and watched over the other three. Skye always seemed unaffected by whatever life threw at her, no matter how horrific. Natasha knew that most people in Skye’s life, especially those at SHIELD, thought of Skye as extremely resilient, but Natasha knew that such resilience only came from great strife. Not to mention the fact of the sheer amount of undercover skill the girl had when she had first met Natasha and Maria, being able to pickpocket and obtain information just as well as Natasha could. Not for the first time did Natasha wonder what had happened during Skye’s years in the system.

Even around her soulmates three years later, Skye’s words didn’t match her feelings when she was scared. Her first instinct was to suppress the bad things and deal with them herself rather than lean on her soulmates. After that first, instinctive reaction, Skye now shared, but Natasha was almost positive there had been abuse in Skye’s past. Natasha didn’t care past making sure Skye was okay and making the people responsible pay. Natasha Romanov sat in the dark, watching over her soulmates, and made plans.

Unsurprisingly, Skye woke first in the morning. Maria and Wanda had their sleep interrupted, and Natasha could tell they would sleep for a while yet. So she very gently helped Skye untangle herself from Maria’s embrace and Wanda’s legs and the two of them crawled carefully out of bed. In her sleep, Wanda snuggled closer to Maria and it didn’t take them long to settle again, entwined in each other this time.

“How did you sleep?” Natasha asked, her voice just above a whisper as they padded barefoot down the hall towards the kitchen.

“All right, the second time,” Skye answered just as softly. “But you don’t look like you slept at all.”

“I wanted to watch over you,” Natasha admitted as the lights came up in the kitchen. They both had faint circles under their eyes, but nothing a little makeup couldn’t hide. “Besides, you know I do alright on less sleep than most.”

Skye nodded. She did know that, and occasionally wondered about it. But Natasha was unique in a lot of ways, and she had long ago decided not to ask questions. If Natasha wanted to tell her something, she would. And it went both ways; Skye didn’t press Nat about her past, because there were still some things in her own that she just didn’t want to talk about.

Natasha headed for the coffee pot while Skye went for the fridge to peruse food options. She still tended to be the cook, of the four of them, though Wanda wasn’t bad at it either. But the kinds of foods they were familiar with were very different, and for the moment Skye was more interested in comfort food than a new culinary experience.

She dug out eggs, milk, cinnamon, nutmeg and a loaf of bread; whisking together the ingredients for French toast was simple enough, and she asked Nat to slice up some fruit to go with. They had plenty of produce, and Skye’s favorite tended to be strawberries and bananas on her toast. Natasha, of course, obliged her.

Running on autopilot, Skye automatically made enough for all four of them despite knowing that Wanda and Maria were still sleeping. So she left the covered plate of extras in a warm oven and sat down with Natasha to eat breakfast. “Here, love,” Natasha said, offering her the bowl of sliced fruit as well as a cup of coffee made the way Skye preferred it.

Skye smiled. “Thank you. You take such good care of me, Nat.”
“You take care of everyone around you; someone needs to take care of you once in awhile too. I know Maria thinks the same,” Natasha said gently, smiling back.

“I know. She’s said something like that before,” Skye admitted as she scooped fruit onto her buttered toast and added a sprinkling of powdered sugar before digging in.

“She has?” Natasha asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah. The first time was,” Skye paused to chew, thinking. “Oh, I remember. Back when she first told us about Coulson. We didn’t want to bother you and Clint, but I told JARVIS to see if you’d like to eat while we were ordering food…”

“You have a big heart, Skye,” Natasha agreed. “You take care of people, even when they’re used to taking care of themselves. And we appreciate it.”

Skye sighed. “I know. I guess… I just feel like I’ve been super needy, the past few months, and I’m a little tired of it. I just want things to be normal again.”

“You’ve been through some rough times, including a physical transformation that gave you powers,” Natasha replied patiently. “You’re allowed to need help and reassurance, Skye. There’s nothing wrong with it.”

Skye took a deep breath and sighed. “Look, both of us… we have things in our past that affects how we act in the present. I need things to get back to what’s normal for us. I need you to accept the fact that I don’t like to be this needy. I get that you’ll always be there for me and knowing that really helps. I just don’t want to feel like I’m the only one being benefitted from the bond.”

“I think we can respect that,” Natasha said. “Within reason, of course.”

“You gonna stop pulling your punches now during sparring practice?”

Natasha snorted. “I haven’t been pulling my punches,” she argued. Skye gave her a look. “Okay, fine, I’ll stop.”

“Thank you,” Skye said with a wry smile. Natasha smirked back and stole a strawberry from Skye’s plate. Skye retaliated by snagging a slice of banana from Natasha’s breakfast; ultimately their teasing play turned into feeding each other breakfast instead of eating their own.

“How are you guys this cute this early?” Maria asked groggily, half of her hair sticking up in the wrong direction.

“I’m always cute, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Skye sassed with a grin. But she got up and poured Maria a cup of coffee; she knew her soulmate enough to know that she wouldn’t be ready for food until after her first cup.

Wanda was the last up, padding into the kitchen to join her soulmates. Natasha gave her a good morning kiss while Skye served up the last of the French toast for Wanda. Maria dropped a kiss on Wanda’s head as she headed for the shower, being the first to get their day really started while Skye and Nat lingered in the kitchen.

“I guess I should go start my warm up,” Skye groaned, getting up.

“I’m coming with,” Nat said.

“Am I going to be allowed to go running around Central Park?”
“Yeah, come on, let’s see if Steve has left yet with Sam,” Nat said with a grin.

Skye went and grabbed her running clothes and grinned as she met Sam, Nat, and Steve on the common floor. “Regular fifteen miles?” Steve said with his usual shit-eating grin.

Sam laughed. “Maybe for you, big guy,” he said with a grin. “The rest of us are gonna run our regular seven. Because we’re not super soldiers.”

“Some of us just vibrate molecules,” Skye said with a grin.

“Rock it, girl,” Sam said. Skye grinned. Sam still worked in D.C. for now while they convinced The Falcon to join the Avengers, but he reminded her of Trip, which made her miss him just a little less.

Skye ran silently around the park, lost in her thoughts about her nightmares while unaware of the silent conversation going on behind her between Sam and Natasha. “So, how are you doing?” Sam said, running next to Skye.

Skye rolled her eyes. “I’m fine.” Sam gave her a look that spoke volumes, and she sighed. “Yes, I’m having nightmares. You would too if your biological father did what mine did. And someone who I thought of as a close friend was ranting about eradicating me…” Skye trailed off, not really wanting to think about that point. “So, my biological father is a nutbar. I considered that as a possibility by the time I was five. I know that that sounds horrible, but for me it’s just reality.”

Sam stopped, looking a little horrified. Skye stopped too, though Natasha passed them by. “Really?” Sam asked, a little disturbed.

Skye grinned. “I grew up in Hell’s Kitchen, Sam. Most of the other kids that I grew up around were kids with parents who had done violent crime, frequently while doing drugs, or kids with parents who’d been murdered. Sometimes both.”

“Good point,” Sam said, and started running again.

“And the other thing…” Skye hedged, falling into step beside him. “Jemma’s always seen the world through black and white lenses. It’s not like her attitude is out of left field. I just thought she had more loyalty than that.”

“As long as you’re sure you’re okay.”

“I’m okay,” Skye said.

“Then last one to the finish line buys coffee!” Sam said, rushing off. Skye laughed dryly and ran to catch up with him.

Coffees in hand, from a little coffee shop on their way back to the tower, the quartet stepped off the elevator at the gym. Wanda smiled brightly when they arrived; she stepped off the treadmill and skipped over to give Natasha and Skye hugs.

“Ooh, smells good,” Wanda said when she got a whiff of Skye’s dirty chai. “Would you bring me one next time, please?” she asked, pouting prettily.

With a laugh, Skye handed over her half-empty cup to let Wanda share. “You could always come running with us. It’s way more fun at the park than on a treadmill.”

“I do not think I could keep up,” Wanda said bashfully.
“You don’t have to,” Skye assured her. “None of us can keep up with Steve; he runs about twice as far as we do because he’s so much faster.”

“Well… maybe.”

“Think about it,” Skye said lightly. “No pressure.” She stole her cup back for one more swallow before letting Wanda finish it. “And think… if you come with, you could have your very own caffeinated treat.”

Wanda laughed. “I will think about it.”

While they had been talking, Natasha had paired off for sparring practice with Steve, while Sam paired with Clint. That left Skye to work with Wanda, which she was happy enough to do. Wanda did not have a lot of skill with physical fighting, and basics Skye felt confident enough to teach.

The afternoon included meditating with Bruce and Wanda, then working further with Bruce and Tony on the GPS chip. They made good progress and were mostly satisfied with their plans as they headed up to join everyone for dinner. Pepper had taken it upon herself to order in for everyone with one of their standing orders for Chinese.

“Can you do me a favor, Skye?” Hunter asked as they settled in to eat, passing containers around to share.

“Sure. What’s up?” she asked immediately.

“It’s about that email… I’m not sure I really want to, but… maybe I should listen, yeah?” he said in a low voice.

“I don’t think it can hurt anything, and if you want to… it’s certainly up to you,” Skye replied with a look of sympathy and understanding in her eyes. “Did you want company, if only for moral support?”

“I… I think I might, yeah,” he agreed. “If you’re willing.”

Skye nodded. “I… yeah. I kinda miss some of them. Trip, Fitz… May and Coulson.”

“Skye…” Tony began, his tone concerned and still with a touch of anger - though not at her, she knew.

“I know you’re all still mad about what happened, and I get it,” Skye said, holding up a hand to forestall further comment. “I wasn’t planning on going back to the base. If Bobbi wants to talk, she can come here. Or we can meet at the coffee shop down the street, or something. But…”

“But they were your other family, and you miss them,” Clint said, nodding in understanding. “And really, it wasn’t them threatening you… just being unable to stop others from doing so.”

“And both Trip and Fitz were really supportive. Fitz got Bruce his research and test results, remember?” Skye reminded them.

“Tell you what,” Steve said, his expression serious. “If you set up the meeting somewhere neutral and nearby, that we can keep discreet,” he paused, glancing significantly at Tony, who grumbled but nodded, “watch on the area… then we won’t make a fuss about you going.”

“Tell Morse that she can bring one other person, but it has to be Trip or Fitz… or May,” Maria added, knowing that her former SO was still trustworthy. If nothing else, May wouldn’t allow a
neutral meeting to be violated if she could help it… whichever side she ultimately fell on.

“I think I can live with that,” Hunter agreed. Skye nodded. “Set it up, love. We’ll work out the
details once we know when and where.”

Skye smiled and nodded. “That works for me. But… after dinner.” She dug into her meal hungrily,
feeling a little more hopeful with the prospect of getting to at least attempt a connection with people
she still cared about.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Meeting with Bobbi. And then some downtime.

Chapter Notes

Holy cats, guys. Over 17,000 hits on the first 30 chapters! And we're only one shy of 800 kudos! The support we've gotten is amazing, and we thank you all for it every day.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 31

The meeting was set for four days later; Skye didn’t ask for a reason behind the delay, just passed the info along to Maria and Steve so they could take whatever precautions they deemed necessary.

It was partially beneficial that the location of the tower was publically known, since Bobbi suggested meeting at the Strawberry Fields memorial in Central Park. Maria and Steve had both signed off on it tactically, though they weren’t completely happy with the fact that there was even an outside possibility that it was a trap. There were lots of trees for Hawkeye to keep a lookout in and close enough to the tower that Steve could easily call for backup if they needed it.
It also mollified Steve that Hunter never went anywhere unarmed, and Skye no longer needed weapons - though she took an ICER with her anyway, hidden in an underarm holster beneath her leather jacket. She and Trip had left a couple there on her last visit, just in case, so she had one available. Tony was pretty sure he and Bruce could duplicate the ICER rounds if need be.

So an hour before the meet, Clint and Natasha, both hiding out of sight, took their places. Fifteen minutes before the meet, Hunter, Skye, and Steve left the tower and headed for Strawberry Fields. By the time they got to the meet, Bobbi was already waiting and she appeared to be completely alone.

“Hunter,” Bobbi said, smiling for a split second. “Skye…” she stared at the two of them. “Look… I’m sorry… you know… about how things went down. It was never our intention to…” She paused, looking sad. “Hurt anyone,” she finished weakly.

Hunter looked tired for a second. “It never is,” he said thickly. “I’ve never called your intentions into question. But you kept another secret from me Bob. And this one hurt people that I care about.”

“I didn’t know Gonzalez was going to react like that to Skye,” Bobbi said, her hands up in a calming gesture. “But you have to admit. Power like that… it takes a moment to get used to.”

“No kidding,” Skye said dryly. “It would have been nice if you guys extended me the courtesy of giving me time to adjust myself.”

“Preferably not while locked away in quarantine,” Hunter added in a flinty tone.

“She wasn’t isolated!” Bobbi protested.

“Only because Wanda influenced Jemma,” Skye admitted quietly. “She refused to let me be left alone to cope with this, for which I will eternally be grateful.”

“I think we all are,” Hunter responded with a small smile for Skye. “If you’d been in there alone when the Avengers arrived, more than just your soulmates would’ve torn that glass box to pieces.”

Bobbi blinked, following their exchange but feeling like she was missing something. “Wait… Wanda influenced Jemma?”

Skye sighed and nodded. “Wanda and Pietro have powers of their own; you’re going to have to accept that I’m not going into it right now, but they have been accepted by the Avengers. But yes, Wanda convinced Jemma to let us stay together and she was using her powers to help me stay in control of mine as much as was possible. Otherwise there might have been more than a few broken dishes to contend with.”

Bobbi blanched, but nodded in acceptance. “You seem… much more in control, now.”

“I am. The guys had a few ideas about how to fine tune my control.”

Hunter gave Skye a proud grin and a fist-bump. “She worked so hard, Bob. If only… if only your people could’ve seen her…”

Bobbi gave them a small, sad smile; both because of what had happened, and because they had obviously become closer than she’d ever realized. “I’m happy for you, then.” She sighed and stuffed her hands into her coat pockets. “I promised to tell you the other side of the story. Will you listen?”

“Is it safe?” Hunter asked quietly.
“Yeah,” Bobbi gave them another sad smile. “I didn’t tell anyone why I was coming, just took a couple days off. No bugs, no recording devices. I have my phone, but I can turn it off if it makes you feel better.”

Skye focused her senses on Bobbi and after a moment was able to confirm the truth of her statement. She nodded slightly to Hunter, and he let out the breath he was holding. “Alright, Bob,” he said finally. “We’re listening.”

“HYDRA had almost taken the Iliad when we managed to take it back. We lost a lot of good men on that ship,” Bobbi started slowly. “I lost a lot of friends. So that night while we were… dealing… with the bodies of our friends, we decided that it would be a good idea for there to be shared power, and more Operations agents should have input on missions. We wanted SHIELD to be run safer… smarter.”

“So the woman who’s always told me to trust the system decided to change the system because she couldn’t trust it,” Hunter quipped. “Interesting validation.”

“What about Gonzalez’s grab for power?” Skye asked. “What about what I witnessed after San Juan?” Unspecified was the question about Calderon, about a man in a leadership role who would have killed her just for having gained powers she hadn’t sought in the first place.

Bobbi bit her lip. “Gonzalez didn’t… have all the facts at the time.”

“And the asshole that aimed a gun at Skye’s head?” Hunter asked.

“He’s still around,” Bobbi said carefully. Skye and Hunter both bristled. “He has his uses.”

“He aimed a gun at our friend’s head, Barbara Ann Morse,” Hunter said scathingly. “Find the use somewhere else.”

“That’s not my call,” Bobbi said.

“I thought the fact that you were on this so-called ‘Board’ of SHIELD made this your call,” Hunter shot back.

Bobbi sighed. “I was overruled. It is a Board, Hunter.”

“So you’re saying that between you, Weaver, Coulson, May and maybe Mack, Gonzalez and his cronies disagreed and ignored your concerns,” Skye put in. “Sounds like a smarter system to me,” she added, her tone laced with bitterness and sarcasm.

“Skye,” Bobbi began, but she stopped, knowing there wasn’t a good argument she could make.

Skye just shook her head. “I’m not a threat to you, or to anyone, Bobbi, except the kind of villains we’re supposed to protect people from. You know me well enough for that. If Gonzalez and the others can’t see that, then they’re a bigger threat to SHIELD and the world than I am.”

“I have to admit, a lot of it was fear,” Bobbi said quietly. “It’s not every day that someone can shake the base.”

“And now?” Skye asked. “Something tells me that he’d still level the gun at me and Wanda, just because we have powers. Just because of fear.” Bobbi opened her mouth, but Skye kept going.

“You know, SHIELD’s always stood for protection. And under Fury’s SHIELD, if you had powers and you had it under control and you didn’t intend anyone harm, you were protected too.”
“Gonzalez is arguing that you don’t have it under control,” Bobbi said. “He and Calderon are trying to convince the rest of the board to move on the Avengers to take custody of you.”

“On what charges?” Skye asked calmly. “To the best of my knowledge, threatening an unarmed person with a gun is a more serious offense than breaking a few glasses.”

Before Bobbi could answer, Hunter began snickering. When Skye glanced at him, he grinned at her. “Can you imagine what would happen if they tried? Your dad would flip, and they’d have a hell of a fight on their hands from nine Avengers, two to four affiliated agents, coupla rowdy scientists, and Stark’s security.”

“Over a dozen people?” Bobbi asked curiously.

Skye began to chuckle along with Hunter. “Yeah. Tony, Steve, Bruce, Sam, Natasha, Wanda, Pietro, Thor and myself, plus Maria, Hunter, Pepper, Jane and Darcy, and whomever else happens to be around at the time. Not to mention the fact that I highly doubt most of our old team would cooperate, which leaves your people down a couple of elite agents.”

Skye sobered quickly. “I hope for their sakes that you manage to continue to keep them from acting on their crazy ideas. If SHIELD turns against the Avengers, I don’t think they’ll ever recover from being branded a terrorist organization. Though we’re not universally beloved, our public acceptance levels are much higher than yours at the moment. And our PR team would have a field day with threats against an Avenger by SHIELD.”

“Even better, you should get those nutters off the Board,” Hunter chimed in. “Go back to dealing with real threats, like HYDRA.”

“Wait… our? Hunter, are you an Avenger?” Bobbi asked, eyebrows raised and flabbergasted.

“I run tactical for them,” Hunter said. “They see value in what skills I have. Not quite like SHIELD.”

Bobbi stared, wide-eyed, between Skye and Hunter. Her mouth hung open in shock. “Like Maria, he has skills that not all of us do. Back end tactical planning, logistics, and if we need extra people or those skills are needed on the ground, we know he’s capable of holding his own enough to provide us with help,” Skye explained. “One thing I learned long before SHIELD is that you can’t dismiss anyone’s capabilities when your resources are slim and you don’t have a lot of friends.”

“That… actually sounds like a good system,” Bobbi agreed weakly, recovering from the surprise.

“Our methods might not work within an organization like SHIELD,” Hunter said. “But… get rid of the assholes and power-mongers in your system and your organization and we might be willing to cooperate.”

“I’ll pass it along,” Bobbi said. She stared at Hunter for a moment. “You certainly landed on your feet.”

Hunter looked at Bobbi sadly. “It helps when you have friends to catch you,” he said with a little bit of rage. “It also helps when your friends let you fall and total strangers catch you.” Skye rested her hand on Hunter’s shoulder for a moment, offering her silent support. She knew this wasn’t easy for him. “Damnit, Bob!”

“Do you want me to leave?” Skye offered quietly. “Let you two hash this out?”

“No, love, I don’t,” Hunter’s tone softened immediately when he spoke to Skye. “I’ve got nothin’ to say that you can’t hear.” His tone and expression hardened again when he looked back at Bobbi. “I
can’t believe you all left me out of this… this thing! That Izzy brought me into Coulson’s SHIELD, without telling me that the intent was to spy and overrun them! I trusted you. I trusted her!” Hunter began to pace as he ranted. “And then, fuck it all, but you kept me in the dark right up to the point where you couldn’t! And you all, every one of you folk that I was closest to, you let me fall with everybody else!”

“I couldn’t tell you, Hunter!” Bobbi yelled back, her eyes full of remorse. “You weren’t SHIELD, you didn’t ever play by the rules, and I sure as hell didn’t expect you to get close to everyone else! None of us did!”

Hunter rubbed his hands over his face. “With people like Trip, and Skye here, how could I not start to get close to them? They bloody well accepted me, past an’ all. They didn’t hold back on me ’cause I wasn’t a full-on bloody agent! And even if Skye was undercover, she was the most fuckin’ genuine person I’ve ever met. She gives everyone a chance! More than one, even. I bet she’d even give you a second chance, if she thought you really wanted it.”

When Bobbi looked at her, Skye shrugged but nodded. “Coulson is big on second chances, too; he gave me one when I needed it. My soulmates… well, to some extent we’re all each other’s second chance. If fate would give me that… there must be something to it, you know?”

“Why’d you come here, Bob? Really, why? You’re clearly still heavily involved with your takeover group, so why…” Hunter asked, his anger dissolving into a deeper hurt than he wanted to admit to.

“I guess… what I really wanted was a chance to say that I’m sorry,” Bobbi admitted quietly. “I never wanted things to blow up like they did.”

“If you’re really sorry,” Skye said after a long moment when Hunter didn’t respond, “then work to make this right. Work with our friends, the people who are trustworthy. You know now that Weaver knew all along who I was and that Gonzalez is wrong. So do something about it. Work together, and stop this bullshit.”

Bobbi could only nod helplessly and watch them walk away together.

“Heard you had a rough morning,” Sharon said to Skye at lunch.

Hunter raised the bottle of beer he was nursing towards Sharon. “Cheers, lass.” Hunter said.

“I have to go dress shopping this afternoon,” Sharon said. “As one of my bridesmaids, I was hoping you’d come along. Pepper wants to take me to one of those fancy places that serve champagne and cake. And we have bridesmaids dresses to check out.”

“Of course I’ll go,” Skye agreed. Shooting a glance at Hunter, she grinned, and winked. “Maybe you can enjoy the guys getting their penguin suits.”

Hunter chuckled. “No thanks, love. Once and never again, I say. But I’m sure you ladies will have a lovely time.”

“I don’t know,” Skye teased. “Steve Rogers in a tux… TMZ is gonna love that. You could get a pretty penny for those photos.” Hunter laughed. Both of them knew neither of them would do such a thing.

“Go have fun,” Hunter said. “You were there for me today when you didn’t have to. You deserve some fun.”
Pepper grinned. “You ever been wedding dress shopping?” she asked Skye.

Skye smiled tightly. “The people I hung out with before I met you guys couldn’t even afford Sears.”

“That reminds me,” Pepper said. “We need to update your wardrobe soon.”

“Pepper, you bought me clothes before,” Skye said. “You don’t have to do it again.”

“Spring shopping season is here and the fashions have changed. If you’re going to be Quake, the tabloids are going to have their eyes on you. I do it for all the Avengers. It’s not hard, I’ll make an appointment with the Tower’s Stylist and we’ll look into clothes.”

“Wait…” Skye said, looking at her team. “Quake?”

They all shrugged, clueless. “You need a superhero name that doesn’t make people think of a bad horror movie,” Pepper said. “We have an opportunity to name you, Wanda and Pietro before the Press names you something stupid. For you, I came up with Quake. It’s a name that’s as imposing as your powers. I’m thinking something Quick or Fast for Pietro and something Red or Scarlet for Wanda.”

“The Scarlet Witch,” Wanda suggested, smiling as she used her powers to pick up the salt and pepper shakers from the counter and started spinning them.

Pepper grinned. “That’ll scare ’em,” she said.

Sharon laughed. “Come on, Pepper and Quake. We’ve got an appointment to keep.”

Skye’s first impression of the wedding shop was that it was white. Skye didn’t know so much white could exist in one place. It wasn’t just regular white either. There were apparently about seven types of white.

With a couple of bottles of champagne and several slices of cake, they were all laughing and watching Sharon spin around, modelling a mermaid style dress.

“I think you should try on the ball gown,” Pepper said with a grin.

“No,” Sharon said, shaking her head, but she was smiling. “No.”

“She’s right,” came a voice. Skye turned around and saw Kara. Skye stiffened. Kara held up her hands. “I quit SHIELD, don’t worry,” Kara admitted. “I’m sorry it took so long. It’s… he’s my Uncle. He’s crazy, but he’s family so I had to try.” All of them stared at her. “Now try on the damn ball gown,” she said, welling up with tears.

Sharon rushed forward and embraced her friend. “Oh honey,” Sharon said, crying. “I’m so happy to see you! You’re still my maid of honor, right?”

“If you think you can handle it,” Kara said, sobbing.

Skye grabbed the box of tissues from the table and carried it with her over to where the two women clung together. “I’m sure we can all handle it. I’m glad you made it, Kara, and I’m sorry about your uncle.”

Kara freed one arm and pulled Skye into the hug. “I’m so sorry for what he did to you, too, Skye,” she said, tears still spilling from her eyes.

“It’s not your fault, I promise,” Skye said with a sad smile; leaning into the multiple embrace was
second nature at this point, so she didn’t find it awkward at all. “I’m alright, and whatever they may want… they can’t get to me. I’ll be fine.”

They held each other tightly until Sharon and Kara managed to calm down; Skye handed over the box of tissues with a brighter smile. Dabbing at her eyes, Kara returned Skye’s smile. “Well, if the offer of a job is still open… I’ll take it,” she said.

Skye’s eyes went wide, but then she grinned. “You bet it is. And you’re welcome to stay in the tower with us until you get your living situation sorted out.”

“My bags are in a storage locker at the airport,” Kara admitted.

“We can send someone to retrieve them for you,” Pepper offered.

“Oh, it’s fine,” Kara demurred. “I can get them later.” Pepper just raised an eyebrow and held out her hand until Kara surrendered the locker key. Stepping outside for a moment to talk to Happy, she returned after leaving the arrangements to him.

“So, then, back to dresses?” Pepper asked, chivvying Sharon back to the changing room. Skye gently pulled Kara over to their comfy chairs and the attendant brought another champagne glass for her.

“Pepper is nothing if not efficient,” Skye said with a smile. She made introductions and watched as her friends shook hands. They chatted idly, Kara and Pepper getting to know each other a bit as they waited for Sharon.

Skye found herself looking around the shop as she half-listened to her friends. A dress caught her eye and, despite herself, she got up to look more closely at it. The dress was a lovely gold-ivory tone with twining branches of cherry blossoms in red overlaid on the gold. It was breathtaking, literally, and Skye had to almost pull herself away from it.

“You should try it on,” Sharon’s voice was soft over her shoulder. “It’s gorgeous.”

Skye shook her head. “We’re not here for me, Shar,” she said lightly. “It just caught my eye.”

“Now that you’ve found your fourth, though, it’s on your mind,” Pepper said as she joined them. She reached out and gently traced the pattern of branches on the dress. “Sharon’s right, if you like it you should try it on.” When she saw Skye hesitating, she added, “You might not know this, but red is a very traditional Chinese wedding color for brides. It’s a nice nod to your heritage.”

When Kara agreed with the other two, Skye gave in, with a qualification. “Not until Sharon’s done. We’re here for her, not for me.”

“Fine, but I’m holding you to that,” Sharon conceded.

“Oh, Shar, that one’s just right,” Skye said as Sharon stepped out of the dressing room in a wrapped trumpet dress with a lot of ruching.

“You look like a bride,” Kara agreed, sipping her champagne.

“You think so?” Sharon asked, examining herself in the mirror. “I don’t know…”

“It’s great,” Pepper assured her. “You look gorgeous.”

“And Steve will love it,” Skye added. “It flatters your figure so well.”
“It does,” Sharon agreed, twisting around again. “I’m not so sure about dancing with the train, though…”

Pepper smiled. “It’s detachable,” she assured Sharon. “Nowadays that’s common. A lot of women don’t want to drag the train around all day. They’re right though. The dress is timeless enough for Steve to appreciate it and modern enough for it not to feel like you’re still in the ‘40s.”

“Alright, you’ve convinced me,” Sharon exclaimed. “We’ll go with it.”

“Perfect,” Pepper said, then turned to Skye. “Your turn, then.”

“Is there another engaged girl here?” the attendant asked curiously.

“Yes,” Pepper said before Skye could respond.

The attendant clearly saw dollar signs and immediately rushed to action. “Can I help you find anything, dear?” she gushed at Skye.

“She’d like to try that dress on,” Pepper said, speaking for Skye again. Kara and Sharon were smiling smugly at Skye, like they’d wrestle the dress onto her, powers or no powers. Skye had had enough champagne that she gave in and tried the dress on.

When she stepped out, everyone gasped and she blushed heavily. She looked over and caught herself in the mirror. She couldn’t believe the sight in front of her. She stood there, staring at herself in an ivory, fluffy dress she had never pictured herself in surrounded by friends she never believed she’d have, and suddenly the dam broke and she crumpled to the floor, sobbing.

Sharon was the first to her side, ignoring the annoyed mutterings of the staff as she knelt on the floor in her own trial gown and gathered Skye into her arms. “Shhh, Skye,” Sharon soothed. She didn’t try to ask what was wrong, just let her friend cling to her as she cried.

Pepper pointedly shooed away the shop attendants before approaching the pair on the floor. She sat on Skye’s other side and ran gentle fingers through dark hair. Kara looked confused, having no idea what was wrong as she looked on; then she remembered what she’d heard about Skye’s past, both from the woman herself and from others like Trip and Sharon. Retrieving the box of tissues, she joined the cluster on the floor with every intent of being supportive.

When Skye calmed enough to take a tissue, Pepper was the first to ask the question. “What is it, Skye? Are you alright?”

Skye nodded and smiled a bit, trying to turn her tears into weak laughter at herself. “I’m sorry, I’m being ridiculous.” She paused, but no one spoke as they waited for her to go on. “They’re happy tears, I promise. It’s just… I never saw myself here, you know? Until my soulmates, I never really believed anyone would want me, let alone that I’d get married. Before the Avengers and my SHIELD team, I never thought I’d have friends to take wedding shopping with me, or who’d want to help me find something perfect. I just… it was never my life…”

“But things can change in a heartbeat,” Kara said softly, maybe not fully understanding where Skye was coming from but well aware of how quickly things could change… for better or worse. “It only takes one person, sometimes, to show you that the castle you thought was made of bricks is actually made of sand. Or that the sandcastle you thought you made is actually life sized and solid.”

Skye laughed softly and nodded, reaching out and pulling Kara into the pile of women on the floor. “Thank you.”
Kara smiled and hugged Skye gently. “You’re welcome.” She wasn’t entirely sure what Skye was thanking her for, but she didn’t mind anyway.

“Alright now?” Pepper asked gently, wiping the last tear tracks from Skye’s cheeks.

“Yeah,” Skye agreed. She let Pepper carefully help her to her feet while Kara did the same for Sharon, taking extra care with the dresses. Sharon stood next to Skye, the pair of them reflected in the mirrors.

“I’m not sure this is the right one for me, either, I think I’m going back to that last one,” Sharon said after a moment, since she’d tried on the last one of her selections before making a final decision. “But yours is perfect, Skye. You should get it. You know, for when you’re ready.”

Skye sighed. Part of her was already absolutely in love with the dress. But… “I can’t,” Skye said, shaking her head. Mindful of what Pepper had told the sales people, she hedged her next words carefully. “I’m not engaged. We don’t even have a… a date set, or anything like that. We really weren’t supposed to be here for me at all…”

“I know,” Sharon replied with a smile. “But you will, when the time is right. And I still think you should get it.”

“It might not even fit by then,” Skye protested.

“So we’ll get it altered if we need to,” Pepper added in her two cents.

Skye just shook her head and went to the changing room to take the dress off. While she was gone, Pepper spoke quietly to the attendant. “The ivory and red dress… we’ll take one. When you get her measurements for the bridesmaid dress, do up one of those too. It’ll be a surprise for her later.”

The attendant nodded, smiling brightly. “Of course, Miss Potts. We should have it delivered to you, then, when it’s ready?” Pepper nodded.

“Now that that’s out of everyone’s system,” Skye said, stepping back out in her street clothes. “Bridesmaids’ dresses?”

Chapter End Notes

If you’re curious, this is the dress that Skye spotted: http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-TysD8JTIwTw/VRAjy2dGXYI/AAAAAAAABMo/CjiM8A3wFVU/s1600/zuhair%2Brojo.jpg
Chapter 32

A few days later, Maria and Hunter had a solid plan for the HYDRA base in Sokovia. Wanda and Pietro had been able to provide a fair bit of information on the base itself, though they hadn’t made note of guard posts and patrol routes beyond what they needed to escape. Still, the Avengers knew where the labs were, where “volunteers” were held, and where the main control room was. Anything else could have changed, but moving those would have taken far more work than was really feasible.

Skye spent her time in the Quinjet on the way to Sokovia meditating. Her father hadn’t been wrong the day previous when he’d joked that she had Hulk-sized powers. The world was huge and noisy now. Sometimes she liked to sit and meditate and just listen to everything vibrating around her, everything interconnected, acting and reacting to each object around it. It was loud and chaotic and beautiful.

She noticed that even with her eyes closed, she could ‘see’ her teammates moving around the Quinjet’s cabin. She wondered if, in the future, she could even fight blind. She smirked to herself, remembering her childhood friend Matt and the fights he used to get into at the orphanage, despite his blindness. She had always wondered if there was more to him than met the eye, but even the last time she saw him, just before New York, he wasn’t spilling any of his secrets. For now though, she would fight with her eyes open.

“You good to go, Quake?” Steve asked, all business.
“Yup, I’m one with everything,” Skye said.

“No daughter of mine is growing up to be a hot dog,” Tony snarked. “You should at least be aiming for Italian Sausage.”


“It’s an American thing,” Steve said. “When you order a hot dog and you want everything on it, you order ‘one with everything’.”

“There’s an old joke about a Buddhist asking to be made one with everything,” Clint explained. “It was a double meaning. It’s a bad joke.”

“Ah,” Pietro said, nodding, but he smiled in comprehension.

“Can I go back to meditating now?” Skye said crankily.

“Someone got up on the wrong side of the zen garden,” Tony groused.

“Tony,” Bruce said from the corner where he was meditating himself. “Shut the hell up.”

“Shutting the hell up,” Tony said, but his smirk stayed in place.

Skye’s amusement at Tony’s response to Bruce shone through the soulbond for a moment before she focused again and her sense of the others dimmed. Meditating didn’t completely negate her awareness, but since the bond was primarily emotional it was mostly quiet when they were all calm and focused. Wanda moved to sit beside Skye, hoping her soulmate’s calm assurance would help settle her, too. It was their first mission as Avengers, but Skye had been on other missions before and so was handling the tension somewhat better.

Skye didn’t open her eyes, but she silently found Wanda’s hand and laced their fingers together in quiet support. “You’re going to be great,” Skye said softly.

“I manipulate chaos,” Wanda said softly. “It is not so easy to manipulate. Sometimes I manipulate it in the wrong direction when I am stressed.”

“We all take these risks when we’re in the field,” Skye said gently. “It’s possible for me to do the same with my vibrations. Hulk could smash the wrong thing. If someone reflects or redirects Tony’s repulsors, he couldn’t control where they go. Clint’s an amazing marksman, but if someone steps into his line of fire at the wrong moment, bad things could happen. We just have to stay focused, try to stay calm, and do the best we can to minimize those risks.”

“Alright, everybody,” Steve spoke up, interrupting all the small conversations around the plane. “We’re almost there, and we’re going in hard and fast. Stick to the plan, keep your comms open, and remember your partners. We work best as a team, so let’s show them that.”

Skye got up and pulled Wanda up next. She gave her a soft kiss, whispering, “For luck.” Then she moved to Steve’s side. The plan called for the two of them to go first, and Skye knew that Steve seldom bothered with a parachute. The plan was for him to grab her and use the shield to absorb the landing, though Skye fully intended to use her powers as much as she could to both guide and cushion their landing.

“Ready, Quake?” Steve asked her seriously.

Skye nodded and gave him the hint of a smile. “Ready, Cap. Let’s do this.”
Steve pulled out his shield, wrapped his free arm tightly around Skye and waited for her to grasp him in return before throwing himself out of the plane. Skye guided their landing and what velocity her powers couldn’t counter, his shield absorbed upon landing. He released her and they both rolled to their feet as Hulk landed beside them, Pietro safely in his grasp, and the roar of Iron Man’s repulsors sounded overhead.

They dove into action immediately, targeting the lookouts in the woods surrounding the base; there was no good place to land the jet, but Maria would hover near enough to the ground for the others to get out without injury.

Skye was the first to notice the flash of light off to one side, even as she used her powers to knock a sniper out of a tree. She turned to look as soon as she thought it was safe. “Shit. We’ve got a photographer nearby, guys!” she called into comms.

“What the hell?” Steve yelled back. “I see him; off to our left. Someone get that idiot out of here before he gets shot!”

“On it, Cap,” Tony called. She heard yelling in a foreign language as Tony jetted by and grabbed the photographer, airlifting him quickly well out of the danger zone. “He’s clear,” Tony reported a few minutes later.

“Guys, I’ve got an idea.” Skye said. “Stand clear of the trees. HYDRA’s about to get snowed in.”

“Want some help, Quake?” Wanda asked.

“Keep the snow off our guys,” Skye called as she put up her hands and concentrated on the trees along the path towards the door of the base.

The ground started shaking. Not enough that the others were knocked over, but enough so that the pounds of snow that was in the trees fell out of them and onto the HYDRA soldiers.

“Nice moves, Quake,” Steve called. “Think you can make our lives easy by clearing a path?”

“I can with a bit of help,” Skye said with a hip check towards Wanda.

It was a lot of snow, so they couldn’t clear a wide path, but they were able to thin out the Quake-controlled avalanche enough that they were able to make it for the door of the base. Steve took point and wrenched the doors open. Of the HYDRA agents left, at least some of them scattered like ants when they saw the Avengers.

Some of them were idiots who somehow decided it was a good idea to take Steve on. More of them tried to take Wanda and Skye, perhaps assuming they were easier targets or the lesser threat. A small part of Skye was a little entertained as she threw HYDRA agents against the stone wall.

Steve was calling audibles over coms and Tony was flying through rooms, taking out agents who were trying to go for backup. They had yet to find Von Strucker or Loki’s staff; their primary targets. The teams split, Steve and Skye going one way and Wanda and Natasha another; Skye knew her goal was the control room and its computers, with the hope that perhaps Von Strucker was there. Wanda and Natasha would head for the labs.

Steve burst into the control room, shield ready to protect his core. Skye darted in just behind him and flung out her hands, knocking everyone to the ground or into walls. Several people recovered quickly enough to shoot at them over the control consoles, but now that she knew where people were she could focus her strikes and, together, they took care of most of the guards.
Skye saw movement out of the corner of her eye and turned so that she was facing Steve. She saw Von Strucker, who had raised a gun and was aiming it at Steve’s head. She moved around Steve’s body and threw up her hands at the same time Von Strucker fired. The bullet was forced up and back while Von Strucker was thrown backwards.

He hit the wall and after getting his breath back, he gained a possessive look in his eye. She shivered for a second, reminded of Ward. “Well that’s... curious,” Von Strucker said silkly. He took a step off the wall. Skye used her power to pin Von Strucker to the wall. “What would we discover, I wonder, if we had more time,” Von Strucker pondered. “Discovery requires... experimentation.”

Steve, who was fighting the last of the agents in the control room, threw his shield at Von Strucker and knocked him out before the shield boomeranged back to him and allowed him to continue to fight.

“Not on people, you egotistical asshole,” Skye grumbled back as she returned her attention to helping Steve finish the fight.

After everyone was knocked out, killed or gone, Skye hacked the HYDRA mainframe and downloaded as much information as she could grab onto her external hard drive. After that she wiped their systems and left a few viruses to keep anyone who was left busy.

“Did you know you could do that?” Steve asked quietly as he secured Von Strucker for transport. The Sokovian police were going to be dealing with the low-level HYDRA agents that survived the attack, but Von Strucker was wanted by the International Criminal Tribunal for crimes he and HYDRA had committed over the last 70 years.

Skye looked up from the files she was preparing for the police; evidence of what had been done to the people of Sokovia here in this base. Particularly those they were able to free, but also those who had died so families could be notified and memorials held. “No, I didn’t,” she answered just as quietly. “It was... instinct, reflex. I saw it happening and had to stop it.”

The nodded, accepting her explanation with a small smile. “Thank you.”

Skye smiled back. “What are partners for?”

Skye wasn’t currently on what Tony fondly referred to as the ‘Political Hockey Team,’ basically any Avenger that was able to talk to the press or government officials without any major fallout. Tony had a reputation for nearly causing international incidents and, due to Skye’s situation, no one wanted her to be more exposed than she had to be. Skye didn’t mind that too much though, since she still felt awkward in front of influential people, the Avengers notwithstanding. Regardless, she was fine with Steve and Maria handling the government officials while Pietro translated.

She was glad when Tony stuck by her side while the others handled the politics; Von Strucker’s comment had left her feeling uncomfortable, more like a subject than a person. She knew he wasn’t the first and wouldn’t be the last, but it still bothered her.

“You alright, sweetheart?” Tony asked. When she looked up, his expression was concerned. For her. And at moments like this, that still surprised her a little.

“Yeah,” she said after a moment. “Just... the way Strucker looked at me. Like I were a thing and not a person. I mean, the mentality isn’t so foreign to me... but I’m not used to that look of... covetousness, I guess. Over my powers.”

Tony frowned, then sighed. “I’m afraid that’s just something we have to get used to. There are
always going to be people who see what makes us special, what makes us powerful, and want it for themselves. Whether it’s Hammer trying to steal my suits or Nazis who want you to be part of their super race, they’re going to be out there.”

“I know.” Skye sighed. “We’ll just have to do what we do best and watch each other’s backs, right?”

“You got it.” Tony beamed proudly at her. “You’re strong enough for this, Quake. Don’t ever let them make you think you’re not.”

She smiled back at him gratefully. “Thanks.” A few more keystrokes and she had sorted out what the Sokovian police would need from the files. She lifted her hand to trigger her comms. “Cap, I have the files ready. Just have someone let me know where they want them.”

“Affirmative,” Steve responded. “I’ll have Widow send you the details shortly.” Skye grinned; Steve was much better at technology than he used to be, but he still left the details of these things to his tech-inclined teammates.

“Standing by,” she told him, though she was certain he heard the amusement in her voice. She knew he didn’t mind, though, either.

The team was wiped by the time they got back to New York. No one had really slept on the jet, still amped up from the battle. But between the time difference, the fight, and the trip home, most of them headed to bed, crashing as soon as they got back to the Tower.

Running the next morning with Sam was a strange experience. People kept looking at them, staring. They were whispering to each other too, pointing at their phones as they stared. By the time their seven miles around Central Park was finished, Skye intended to check her Internet contacts on the darknet to see what had everyone so curious.

Her phone rang just as they were getting into the elevator. She grinned when she saw it was Trip. “Hey Trip, what’s going on with you?” she asked.

“Girl, you’re trending on Twitter,” Trip said.

“What?” Skye said, her jaw dropped. “How?”

“Were you in Sokovia yesterday?” Skye realized the photographer had gotten more than any of them realized and cursed. “There’s a vine of you blasting a guy out of a tree with your powers. You look awesome.”

“What does… what does everyone at the base think?” Skye asked carefully.

“I don’t think anyone’s ever seen May so proud. She’s full on smiling. It’s scary,” Trip said. She could hear the smile in his voice. “Coulson’s really proud too. Fitz and Simmons keep debating how your powers work…”

“And?” Skye supplied.

“Bobbi’s pissed off, but she’s been pissed off for days, and she won’t tell anyone why,” Trip said. “The news of the ‘new Avengers’ that’s trending on Twitter pissed her off even more. Gonzalez’s niece left SHIELD after she yelled at him for about an hour. So what’s the real story girl? How are the new powers treating you?”

“I can fly,” Skye said with a grin. “Tony’s jealous.”
“Girl, please tell me you’re joking,” Trip said, no hint of his usual smile in his voice.

“Kinda. So far I can only hover. I’m working on being able to move mid-air,” Skye explained.

“Girl, wait until the others hear… hold on, here’s May,” Trip said, passing the phone before Skye could interject.

“Skye,” May said, and Skye was startled by just how warm her mentor’s voice sounded over the phone. “You’re alright?”

“Yeah, just fine. No one was seriously hurt on our last mission,” Skye answered readily.

“Good,” May said, her tone conveying her pride and excitement for Skye even if her words didn’t reflect it. “You wanna tell me why Trip’s grinning like a loon?” she asked after a moment.

Skye laughed. “He asked how I’m doing with my powers. I told him that Tony’s jealous because I’m learning how to fly and I don’t need a suit.”

“You can… fly.” May repeated, deadpan.

“Getting there, yeah,” Skye said lightly. “I can hover, and the team has some ideas about how to control direction once I get the hang of it.”

May was quiet for a moment, and Skye checked her phone to make sure she hadn’t been disconnected. “That’s amazing, Skye,” May finally said, her voice low and impressed. “You’ve accomplished a lot. I’m proud of you.”

Skye beamed, and she knew her joy was evident in her voice. “Thanks, May. It took a lot of work, but it’s going well. I’ve got it under control now.”

“Good for you,” May approved. “It’s shaking people up, here.”

“We thought it might. Good or bad shaking?”

“Not sure yet,” May admitted. “Coulson’s pleased, though. I’ll be sure to tell him your… news.”

Skye laughed. “Trip might beat you to it. He’s super hyped.”

“He won’t,” May said, giving Trip a pointed glance. “He can tell the others, though, if he wants to.”

“Can you tell me if the RealSHIELD people want to come after me? Or us?” Skye asked, her tone sobering.

“Want to, yes,” May said, keeping it concise. “Able to, not currently. We’re working on it.”

Skye considered that for a moment. “Please tell me that I won’t have to fight you and Trip and the rest of the team. I don’t want to.”

“You won’t,” May said. “It won’t come to that.”

“I hope not.” Skye said. “Look, I know you knew most of it, but I’m sorry for… everything.”

“If you’re apologizing for what Agent Simmons said and the chip on her shoulder that she seems determined to carry around, you can save it,” May snapped, clearly annoyed.

“She’s still pissed I didn’t trust her, huh?” Skye said softly.
“Honestly? It varies from day to day. Lately she’s mostly been upset that Thor called her knowledge of biosciences ‘elementary’ and Dr. Banner stomped all over her theory that what affected you was contagious, but I think Agent Weaver’s been helping her, since not even your SOs knew about your soulmates. Mostly though, I think she wants to apologize, but doesn’t know how.”

Skye chewed her lip. “Well, if she has any vacation time due and wants to go through JFK to get to Heathrow, I’d be willing to meet her and hear her out,” Skye said softly.

“I will,” May said. “Do you want to tell the others anything else?”

“Tell them that Quake sends her regards,” Skye quipped. She smiled as she hung up the phone. During her conversation with Trip and May, they had arrived at the Avengers’ floor and Maria had started serving Skye a plate of breakfast. Eggs, bacon, and a protein smoothie had been deposited in front of Skye.

“Who was that?” Tony asked as he ate toast and bacon while tapping away on his tablet. He clearly hadn’t been to bed yet.

“Trip and May. Apparently that reporter got more than we bargained for on the mission yesterday,” Skye said, grabbing another tablet from nearby - she and Tony often left them out, though he was worse about it than she was - and pulling up the information to see it for herself. “It’s trending on Twitter.”

Pepper immediately launched into work-mode. “We need to get the word out. The news will have it by five.”

Hunter pulled the tablet out of Skye’s hands and pushed a fork into them instead. “Eat. Let me look,” he said, and Skye obediently started on her breakfast. Then, after a moment, he whistled. “They got a couple of really good video clips. And apparently the BBC got a hold of it several hours ago and translated the Sokovian.”

“Wonderful,” Pepper said with just a hint of sarcasm. “At least I know where to start. See you all tonight.” She picked up her coffee mug and took it with her, finishing a slice of toast as she pulled out her phone. She stepped out of the room to make a few phone calls.

“Sorry, Pepper!” Skye called out. Pepper waved over her shoulder, though whether to accept the apology or dismiss the need for it, Skye wasn’t sure.

Hunter chuckled. “It’ll be fine. Though hashtag ‘new Avengers’ is apparently the most popular tag of the day. They’ve got at least one of each of you,” he added looking from Skye to Wanda and Pietro.

“Well, now we know why the strange looks,” Sam said with a shrug. “They’re starting to recognize us.”

“I’ve got a twenty that someone from Fox News makes the first lewd statement tonight.”

“I’ll take that action,” Clint said. “My money’s on CNN.”

“You’re both wrong,” Natasha said from behind her tablet. “Buzzfeed’s already got a vote up to determine who the hottest Avenger. Currently it’s a fight between Steve and Skye.”

“Technically, not a lewd statement,” Skye responded.

“No, but the suggestion that you two are screwing is,” Natasha said.
Steve and Skye both grimaced, making everyone laugh. “At least your soulmates are laughing about it,” Steve said to Skye, and she nodded with a wry smile.

“I’m sure Sharon will too,” Skye answered with a shrug. “She has no reason to worry about you and me; she knows neither of us would ever consider hurting our soulmates that way.”

“People are gonna speculate,” Tony told them matter-of-factly. “You can’t stop it. You can’t change it. Denying it publicly is only going to make them wonder more, or speculate about your orientation or whatever else occurs to them at the time.”

Natasha nodded. “People have speculated and theorized about me with just about everyone else on the team. If people ask you about it, whether fans or media, just smile politely and tell them that your personal relationships are private and you expect them to respect that.”

“Besides, small or not, your wedding is gonna create a stir,” Sam pointed out. “There’s no way that’s gonna stay secret unless you can find somewhere to elope to that doesn’t care about Captain America - which I’m pretty sure just just about nowhere.”

“And the fact that Skye’s in the wedding party is sure to cause talk,” Maria said. “Alright, I’m putting my bet down. Twenty says no one guesses that the three female Avengers are all soulmates.”

“I’ll take that action,” Tony said.

“You can’t call in tips to news outlets Tony,” Skye said. “Or create an anon account to leave suggestions on social media.”

“Damn it,” Tony swore. “Spoil my fun, why don’t you.”

Skye rolled her eyes. “You won’t even notice the twenty bucks, Dad. So you don’t get to cheat to win.”

“But I wanted the bragging rights!” Tony pouted.

“You might still win,” Sam pointed out. “People speculate about everything on the internet. Particularly in fan groups.”

“And since most of the Avenger fans are males in their mid-40s, some of them will probably speculate the lesbian angle,” Clint said.

Skye rolled her eyes. “I’m so telling Laura you said that,” Skye said.

“Hey!” Clint objected. “I’m not that old!”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Skye said, sticking out her tongue.

“Come on,” Steve said with a smile. “Let’s Pepper do the PR work while we get to work ourselves. Just because the world found out about our newest recruits doesn’t mean we get a day off of training.”

Maria nodded agreement. “Everyone at the jet in 30 minutes. Skye, we’ll need copies of the data you recovered from the base in Sokovia.”

“We also need to contact the UN today about Von Strucker,” Hunter reminded everyone. “So if you ladies want a crack at him, today’s the day.” He met Natasha’s eyes, and she nodded.

“I uploaded the data to our server last night,” Skye said. “JARVIS, can you send the information to
anyone who needs it? And can you please make sure Thor’s awake and ready?” The others grinned knowingly. Thor had been given a hero’s welcome by Jane and Darcy. No one really questioned the threesome’s relationship but they didn’t ignore it either. No one questioned it if Darcy or Jane were found wandering out of Thor’s rooms.

With a soulmate quad running around, no one was going to question anyone else’s relationships - conventional or otherwise. It really just didn’t matter to anyone, so they didn’t bother asking. If the trio wanted to share, they would. Most of the Avengers were unsure there was such a thing as marriage on Asgard anyway. None of them were very well-versed in Norse mythology, and Skye only knew what Sif and Thor had told her about Asgardians’ views on soulmates.

“Indeed, Miss Stark,” JARVIS said.

Skye groaned. “Stop programming JARVIS to call me that, Dad!” she whined.

“If it helps, I don’t think the news outlets will be calling you that any time soon,” Tony said.

“Which reminds me, we need to schedule a meeting with the Board soon,” Pepper noted, returning briefly for more coffee. “If she’s going to inherit the company they’re going to need to know ahead of time.”

“We’ve talked about this,” Skye protested. “I don’t want the company. Keep it for your actual kids, whenever you get around to having them together.”

Tony shook his head. “At least part of it is going to you, Skye. I know you don’t need it, but I told you when I adopted you that I wanted to help make sure you’re taken care of. I have the means, and I want to.”

“And even if you’re only inheriting a portion of SI, the Board needs to know,” Pepper said gently. “Whether or not you ever work for the company, eventually you’ll have a seat - or a proxy - on the Board itself just by owning a percentage of the company.”

Skye was a step closer to accepting Tony’s talk about her inheritance, but still, it was tough. She had grown up on next to nothing, and spent the first ten years of her adult life on even less. Some part of her wished that Tony wasn’t rich. That Tony was the one she fully accepted as her father. That kind of money… she just couldn’t even process it.

Skye got into the Quinjet jumpseat and sighed. “Hi ho, hi ho, huh?” Steve asked across from her.

Skye laughed. “I love my job,” she said.

“I never said you didn’t,” Steve said with a grin.

“I’m proud of you for the reference, though,” Skye said.

“Snow White was released in 1937. I saw before I went overseas,” Steve said, clearly amused. “Not everything was created after 1945.”

“Right, sorry,” Skye said, giggling. “I knew it was old, but I wasn’t sure how old. I’d have had to look it up.”

“And while it’s wonderful that you can do that in ten seconds, these days, that doesn’t mean there weren’t some things to appreciate before technology,” Steve said, his tone teasing.

“Hey, I’m not the one who looked like he’d swallowed a lemon when he realized that almost
everyone can access the sum total of human knowledge from a device that fits in their palm… or that most people use it to post amusing pictures of their pets,” Skye teased back. Steve laughed good-naturedly.

“Keep it up and the press is gonna have a field day with it when you get out into the public,” Clint said, getting into the flight seat. “Skye, come up here and log some hours. You need the practice time to get that license.”

“Aye aye, captain,” Skye said smiling, getting out of the jump seat and into the seat next to Clint. After everyone got on board, she took off with only a slightly rough take-off.

The day was pretty standard. The UN came and picked Von Strucker up after Maria, Natasha, and finally Wanda took what the Avengers needed from him. Steve had Skye take a lesson in hovering higher up in the air, letting herself fall, then hovering again. It was terrifying, but it would be a good tool to have under her belt.

They all clocked out earlier than usual, wanting to be in the Tower by the 5 o’clock news. They arrived at about ten ‘til, and by mutual consensus all piled into the media room. Tony had JARVIS recording multiple newscasts, but they intended to watch as many as they could. Surely not all the nightly news reports would be given with the Avengers in the same time slot. Fortunately, with JARVIS monitoring the stations, they were able to cycle through at least the ones that didn’t overlap.

“Perhaps our most fantastic story of the day is the sudden and previously unannounced increase in the size of the superhero team known as the Avengers,” the first report they heard began. “The size of the team has grown by half since they first appeared fighting as a unit in New York City during the alien invasion.” The report went on to show pictures and video of Skye, Wanda, Pietro and Sam - though Falcon had worked with Captain America in Washington D.C., he hadn’t been attributed as being a member of the Avengers.

Skye could tell when the newscast moved on from the reports from Sokovia to the information Pepper’s people most likely provided; rather than eyewitness accounts, the details were more about their skills than their powers and spoke of their dedication to protecting the various peoples of the world from threats to their lives and livelihoods. The sort of thing that made for good PR; information that made people feel safe rather than threatened.

All in all, it wasn’t a bad report. A lot of speculation on their real identities, of course, but Skye had already taken care of sanitizing Wanda and Pietro’s electronic history. There wasn’t anything particularly dangerous for anyone to find. School records existed, of course, but a person would have to actually go to Sokovia to research paper files. The electronic background was clean.

With a relieved sigh, Skye switched channels and they sat back to wait for the next one to run a story about them. With luck, they would all be favorable.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

The new Avengers hit the media.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I have sad news for you. This is the last of the manips I've made, and I won't have time to do more before Thanksgiving.

I will still try to include pictures, but they're more likely to be screencaps.

Chapter 33

Of course, the real commentary didn’t come out until the team started going over the blog posts and reviews.

“Ooo. This one’s interesting,” Skye said. “Apparently, I’m a royal alien from another planet, like Thor.”

“Princess Skye,” Maria said with a smile. “I kinda like the ring of that.”
“Lady Skye would make a very fitting royal,” Thor boomed. “She is both fair and wise.”

“This one also believes for me to be an alien as well,” Wanda said.

Clint glanced over her shoulder and his face went stormy. “Assholes,” he said.

“I do not understand,” Wanda said. “It was good when they called Skye an alien…”

“It’s not that kind of alien,” Clint said darkly. “Context is all wrong.”

“English is a strange language,” Wanda said with a sigh. “The same word does not always mean the same thing.”

“That’s unfortunately very true,” Skye agreed. “Here’s a fun one, though.” She flicked a blog post from her screen over to Wanda’s. It theorized that since Skye and Wanda appeared to have actual “magic” powers, rather than just superhuman strength or an odd transformation, that perhaps magic really did run through female lines.

Wanda laughed and even Clint chuckled. “Interesting ideas people come up with,” Clint commented before going back to his own perusing.

“Something wiccan this way comes,” Natasha said. “You did name yourself The Scarlet Witch,” she said.

“This one claims that Quake is some kind of… weather shaman,” Pepper said in confusion. “I’m starting to think this was a bad idea.”

“Oh! I hit pay dirt!” Tony said. “This guy, he put together that Skye was spotted around the tower a couple of times. According to him, Quake and Capsicle have been married for four years and have three kids.”

Everyone burst out laughing. “That’s all speculation,” Skye said. “Anyone can see that Steve and Sharon are totally in love.”

“He’s got a point, though,” Pepper said. Skye missed the look that Maria threw at Pepper, but Wanda caught it and wondered just what it was about. “Even if he has the people involved wrong, there are several relationships among us.”

“At least they’re not speculating too much about soulmates,” Skye said absently, absorbed enough in her searches to not be paying much attention to undercurrents going around the room. “Means we’re a bit safer, if we’re keeping the truth quiet. Of course, we keep getting told that there hasn’t been a recorded Quad in ages, so it’s unlikely people will actually come up with that one.”

“Does it matter if they know?” Wanda asked softly. Skye blinked and looked up at her. Then she looked over at Maria and Natasha.

“Honestly? I’m not sure anymore,” Skye admitted softly. “We kept it secret for so long because everyone was worrying about me getting hurt or being used to get at Nat and Maria. But if we’re all Avengers… I’m not sure it matters anymore…”

“We can discuss it,” Maria said lightly. “There may be benefits either way, but I’m not sure we want that kind of scrutiny on our personal lives either.”

Wanda sighed. “We cannot just be people, can we? We must always be aware that we are Avengers.”
“To some extent, yes,” Steve said, his tone sympathetic. “That is one of the reasons we take our security so seriously. So that we always have a home, a place where we can be ourselves and not our public images.”

“And if there’s one thing I’ve learned in my life, it’s that having a place to stay out of the public eye is sometimes invaluable,” Tony said softly. “I know I spent a lot of time not caring about my image or what people thought of me, but even then all most people saw was the drunk playboy.”

“And there’s plenty more to you than that,” Pepper agreed softly, her smile full of love. “Even if you spent years hiding it from everyone, even sometimes yourself.”

“Being part of a team, and eventually a family, made me want to be a better person,” Tony admitted ruefully. “Especially for you,” he added, ruffling Skye’s hair.

Skye set down her tablet and got up to give Tony a hug. “You’re a wonderful person, Dad, and I’m happy having you just the way you are.”

“I know, sweetheart,” Tony said in a low tone. “But you are such a wonderful, open, giving person that… well…”

Skye blushed but didn’t let go of Tony. She hugged him tight and, surprisingly, he just held her until she was ready to pull away. He kissed her forehead gently as he released her, and she smiled.

Wanda smiled wistfully as she looked on, her eyes far away for a moment.

“What is it?” Natasha asked, stepping up close to Wanda.

“Just… seeing this for myself,” she said lightly, her focus returning to the present. “For many years, we hated Stark, Pietro and I,” she explained. “His weapons took our parents, could have killed us except that for some reason the missile did not explode. We were just children, staring wide-eyed at a missile in our kitchen, bearing Stark’s name, and waiting to die.” Wanda paused and took a deep breath. “But when I gained my powers, I began seeing visions of you, Natasha, and Maria and especially many of Skye… I also saw him, and some of the others, with you. With her. Taking care of her, being there for her, giving her the support she needed. And I found that what I hated was not a real person… just an idea of one.”

“Still… it couldn’t have been easy, giving up that kind of anger,” Natasha said sympathetically.

“True, but it was necessary,” Wanda agreed. “How could I love her if I held onto hate for one she loves?”

“It was never an all-or-nothing deal,” Skye protested. “You don’t have to love my friends and family just because you love me.”

“But it would have been hard for you, to see animosity between myself and the one you call father,” Wanda said gently, approaching Skye and taking her hand. “And you, who have known so much pain, would have been hurt by it. By me. I could not allow that.”

Skye smiled and pulled Wanda into her arms, kissing her softly. “Thank you,” she whispered, not knowing what else to say.

“You are welcome, my Skye,” Wanda whispered back.

The next few days passed as they always had. The cosplayers returned to stand for hours at the base of Stark Tower and Skye was almost embarrassed to see a few people had dressed up as Quake.
Skye managed to slip out the back door one evening without telling the others while disguised in a blonde wig. She didn’t like doing this, but she knew they’d want to come along if she told them she was headed to Hell’s Kitchen and she couldn’t explain everything with all the other Avengers breathing down her neck. She slipped into the building that she was looking for and knocked on the door before entering.

She was a little shocked to see a woman sitting at a desk behind a pile of paperwork.

“Someone will be right with you,” the woman said automatically. Skye removed the wig and placed it into her bag. The woman glanced up with a smile, but then the smile dropped. “Holy fuck,” she said.

“Hey Karen, can you get me that file we have on the bombing of Hell’s Kitchen?” Foggy called.

Karen didn’t respond, just staring at Skye. Foggy came out a moment later. “Karen?” He stopped dead, then broke into a huge grin when he spotted Skye. “Matty always did have a knack for ending up with a hot woman,” he said.

“You still using the same tired line?” she asked.

“Well, at least on you,” Foggy said. “You here for any particular reason?”

“I’ve come by to tell you two the truth,” Skye deadpanned. “I’m leaving him. I’m in love with you, Foggy Nelson.”

Foggy laughed, then went over and hugged her tightly. “No fire escape this time, kitty cat?” he asked curiously.

Skye laughed. “I think we’re all a little old for that,” she said.

“Seems like that was just yesterday. Now we’re all grown up and you’re an Avenger,” Foggy said, breaking the hug and ruffling Skye’s hair. “Did you always have these powers?”

“I got them several months ago,” Skye said softly. “Not my best moment, but they’re under control now. It’s kind of a long story.”

“I have to say, you kinda scared us the way you just dropped off the face of the Earth after… aliens rained down from the sky. I was sure you were dead for a long time.”

“You… know her?” Karen asked, shocked and staring at them.

“I met her eight years ago,” Foggy said. “She’s a very old friend of Matt’s. She used to turn up on the fire escape of our dorm half-starved and in need of some serious sleep. Skye, this is Karen Page.”

“Hey,” Skye said cheerfully.

“Hi…” Karen said distantly.

Skye’s phone beeped to inform her of an incoming text from Nat and she shot back her response. “Matt went home already or he went wherever he’s been going these days, but we were about to go for a drink. Do you want to come?” Foggy offered.

“I don’t know if an Avenger being seen in Josie’s is a good idea, Foggy,” Skye pointed out. “Either someone could get a bad idea and try to take a swing at me or at best someone posts it on the internet.”
“We’ll find a corner and you can borrow one of Matt’s hoodies that he leaves in his office and thinks I don’t know about,” Foggy said. “I want to hear this very long story.”

“Okay, but not without Matt,” Skye said.

“Foggy, do you have that –” Matt said on cue, entering the office. He always was turning up at the best possible moment.

“Matt!” Skye greeted.

“Hello, Mary,” Matt said. Skye hit him, and he didn’t even try to evade.

An hour later, Skye found herself at a table in the corner of Josie’s, without her wig, like it was old times. So far the only comment that she’d heard was that her “cosplay outfit” was either spot on or way off base depending on who you asked in the bar. One patron even said she was too short to be Quake.

“Okay, so tell us your very long story,” Foggy said.

“First tell us why Foggy and Matt call you different names,” Karen suggested.

Skye’s face went ruby-red. “I, uhm, was abandoned at the orphanage Matt and I grew up at. The nuns named me… well, let’s just say it was awful and leave it at that. Matt still calls me by my first name, Mary, and he’s the only one who’s allowed to. To everyone else, I’m Skye and I have been since I was twelve.”

“I didn’t hear from you,” Matt said. “I tried calling during the invasion.”

“I was in my van, parked off of 51st. Nearly got killed by one of those space whale things,” Skye said.

“Then?” Foggy said. “You’ve only sent us vague emails since then. I mean, you skipping town wasn’t ever exactly unusual and I’m not saying that the Battle of New York isn’t a reason to leave, but you never really did tell us what you were doing.”

Skye sipped her beer. “My soulmates found me,” she said quietly. “And because of them I joined SHIELD.”

Foggy and Matt both looked at her like she’d lost it. “You joined SHIELD?” Foggy finally asked. “You.”

Skye nodded. “And Matt gets to say ‘I told you so’,” she said hesitantly. “Part of the SHIELD entrance exam includes an IQ test.”

“What’d you score?” Matt asked in his tone of demanding curiosity.

“172,” Skye said softly.

“I told you so,” Matt said, a brief smile quirking his lips.

Her phone rang that instant and she picked it up, seeing it was Nat. “Where are you?” Nat demanded. “JARVIS says you left the tower.”

“I had to go see some old friends of mine,” Skye said. “I owed them an explanation.”

“In Hell’s Kitchen?” Nat assumed. They had talked for years about Skye’s childhood and how she
had a few friends left in Hell’s Kitchen. Skye had always meant to meet up with them, but in the last few years, there just hadn’t been time.

“It’s not as dangerous as it’s reputation says it is,” Skye said, rolling her eyes. She saw a look on Matt’s face that made her curious. It was the same look that Steve got when he was overhearing things that most people couldn’t unintentionally.

“I’m not sure you should be walking back alone is all I’m saying,” Nat said.

Matt grabbed her phone from her before Skye could say anything. “I can take her home,” Matt said. Skye cursed the fact that she couldn’t hear Nat’s response. “Matt Murdock, ma’am. I’m an old friend of Skye’s… yes ma’am. Will do.” He hung up the phone and passed it back to Skye.

Foggy sighed. “Well, I suppose I should head home,” he said tiredly. “Skye, it was really good to see you.”

“See you tomorrow, Foggy,” Matt said.

They left the bar and parted ways, Matt and Skye headed for the tower. “You know, having told her your name means they’ll most likely have run a background check by the time we get back…”

“Yeah?” Matt said. “Is she one of your soulmates?”

Skye nodded. “A lot’s changed over the last three years, Matt. A lot that I couldn’t tell you over email. I… I found my biological father. And I found my real father too. Matt, I got adopted.”

“Really. At your age,” Matt replied thoughtfully. “Well, if you found the family you wanted… I’m happy for you, Mary.”

Skye smiled. “I’m happy. I’m so happy. I have my soulmates, a family, good friends… a home…”

Matt slung an arm around her shoulders as they walked, content to share in her happiness, “So I’ve been reading about the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen,” Skye continued. Matt stiffened ever so slightly. “After the bombings of all those properties and those cops were shot.”

“Hell’s Kitchen is more dangerous than ever,” Matt said smoothly. “That’s part of the reason I wanted to walk you home.”

“I don’t know,” Skye said. Matt knew something about what was going on in her old neighborhood, she just didn’t know what. “Something tells me there’s more to the story than the papers are letting on.”

“Perhaps,” Matt said. “Perhaps he’s just a cold-blooded killer.”

Skye shook her head. “He’s shown restraint up until now. And he’s only gone after people who deserve it.”

Matt was silent for half a block before he spoke. “What if I told you that it’s possible those cops were bought off and weren’t upholding the law?” he asked.

“Cops on the take in Hell’s Kitchen,” Skye considered. “It’s hardly news. Cops were on the take back when we were growing up. It stands to reason that at least some corruption must still exist. Still, I wonder if he ever considered going to the Avengers for help if something was really wrong.”

“The Avengers can’t deal with every wrong doing in every neighborhood in every city. They have
to save the world,” Matt said. “Maybe… maybe he just wants to save his corner of the world.”

Skye grabbed Matt and shoved him into an alley. “What the hell Matthew Michael Murdock?” she hissed. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Do you remember what I told you about the accident that left me blinded?” Matt asked.

“Yeah,” Skye said slowly, unsure of where this was headed.

“It left some… effects,” he admitted.

“What kind of effects?” Skye said, now suspicious.

“Punch me,” Matt said.

Without hesitating, far too used to such challenges at this point, Skye punched Matt. Matt ducked to the side and countered and all of a sudden Skye was in the middle of some kind of fight with one of her oldest friends. She stopped after a few minutes, staring at him. “You’re him. You’re the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen,” she whispered.

“I never asked for that part of all this. I didn’t want a name or the publicity,” Matt said quietly so no one would overhear. “I just want to keep my neighborhood safe.”

Skye chewed her lip. “I think my family should hear what you have on what’s been going on,” she said. “I trust you enough to hear you out.”

Matt studied her, putting two and two together quickly. “Your soulmates are also Avengers. Your whole team… is more than just a team, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” she admitted quietly. “Come on. Let’s get there, where it’s safer, and I can tell you more after you tell us what you’ve been doing.” With a sigh, Matt fell into step beside her again. They didn’t have much further to go.

Matt looked uncomfortable at Stark Tower as they rode the private elevator up to the common floor. Skye knew how that felt; it hadn’t been so long ago that she felt the same. She slid her hand into his, offering him her sympathy. She was a little surprised when his hand tightened around hers.

Skye stepped out first, giving Matt a chance to take in the several voices that spoke up upon their entry.

“Skye!” several people said at once. Steve waved in greeting, though his expression held concern for her. Wanda sent her a small, confident smile.

“Skye! Thank goodness,” Natasha said as she approached. Skye smiled and hugged her, though she didn’t release Matt’s hand. Instead, when she pulled away she figured she’d better get to introductions.

“I know you spoke on the phone, but Nat, this is Matt. Matt, Natasha Romanov.”

“You let a blind guy take you home,” Tony said, blanching when he saw Matt’s face. “The point of someone walking you back was for extra protection.”

“Matt can handle himself, Tony,” Skye said confidently, adding the name for Matt’s benefit.

“I’m just saying,” Tony said.
“I understand your concern,” Matt said to Tony. “But I assure you that Skye was in no danger.”

“Maybe we should all sit down,” Skye said slowly. “Matt shared something with me that I think affects all of us.”

They all sat, looking concerned. Matt stood in front of them, silently. “Look, I’m not blaming you for this, but the Battle of New York opened a lot of doors for a lot of bad people. Some of them have been trying to take over Hell’s Kitchen, both legally and extralegally. The bombings that happened a couple of days ago in Hell’s Kitchen weren’t an accident, nor was the shooting of the two officers. It’s all become a game of chess, and the chess master is a man named Wilson Fisk.”

“What do you need us to do?” Steve said. He was always a little more passionate about issues that hit close to home.

Matt shook his head. “Nothing. For now, I’m working on taking care of the issue. Regardless of what the court of public opinion says, I plan on making sure that Fisk never gets his hands on my neighborhood.”

“Guys,” Skye said with a smile. “Meet the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen.”

Everyone was silent for a long time. “That… explains a lot,” Natasha said. “My contacts have said that the Devil seems like he has eyes in the back of his head. It makes sense that he’s just using his other senses to fight.”

“You’re… not surprised?” Matt said, eyebrows raised.

“She’s been my partner for long enough to get the whole ‘use of other senses’ shtick,” Clint said. Skye absently murmured his name for Matt, so he would know who the voice belonged to. “I mean, the press doesn’t know it, but I’m something like eighty percent deaf. It’s part of the reason why I became so good at aiming.”

“Getting the job done is ninety percent effort,” Steve said. Matt nodded when Skye supplied his name. “I wouldn’t have made it through basic without it. Clearly keeping your home safe from this ‘Fisk’ character is something you feel needs to be done.”

“I mean, I was surprised that it was you,” Skye said. “But I can tell you, ‘blind ninja taking down corrupt businessman’ is not the weirdest thing I’ve heard this week.”

Matt managed to chuckle at that, while others smiled. “It does, however, beg the question - just how good are you at fighting?” Natasha asked, semi-rhetorically.

“Good enough for what I do,” Matt replied, knowing he wasn’t actually providing her with a satisfactory answer. Skye chuckled softly, though she doubted many were close enough to hear it.

“Is it rude for me to ask how you do it?” Tony spoke up. “Fuck it, I don’t care if it is. How do you do it? Super hearing? Some sort of ESP?”

“Tony!” several voices scolded. But the ensuing silence held an air of expectancy, and Skye could see curiosity on everyone’s faces.

With a sigh, Matt shrugged. “Enhanced hearing is part of it. I can, quite literally, hear the beat of a person’s pulse or the sound a single raindrop makes. Beyond that, I haven’t experimented much. What I feel is what I feel, and I don’t remember before clearly enough to really have a good grasp on all the differences.”
“I wonder…” Skye murmured thoughtfully.

Curious, Matt turned to her. “What is it?”

“Idle curiosity,” she said, shrugging dismissively. “Wondering if my powers would affect your senses.”

Matt raised an eyebrow. “You never did get around to telling me what it is that you actually do, now,” he prompted her.

“Oh, right,” Skye answered, blushing a bit. “I manipulate vibration. I haven’t quite gotten the hang of making sounds out of thin air, but I am getting pretty good at stringed instruments and chimes.”

Matt considered her words thoughtfully. “It’s possible. I know that I get a better image in my mind during a rainstorm, because hearing where the drops land can build a picture for me. It’s possible your vibrations could do the same thing.”

“Or possibly shield against you,” she pointed out. “You might, say, sense a dome or a blur of vibration, but not know what’s inside.”

“That would be… disconcerting.” But she was probably right, it could work. Loud sounds in close proximity tended to distort his “picture” of what was happening around him.

“Is it anything like… echolocation?” Bruce asked thoughtfully. “What I mean is, can you see objects’ locations without seeing details?”

“I see a world on fire,” Matt said. “Blobs of burning masses… echolocation kind of makes sense, yes.”

“I brought Matt here because when he told me that he was the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen,” Skye said, “and why he had taken to the streets… it made me think that we could use him as an ally. Matt brought up an important point - we can’t be everywhere and we can’t protect everyday citizens from average crime, like what Fisk is doing. There are a million Fisks out there. We need allies to change the world.”

Over the next week, Skye could feel that Maria and Nat were excited about something. She didn’t understand why, but she figured that they wanted to do something nice for Valentine’s Day and let it go. The Wednesday night before Valentine’s Day, Maria threw Skye a dufflebag and Nat threw Wanda one. “We’re not going to training tomorrow. We’ve got other plans,” Maria said.

“So do we,” Sharon said. “We’re going to Rome.”

“Paris,” Pepper volunteered. “Tony’s not very original, but he’s consistent.”

“Asgard,” Jane volunteered.

“We do not have a Valentine’s Day on Asgard,” Thor said. “We have Valisblot instead, which honors the Asgardian warrior Vali. Much mead is drunk on the night of Valisblot.”

“Where are we going?” Skye asked.

“Pack for cold weather,” Maria said. “That’s the only hint we’re giving you.”

“Oh come on, that’s no fair!” Skye objected, but she was grinning. “Does the hotel at least have a swimming pool?”
“There’s a lake,” Maria noted with a shrug. “But it is February.”

Wanda, who had been curled up against Skye, kissed her on her cheek. “Let us go pack,” Wanda suggested. “I believe it is going to be an early morning for us.”

It was an early morning. Tony had loaned them one of his private jets and they had taken off well before the sun was up. After flying for a few hours, they landed in a snow-covered airport.

“Oh, we are where?” Skye asked curiously.

“Inverness,” Maria said, her smile conspiratorial. “We’re going to the Isle of Skye and staying a couple of nights at Kinloch Lodge.”

Wanda’s eyes went large and Skye grinned. “I’ve always wanted to visit Scotland. Fitz is gonna be so excited to hear that I got to see it, even if he’s not here to show me around.”

“You’ll have other chances to sight-see with friends, I’m sure,” Natasha agreed, smiling. “I’m sure Fitz will understand that this weekend is just for us.”

“Oh, he will,” Skye said with a softer smile. “Once he got over being surprised by our quad, he’s been nothing but supportive. Fitz has a genuinely good heart, and he just wants us to be happy.”

“I am sorry I did not get to know him better,” Wanda said gently. “Perhaps you can invite him to visit, once our… problems… with SHIELD settle.”

“Maybe. But for now… let’s just have a good weekend, yeah?” Skye suggested.

“You got it,” Maria replied.

They unloaded from the jet and transferred to a car. They still had a couple of hours before they reached their destination, but they didn’t mind the trip. It was much shorter than driving to the Bartons’ farm, after all. And the scenery was beautiful, highland moors with a dusting of snow and partially frozen lochs.

As they drove over the bridge connecting the mainland to the island, Skye began humming to herself; Natasha glanced at her, but she didn’t seem to really be aware of what she was doing. She was so caught up in taking in the scenery around them.

“That’s pretty,” Wanda said after a moment. “What song is it?”

“Huh?” Skye’s humming stopped as she blinked. “Oh. Oops.” She began to blush. “It’s the ‘Skye Boat Song’... I learned it as a kid. It’s about Prince Charlie’s escape to Skye after losing the Battle of Culloden.”

“Do you know the words?” Maria asked curiously. “I’d like to hear it.”

Still blushing, Skye sang the song for them. “Speed bonnie boat like a bird on the wing. Onward the sailors cry. Carry the lad that’s born to be king over the sea to Skye …” It had several verses, and she sang the ones she knew in a soft, sweet tone. Maria and Natasha exchanged a glance, wondering how they’d gone so long without realizing that Skye could sing quite well when she wanted to. Perhaps just that it had never come up.

The car took them to a gorgeous hotel in front of a huge lake. The whole place was frosted in snow. “Wow,” Wanda said. Wanda hadn’t really experienced much snow before. The quad had mainly stayed near New York City, where snow didn’t really stick because there was too much activity -
both above and below ground. The base upstate got a lot, but they mainly stayed inside.

“Pretty, right?” Maria asked.

“It is like a... Christmas card,” Wanda said in awe.

“Welcome to the Kinloch Lodge,” a bell boy said professionally. They were ushered up to their rooms after check in. It was a large suite, room for all them.

“This is nice,” Skye said slowly, unsure where all of this was going.

“We deserve something nice,” Natasha replied soothingly, draping herself against Skye’s back and winding her arms around Skye’s waist. “It’s been HYDRA and SHIELD, danger and pain for too long. Even when we’re home and alone together, it’s always in the background. So this… this is our chance to ignore it all for four wonderful days.”

“Our team has strict instructions not to call us unless the end of the world is pending,” Maria added, smiling as she tossed her bag on one of the chairs and reeled Wanda into a hug of her own. “No interruptions. No computer programs. No Stark with his inappropriate comments.”

Skye laughed softly. “I get it, I get it. So what are we going to do with our time off?”

“Well, we had some sight-seeing in mind,” Maria replied. “But it’s all flexible. We’ll be here a couple of days, thought we’d spend a day in Edinburgh and one in London before we go home.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Wanda said, speaking up for the first time since they arrived in their room. “It will be nice to just be ourselves, with no other concerns - even family - for a few days.”

“There is a jeep tour of the Isle of Skye,” Maria said, “or if we dress warm we could rent a boat and go out on the water.”

“I do not believe I have ever been on a boat,” Wanda contemplated aloud. “What is it like?”

“This time of year? Cold,” Skye said. “I’ll do it if everyone else wants to.”

In the end, it was decided that they go on the jeep tour. Skye was glued to her phone, taking pictures and video to upload to the Avenger’s server to share with them. Pepper often took some of the pictures Skye and the others shared and posted them to the Avengers social media pages. Skye pouted a little when Maria took her phone away and insisted that she just enjoy the tour for a while, but she felt a little better when she realized that Nat and Wanda were still snapping photos occasionally, so she didn’t argue.

She cuddled next to Maria to warm herself against the cold wind that blew through the open jeep, chatting with Maria, Nat, and Wanda. It was nice to ‘unplug’ from Avenger-life. The jeep’s driver clearly recognized them, but after a while he adjusted, taking them on the back roads and giving them an extra hour free to see uncommon parts of the Isle of Skye.

After the jeep tour, they returned to the hotel and had dinner together in their room. They were polishing off the last of of their dinner as Maria and Nat tossed Skye and Wanda their swimsuits. Shortly thereafter, they were all out on the deck, where a hot tub sat.

They lay back, Skye’s back against Natasha’s chest and Wanda’s against Maria, enjoying the cool air on their cheeks as the hot water kept them comfortably warm. They looked up at the stars, Maria pointing out some of the constellations, Skye recalling the myths and legends that gave the stars their names, and Wanda describing how some of the stories had changed or were different in her
childhood.

They had all fallen quiet, just happy to be together when Natasha caught Maria’s eye. Maria nodded slowly, and both the older women wrapped their arms around the younger pair, leaning together until they were all touching. Hands were found and fingers entwined linking them all, and Natasha was the first one to speak.

“Marry us?” she asked softly. Skye went very still in her arms and Wanda blinked in surprise.

“We know it’s probably too soon,” Maria added softly, pressing a soft kiss to Wanda’s hair. “We haven’t all been together that long. Just… now that we’re all together… we didn’t want to wait. Life’s too short.”

“We don’t have to have the wedding soon,” Natasha said, her tone gentle. “We can wait until you’re both ready for it. But…”

“But we would have done this years ago, if we’d all been together,” Skye said in a low voice, with tears glistening in her eyes and a smile on her lips. “It wouldn’t have felt right without all four of us here. But…”

“We all waited for so long,” Wanda agreed. “Yes, my soulmates. I agree, we should all be married. I’m… not sure I’m ready to jump into a ceremony just yet…”

“Then we’ll wait,” Maria agreed readily. “It will be enough that we are committed. We can have as long an engagement as need be for us all to be equally comfortable.”

Wanda nodded and snuggled happily against Maria. “Then I accept.”

“And you?” Nat nudged Skye, who had been quiet beyond the one comment.

“Of course I will,” Skye replied, smiling. “I just… sometimes when I was young, I didn’t ever believe this would happen for me. You know?”

“I know,” Natasha agreed. “Believe me, I know. But we’re here, and we’re together. And we’re happy, right?” Skye nodded. “Then believe it. We’re getting married, love.”

Skye laughed merrily. “We are. We’re getting married!” The other three laughed with her.

“We didn’t pick out rings,” Maria began when they calmed down.

“To be honest, rings might get in the way of combat,” Skye noted. “Three of us have to be ready at a moment’s notice to fight. We could get in trouble if we’re all taking off our rings in the middle of a fight.”

“That was my thought, too,” Natasha said.

“Perhaps… we could get earrings?” Wanda suggested. “A small cartilage piercing, perhaps? That should not be a danger to us in combat, I would think…”

Maria smiled. “I like it. We can make them personal, something for each of us that represents the others.”

“And it has the benefit that the press won’t pick up on it,” Skye said. “You know someone caught Steve coming out of the caterer’s yesterday.”

“They’ll figure it out eventually,” Maria said with a laugh. “Can you believe that Steve is getting
married in October?”


Wanda laughed. “I am sure Sharon will have her hands full.”

“She will, but she’s up to the challenge,” Maria agreed with a smirk.

“She handles him beautifully,” Natasha snickered. “It’s fun to watch sometimes. Give it time and she’ll manage Steve just as easily as Laura manages Clint, I think.”

“Speaking of Clint, did you tell him ahead of time that you were planning on proposing this weekend?” Skye asked curiously. When Maria glanced at her, she shrugged. “He’s the one you guys are closest to. I love him, too, but I think at this point I’m a little closer to Steve and Trip. Clint is kinda like my big brother; always there when I need him and sometimes a little too close when I want space.”

Natasha chuckled. “Sounds about right. And no, we didn’t tell anyone. We figured you two should be the first to know what was on our minds.”

“And I honestly couldn’t see us going to Tony to ask his blessing to marry you,” Maria added wryly. “I know he’s your dad and all, but…”

Skye shook her head. “No, I get it. It’ll be fun to drop on him, though. I call dibs!”

“Aww.” Natasha pouted at her. “He’s been a pain in my tail a lot longer than yours…”

“You can be there. I just want to be the one to tell him,” Skye said with a shrug. “We should all get to tell our respective families. You two get to tell Clint and Laura. Wanda gets to tell Pietro.”

“Are you going to tell your friends at SHIELD?” Wanda asked cautiously.

“Eventually,” Skye said with a sigh. “We’ll see how things go between now and when we start planning. I’d really like Trip there, though. And Fitz, and May, and Coulson. But… I don’t have to tell them right away.” Skye was tempted to admit she wanted to tell Jemma also. It was hard to hold a grudge with someone who was your friend for things said over a single hour. Not for the first time Skye wondered how the bioscientist was doing.

“Hey,” Wanda said, drawing Skye’s attention away from her thoughts. “No sad thoughts this weekend. We’re supposed to be enjoying our time away.”

“She’s right,” Maria agreed. “It’s just us, we should keep it that way.”

“We should probably also head to bed soon,” Natasha said after a moment. “I know it doesn’t feel late to us, but with the time difference it’s much later here than we realize.”

Skye sighed. “Someone needs to invent an anti-jetlag medication. You know, like air sickness pills.”

“They did, but it doesn’t work on you, remember?” Maria chuckled. “We’ll just have to make do until there are better options,” she said. “Nat’s right, though. We should dry off and get ready for bed.”

Chapter End Notes
So exciting! What's next?
The version of "Skye Boat Song" we're referencing comes from here: http://www.rampantscotland.com/songs/blsongs_skye.html
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

The four ladies spread the good news.

Chapter Notes

As always, you guys are awesome and amazing! The feedback we get is always amazing, and we love to hear from you. So many thanks, from the both of us.
Chapter 34

They had a leisurely few days of vacation; Skye took full advantage of the respite to sleep in, happily snuggled with whichever of her soulmates chose to linger in bed with her. They explored local restaurants for late breakfasts, grabbed lunches while sight-seeing and took turns picking out places to have dinner.

Though they tried to be as discreet as possible, they were recognized while in London. They were approached by a few people here and there for pictures or autographs, particularly children, which they happily gave. Skye caught sight of a few people snapping pics with their phones without approaching, but when they saw her looking most of them waved or smiled sheepishly. She smiled and nodded, letting them know they could keep the pictures though they would have appreciated being asked first.

Maria texted a quick note to Pepper and their PR people, just letting them know that the pictures would likely be appearing online and that they were okay unless someone posted with inappropriate commentary.

But, for the most part, they were allowed to enjoy their day. Knowing that they were being noticed, they toned down their usual snuggly behavior; both because none of them were overly prone to PDAs, but also to keep the appearance of friendship rather than anything else. It wasn’t as difficult as it could have been, though, because it was common knowledge that the Avengers were all close friends.

They did have to dodge the British paparazzi a few times; fortunately, quite a few people were willing to help them be discreet. Restaurant owners refused to allow the media inside to harass the diners, managers slipped them out back doors and tour guides insisted that only paying customers were allowed on tour grounds.

By the end of the day, though, they were happy enough to disappear into their hotel for one last night away from everything. The suite in the London hotel was spacious and comfy, and they took full advantage of the amenities available. But none of them were completely sorry to board the jet on Monday morning for the flight back to the US. Due to the time change, they actually arrived earlier than they’d left London, so they were able to join the rest of their team for breakfast - a second breakfast for them, but it was going to be a long day so they just shrugged and enjoyed it.

Skye was sparring with Steve after breakfast when she started up the very important conversation. She saw Natasha talking to Clint from the boxing ring and Pietro and Wanda talking on the treadmills. “So how was your weekend?” she asked. Sometimes they chatted while sparring. It was good for them to be able to talk and spar at the same time mid-battle, so Steve thought nothing of it.

“Very relaxing,” Steve said. “Glad the bad guys gave us the weekend off.”

“Thoughtful of them, right?” Skye said.

Steve laughed. “Exactly. How was your weekend? We saw you guys trending on Twitter.”

“It was good,” Skye said, ducking Steve’s punch. “Maria and Nat asked us to marry them.”

Steve stopped punching and stared at Skye, dumbfounded. “You got engaged?” he asked quietly.
“Yeah,” Skye said with a smile. “We’re telling our people separately.”

“Have you told Tony yet?” Steve asked. Tony usually slept during morning workout due to his regular insomnia and habitually late night hours.

“I’m saving him for last,” Skye said.

“Can you do me a favor and let me know before you tell him? Or at least do it in full view of JARVIS’ cameras.”

“I think everyone wants to see it,” Skye replied, laughing. “I’ll plan it in the common area, where JARVIS has cameras. Because I have a feeling people might try to kill me if there isn’t at least video…”

“We’re going to lord Tony’s reaction over him for a while,” Steve said, resuming sparring. “Congratulations, though.”

“Thanks,” Skye said bashfully. “We’re going to wait a while before getting married though, so you’ll be walking down the aisle first.”

“The press will catch wind of it eventually though, right?” Steve asked. “You all got rings, I’m assuming?”

“We decided we didn’t want to wear engagement rings,” Skye explained. “We’re going to all get matching cartilage rings.”

“Interesting idea,” Steve replied thoughtfully. “I suppose it both draws less attention in general as well as not compromising missions. If Nat’s going undercover again, she’d have to take hers off.”

Skye ducked another blow and followed up with a strike to Steve’s shoulder. “Yeah. And since both Wanda and I channel our power through our hands, we weren’t sure how jewelry would affect or be affected by that. And we don’t want to be scrambling to remove our rings every time we’re called up for a mission.”

“Makes sense.” Steve nodded as he rolled with her hit and twisted around behind her in attempt to grapple. She dropped down out of his grasp and kicked out at his leg, knocking him off his feet to give herself time to recover.

Clint suddenly raced over and slammed into Skye, knocking her to the ground. “No fair!” Skye protested, laughing.

“Nat just told me you guys are engaged!” he shouted.

“Is this true?” Thor asked. “Your quarter-mates and you are to wed?”

Skye bucked her hips, throwing Clint off of her and glaring at him. “If Dad finds out before I get to tell him ‘cause of your big mouth, Clint…” she growled menacingly.

“Mums the word,” Clint said, putting his hands up.

“I will say nothing as well,” Pietro said, approaching them and hugging Skye after she got to her feet. “I will, however say that I am excited to gain three sisters, as painful as the first one is.”

“I will put in my best efforts to keep my silence,” Thor said, bowing his head.

Skye sighed and relaxed, offering Clint an apologetic smile instead. “I appreciate it. I know you’re
just happy for us. And thank you, everyone; yes, it’s true.”

Clint grinned, unabashed and swept Skye into a hug instead. She hugged everyone who wanted one, happy to see her family happy for her. In the back of her mind, though, she decided she’d probably better find Tony and tell him soon. Otherwise he might hear it from someone other than her, and that would be even worse than just dropping it on him over dinner. She wanted to tell him in her own way, not cause a huge scene.

She managed to make it to the landing pad for Tony’s suit just as he was landing. “Hey!” Tony greeted. “How was your vacation?”

“Relaxing,” Skye said with a grin. “London wasn’t all that great. The paparazzi there is really bad.” She waited until the system removed his armor for him and then hugged him lightly.

“Yeah. Pepper loves it there, but their cameramen are certainly … aggressive.” Tony said, releasing her.

“It’s certainly beautiful there,” Skye said, “especially my pseudo-namesake.” Skye had named herself after Skynet when she was twelve and saw the movie, but she had to acknowledge the fact that the Isle of Skye existed before she had.

“Yeah?” Tony said as they started walking the empty halls towards Tony’s lab.

“Yeah…” Skye said. “So I have something to tell you…” She hesitated a moment, and Tony turned to look at her with his full attention. “While we were on vacation, Nat and Maria proposed.”

Tony’s eyes went wide and his jaw dropped for a full ten seconds. “I… they… you…” he stammered in shock. Skye nodded, biting her lip nervously. A moment later Tony rushed at her, scooping her up and spinning around with her. “My little girl is getting married!” Skye laughed, clutching his arms for balance; it was a good thing she wasn’t heavy, ’cause Tony was no Steve to be swinging her around easily.

“Yeah. Not sure when, yet. When we’re all ready,” she confirmed.

“Congratulations, sweetheart!” Tony crowed. “I can’t wait to tell everyone!”

“Well, we agreed that we’d each get to tell the people we’re closest to. So Wanda’s telling Pietro, Nat’s telling Clint…”

“And you’re telling me,” Tony said with a grin. “Oh, well. So I can’t tell them. I can tell everyone else!”

“Dad… we don’t want a big announcement,” Skye said tentatively. “We don’t want the attention right now. I’m sure when we do make an announcement we’ll let you and Pepper know so we can do it right. But for now… just family. Please?”

Tony pouted, but he couldn’t keep it up long in his excitement and just nodded. “Alright, sweetheart. Whatever you want.” Still exuberant, Tony grabbed Skye’s hand and pulled her with him into the lab. Spying Bruce at work in his usual space, Tony called across the room, “Hey, Brucie! Guess what… my daughter’s getting married!”

Bruce looked up at them, blinking at Tony’s happy shouting and Skye’s rueful smile. “I, er… congratulations?” he offered.

Skye smile grew a bit brighter. “Thanks. Nat and Maria proposed over our holiday weekend.”
“I’m happy for you. Set a date yet?” Bruce asked.

“No, not yet,” Skye explained. “We’re all together and so wanted to make the commitment... but Wanda still needs some time to get as comfortable with us as Maria, Nat and I are with each other. So we agreed to wait a while.”

“Understandable.” Bruce nodded. He approached easily and gave Skye a hug. “I’m glad you’re happy, Skye. You deserve it.”

“Come on, I know you wanted to tell me, but I get to tell everyone else right?” Tony said, dragging Skye towards the elevator, calling to JARVIS to take them to the gym.

Skye tried to stop him, but nothing she started to say would even slow him down.

He burst into the gym. “My daughter’s getting married!” he announced loudly.

The Avengers all stared at Tony and Skye for a moment. Steve was the first to react. He walked over, still beaming from the first time Skye told him, then picked up Skye and hugged her. “Congrats!” he said.

“What are you guys up to?” she whispered in his ear; the question didn’t stop her from hugging him back, though.

“Just playing along,” Steve whispered back, too low for Tony to hear as he was still bouncing like an overgrown kid.

“Thanks,” she replied aloud as he set her back down.

“Sojfn shines down on you for finding your quarter-mates, Lady Skye,” Thor said, coming up and embracing her as well. “I wish you eons of happiness.”


“For an Asgardian, to wish mates years of happiness would be a curse,” Thor said seriously, reining in Skye’s amusement. “Even after our time in this life, it is said we will all find our mates in Valhalla, even those without them in this life. Do your people not believe that the spirit goes on after death?”


“Why didn’t you tell me?” Clint asked Natasha, looking upset. Natasha swore in Russian and rolled her eyes. “Why wouldn’t you tell me about this Natasha. I’m your partner. You didn’t think I’d deserve to know before loud-mouth over here? Should I tell Laura and the kids?”

“Oh, we told her already,” Natasha deadpanned. They hadn’t, Skye knew. Natasha wouldn’t without telling Clint first.

“And what about you,” Clint said accusingly to Skye. “I thought we were family. You’re an aunt to my kids.”

“You saw Dad drag me in here to tell everyone the news, right?” Skye said, deflecting the question neatly. “Does it look like I could’ve gotten away without hurting someone?”

Clint pouted at her, but he winked when Tony wasn’t looking. Skye rolled her own eyes. She should have known Clint couldn’t resist the temptation to screw with Tony. Even with something this important; maybe especially with something this important. Still, Tony looked rather smug at the
moment, with Clint pretending he hadn’t known. Really, with everyone playing along.

Skye wasn’t sure if it was sweet, amusing or infuriating.

“Come on,” Nat said to Clint. “You promised me that we could go call Laura.”

“Wait… what?” Tony said.

“Oh, I told Clint,” Natasha said. “Just before we got here.”

“You knew?” Tony asked.

“We all did. We were all individually told just before you got here,” Steve admitted.

“All except for Bruce,” Skye said. “We all wanted to tell our families first. You’re not mad, are you?”

“Nah,” Tony said after taking a moment to recover. “I got to tell Bruce and I’ll get to tell Pep. I’m guessing Choir Boy Steve was the other person you told?”

“Yeah, it kinda came up while we were sparring this morning,” Skye replied with a sheepish smile. “Then Clint came bounding in here yelling about it, and Thor heard. But by all means, you can tell Pepper. And I came to tell you as soon as you got in.”

“It’s alright, sweetheart,” Tony soothed, letting his excitement for her wipe away any traces of hurt that the others had known first. She clearly had tried, that was the important part. “I notice that none of you are wearing rings, though. Do we need to fix that?”

Skye shook her head. “We’re all going to get cartilage rings. We don’t want it to be immediately obvious; it’s better to be subtle. And also, this way we don’t have to worry about taking rings off for missions. God only knows what my powers, or Wanda’s, would do if we were wearing jewelry.”

Tony frowned thoughtfully. “We could probably make you rings that could withstand it, if you wanted… we’d have to find the right alloy, but…”

Skye shook her head. “I’m not sure that’s even possible. Given the way I manipulate atomic structures, I’m not sure there is anything that I can’t deconstruct. And I don’t want to do so accidentally.”

“I know you worked on fine control. Did you and Bruce ever get around to experimenting with different atomic structures?” Tony asked curiously.

Skye shrugged. “Not as such. I know that it’s harder to make cold metal chimes ring than to, say, melt ice into water. And both are harder than doing something like shake the branch of a tree. But I haven’t really tried completely disassembling something. I think I could, but I haven’t really tried.”

“Research time, then. Come on. You too, Brucie,” Tony said with a grin as he headed back out of the gym.

Skye and Bruce exchanged a glance of long-suffering, but followed without complaint.

It made for a long, very tiring day for Skye. Tony managed to find things that ranged from Jell-O to Steve’s shield for Skye to try to shake apart. Skye found that Steve’s shield was nearly impossible to affect. The atomic structure’s natural vibration literally fought against her powers. Bruce theorized that she probably could change the vibration of Steve’s shield, but it would take a lot of effort and
was inadvisable for simple scientific inquiry. Especially after she had spent hours testing her powers on other materials.

They also tested a theory that Bruce had that if she used one hand to hover and the other hand to steer, she might be able to move in the air. It was very much like how she’d first tried it, but she had better control of her powers now. She was still a little crooked when she did it, but she was starting to be able to move.

After they were done, Bruce insisted Skye eat a large lunch and take a nap in the room that had been designated for her and her soulmates. After her nap, she felt a lot better and spent some updating the search algorithms to find Bucky since the current ones weren’t working.

Two days later, Nat, Maria, Skye, and Wanda took the morning off from training and went down to go get their engagement piercings. They had chosen diamond earrings online and had picked them up, and now were on their way to a tattoo parlour to get pierced.

They were recognized at the shop, but they explained the four of them getting piercings because they were the girls on Team Avengers. Darcy and Pepper helped sell it by coming along to join in then ‘chickened out’ while at the shop.

“I can’t do it,” Pepper said with a well-feigned guilty expression. “I’m sorry. I thought I could, just… the Board of Directors already doesn’t like me. They might find this too unprofessional…”

“It’s alright, Pepper,” Skye soothed gently, offering her hand to help Pepper out of the chair. “We won’t take it personally, I promise. Maybe when things settle down.”

“I won’t do it either,” Darcy announced. “Solidarity and that sort of thing. Besides, I’m not an Avenger.”

“I’m not either,” Maria pointed out, “but we’ll respect your decision.”

“But you’re totally one of us,” Skye said with a huge grin.

“You start chanting ‘one of us’ and I’m leaving,” Darcy threatened with a wink.

Nat and Skye exchanged a look, pretending not to see one of the tattoo artists had pulled out their phone. It’d be good for PR to let people see the Avengers as people first. “One of us! One of us!” Nat and Skye chanted. Darcy groaned.

“One of us, one of us!” Wanda and Maria joined in, grinning. Pepper started to laugh when a tattoo artist with a cartilage piercing similar to the ones Skye and Nat had just gotten and Maria was in the process of getting at the moment, sat down and began chanting with the quartet of Avengers.

Darcy rolled her eyes, giving in and laughing with them. “Fine, fine, we’re all Avenger ladies. But I think I’m gonna leave the official team-bonding thing to the four of you with actual titles. I’m content to be the tagalong.”

“Have it your way,” Nat said with a shrug. “Let us know if you reconsider.”

The four of them finished their visit to the shop with listening carefully to the care and cleaning instructions, and then the grinning artists waved them on their way. They left, feeling happily accomplished and hopeful that no one was the wiser about the real reason for their new piercings.

It took their ears a few days to heal, but Skye was happy. She could hardly believe how much she had gained in the last few years. The fact they were getting married had become real when she got
her ring. It was definitely a new feeling.

Skye spent her time searching for Bucky when she wasn’t training. Now that they finally had the time available, she decided it was time to focus on something meant to help others. After searching for two weeks with the new algorithm, Skye finally got a hit that Bucky was in Kathmandu. A Instagram user had taken a picture of an open market and Bucky had been in the background.

To ensure that Bucky didn’t bolt first-thing, the Avengers quickly decided that only Steve, Natasha, Wanda, and Skye would go to try to bring him in. Wanda was deceptively good at sneaking around people so she could use her powers on them. Skye was brought just in case Bucky needed to be brought down and Steve and Natasha both knew Bucky and the hope was that Bucky would remember them.

Natasha talked to a couple people in the area Bucky had been spotted in and then tracked him to an abandoned building. The fact that he was still in the building was a surprise to Skye. He stood tense across from them.

“Bucky?” Steve asked hesitantly. Skye wasn’t sure if he was going to bolt or attack them. Without really meaning to, she tensed as well.

Bucky stared at Steve for a long time. “Bucky… I think my name was Bucky, once,” he said softly.

“It was,” Steve said. “You… don’t remember?”

Bucky frowned, his brows furrowing in thought. “Sometimes… sometimes not. It’s… confused.”

“Do you remember me?” Steve asked, his tone somber but still gentle.

Bucky snorted a laugh, his eyes bleak. “Your mom’s name was Sara. You… used to stuff newspaper in your shoes… But it all comes and goes.”

“We’d like to help, if you’ll let us,” Steve said.

“No one can help. You shouldn’t try. I’m… dangerous.”

“So are we,” Natasha said, stepping forward into the light a little more.

Bucky glanced at Wanda and Skye. “They don’t look very dangerous,” he noted.

Skye reached out and shook the spot where Bucky was standing. Startled, Bucky took several steps back, then stared in wonderment as he noticed that nothing else was shaking. He went back to his original spot and Skye maintained the quake.

She grinned. “Looks can be deceiving,” she said.

Putting two and two together, Bucky stared at Skye, then looked at Steve. “Where’d you dig her up, punk?” he asked.

“Technically, she found us,” Steve said with a grin. “Bucky, this is Skye, my other best friend. Skye, Bucky.”

Skye dropped the quake and grinned. “Glad to see you alive,” Skye said. “You guys were pretty much the only subject I ever bothered to show up to history class for.”

Bucky’s lips quirked in a small smile in return. “Glad he has a friend to watch his back, then,” he said, tilting his head slightly in Steve’s direction. “God knows he needs one.”
Skye nodded, chuckling softly even as Steve began to laugh. “Been lookin’ for you for a while, Buck. You’re tough to find…”

“Should’ve left it,” Bucky replied with a sigh. “I ain’t safe t’ be around.”

“We do want to help,” Skye offered. “We know it’s not easy. We don’t expect it to be. But we can hold our own if we have to.”

“Don’t wanna hurt anybody. Not anymore,” Bucky shook his head.

Skye and Wanda traded a glance, and Wanda stepped up to stand beside Skye. Their hands met and fingers entwined. “You said you cannot remember… I think I can help with that, if you will allow it. Perhaps not here or today… but I will try, if you wish, whenever you wish.”

Bucky’s eyes followed their motions, watched their hands twine together, and smirked a bit. The smirk grew larger when Natasha joined them, standing just behind them in the space between their shoulders; her hand found theirs automatically even as she watched Bucky warily for signs of the Soldier lurking within.

Bucky shook his head, glancing at Steve again. “Three beautiful dames, an’ not one of ‘em for you, huh punk?”

“Jerk,” Steve accused in a fond tone. “I have a lovely lady of my own, back home. We’d love it if you came to the wedding.”

Blue eyes widened in shock, but Bucky nodded thoughtfully. “Always promised I’d be there…”

“To the end of the line,” Steve agreed. “Please, Buck. Let us help. We can take you someplace safe, help you get better. Maybe help you remember.”

“I don’t want… I don’t want to be a weapon any more,” Bucky said, causing Skye’s heart to break a little.

“None of us do,” Skye said. “That’s why we’re a team. We watch each others’ backs, keep each other safe. We’re the Avengers.”

“I’ve heard of them…” Bucky said slowly. “The news talks about them.”

Skye smiled. “I know they do. And while they’re not wrong, they don’t know the half of it.” She held her hand out to Bucky, palm up, just waiting for him to take it. “Let us show you. You’ll be safe with us.”

Bucky hesitated, his eyes darting from one person to another. He saw Natasha nod and Steve smile. Skye just waited patiently, her eyes full of sympathy and Wanda’s eyes dark with understanding. Wanda was no stranger to the thought of being someone else’s weapon; it was something she had no desire to return to either.

Slowly, Bucky reached out with his flesh hand, placed it atop Skye’s. Her fingers closed gently around his and she smiled. “That’s it,” she whispered encouragingly. “Come with us. We’ll help you to heal. And we can get pizza tonight, how does that sound?”

“Pizza?” Bucky asked cautiously.

“It’s not five cents a pie anymore,” Steve said. “But they’ve got a lot of variety back home.”
Skye pulled out her phone and started typing one-handed. “What do you guys think? We could get get pies from… what? Do you think ten pizzas would do the trick?”

“Twenty,” Natasha noted. “Remember, between Steve, Bucky, and Thor that’s like… ten pizzas.”

“Or twenty-five?” Wanda suggested. “Remember, Skye, that Dr. Banner wants you to eat more. You need it for your powers.”

“Twenty-five sounds good,” Skye said. She knew it was a 50-50 shot whether Tony was going to want to stay with the group or leave, so she wanted to give her father an excuse if she needed it. A thought struck her that by the logic that Tony was her father, Howard and Maria would have been her grandparents.

“Twenty-five…” Bucky asked, amazed at the idea of that many pizzas let alone being allowed to eat one himself. The wave of anger that even might have come up for Skye was instantly put out by the look on Bucky’s face. It was clear that Bucky hadn’t eaten anything beyond what kept him alive since 1944.

They loaded up and Skye flew them back with Wanda in the co-pilot seat. They gave him the choice of sedating him for the journey, since it was a 12-hour flight, which Bucky decided to take. After several hours, Nat relieved her so she could sleep.

Instead of sleeping though, she sat next to Steve. “You okay?” she asked him.

“Honestly? I don’t know. I haven’t known since I found out Bucky was still alive. I mean… what they did to him…”

“I get that,” Skye said. “If someone did that to you, I’d burn down the world.”

Steve’s ears went pink with embarrassment, but he smiled at her. “I believe you,” he said softly.

Skye smiled back. “You’re family. Closest thing I have to a brother, except for Clint. Of course I’d come after you.”

Steve sighed. “I know. But I felt the same about Bucky, and…”

“You didn’t know he was alive,” she soothed him. “How could you? You weren’t even sure you would survive a fall like that, and an unenhanced human wouldn’t have. If you’d known he was alive, you’d have followed him down in a heartbeat.”

Steve sighed again, but gave her a small smile. She squeezed his hand gently, understanding his ambivalence despite her calm reasoning. She knew it must be hard for him… as hard as discovering that her parents were somehow still alive, but learning what her father had become in the meantime. She knew Wanda really got where Bucky was coming from; in much the same way, Skye got Steve. She just did.

Shifting so she could lean against Steve’s body, Skye wrapped his arm around her body and snuggled into his warmth so she could catch a short cat-nap. Steve tucked her into his side comfortably, grateful for both her comfort and her presence. He might not be okay, just as Bucky wasn’t really okay yet.

But they would be. They both would. Because Skye had built their team into an amazing family, and together they could get through anything.
Chapter 35

Skye was awakened by Bucky whimpering in his sleep. It seemed that, like Steve, Bucky ran through sedatives quickly. Steve went down and held his friend’s hand until he drifted off again.

Skye checked her watch and saw they still had three more hours until they landed at the Upstate Base, thinking Bucky would be more comfortable there than in the city. Skye pulled out her phone
“Hello Miss. Skye,” JARVIS answered. “Do you need me to connect you to sir?”

“Yes, please, JARVIS,” Skye replied in a soft voice, hoping not to wake anyone.

“Skye!” Tony said. “What’s your ETA back to the Tower?”

“We’re not coming back,” Skye said.

“Running away with Capsicle on the eve of his wedding?” Tony joked. “What about your soulmates?”

“Not now, Tony,” Skye said softly. “We found him. We need you to bring everyone up to the Upstate Base?”

“Skye, I don’t know…” Tony started, his tone reluctant.

“Please Dad?” she begged.

“I’ll assemble the team,” Tony conceded with a sigh.

“I was gonna order pizza from a few places in the City since the base is too remote to get delivery. Is it okay if we send it to the Tower?” Skye asked. Tony had insulated bags that were powered by arc reactor technology so they would stay warm for the flight. Tony had invented it so he could pick up pizza in his suit, but Skye knew it would keep the 25 pizzas she was ordering warm.

“Make sure one of them’s pepperoni,” Tony said.

“I’ll make sure two of them are,” Skye said fondly. “Thanks, Dad.”

The rest of the flight to the base was uneventful. The sedatives had worn off completely by the time they landed so it wasn’t hard to wake him up. Bucky hesitated at the top of the ramp, looking nervous - and Skye didn’t think it was the size of the facility that daunted him. She waved Nat and Wanda on ahead and, with Steve, went back up the ramp.

“Hey, it’s gonna be all right,” Skye said lightly. Bucky smiled tightly back but remained where he was. Steve clapped him on the shoulder, but they just waited patiently for him to look around. Finally, Skye saw him swallow hard and take a few slow steps down the ramp. Steve stayed at his shoulder, and Skye slid into place on Bucky’s other side, slipping her hand into his arm - the metal one, but she didn’t give a damn which one it was. Bucky seemed startled and he paused, looking at her quizzically. She just smiled. “Whenever I get offered an arm, it’s usually the left. So, I figured if I was gonna just take one…”

Bucky smirked and bent his arm, giving her a more comfortable hold as they walked; Steve grinned at Skye’s ability to distract people from their worries and just followed along. She led the way into the facility to the large common lounge area in their part of the building. There was a second lounge in the lab area, not that many of the scientists used it for breaks.

The smell of hot pizza was the first thing to greet them as they walked into the lounge. Bucky stopped and just sniffed for a moment. “Smells good,” he told Skye in a low voice.

“Good,” she said. “That’s the idea. Okay, quick introductions and then food.” She moved to where they had a good view of the room’s occupants and pointed everyone out to Bucky. “Natasha and Wanda just joined Maria, who’s the fourth of our soulmates quad,” she began, winking when he
blinked at the news. “With them is Lance Hunter, who’s part of our tactical planning team. He works with Maria, mostly, but he’s a good friend of mine. The blonde hotness next over is Thor, Prince of Asgard – he’s from another realm, and they’re naturally stronger than us mere mortals.” Her smirk let Bucky know that there was definitely some banter involved there, and Thor just chuckled. “Beside Thor is Dr. Jane Foster and her assistant-slash-scientist-wrangler-slash-best-friend, Darcy Lewis. Jane’s an astrophysicist, and Darcy’s main job is making sure that the science folk don’t get so wrapped up in their work that they forget to do things like eat and sleep. Hitting on Darcy, over there, is Pietro Maximoff, Wanda’s twin brother. Down the row is Dr. Bruce Banner, and beside him is Tony Stark - my adoptive dad. I think Steve said you knew his father, Howard. Across from them is Sam Wilson, talking to Steve. They got to be friends a couple of years ago.”

“Everybody, this is James Buchanan Barnes,” she finished. “Go easy on him; his memory is pretty sketchy right now.”

“Get some food while it’s hot, love,” Hunter called out to Skye. “God knows you don’t eat enough,” he added teasingly.

Skye laughed and tugged Bucky over to the tables where the pizza boxes were set out. She handed him a plate. “Help yourself. Whatever looks good, whatever you want to try. If you have questions, ask.” Skye helped herself to a couple of slices of Hawaiian pizza, a couple slices of barbecue chicken, and a couple of chicken mushroom spinach, then added a piece of garlic bread.

Bucky followed along, a little more hesitant. He stuck with familiar options of pepperoni, and sausage with black olives, and Skye didn’t say a word about his limited selection or the fact that he only took a slice of each. They had time to teach him to take plentiful food for granted again.

Conversations struck up around the room as everyone settled in to eat, but Bucky sat silently between Steve and Skye, focused entirely on his food. He wasn’t unaware of the others, though; he saw how everyone treated Skye, as if she were a sister or a daughter. Saw how people reacted to her smiles and her laughter, and wondered about it.

She was certainly different than most of the people he remembered.

Bucky found his eyes straying to Tony Stark. Howard’s son. He had known Howard had a kid; it was in the mission briefing packet. He hadn’t remembered Howard, during the mission. It was only after his programming began to break down, only after the wiped memories started to resurface, that he realized that he was responsible for the death of a man who had once been a friend.

Not until they’d tried to make him kill Steve had he realized that, once upon a time, he’d had friends and not just orders.

The room fell silent as Bucky got out of his seat and moved around the room, heading for Tony. Even Tony didn’t say anything as Bucky stopped in front of him, his smart remark about Bucky finishing the job dying on his tongue when he caught sight of the bleak anguish in the former soldier’s eyes. He just held his ground, waiting.

“If you want to kill me, I wouldn’t stop you,” Bucky said quietly. Everyone in the room stiffened, staring at Bucky. “Honestly, I can’t figure out why you haven’t already.”

Tony seemed to unstick first. “Shit…” he swore slowly.

Steve took a step forward. “Buck…”

Tony put his hands up, surrendering. “I’m not so heartless and hypocritical to do it, Steve,” Tony
said seriously. “I mean, Wanda and Pietro forgave me for what my weapons did to their parents. Guess I can at least forgive the weapon that killed my own, even if I don’t forgive HYDRA.” Tony sighed. “You weren’t in control, back then. And, well… it was a long time ago.”

Skye smiled and crossed the room as well, tucking herself into Tony’s side. “Proud of you, Dad,” she whispered to him.

With a hint of a smile, Tony hugged her close. “Besides, I have to be a good example for my daughter.” Everyone in the room snorted at that, except for Bucky. “And she’d never forgive me if I hurt or killed you over something you couldn’t control.”

Bucky looked bewildered, like he really just couldn’t comprehend what Tony was saying. A single tear tracked down his cheek, and Tony couldn’t help but see it. Then a few more followed and Bucky stepped back, rubbing his eyes and looking away. Skye looked up at Tony as she considered following Bucky, but Natasha beat her to it.

Natasha moved to wrap Bucky in her arms, letting him hide his face and his tears in her hair. This pain, this was something she understood. Knowing she could never make up for the lives she’d taken, only that she could try to balance it with lives she’d saved. She murmured to him in Russian, soothing things about forgiveness and second chances.

After a few minutes, Tony stepped forward and touched Natasha lightly on the shoulder. “There’s a small office just across the hall. Take him there; we’ll save you some pizza,” Tony offered in a low voice. Natasha nodded and, with a glance at Steve, led Bucky out of the room.

Everyone else was quiet for a few minutes before Skye broke the silence. “He’s gonna need our help,” she said firmly. “I can’t even imagine what he’s going through.”

“He shall have it,” Thor said solemnly.

“He may need an actual therapist,” Maria agreed. “I know one or two good ones that used to work with SHIELD but left before HYDRA.”

Sam turned to Maria, lips quirking in a smile. “Might be a good idea to call them. I might need some advice, if Barnes decides he’d rather talk to me.”

Maria nodded. “I’ll look into it.”

“You alright?” Skye asked Tony softly as other conversations resumed around the room.

“More or less, yeah,” he told her with a small smile. “Go on, finish your pizza. Don’t worry about your old man. I can handle it.”

“I’ll always worry about you,” Skye said. “It’s what daughters do.”

“I thought that was my job,” Tony shot back weakly, returning to his former self.

“No one would ever buy you as the worrying father,” Skye said. “And someone in this family has to fill those shoes.”

“Fair point,” Tony said. “Anyone for ice cream?”

Wanda’s eyes lit up and Tony grinned as he texted a message to the main kitchen to bring up the ice
When they arrived, it was with ten different gallon tubs of ice cream and a variety of toppings as well as bowls and spoons. Skye smiled and went to finish her pizza while her soulmate dished herself up a bowl of ice cream; she knew they hadn’t often had access to the treat in Sokovia. Though Wanda wasn’t normally a big fan of sugar, she couldn’t resist ice cream. Especially if she could put fresh berries on top.

Skye looked down at her phone when she heard the Captain America TV show theme song, indicating that Coulson had sent her an email.

She idly scanned through it. Apparently the SHIELD and RealSHIELD factions had fused. Coulson was still in charge, but he now had the assistance of several “level 9” agents, a council that Coulson consulted with to hear varying opinions. Calderon had been demoted, severely, for leveling a gun at Skye’s head. Apparently not even Gonzalez could justify Calderon threatening to shoot an unarmed agent who had been in control of her newly acquired powers until they cornered her.

Coulson made a point of telling her that Gonzalez and Oliver were still on the council, if only so that he could get honest criticism when he got too caught up in the way things always used to work. May was on his council, as were Weaver and Morse. Mack had decided to step back from it, happier in the garage than in the conference room. Hartley and Idaho were apparently considering a return to mercenary work rather than remaining with SHIELD, but Coulson was hopeful they could change their minds.

The interesting part was at the bottom of the email message. Coulson wanted to meet with the Avengers, hopefully rebuild ties. Reading between the lines, she thought that Coulson might also be hopeful of getting some of his former agents back. The Avengers had acquired quite a few, between herself, Hunter, and Kara; not to mention Maria, Natasha and Clint.

Well. She wasn’t going to bring it up right away. They all needed to eat and rest, and she rather suspected that Bucky was going to have a rough few days coming up. But she would mention it. And soon.

“Did I hear the old Captain America theme for a minute?” Sam asked her curiously, his eyes showing his amusement.

“Yep,” she agreed, waving her phone for a minute. “It’s a ringtone for my old boss. He has, like, all the Captain America memorabilia ever.”

“Your old boss ever meet Steve?” Sam asked, grinning.

“Reportedly, he told Steve that he watched him sleeping the first time they met,” Skye said with a wide grin.

“Sounds like a unique experience,” Sam said slowly, glancing at a cherry-red Steve.

“It was exactly as awkward as it sounded,” Steve said gruffly, trying to hide his face in his ice cream bowl.

Skye smiled. “My old boss is a total fanboy. Even gave me a ‘Trust Cap’ sign for my office back at the SHIELD base, before all this happened.”

“What did Agent want?” Tony asked roughly. From the looks on everyone else’s faces, SHIELD was still a bit of a touchy topic.

“Just updating me on the status of SHIELD. Coulson’s still in charge. Gonzalez and Oliver are still around, apparently providing him dissenting opinions to make sure that he’s thinking about all issues...”
“Is that asshole locked up yet?” Steve asked, referring to Calderon.

“No,” Skye said slowly. “But he’s apparently been demoted to the equivalent of a janitor. He’s not allowed to be on any missions at this point and he has no security clearances.”

“That’s the very least they could have done,” Steve growled.

“As angry as we all were about what happened,” Maria pointed out in a calm, logical tone, “he didn’t actually pull the trigger. No one was hurt. There are no real charges to file against him, or at least nothing that would hold up in a court of law.”

“Guys, it’s fine,” Skye said. “It’s never going to happen again. I have better control of my powers. Someone levels a gun at me, I can just rip the gun apart.”

“She’s got a point,” Sam said. “Come on, Steve. If that guy does it again, you’ll be there and you can put him through a wall with everyone’s blessing.”

Skye quietly decided to herself that she would wait a few days to bring up SHIELD again. Everyone was so jumpy about it, and particularly with Bucky’s retrieval so recent… it just didn’t seem like a good time.

The group spent the rest of the day just relaxing, enjoying time together. Natasha returned eventually, alone, saying that she’d settled Bucky in a guest room and that he was asking for Steve. Steve immediately got up and left the lounge, waving as various voices wished him luck.

The next day, Maria and Tony worked together to get in touch with a therapist with both a high security clearance and also no connections to HYDRA. Steve introduced Sam to Bucky, and the three of them talked for hours. Sam admitted freely that Bucky’s trauma was well outside his experience, but he was willing to try to help - either with outside advice from Maria’s contact or in cooperation with him.

They left the choice up to Bucky. Sam said that since he’d spent so much time having his choices taken away from him, it would be therapeutic for Bucky to make all the choices regarding his life going forward.

The problem was that Bucky didn’t trust his own judgment, particularly when it came to other people. He asked for other people’s opinions, though Sam and Steve refused to give advice initially. It was Wanda who finally pointed out that it was going to be nearly impossible to make a choice without knowing both what the options were and the benefits or drawbacks to both.

At Bucky’s request, Sam, Steve, Skye and Wanda met with the therapist first. He knew it was putting off the decision, but he told them he wanted their honest opinion of the man before he was willing to meet. Skye hesitated before agreeing; she hoped it wouldn’t be so bad because he wasn’t there to see her specifically.

Ironically, given her usual opinion on therapists and shrinks in general, it was Skye’s opinion that held the most weight with Bucky. “I don’t normally like these guys,” she’d told him. “I’ve had some… less than stellar experiences with shrinks, especially ones who work with traumatized ki… people. But… he seems genuinely concerned about other people. I think he might really be able to help you, if you think you want to let him try.”

So Bucky started meeting with Andrew on a daily basis. They kept it quiet, bringing Andrew to the facility via StarkJet each afternoon. In the meantime, Skye finally broached the subject of meeting
with Coulson and SHIELD to the rest of the team; they agreed, but preferred to have all their associates functional before any meeting would occur.

They set the date for six weeks out; Coulson wasn’t thrilled about it, but there wasn’t much he could do to argue either.

Since Andrew was coming to the base every day, it didn’t take long for Tony to offer to put him on retainer.

“You know,” Skye said one afternoon. “Since you have Andrew on retainer, you might as well get some use out of him.”

Tony laughed. “If you think you can get Natasha into a therapy session, go with god.”

Skye looked at Tony. “Actually, I was thinking about you,” she said gently.

Tony froze. “You think I need therapy?”

Skye shrugged. “Maybe not a regular session, but I know you haven’t slept in like three days. Maybe he can help.”

“I don’t need to sleep much,” Tony said, shrugging. “Too many ideas.”

“I get that,” Skye agreed. “Trust me, I do. But I don’t think that’s always it. Besides, he’s actually a nice guy. Smart. I think you’d get along.”

“Well if you think he’s smart, he must be,” Tony said. “I still don’t know…” Skye brought it up with Andrew the next time she saw him and he challenged Tony to a chess game. The next thing everyone knew, Tony and Andrew were playing chess every Friday after Bucky’s session. Neither Tony nor Andrew would say if they were playing chess or having therapy sessions, but even after a few weeks Tony was looking better than anyone, including Pepper, had seen in a very long time.

Not long before they were scheduled to meet up with SHIELD, Bucky cornered Skye while she was grabbing a late lunch. “For someone who doesn’t like therapy, you sure recommend it a lot,” he said.

Skye shook her head. “I’ve been to enough therapists to know it’s not going to work for me,” Skye said quietly.

“Maybe this time is different,” Bucky said. “Dr. Garner’s been a big help to me. He could help you too.”

“The system… the foster system is really screwed up,” Skye said. “Until I met Nat and Maria, I had no sense of stability. Every time I was sent back from people who promised me a home, they’d make me go to a therapy session and the shrink kept giving me this bullshit about how it would get better. They lied to me, telling me that some day I’d find parents and I’d get adopted. And it wasn’t until I did something about it that I found that - a father, stability… a home… I finally found home.”

“Sounds like you still have a lot of issues,” Bucky said. “Maybe you could try? For me?”

Skye sighed. Bucky was getting a lot better at the puppy-dog eyes thing. “Fine. I will try two sessions,” she said. “For you.”

“Four,” Bucky countered.

“Three,” Skye conceded.
Not that she’d admit it out loud, Skye found that Andrew was actually pretty good at what he did. He called her out on deflection, but respected that there were some things she just wasn’t ready to talk about if she told him honestly. They talked a lot about her childhood, about how lonely and anchorless her life had been before her soulmates. They also talked about how she truly felt about her SHIELD family and losing them when the truth came out.

Skye realized that she had never really dealt with the fact that she had lost her friends at the same time as Jemma acting like she was something to be killed, Gonzalez calling into question her entire past, and Calderon nearly shooting her.

Not long after that, Skye was sitting with Bucky and Andrew as the others went and met the SHIELD group. The base was fully wired for audio and video so they were able to hear and see the team when they landed. Skye tensed slightly when she saw Trip, May, Coulson, Fitz, and Simmons were there along with Bobbi, Gonzalez, Weaver, and Oliver.

Coulson stepped forward and extended his hand to Steve. “Captain Rogers,” he said.

“Director Coulson,” Steve said, taking his hand. “Wish I could say it was good to see all of you again, but not all of us are exactly excited for this meeting to take place.” Thor looked menacing and tightened his grip, glaring at Gonzalez, Oliver, and Bobbi. Clint didn’t look too friendly at them either. Both had voiced objections to meeting with SHIELD.

“I respect that,” Coulson said. “I’m sorry for what happened. Calderon wasn’t allowed attend this meeting and he won’t be at any further meetings we may or may not have.”

“We also need all your weapons,” Maria said in her non-nonsense tone.

Coulson, May and Trip automatically handed over their weapons, and the scientists held up their hands to indicate they had no weapons, but some of the other agents resisted. “Absolutely not,” Gonzalez said.

“Then you can leave,” Natasha said. “If we’re allies, you don’t need them.”

Reluctantly, the others who were armed gave up their weapons. Steve led everyone into the conference room and very subtly nodded at the security camera.

“That’s our cue,” Skye said and she, Andrew and Bucky got up. “You ready?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said gruffly. Skye looped her arm through his and led the way, Andrew following calmly behind them. Everyone in the conference room looked up from where they were settling into their seats when the door opened again. Several pairs of eyes brightened upon seeing Skye, but all eyes went wide when they identified the man walking in beside her with her arm twined in his.

Several agents fumbled for weapons they weren’t carrying, and Gonzalez frowned. “That’s the Winter Soldier,” he accused, glaring across the table at Skye and Steve.

“No,” Skye refuted, meeting Gonzalez’s eyes with a steely gaze. “This is James Buchanan Barnes, a World War 2 hero and part of our team.” She didn’t need to introduce the others to Bucky; they’d filled him in well ahead of time, so he had a chance to put names and faces together. She also noted that while May assessed Barnes and Skye’s comfort level with him, it was the man behind them who drew her former SO’s eyes. She wondered if there was a story there.

Unsurprisingly, Trip was the first to pick his jaw up off the floor. He got up and circled the table, grinning. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir,” he said, extending his hand. Bucky took it with a confused smile, and Skye just grinned back at Trip. “My grandfather used to talk about you almost as
much as Steve, and I grew up on stories of the Howling Commandos. I’m Antoine Triplett, grandson of one Gabe Jones; most of my friends call me Trip.”

“Gabe got married?” Bucky said, his smile growing bigger and more genuine. “Good for him. It’s nice to meet you, Trip,” Bucky said politely. Then he faltered. “Sorry, everyone here calls you that. If you prefer I didn’t…”

Trip shook his head. “Nah, it’s cool. I don’t mind at all.” When Bucky released his hand, Trip held his arms out to Skye; she stepped into his embrace with a speaking look and let him hug her tight. Trip dropped a kiss on her head as he let her go; they would talk later, and they didn’t need words to communicate volumes. Trip returned to his seat as Skye found hers beside Steve.

Coulson stood as well and offered his hand across the table to Bucky, who shook it briefly. “Sergeant Barnes, it’s an honor,” Coulson said; his expression held neutral, but his tone was warm.

“Director Coulson,” Bucky replied with a nod of greeting. His tension levels were on the rise, given the way some of the SHIELD agents were staring or glaring at him. Andrew stepped forward and touched the back of Bucky’s shoulder, just enough to help him settle, and Bucky visibly tried to relax. He managed to get through a few more introductions well enough, then excused himself before the tension could get to him. Andrew followed after nodding at the SHIELD council, knowing they’d have a lot to talk about after that little show.

“You called Andrew?” May asked Maria,

Maria raised her eyebrows. “Do you know of anyone else good enough to treat Barnes?” she asked.

“I’m not saying he’s not good,” May said smoothly. “But my ex-husband? Really?”

Skye had a hard time keeping her poker face and hide her surprise. May mentioned she had been married on very rare occasions, but somehow Skye had never pictured that she’d be married to someone like Andrew. She supposed that opposites did sometimes attract.

“You should turn him over to us.” Oliver said. “He’s dangerous.”

“He was brainwashed and was used as a weapon for seventy years,” Steve said with a slightly broken voice. “He needs help. He doesn’t need to be locked up.”

“If you want Bucky, you’ll have to go through us,” Skye said. “And I think I’ve proven to you guys that I can be very dangerous if you piss me off.”

“Yeah,” Tony quipped, breaking the ice. “You won’t like her when she’s angry.”

“That’s my line!” Bruce complained lightly. Skye knew what they were doing. Re-establishing that the Avengers were equal parts team and family. Wanda slipped her hand in Skye’s, all of them silently supporting her.

Chapter End Notes

Since it's a holiday, we're not expecting comments or reviews right away, though we will happily read them if you're actually online today! But we do always love to hear from our readers, and we hope you're excited for what comes next.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

SHIELD and the Avengers. Together. In one place. Oops?

Chapter Notes

We hope everyone in the US had a great holiday. Sorry we haven't responded to comments yet, but it's totally on the agenda! We both had family commitments and were not easily available.

As always, we're SO VERY THANKFUL for all the love and support we've gotten over the course of this story. You guys rock!

Sorry, still no new manips. But have a Trip and Skye bit, because they're adorable!

After everybody settled down, serious discussions between SHIELD and the Avengers began. There were clearly still some misunderstandings and grievances that needed to be settled, and everyone quickly realized that they weren’t likely to get through everything in a single afternoon. Skye sent a message to the staff to have the guest rooms set up for the SHIELD delegation; when they decided to take a break for dinner, Steve offered the Avengers’ hospitality to the SHIELD agents.

Coulson gratefully accepted; whether or not the others were pleased about it, apparently it was not a decision up for discussion.
The groups began to mingle a bit more over dinner. Particularly when Jane, Darcy, Hunter, Sharon, Kara and Helen Cho decided to join them. Kara reluctantly agreed to sit with her uncle, and Sharon offered to join her for moral support. She shot Steve an apologetic glance, but Steve was nothing if not understanding and he just smiled back at his fiancee.

Jane and Fitz got into a science discussion, which led to Jane dragging Darcy and Thor to sit with Fitz, Simmons and Bobbi. Bucky and Andrew also joined the group in the dining hall, with Bucky using Skye, Wanda, Steve and Trip as a shield against the less friendly agents. Andrew chose to join Coulson and May, clearly pleased to have a chance to catch up on old times.

Skye mostly listened to people talking, well aware of how tense Bucky was. She didn’t really blame him since she was a bit tense herself. Mercifully, dinner passed pretty quickly. Skye was picking at the remnants of the second serving of dessert she had been given when Darcy called her over.

“Skye!” bellowed the scientist wrangler.

Skye looked over. “What?” she asked.

“We need you over here so you can settle something,” Darcy said.

Skye saw that Jane, Bruce, Fitz, and Simmons were all talking animatedly while Bobbi and Thor looked amusedly on.

Skye made her way over, grabbing an empty seat next to Thor. Bobbi looked a little uncomfortable for a moment, but said nothing. “How can I help?” she asked.

“We’re debating the likelihood of another Hulk occurring,” Darcy said. “Agents Fitz and Simmons wanted Bruce’s input and he said that you were the one who knew more about gamma radiation itself.”

Skye rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “Bruce knows very well that my research followed different lines than his. But I think the circumstances that created the Hulk were fairly unique, and while we don’t really have before-and-after samples, I suspect there’s something about Bruce that made him change when other people exposed to that much gamma radiation probably would have just died.”

“But it’s possible,” Jemma said.

“If you could find a way to duplicate the exact conditions, and that includes whatever may be different about Bruce… in theory, yes. But it’s my understanding that things got out of control and caused an accident?” She glanced at Bruce for confirmation. “In that case, the probability of free radicals in an accident behaving the exact same way twice are next to zero.”

“Well that’s good,” Fitz said with an easy smile. “At least we don’t have to worry about an army of Hulks running around.”

Simmons frowned, unable to let the idea go. “What makes Dr. Banner special though? Or your soulmate and her brother? Or you? How do we know there aren’t more people out there? Without them on the Index…” Jemma trailed off.

“What makes Bruce special is that he has dedicated himself to using what happened to him to protect other people,” Skye said firmly. “Wanda and Pietro have chosen to take what they were given through dubious means and use it to keep our world and its people safe. Every single person on the Avengers team has made that commitment, powers or not. We don’t need the Index. If you assume people are going to do bad things, you give them motivation to do so.”
“I don’t have to assume,” Jemma said tersely. “You’re aiding and abetting the Winter Soldier and he’s done horrible things. You’re still lying and hiding things to protect yourself. How do we know that you aren’t also helping others like Rumlow or your father?”

Skye scowled. “We’re aiding a man who has been brainwashed into being a HYDRA weapon for over seventy years. He was taken as a prisoner of war back in frigging World War Two, made to kill people who were in HYDRA’s way and all his memories of who he had ever been were taken away from him. He couldn’t recognize or remember his best friend in the whole world. How the hell could we turn our backs on him and not help?”

“You were one of my best friends, and you turned your back on me,” Jemma said softly. “You lied to me. You didn’t trust me with anything. Why not?”

“Because I was under direct orders from both Director Fury and Assistant Director Maria Hill to keep my cover, for my protection as well as Maria’s and Nat’s. And I would do anything to protect my soulmates, just as they would for me. If that means that people who don’t understand that kind of commitment, that need to protect the people I love, can’t understand and forgive me, then I’m sorry for them… because clearly they must not have people they love that much.” Skye’s expression was fierce and her emotions ran high. Her soulmates all looked towards her, but when Wanda made to get up and join Skye, Natasha shook her head. Skye needed to deal with this, and it was well past time for it.

“We do understand,” Fitz said neutrally. “It was just… all this information came out about you and then you were just gone. You gave us no time to adjust. No time for us to talk to you about it. I think Jemma’s just hurt that she didn’t get a chance to adjust.”

“Well, after Calderon leveled a gun at my head, none of us thought staying was a good idea,” Skye said wryly, her tension unwinding just a little. “I don’t think you can really fault my family for wanting me out of that situation and out of reach of people like Gonzalez who wanted me locked up somewhere for everyone else’s safety without giving me a chance to learn control.”

Fitz nodded and Jemma wilted. “From our perspective,” Fitz continued. “We were your family. We didn’t know you had other people. From our perspective you had nearly died a year ago on our watch.”

Skye smiled gently at Fitz. “I’ve told you before, and I’ll tell you again; what happened in Italy wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t anyone’s fault but Quinn’s and Garrett’s, and neither of them can hurt anyone else anymore.” Skye sighed. “You guys were my family. I always thought of myself as having two families, our team and my Avengers family. I stayed with SHIELD after Cybertek because I thought it was where I belonged, and where I could do the most good. I could have gone back to New York then; Dad keeps telling me that I don’t have to work if I don’t want to, but I stay with it because it’s work that needs doing. When we moved to the Playground, I managed to convince my soulmates to set a timeline for when I could tell you all the truth; the problem was that we knew about the other SHIELD division and that they were infiltrating us. We hoped to find a way to resolve that situation without it coming to an attack, but until that happened Maria and Nat weren’t willing to risk that RealSHIELD would try to get to me in order to influence them. And between Gonzalez and Calderon, I suspect they were capable of it.” Skye glanced at Bobbi, who grimaced slightly. Then Skye turned her eyes to meet Jemma’s. “It was never about you guys, beyond the fact that neither of you is particularly good at lying when you know something other people aren’t supposed to know.”

Fitz reached out and squeezed Skye’s hand. “I’m sorry for whatever part I played in what happened.” Fitz said. “I’m really sorry I ever underestimated you. That time with the holotable our
first year… you were trained how to work it, weren’t you? I mean, Weaver was your SO.”

Skye nodded. “I was, though I’d never actually used one before. Took me a bit of practice.” People who had been staring at them went back to their own conversations.

Fitz bit his lip. “So… what are they like? The Avengers?”

Skye smiled, relaxing again. “Well, you’re sitting next to three of them,” she teased, nodding towards Bruce and then Thor. “Really, they’re all amazing people. We all really care about each other. They welcomed me when I was just an orphan meeting my soulmates for the first time. Kind of like how Coulson took me in after LA.”

“I always wondered about how you seemed to just settle in with us so easily,” Jemma offered timidly.

“Honestly, you guys made it easy,” Skye replied. “You guys only knew the old me, at the time, but aside from underestimating me… you really made me feel welcome, and I appreciated it. I can’t tell you how many times I wished I could tell you everything, but… well, I’m not sure I want to think about what might have happened if Ward knew who my soulmates were…”

“It certainly explains why Agents Hill, Romanov, and Barton just showed up after the Triskellion fell,” Jemma said, a hint of a smile ghosting her lips. “I can’t imagine watching my soulmate nearly die, then letting them back into the field.”

“I didn’t really give them much choice,” Skye said, chuckling softly. “They weren’t thrilled, but they wouldn’t keep each other out of the field so it wouldn’t be fair for them to try it with me.”

“I don’t see that going over well,” Darcy chimed in with a wry grin.

“Honestly, I think they knew it would be pointless to keep trying when I joined the women coming to help you guys with the Lorelei situation,” Skye commented lightly.

Jemma blinked. “I still don’t understand how you recovered so quickly…”

“Something to do with the drug they gave me,” Skye sighed softly. “I don’t know anything about it, really, so please don’t ask.”

“We’ve decided to just be happy that she’s still with us and she’s okay,” Bruce said evenly.

Thor inclined his head. “Indeed. We are most blessed that Lady Skye survived the bout with Quinn,” he said. “Sometimes you must forget the mystery behind the blessing because if you do not, you miss the blessing itself.”

Jemma froze. “I… I never thought about it like that. I’m sorry Skye. I’m… I’m not good with not knowing things. Even at SHIELD, there’s very little that I can’t figure out. I guess the fact that the information wasn’t available made me a little…”

“Overzealous?” Skye offered a neutral term, though she was smiling a bit. “I get it. It took me a long time to come to grips with the fact that some secrets were meant to be kept. Some are too dangerous to the people involved to be shared… and I’ve learned that some people keep secrets because they hurt too much.” Her thoughts went to Nat, but she kept her eyes on the people around her.

“Like how we set Hannah up with a new identity after the incident with the ghost - or whatever he was - on the Bus?” Fitz asked. “She should keep to herself what happened, so she can be happy in her new life.”
Skye nodded agreement, and Jemma pursed her lips thoughtfully.

“Neither Jane nor I could tell anyone about Thor,” Darcy piped up. “I couldn’t tell my parents a single thing about what I did in the desert for a summer. Then I had to sign another NDA after Greenwich.” Darcy rolled her eyes. “Like any of my college friends would actually believe that I know Thor. They just think I’m working for Jane.” Skye smiled. Darcy and Jane had been hired by SI and Darcy was currently working as a lab manager for multiple scientists, including Jane. Darcy was particularly good at making sure that everyone was fed, hydrated, and semi-well rested. “We all have secrets,” Darcy continued. “I’m sure you don’t tell your parents how much danger you get into at SHIELD.”

“I remember feeling envious when your parents kept calling, while we were doing cleanup in Greenwich,” Skye told Jemma softly. “Even with all the family I’ve got now, there has never been a time when a person has called me ten times a day because they’re worried. I mean, my soulmates don’t have to, but you know what I mean I hope?”

“Even people like me who still grew up having a mum… she didn’t call me after Greenwich,” Fitz said. “Most of us at SHIELD don’t have parents who are all that invested in our lives.”

Jemma blinked, as if the idea had never even occurred to her. Skye and Fitz knew it probably hadn’t. “I… I didn’t realize…”

“No one’s blaming you, Jems,” Fitz said, resting his hand atop hers for a moment.

“No, we just want you to try to think outside the box a little more,” Skye added gently. “Everyone has different experiences of life and different ideas of what life should be.”

“I… I’ll try to remember,” Jemma agreed in a low voice. “I want to understand. I really do.”

“Then remember the story we told,” Skye said as a light reminder. “About the orphan girl who changed schools so often, she could never keep up. That none of the teachers ever believed in her, so she learned not to believe in herself. Who went to the library and devoured books instead of going to class, and never realized just how much she was learning. Never graduated high school, never went to college. And then, one day out of the blue, was given an entry exam for an Academy she never would have thought she could qualify for… and passed, even breaking records in the process. It’s all true. Every bit of it, both what you knew originally and what you learned more recently. Not every life follows the same path.”

Jemma nodded, smiling brightly as a thought occurred to her. “Then I was right, at least in part… Agent 42 was SciTech.”

Skye laughed and nodded. “And Ops, and Comms, yes. I was all three, with different levels in each. It was unusual, I’m told.”

“I’ve never heard of any agent doing that,” Fitz piped up. “Fury must have seen something really special in you to do that.”

“Fury wasn’t the first one to do so,” Bruce said, breaking into the conversation for the second time since Skye had sat down.

Skye smiled fondly at him. “No, that was you. And then Maria, then Nat, Clint, and only Fury later.”

“So why weren’t your soulmates the first?” Darcy asked bluntly.

“Years before Skye met her soulmates, she audited one of my classes at Culver,” Bruce answered.
“I hacked the school so I could audit; I had neither the grades nor the money to actually get into the university,” Skye admitted.

“So what happened?” Fitz prompted, fascinated.

“She was one of the best students I’ve ever seen,” Bruce said. “My TAs were blown out of the water by some of the conclusions she made on her papers and tests. I encouraged her to take other Physics classes, but after the final… it was like she never existed in the system.”

Skye shrugged. “I moved on. Went down to Florida State and took one class on Astrophysics and one class on Computer Forensics. Every semester, I went to a different school and audited a class or two.”

Jemma smirked. “So that’s how you could know so much. How many classes did you audit?”

Skye shrugged. “I don’t know. Around twenty or so? I never really counted. Tulane was one of my favorites. I spent a lot of time hacking outside Cafe Du Monde in the French Quarter in the early morning hours.”

Jemma’s shoulders slumped. “I’m… I’m sorry Skye. I guess when I found out… I’m not used to people being smarter than me. Especially someone who doesn’t have a single Ph.D. Have you ever thought of pursuing a degree?”

Skye shrugged. “Sure, on and off. But… it seems unnecessary at this point. I have work I enjoy and there’s nothing missing in my life that a degree would provide. As long as the people I work with and care about have faith in my abilities, I don’t have anything to prove.”

“I meant no offense,” Jemma said gently. “I was merely curious…”

“I’m not offended. You’re not the first person to suggest that I should. It just… it doesn’t mean the same thing to me as it does to other people.” Skye smiled. “Having my family, or families, is a dream come true for me. Next to that, a degree just doesn’t carry the same weight.”

Noticing that dinner was winding down, Skye stood up. “I can show you to your rooms, if you’d like,” she announced loudly. “I can show you to your rooms, if you’d like,” she announced loudly. “We’ve got you set up in one of the wings. We don’t exactly have turn-down service here, but since Tony funds us, it’s pretty nice. Breakfast is served pretty early, but if you’re planning on sleeping in, we have cereal and milk. We run at 0500 around here, if anyone wants to join us.” She smiled when she saw Trip’s expression change. He looked like Lila did on Christmas Eve, desperate for presents and cookies.

Steve glanced at Skye first, asking permission. He looked at each of the others, confirming consent before approaching Coulson. “At 0700, we usually start morning training,” he told Coulson. “If you want to bring a member or two of your Board along, we’d like to extend an an invitation to come and see a demonstration of what we’ve been doing.”

Coulson looked a little surprised at the invitation; he met Steve’s eyes first, then Skye’s. When both nodded, he smiled a little. “I appreciate that. I think it’s a good idea. We’ll sort out who will be joining me and I’ll let you know at breakfast.”

The group broke up, one or two of the SHIELD agents lingering over conversations; Skye, Steve and Bruce showed the rest to the guest wing. Skye and Steve were entirely unsurprised when Trip left his room before they escaped down the hallway and joined them.

“Hey, Trip,” Skye said with a smile once they had a set of doors between them and the rest of SHIELD.
“Hey yourself, girl,” Trip replied with his signature grin. “How’s the little sister of my cousin’s fiancé?”

Skye laughed at him; they were well aware that they were more like sibs to each other, but Trip occasionally liked to tease about their actual relationship. “I’m fine. Happy. Oh, and engaged,” she added cheerfully.

Trip boggled at her for a few seconds, then scooped her into his arms and spun her around, laughing. “Congrats, girl! I had no idea...”

“We’ve kept it in the family,” she explained when he stopped spinning. She hugged him, then tilted her head so he could see her earring. “We went with these rather than regular rings. Subtler.”

“It’s gorgeous, Skye. Suits you.” Trip finally set her down but tucked her arm into his. Steve, on her other side, offered his arm and she took it as well. Bruce just smiled fondly as he walked a few steps behind them.

Trip spent an hour or so visiting with the Avengers’ team before heading back to the guest wing. He was well liked among the group, so his presence wasn’t in any way disruptive. By mutual consensus, the group turned in early; they all wanted to be in top form for their demonstration the next morning. Before bed, Skye set things up so that if Coulson wound up having to bring along Oliver or Gonzalez to the demonstration, people she really wanted to show off for - Trip and May, mostly - would be able to watch remotely. Now that Jemma and Fitz were on better terms with her, they might want to watch too.

“Come to bed, Skye,” Maria’s said, bringing her out of what she was doing. Maria shut the laptop. “It’ll keep until tomorrow. Nat and I need you and Wanda between us tonight.”

Skye allowed herself to be dragged to bed. Morning came as early as it ever did, but she still couldn’t help but grin when she spotted Trip standing with Bucky and Steve. May and Bobbi were also there. One of the nice things about the base was an outdoor track that was exactly two miles. Skye and Sam usually ran eight miles while Bucky and Steve ran fourteen. Between the distance and the company, Sam seldom complained about being lapped anymore.

The SHIELD agents joined Sam and Skye, May characteristically silent and Bobbi giving Skye a good number of awkward glances. Trip was positively chatty though, obviously wanting to catch up on her life.

“These are some nice digs for an office, girl.” Trip said

“Tony tends to provide us with the best toys,” Skye teased. “You should see the gym.”

“Stark, into conspicuous consumption?” Trip replied, deadpan. “Never would’ve guessed.” Even Bobbi couldn’t help a soft laugh at that.

“Yeah, Dad loves his stuff. He made me gloves that concentrate my power. It’s a little scary what I can do with them.”

“Can I get a demonstration later?” Trip asked.

Skye shrugged. “Maybe. It’ll depend on how SHIELD’s observation of the Avenger training session goes.”

“Girl, you know the Director isn’t going to be anything but supportive,” Trip told her.
“DC isn’t the one I’m worried about,” Skye retorted with a sigh.

“Gonzalez might disagree with Coulson, but he’s rational,” Trip said.

Skye didn’t answer until they had finished running. “Okay, I’ll give him another chance. But I can’t make any promises that the other Avengers will. RealSHIELD’s name is kind of mud around here.”

Trip nodded. “I get that. I do. But we have to make this work. SHIELD needs to work.”

“I know it does,” Skye answered. “You guys handle things that there just aren’t enough of us for. Or problems that don’t necessarily hit our radar, though I’m trying to set things up so that there doesn’t have to be an alien invasion or massive attack from Hydra to get our attention… But by the same token, they spent a lot of time and effort on us while we were trying to focus on Hydra… it’s not really trust inspiring, you know?”

“Trust me, girlfriend, Coulson and May have been all over that one,” Trip assured her.

“Good,” Skye said. “As long as I know it has been addressed, I’m fine with it. I trust Coulson. If he thinks I need to know, then I’ll hear about it. If it’s internal… well, I suppose I’m not considered a part of SHIELD anymore, so none of you actually owe me anything.”

“I’d like to say that you are,” Trip said as they started back for the base. “But I think it’s safe to say you’re too good for us.”


“You’re literally three times the agent most of us are, you were the smartest one on base, you managed to remain undercover under startling circumstances,” Trip said. “Trust me girl, you were the best agent Coulson had. You were always too good for SHIELD.”

“I’d agree with that,” May said catching up with them. “But that’s just evidence that we need to make SHIELD better.”

They came into the kitchen where cups of cottage cheese and yogurt, as well as a variety of fruits were laid out. There was granola for those who liked such things, as well. Skye ate lightly; she always did in the morning before training. There would be plenty of time for her to stuff her face later; she usually ate four or five meals rather than the typical three.

It was only 6:30 when Skye pushed away from the table. “I’m going to head to the gym; I Tai Chi before training,” she said, explaining to those who weren’t familiar with her routine. May caught her eye, head tilted in query. Skye gave a slight nod and small smile, and May pushed away from the table to follow her.

They didn’t speak as they went through the graceful, controlled motions of Tai Chi. Still, Skye caught the hint of warmth in May’s eyes and knew her former mentor was proud of her for keeping up the practice and improving her skill at it. It was a nice feeling, and one she hadn’t gotten for what felt like a long time.

After Tai Chi, the Avengers filed in with Coulson and Skye started her deep stretches, getting ready for her first sparring session. She knew that everyone else was watching from the other room; Steve told her they’d decided that it was better than excluding part of the group.

"Skye, you’re sparring with Thor,” Steve ordered. May and Coulson both looked at Steve, startled. Coulson looked like he wanted to object.
Thor bowed his head, then called his Hammer to his hand, twirling it. “I warn you Lady Skye. I will not hold back.”

“That makes two of us,” Skye replied lightly.

Both she and Thor entered the ring. Skye knew what Steve was doing. There was no point pussy-footing around her powers. Steve was forcing her to show off her best abilities, including her hovering.

Skye donned her gloves and got in ready position, waiting for the signal to start fighting. She tried to tune out Coulson yelling at Steve, but he was being pretty loud. “DC,” Skye finally interjected tensely, “Shut up.” Coulson was shocked into silence; May smirked.

The tone to start fighting sounded and Skye flew into action, rushing forward and landing a few punches before Thor managed to throw her off. She flew twenty-five feet in the air before she slowed her fall with her powers, flipping in the air and landing on her feet. Thor threw the Hammer in her direction and Skye used her powers at full force against it. She couldn’t move it, but in her experience, she could affect the elements around Mjolnir. She could slow down the air drag around just enough to force it to slow down so that she could get out of the way if she moved fast enough. After dodging out of the way, she instantly shook the ground Thor was standing on as hard as she could.

Thor stumbled just as he called the Hammer back to him and he missed grabbing it. Skye then rushed forward and took another few shots at Thor, kicking his legs from under him as she quaked his upper body. Thor fell down and Skye pinned him down. Thor rolled and tried to pin her. Skye quaked him off of her and got back onto her feet.

Both recovered, Thor called his Hammer and they were back to fighting. Skye had to dodge strikes with the Hammer, but she could use her powers to create a barrier of sorts that would let her block bare-handed strikes so she could retaliate. But though she was well trained at hand-to-hand, against an opponent like Thor her best shot was from a distance.

She retreated to the corner and quaked Thor again. Even though they’d sparred a number of times before, Thor still looked a little disturbed every time she did it. Two tones indicated that the five minute bout was over and Skye sighed, relaxing significantly as the tension left her. She turned and saw May and Coulson staring at her, open mouthed - Coulson’s more-so than May. She made a mental note to have JARVIS pull up the security video to see how the other SHIELD agents reacted.

Skye smiled. “There’s a reason they call me Quake,” Skye said.

“Lady Skye was mostly in close-combat prior to gaining her powers,” Thor said. “She is now a most formidable opponent. I must admit though, even I find it uncomfortable to feel my bones shake of their own accord. It is most unsettling.”

“Skye’s our utility player,” Steve explained. “Part of this demonstration, I admit, was Skye’s idea.”

“To prove that I can handle myself. That my powers are under control,” Skye stated after finishing her bottle of water. “That my team trusts me enough to use my powers in training and not hurt anyone,” she added pointedly, glancing towards the main camera more than anyone in the room.

“We can do some pretty amazing things if we work together, too,” Clint added. “I think we should give them free reign to observe for a while,” he continued, more to Steve than anything. “Save our last big surprise for towards the end.”
Steve nodded and quickly ordered everyone into their usual pairs, excluding Pietro and Bruce. In this case, Pietro would be a solo player, helping out where he felt needed. Bruce joined Coulson and May in just observing.

The various pairs tag-teamed around the room, trading off who was on which side. It was an hour-long melee of chaotic free for all, with the only exception being that partners never turned on each other. JARVIS, as always, was set to record the event from various angles for the team to review later, to help themselves and each other improve.

When the chime rang to halt the session, everyone just stopped. Steve and Skye exchanged high fives, Tony and Sam landed nearby - the gym was deliberately high ceilinged for the flyers - Clint and Nat traded smiles, and Thor slid Mjolnir back into his belt.

“Wow. That was… amazing,” Coulson said as the Avengers caught their respective breaths. Pietro, the only one not winded, zipped around the room distributing cold water bottles to everyone.

“We take training pretty seriously around here,” Maria said from the doorway, having arrived just a few minutes ago. She’d only caught the tail end of the melee, but she knew what was planned.

“So you always work in the same pairs?” May asked, clearly impressed.

“Not always, but often enough,” Clint answered her. “We can split up whatever way makes the most sense at the time, but these are our default mode so to speak. Partners we work easily with, the person who’s always right there when we need them.”

“Though we have to make some modifications each time the roster changes,” Tony added as he finished folding his suit away. “One more demonstration today, yeah, Cap?” Tony asked.

“Yeah,” Steve agreed. “Unless there’s an issue?”

No concerns were raised, so everyone cleared out of the way again, leaving Skye by herself sitting on the mats. Coulson seemed about to speak when Bruce stepped out to join her. “Ready?” he asked, offering her a hand up to her feet.

“Ready.” Skye grinned. Everyone watched, Coulson and even May with startled expressions, as Bruce shifted, growing in size and turning decidedly green. “Hey, big guy,” Skye greeted when his attention turned to her. “Ready to play?”

Hulk nodded, grinning. When the chime rang, he swung a huge fist at her - but Skye wasn’t there when his arm swept through. She was in the air, about at Hulk’s head-height. She flipped in the air as she redirected her power at him, pushing herself away even as she dropped back to the ground but also unbalancing Hulk so she had time to land on her feet.

While she couldn’t necessarily say she won the bout against Hulk, she survived well enough until the chime sounded again. She was panting by the time Steve called time, ready for a gigantic lunch and a nap, not necessarily in that order.

Maria led the rest of SHIELD in while Skye and Nat helped Bruce ‘unhulkify’ as Skye put it. Skye and Bruce were both then handed bottles with powerade in them to rehydrate after the lengthy fight. Kara and Sharon came over and each of them murmuring their ‘good jobs’ and ‘congratulations’ in her ear before joining Hunter and Maria in one corner of the gym, already reviewing footage and debating logistics.

Trip gave her a fist bump, grinning broadly. “Girl, that was a sight to see!” he exclaimed.
“Yeah, fighting Thor and the Hulk were not exactly on my bucket list before I met Maria and Nat,” Skye laughed. Jemma and Fitz both stared at Skye in shock, Bobbi and Oliver had the decency to look impressed, and Weaver looked vaguely proud of her former trainee. Even Gonzalez had seemed to lose his hate-face when looking at Skye.

Bobbi spoke first. “I think I speak for everyone when I say that I’m really glad you’re on our side, Skye,” Bobbi said.

“And to think, all it took was a family who supported me and three weeks in an undisclosed, isolated location,” Skye said dryly.

“You can fly,” Jemma said, awed.

Skye nodded. “It’s really more hovering than flying, but yes I can. So can Wanda,” she explained. “I just vibrate the air under my hands.”

“It’s quite a useful skill, now that it’s in control,” Gonzalez said smoothly. “It’d be unfortunate to only use it for Avenger-level fights.”

Skye froze, then turned and stared at Gonzalez, eyebrows raised. “What, exactly, are you saying?” she asked.

“I’m saying that maybe you should be open to assisting with other things, other projects,” Gonzalez continued. “You’d make a useful asset to SHIELD.”

Steve started forward and several Avengers opened their mouths, but Skye raised her hand as a gesture to stop them. She could do this herself. “You know, the first thing I noticed with SHIELD’s approach to assets? Even before HYDRA had its coming out party?” she asked Gonzalez. He stared at her, eyebrows furrowed. “It’s that SHIELD looks at an asset’s powers first and the person second. I’m almost completely sure that if SHIELD could have figured out a way to control Bruce or his powers, they wouldn’t have let him run off to India. They would have used him.”

“Of course we would have,” Gonzalez said.

“And you’ve just proven my point,” Skye said. “Maybe next time, you should try talking to them like a person first, and then concern yourself with how they could benefit SHIELD. For now I’m an Avenger. Only an Avenger.”

“Skye...” Coulson began, then he paused. “I understand what you’re saying. I do. We made some mistakes, some poor judgment calls were made, and now we have to deal with the fallout. I’m not asking you to come back to SHIELD. I would love it if you did, but I’m not asking you to.”

“The Index...” Jemma began, but she froze when Skye frowned.

“The Index is part of the problem.” Skye shook her head. “You dehumanize people when you classify them by their powers alone. When you look at them as numbers or powers or traits and not as a complete person, an independent human being. So no, I won’t sit placidly by and let you put me on the Index. Besides, HYDRA exploited the hell out of that thing. There’s no way.” Skye crossed her arms and her demeanor dared anyone to try despite her refusal.

“She has a point,” May said. “Putting all assets in one list does make it vulnerable to be exploited to non-SHIELD entities.”

“It’ll have to be something we discuss at the next SHIELD meeting,” Coulson said.
“We should grab lunch,” Steve said. “We’re planning on going over our intel on HYDRA from the bases we’ve brought down.”

“We’d appreciate that,” Coulson said.

Nat handed Skye a huge plate of food at lunch and Skye looked at her in surprise. “You burned a lot of calories this morning. You have to fuel up before we go again.”

“Does that mean I don’t have time for a nap?” Skye asked in a low voice.

“Maybe a short one?” Natasha suggested. “I could sit in on part of the logistics meeting, but I wanted to go through everything from this morning while it’s fresh. Go over what errors you might have made, anything that you could have done differently…”

“As long as it isn’t anything too physical,” Skye said with a smile. “And as long as I don’t have to sit through that logistics meetings. I hate our logistical meetings, much less one with SHIELD.”

“Most of us are leaving that one to Steve for that very reason,” Nat said with a smile.

“Good, because if you made me go, I would totally fall asleep mid-meeting at this point,” Skye said. “I don’t usually have to take on the Hulk and Thor in the same day.”
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Back to business as usual... or is it?

Chapter Notes

Holy cats! We've gone over 20k hits, and over 900 kudos! I don't think either of us ever expected this story to become so popular, nor that it would provoke so many interesting discussions via comments and messages. Thank you all for your never-ending support!

Chapter 37

After SHIELD went back to their base, the Avengers finally got to go home to the tower. The first
thing Skye and her soulmates had done was crash into their bed and spend the evening eating sushi and watching movies.

Bucky had been cleared by Andrew to stay at the tower, though he was still pretty skittish about the whole thing. He was getting better, though, and Steve barely left his side, except for the hour therapy sessions with Andrew and the hour Skye, Sam, and Steve spent running around Central Park early in the morning. Skye exchanged emails with various SHIELD members, even Jemma. Hunter had declared that he was no longer interested in a relationship with Bobbi after her betrayal and was spending a lot of time with Kara. Both of them insisted they were just friends for the time being, but Kara had admitted that there was the potential for more.

“I’m a glutton for an accent,” Kara told Skye with a smile one Saturday when the women were all out to brunch together.

“I agree with you there,” Maria said. Technically speaking, each of Maria’s soulmates came from a different country in Asia and Eastern Europe. Skye didn’t really have an accent, and Natasha’s was trained out of her - though once in a while she lapsed - but Wanda’s was lovely to listen to. Skye did sometimes speak in Mandarin, Natasha in Russian, and Wanda in Sokovian, which mostly made Maria laugh.

“British accents are hot,” Skye said, agreeing with Kara.

“Accents in general are hot,” Sharon seconded. “Have you heard Steve and Bucky when they get going? They lapse into the old Brooklyn accent, and I almost want to melt.”

The women laughed along with Sharon, nodding agreeably. When they both forgot themselves and just got involved in talking, Steve and Bucky were adorable.

They settled back into their usual routines. Light workouts in the morning in the gym at the Tower; powers and team training sessions were kept to the Avengers’ facility but they didn’t go every day. As long as they stayed in good shape and kept working to improve, they didn’t need to overdo it.

After a couple of days of normalcy, Skye noticed a guy watching as she, Steve and Sam ran their laps in Central Park. He wasn’t obtrusive or anything, simply that she’d seen him there for a couple of days and he didn’t resemble any of the homeless who usually occupied park benches in the early morning hours.

She mentioned it to the others, but they didn’t really think it meant anything other than that someone had recognized them. He didn’t approach, never said anything at all, so they decided to just keep an eye out and otherwise not let it affect them. There were plenty of unusual people in New York City; this one hardly stood out despite his long coat and sunglasses - even at 5am. Besides, they had attracted a few groupies once the fans figured out where they ran, though none of them could keep up with them. Mostly they stood at one spot or another and cheered as they went by, taking photos to post to Instagram.

After nearly a week of Skye spotting him every day, the man finally approached them. “Daisy,” the man said as Skye and Sam were stretching while Steve chatted with them, having already stretched. “I’m Gordon.”

All three of them stiffened. “That’s not my name,” Skye said. “And the last person who used it was my father, who kidnapped me.”

“I’m not with your father,” Gordon said with an easy smile. “I work for your mother.”
Skye stopped in her tracks. “My mother?” she asked. “My mother’s dead. My father told me HYDRA killed her.”

“Your father… has often misinterpreted events,” Gordon said in a placatory manner. “Your mother is very much alive; she had no idea you were, though, until very recently. She would very much like to meet you.”

Steve regarded Gordon calmly for a long moment. “If that’s true, then perhaps you’d be willing to come back with us.” He glanced around. “I don’t think the park is the best location to continue this conversation.”

Gordon cocked his head slightly, as if considering it, then shook his head. “While you may be right about this particular location, I don’t believe your home is the safest place for me to be.” He turned back to Skye, and she realized that though the sunglasses hid it well… the man had no eyes. Still, he behaved as if he could see.

“No one will hurt you,” Skye said confidently. “I give you my word.”

“I’m sure you believe that,” Gordon said agreeably. “But our people have not survived so long without being cautious.”

“Our people?” Skye echoed, her tone curious.

“Come with me,” Gordon urged her. “Come meet your people, your mother. We can answer your questions about your change, help you if you need it.”

Skye bit her lip but shook her head. “I can’t just disappear. My soulmates will worry, and that’s not good for any of us.”

“You’ve met your soulmates?” Gordon sounded surprised, though given the general lack of completed quads she supposed she couldn’t really hold that against him.

“I have,” Skye answered with a brief nod. “Maybe another time. I’m not going anywhere without at least talking to my soulmates. But if you want to leave me a contact, a phone number or email…”

Gordon shook his head. “We don’t do much of that. I’ll come back another time. Or if you should need me… just call my name.” He gave her a smile that was just as much a smirk and turned to walk away. When he reached the trees, out of sight of everyone in the park except their small group, he vanished in a flash of blue light.

“Why do I always attract the weird ones?” Skye asked rhetorically with a sigh.

“Birds of a feather flock together?” Sam suggested jokingly.

“I’m kinda serious about it,” Skye said. “I mean, I’ve had creepy, weirdly-obsessed Ward, then weirdly-creepy crazy Cal, and now just plain weird Gordon. I never had this problem before I met you guys.”

“It could be worse,” Steve said. “Immediately after I met the other Avengers, aliens invaded New York. Immediately after I met Sam, HYDRA come out of hiding.”

Sam and Skye laughed. “I suppose there’s that,” Skye said after a moment. “Still, at least you just have people trying to kill you. I’d almost rather that than these strange, obsessive types. They don’t just want me dead, for whatever reason they want me with them… want to take me away from the family we’ve spent years building up.”
“Just as long as we make sure you don’t get kidnapped this time,” Steve said. “I’d feel better if you didn’t go anywhere alone for the next while.”

Skye would have objected, but since she had been kidnapped twice already, she supposed that Steve had a valid point. “Yeah, okay,” Skye said. “At least for a little while. It’s not like I go out wandering by myself. Someone will have to escort me when I go see Matt, but other than that I pretty much always hang with you guys anyway.”

“Let’s get back to the Tower and brief everyone,” Steve said. Which was what they did. The team in general agreed that the possibility of Skye’s mother still being alive should probably at least be investigated. Darcy also pointed out that if there really were more people with powers like Skye’s out there, it was entirely possible that they had reasons to be mistrustful of the rest of the population. Rather like the Wizards in the *Harry Potter* books, perhaps they had reasons behind keeping their presence secret.

Some decisions were made, though in a more general way. And they all agreed that Skye shouldn’t be out alone for a while either. Just in case kidnapping was a family predilection and not just her father being insane.

Despite the fact that Skye was once again being watched carefully to ensure that she didn’t wander off alone, her life didn’t really change that much. They ran in the park, trained in the tower or at the upstate base, and Skye corresponded with Coulson about building the relationship between the Avengers and SHIELD. The protection detail bothered her a little, but she understood. She knew that she would act similarly if it was Wanda or Nat or Maria in her position.

But when nothing actually happened, everyone began to relax again. The group of runners didn’t see Gordon in the park again, they couldn’t identify anyone following Skye - or anyone else - outside of the occasional clutch of groupies. It was possible that there was someone planted in those groups, but no one stood out as being out of place.

They didn’t try to pass it off as nothing, but there didn’t seem to be any sort of threat pending.

A week or so after security around Skye diminished, they received a call from Coulson. It turned out that RealSHIELD had still been keeping secrets up until they were convinced that Coulson’s accords with the Avengers was the real deal. There was an artifact on a SHIELD aircraft carrier, which was apparently dangerous enough for Fury to order the ship sunk rather than letting HYDRA get their hands on it.

The artifact was very strange and apparently of alien origin, so Coulson wanted Skye and Thor to take a look.

By mutual agreement of all the Avengers, they decided that Bruce should also go along. Between the three Avenger powerhouses, if anything went sideways, Thor, Skye, and Bruce could sink the place if they needed to. And SHIELD wouldn’t be able to stop them, if that’s what they decided.

Landing on the deck of the carrier, Skye pinched the bridge of her nose. It caught Thor’s attention and he looked at her, concerned. “Are you alright, Lady Skye?”

Skye nodded. “I’ll be fine,” she said. “There’s something that sounds as loud as a mountain below deck. The metal of the ship is amplifying it. It just takes a minute to get used to the noise. It’s like… going from a quiet room to a loud concert.”

“Alright,” Thor said, nodding. “Then we will go investigate the stone that Coulson wishes us to look at. I believe it may be the source.”
“Skye,” Coulson greeted. Weaver and May were behind him. “Thor, Dr. Banner… Welcome to the *Iliad.*”

“I’m just glad I’m not on a sub or a helicarrier,” Bruce said with a tight smile.

“That makes two of us,” Coulson said. “Come on, I’ll show you the rock I was telling Skye about.”

He led them below deck, into a room with a huge stone that was encased in plexiglass. Skye felt it in her very skin that there was something wrong. The closer she got to the stone, the louder the vibrations in her ears. She stepped up next to the structure and the stone immediately became liquid and *jumped* at her. Despite the glass, Thor reached out and pulled her away from it. Skye shrieked as he did so, both at the rock’s reaction to her and Thor surprising her.

Coulson frowned. “Huh…” he said after Skye backed up and the rock solidified again. “It’s never done that before.”

“It got louder… when it changed, it was so loud…” Skye murmured to Thor, who nodded. He held her arm gently until she regained her bearings, keeping her away from the rock. Bruce carefully moved closer, but the artifact didn’t react to him. He circled the case, examining it closely.

“Interesting,” Bruce mused. “Do you have scans of this… monolith?”

Coulson glanced at Weaver, who nodded. “Some, yes. We’ve never seen it react to a person in that way before, but it does periodically liquify and reform. We don’t have enough data to analyze the timing between incidents, though. They’re fairly far spread.”

“Where did it come from?” Skye asked, nodding to Thor that she was fine. She watched as Thor moved to join Bruce, and the monolith didn’t react to him, either.

“It has been in SHIELD custody for only a short time; we obtained it from NASA, after a failed experiment in their projects,” Weaver explained. “They didn’t seem to know much about its origins, though; it was apparently donated to them in the late 90s.”

“It feels very strange,” Skye commented lightly. “It doesn’t have the same vibrational signature as any rock I’ve encountered in the past few months.”

“Does it feel to you like anything you have encountered before?” Thor asked.

“No… Wait, maybe,” Skye said, thinking back. “It’s hazy, but… it sort of reminds me of something in the old city under San Juan...”

Thor nodded. “Then it is likely of Kree origin, though to what purpose… I am uncertain. I would have to research.”

“You’re saying this is a Kree device?” Coulson asked skeptically. “Like the ruins where Skye was… transformed.”

Thor nodded, his expression serious. “Yes. Given that it reacts to Lady Skye alone, it is possible that it was designed to only work either for or against Inhumans. Which is true remains to be seen, given that we do not know its purpose or what would have occurred had it come into contact with Skye.”

“I don’t think I’m willing to try it just to find out,” Skye quipped lightly, though she was actually very serious about it.

“I would not ask you to, Lady Skye. But if anything ever does happen, one thing to keep in mind is
that Heimdall can see and reach all realms. He will assist you if you call for him.”

“Thanks Thor,” Skye said with a smile.

“If it is Kree…” Bruce said slowly, thinking carefully. “Skye, would you be willing to try using your powers on it?”

“I didn’t bring my gloves, but I can certainly give it a go,” Skye said.

She held up her hands and let her powers loose, matching the frequency of the stone. She whimpered a bit as she took several steps back then redoubled her efforts. The noise was unbearable, drowning out everything else. She wanted to hurl. Someone was calling her name, but it sounded so far away, until someone slapped her. She blinked, coming out of her trance as she let the monolith revert to its inert state.

She was on the ground and Bruce was kneeling over her. “Okay, we’re not doing that again,” he said lightly. She felt something wet on her upper lip and she put her hand on it. “The pressure of the vibrations you were manipulating caused a nosebleed,” Bruce said. “We’ll probably want to do an MRI when we get back to check things over, but you should be okay. Do you think you’re up to sitting up?”

Skye nodded and Bruce helped her sit up. “Okay, that was a mistake,” Skye said hoarsely, wincing. “Moving makes my migraine worse. Did it move at all?”

“It went liquid for about ten seconds, but that’s it,” Bruce said. “Regardless, it’s not a good idea for you to do that again.”

Thor looked pensively at them. “What is a migraine?” he asked curiously.

Skye closed her eyes. “Basically, it’s a very intense headache that makes you sensitive to light, sound, movement and other things,” she explained.

Thor frowned. “Are humans normally prone to such things?”

“Not normally, no,” Coulson took over the explanation to spare Skye the effort. “They can be triggered for some people by certain things, but they don’t happen to everyone. Skye didn’t used to get them, but of course I can’t speak for her since her… change.”

“This is definitely unusual for Skye,” Bruce said in a low voice, with a glance at Skye to be certain she didn’t mind. “She gets headaches from overusing her powers, once in a while.”

“This definitely wasn’t that,” Skye said, her voice strained from the pain of the migraine. “Could I get a couple ibuprofen?”

May passed Bruce a bottle and a can of cola. “The caffeine sometimes helps,” May said.

Bruce shook two pills out and passed them to Skye. She swallowed them dry, then chased them with a couple sips of the coke. “We should probably get you back to the Tower,” Bruce said.

“I don’t know if I should be flying the jet with a migraine,” Skye said softly.

“We can send a pilot with you, if someone can get them back to base afterwards,” Coulson offered.

“Call Clint. I’m sure he’d agree,” Skye suggested.

Bruce nodded. “That works. Come on,” he said, getting to his feet. Skye accepted his help to her
feet, but wavered without really finding her balance for a moment. Then Thor scooped her up into his arms, holding her securely against his chest as they left the room.

Trip ended up flying them back to the Tower, begging an afternoon off so he could spend time with Steve, Bucky, and Sharon. Coulson agreed, in part because he knew Trip would give him an update on Skye’s condition when he returned to the base. At least they all had the comfort of knowing that Skye had agreed to try; everyone would have been pissed if Skye had been pressured into using her powers on the device and gotten hurt as a result.

The flight back to the Tower passed mostly in a haze of pain for Skye. Between the noise and vibration of the jet’s engines and the pressure changes as they took off and landed, her head was a mess. So she didn’t protest when Bruce ordered her to the med lab as soon as they arrived; as much as she hated hospitals, they would all be happier when they had the scan results.

She was set up with an IV and Dr. Cho injected both zofran for the nausea and dilaudid for the pain. Moments after the drugs were injected, Skye sighed as the pain faded away and she passed out from exhaustion.

When she woke up again, her migraine had broken and blissfully, all the tests that she needed to have done had been completed. Everything had come back normal, so Dr. Cho released her into her soulmates’ care.

Fortunately, she didn’t have to explain anything. Thor and Bruce had done so for her; she didn’t even receive any scolding looks from her soulmates. There had simply been no way to know she would react so badly to trying to manipulate the monolith. They just fussed over her, cuddling mercilessly. She reassured them that she was okay and they all went to bed.

Some time in the early hours of the morning, Skye, Maria, and Nat were awakened to shrieking coming from Wanda. Skye untangled herself and tried to get out of the way, unsure of what to do and unused to having another soulmate wake up screaming or hurting. She felt the fear that was coming through the bond from Wanda. She watched Maria start to stroke Wanda’s hair with well-practiced ease, murmuring to her softly. Nat grabbed Wanda’s hand and pushed love through the bond and Skye, following Nat’s lead, did the same with the other hand.

Wanda was silent for a moment, then blinked and started sobbing. Maria dragged her into sitting position and the four of them embraced, comforting Wanda.

“Can you talk about it?” Maria asked quietly.

“They’re all dead,” Wanda sobbed. “They made him kill them all!”

“Shhh,” Maria soothed, pulling Wanda into her lap and rocking her.

It took several hours, but they managed to extract the whole story from her. She had shared in a dream that wasn’t her own; she’d gotten caught up in one of Bucky’s. Nat sucked in a breath between her teeth; from what they knew of his history, his nightmares were probably pretty intense. Deaths he’d caused, most likely; Nat had her share of them, as well.

Skye kept her link to Wanda in the forefront of her mind, sending calm and love as she got up and went for a cool wash cloth and a glass of water for her distraught soulmate. She set the items on the nightstand as she returned, just so they were nearby when needed.

Under the combined attention of her three soulmates, Wanda calmed down more easily than she’d expected. It helped that it wasn’t her trauma, but someone else’s. Still, it had been terrible to have to
witness… and to feel both the cold, efficient part of him that killed without remorse and the grief and pain from the person that Bucky truly was inside.

“JARVIS,” Skye called out softly, shortly after Wanda had told them it was Bucky’s nightmare. She was still too scared at that point to talk about it. “If Bucky is alone, please wake either Steve or Sam and ask them to check on him.”

“Yes, Miss Stark.” Skye just sighed and made a note to reprogram JARVIS’s name database again.

“Good thinking,” Nat whispered as they all snuggled close around Wanda. Skye just shrugged; if Wanda didn’t need her, she’d have gone to check on Bucky herself. But her soulmates were always her first priority, and she knew no one else in the Tower ever questioned that.

They surrounded Wanda with a cushion of love and support until she and Maria dozed off together. Very carefully, Skye extracted herself from the pile, watching Natasha follow suit.

“Is it always that bad?” Skye said. “I mean… when you two have helped me?”

Natasha considered the question, embracing Skye from the side. “I don’t think I think of it as ‘bad’ necessarily. Yes, Wanda had a nightmare, you could think of it that way and not consider anything else, but she was around her soulmates, we helped her through it, and we’ll be there for her if she needs it. We can’t prevent bad things from happening in each others’ lives, we can just be there for each other when it does.”

Skye leaned on Natasha’s shoulder. “You give really good advice,” Skye admitted.

“Do you think you can go back to bed?”

“No,” Skye said softly. They’d been awoken a little past one and it was now nearly four. “But you can if you want to. I’d only get another hour of sleep anyway.”

“Are you sure?” Natasha asked. She only went back into their bedroom when Skye nodded. Skye checked her emails as well the latest social media posts relating to the Avengers that were posted by the PR department.

She flagged an email she received from Pepper asking her opinion on which Avengers should be sent to the White House Correspondents dinner, which was taking place in a month. Skye drafted a response that Steve and Sam were good choices, but wanted to check with them first. She also volunteered herself if Pepper thought a female Avenger should go, since Wanda was still fairly new to the team and had yet to be truly exposed to the American media and politics. Natasha’s name was still unpopular within Congress, so she wasn’t the best choice.

By the time that was done, she decided to head down a little early for their run. Sam and Steve were both waiting for her, without Bucky, and looking tired.

“Hey,” Skye said.

“Hey,” Steve said. “You’re up early.”

“We had to deal with something a few hours ago,” Skye said slowly, unsure of how much information Wanda wanted to reveal, even to her friends.”

“I’m guessing that something had to do with JARVIS calling us in the middle of the night?” Sam asked.
“Or finding Bucky stuck in a nightmare about what HYDRA made him do?” Steve asked. “Jeez, did Wanda intercept it?”

Skye nodded slowly. “Don’t tell Bucky though, okay? I don’t think either of them needs to deal with more than they currently are.”

“Of course,” Steve said, nodding. “Is she…”

“It took us a while to get it all out of her, and a while longer for us to get her back to sleep, but I think she’ll be okay.”

“Good,” Steve said.

“Actually, I have something to ask you guys. Pepper sent me an email last night asking me if I had any thoughts on who to send to the White House Correspondents Dinner.”

“Depends on which table we’re sitting at,” Sam said honestly. “If it’s the Fox table, I’d say none.”

Skye laughed. “Like Pepper would even suggest that. We’d be seated at the New York Times table, I think. I was thinking you and Steve could go. The native New Yorkers of the team, since Bucky couldn’t go.”

“You’re a native New Yorker too, Skye,” Sam argued. “I guess I’d be okay with that. Brooklyn, what do you think?”

Steve frowned. “I’m not a huge fan of these celebrity appearance things,” he said thoughtfully. “But I suppose this is better than some of the requests we’ve gotten. I guess you can send the response to Pepper that the three of us are willing to do it, as long as you are.”


“Who the hell would name their kid Brangelina?” Steve asked in confusion.

Skye and Sam laughed. “I’ll explain it to you when we get back. Come on, let’s go.”

They had a good run, though Skye was a little slower than usual due to fatigue. Of course, Sam was in about the same shape, so neither complained about the slightly slower pace. If it took them a little longer, there was no one there to care but Steve.

Though Steve didn’t comment on it, either. He just stretched as he waited for them to finish and join him. They joined him in stretching, Skye using a few of her Tai Chi moves to loosen up her joints again after the run.

“That looks useful,” Sam commented. “Can you show me?”

“Sure,” Skye agreed. So she walked him through a few of the moves that worked through knees, hips and shoulders.

“You do not see many your age who embrace the old ways,” came an accented voice behind them. All three of them turned around and saw a very old Chinese man looking at them with a large smile. “Most young Chinese girls cannot be bothered to learn Tai Chi,” the man said. “They’d rather forget the old ways and go to yoga.”

Skye smiled. “I learned from my mentor, grandfather,” Skye said respectfully in Mandarin. The old
man smiled wider, if possible. “I think she learned from her mother. But I enjoy it. It’s good for me, physically and mentally.”

“You speak Mandarin too?” The man said back in the same language. “You must make your parents very proud.”

“My family is very proud of me,” Skye said, nodding.

“Well, I will allow you to move on with your day,” the man said, bowing. Skye did the same.

“And a good day to you, grandfather,” Skye replied with a final smile for the old man.

“That was interesting,” Sam said as the gentleman walked away. “What were you talking about?”

Skye shrugged, still smiling a bit. “He’s just happy to see that not everyone is forgetting the Chinese part of their heritage. That I speak the language, practice Tai Chi… he said my parents must be proud, and I told him that my family is quite proud of me. ‘Cause I know you guys all are.”

“Of course we are,” Steve said, pulling her in for a hug. Sam gave her a hug as well, then they started the walk back to the Tower.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

The PR evening mentioned previously.

PR Photos!

Chapter 38

Skye,” Pepper said over breakfast the morning of the Dinner. “You need to stay behind today. I have a stylist arriving in an hour to handle the final fitting for your dress. This afternoon we have appointments at the spa for a massage and to get your makeup and hair done.”
“Damnit,” Skye said. “I hate that going to this thing means I have to be a girl,” Skye grumbled. “Why don’t the boys have to spend hours getting ready?”

“The world sucks?” Pepper offered, amused. “But playing dress-up is fun, and at least we get to wear clothes that reflect our style.”

“My style is my combat gear,” Skye complained good-naturedly.

“I know,” Pepper soothed. “But you look amazing all dressed up, and every woman needs to feel like a princess once in a while. We’ll take pictures for your soulmates, and you can show off when you get home. Like Nat did, when she used to dress up for missions.”

“I am sure you will be lovely to see,” Wanda said with a smile. “I look forward to it.”

“All right, all right,” Skye gave in, somewhat gracelessly. “We’ll go do the girly thing today. I don’t know how you do this stuff all the time, Pepper.”

“A lot of practice. And I generally enjoy it,” Pepper said. “Besides, I’m used to working in circles where you have to look your best to be taken seriously. Your job doesn’t have that requirement.”

“Thank goodness for that!” Skye exclaimed, making the rest of her team chuckle.

“Steve, Sam, make sure you’re back here by two. The tailors will be by to final fit your tuxes, too,” Pepper reminded the guys.

“Yes, ma’am,” Steve agreed respectfully.

“We’ll be here,” Sam agreed.

The rest of the team finished their breakfasts and headed for the jet to upstate. Skye and Pepper lingered over an extra cup of coffee; Skye was surprised by how quiet the Tower was with everyone else gone.

“How do you do it, Pepper?” she asked softly.

“Do what, honey?” Pepper asked, regarding Skye seriously over the rim of her mug.

“Keep up the appearance of being perfectly put together when the Tower gets so silent with everyone gone?”

Pepper gave her a small smile. “Practice, I suppose. I lived alone in a high-rise apartment before moving in here with Tony. And at first, there usually wasn’t anyone here except him and I, and sometimes Bruce.”

“Does it bother you that we all live here now?”

Pepper shook her head. “Not at all. It’s nice to feel like I’m living in a community again. Before getting into the executive professional world, I used to live in an area where I knew my neighbors and their families. This is kind of like going back to that, except that we’re all one big, extended family. And a lot of that is because of you, I think.”

“It’s because of other people too though,” Skye argued. “If Nat and Maria hadn’t insisted I stay all those years ago, I probably wouldn’t have initially. If Steve hadn’t needed and been so open to a friendship I would have thought the other Avengers were too important for little old me.”

“I understand; everyone had to be invested for the group to become the family it is,” Pepper agreed.
“I’m not saying you did everything. But I’m not sure we would be as strong a group as we are without you. You built links between different individuals and yourself, and so those people interacted more because of it. You brought us all together. You weren’t always the one to bring them in, sure; people like Sam knew Steve first, but you helped make them feel welcome here.”

Skye blushed. “I… well… maybe. It sucks, being on the outside looking in.”

“Some of us understand that better than others,” Pepper agreed.

“I still don’t understand how you can be so poised all the time. Never a hair out of place and you always look… classy.”

“Experience,” Pepper said with a shrug, “And a really good stylist. I can teach you if you’d like.”

Skye considered it. She knew some day when she and her soulmates wanted to get married and if her last name got leaked, then she’d be under an even more intense spotlight. If that came out, it was possible that she’d never leave the spotlight if the press found out, depending on whether Pepper and Tony ever had kids - which was becoming less and less likely with every passing year. Besides, she couldn’t always lean on Pepper. Eventually she’d have to do this on her own. “I don’t know,” she said. “I’ll think about it.”

“No pressure. I’m always here,” Pepper said.

“Thanks, though. I appreciate the offer,” Skye added.

“Not a problem. Come, on, let’s go get you ready for the seamstress.”

Pepper’s arrangements were kept promptly, probably, Skye thought, because Pepper wouldn’t waste her time with a vendor that couldn’t be on time. She was shortly thereafter standing on a stool while minor changes to the dress were pinned into place. It didn’t need much; Skye didn’t have a lot of fat left on her body, and muscle mass changed slowly. Skye sat in her robe and chatted with Pepper while they waited for the final alterations to be complete. Then Skye was trying on the dress again, while the seamstress tutted to herself as she eased the fitted bodice into place.

“It looks great, Pepper,” Skye said when she was allowed to look in the mirror. “You have good taste.”

“Thank you,” Pepper replied with a small smile.

“Are you sure that I can do this?” Skye asked, uncertainty hitting her all at once as she studied herself in the mirror. “I mean, these are reporters. Steve and Sam both have origin stories. I… just appeared. How do I prevent myself from being accosted for an exclusive?”

“Okay, dealing with that question? Keep it simple, clean, and true. You won’t do any interviews but if they do ask you about your origins, keep it simple, like the fact that you were an orphan in the foster system. It’s okay to smile and be a little mysterious, too. Just don’t lie. They’ll want answers, but you don’t necessarily have to give them what they want. Oh, and whatever you do, don’t get angry when they ask you the stupid questions.”

“Stupid questions?” Skye asked, curiously.

“Do you remember the question that Nat got right after the Battle of New York during the press conference?”

“The one about her diet?” Skye asked. “Of course I do, that thing went viral, and only partially
because of my influence.”

“Exactly. Nat didn’t yell or threaten the reporter. She just asked the reporter why she was being asked such a stupid question.”

Skye considered the connotations of that. “You mean, because we’re women people aren’t going to stop asking about our bodies or clothing,” she said in a flat, annoyed tone.

“And you can’t get upset about it,” Pepper said with a nod. “If you do, you give them the spectacle they want as well as leeway to speculate. If you calmly tell them that such questions are unworthy of the event or of a response, they usually will back down.”

Skye sighed. “I’ll try to keep my temper in check. At least I’m not as bad as Nat in that department.”

“I know. In any case, we can discuss it a bit more over lunch. I planned light, because these dinners are usually huge and extravagant. But I do have a bit of a snack for you between hair and makeup, because the dinner won’t start until seven. I know, I know, the event is at six. They won’t have dinner in front of you for at least an hour, though.”

Over lunch, Pepper gave Skye all sorts of tips about dealing with hundreds of flashbulbs in your face and how to deal with the TV commentators who would be there. Power demonstration was pretty inadvisable, though there was a good chance someone would ask, as was talking about any depressing topics like HYDRA. This was apparently going to be a pointless night except for providing fluffy b-roll and a story for a senator to bring home to their kids.

Hours later, the five of them were flown in the private jet to an airfield where a limo waited for them. Exiting the limo, Skye was taken aback by the vibrations that all the screaming caused for a moment. She adjusted and kept going. Pepper kept well-ahead of the group while Steve and Sam both flanked Skye subconsciously. Skye did her best to pivot and turn like she’d seen other famous people do so at awards shows. The Avengers often got invitations like this, but seldom accepted them. Skye knew Steve had been to a couple of dinners at the White House and was friendly-ish with the President, and the others had done a few events in New York, but Skye had been undercover the whole time, so she hadn’t participated.

The three of them were escorted to one of the stopping points where a network TV anchor was interviewing people. The anchor started asking the standard questions, and all three of them answered the questions easily until the anchor focused on Skye.

“Now Quake, on a personal note, our viewers are dying to know. How’s your love life? Do you like to shake things up in the bedroom?”

“I have full control of my powers,” Skye said with an easy smile. “No one has to worry about me losing control, even when I’m pissed off or agitated.”

“So you’re single and free to date the men of New York?” the reporter asked

Skye smiled again. “I prefer to keep that part of my life private, don’t you?”

“Woah,” the reporter said. “Things are heating up fast here on the Red Carpet.”

“Trust me man,” Sam said, clapping the reporter on the back with a smile as easy as Skye’s. “She’s way too much woman for you.”

Steve looked at the reporter a little menacingly, causing Skye to laugh. “Come on, Steve. Let’s get inside.”
“Are you okay?” Steve asked.

“What?” Skye asked, confused. “I’m fine. It was just a reporter. I’m cool.”

“He was totally rude to you,” Steve said.

“Yeah, but Sam took care of him,” Skye said shrugging. “That reporter’ll be the laughing stock of the Internet and anyone with a TV by this time tomorrow. Besides, Pepper warned me that reporters were going to ask me questions like that.”

“She did?” Steve asked, not mollified but unwilling to push it further.

“Yep. A lot of people in the media will pick harder at a woman than a man, particularly over personal things,” Skye explained in a low voice.

Sam nodded his agreement. “I understand that Natasha took a lot of grief after New York and DC. Pepper Potts taking over Stark Industries was also a big deal. Despite whatever the current Tony Stark scandal was.”

“It isn’t fair,” Skye added. “But that’s the way it is.”

The dinner went by fairly quickly, at least. Skye got to meet a few celebrities who mostly shook her hand to be polite because they wanted to meet Steve. A couple of jokes were made at her and the other Avengers’ expense, which Steve, Sam, and Skye all took good naturedly. The food was delicious and apparently someone had thought ahead and given Skye and Steve extra big helpings of everything.

Between speeches, the reporters at their table chatted with them easily. One reporter did ask Skye where she came from, but everyone pretty much accepted her answer that she was raised in an orphanage in Hell’s Kitchen and asked nothing too intrusive. Another reporter asked about the nature of Steve and Skye’s relationship and they both happily answered that they were best friends, but weren’t dating and weren’t interested in dating.

“He’s like a cross between my best friend and my big brother,” Skye said with an easy smile. “He’s great but sometimes he can be so annoying. Especially during 5am workouts. He likes to rub it in that he can pass us multiple times without breaking a sweat.”

The Times reporters all laughed as Steve smiled and mussed Skye’s hair in a brotherly fashion. “Skye’s a great little sister, except all my friends think she’s cooler than I am.”

“It’s true,” Sam deadpanned. “Skye’s way cooler than Steve.”

There were the standard requests for selfies and Instagram posts that all three of them happily complied with. Once the dinner was over, they were escorted to the Vanity Fair party. Sam and Steve both danced with her, but she also did shots with a couple of the younger reporters and, at one point, Chelsea Handler.

Being in a room full of media personalities, Skye realized quickly that there were some reporters she enjoyed more than others. Some reporters asked the same questions over and over, while others asked her questions that she had to think about. Or questions that were relevant to herself and her capabilities.

“What’s Captain America like to live with?” Chelsea asked between shots. “Is he really as button-down as he seems or is he a closet slob?”
“Totally button-down,” Skye said with a grin. “We’re thinking about getting him into a 12-step program.” Chelsea thankfully took it as it was intended, a joke, and laughed out loud.

It was novel to think that maybe some of these people were interested in actual news as well as the usual media sensationalism.

At the end of the night, Skye sighed happily as the three of them eased into the limo and Skye was able to take off her heels. She sighed happily as she grabbed a bottle of water from the ice chest.

“You said it,” Sam said.

Skye went straight to her phone and saw that her Quake twitter account had gained a bunch of followers that night. She quickly sent out a tweet with a selfie of the three of them at the dinner then closed the app. “I prefer training to this… stuff,” she said.

“It reminds me of being the ‘Star-Spangled Man with the Plan’,” Steve said, undoing his bow tie. “I felt like a performing monkey.”

“Might as well get used to it, man,” Sam said with a sympathetic smile. “You’re still the most congenial of the team, and the one name that very few people in this country have the guts to smear badly. The readers won’t put up with it; they want to believe in the truth, justice and the American Way thing, and even the media can’t change that easily.”

“Buck up, brother-mine,” Skye quipped teasingly. “At least you don’t get asked stupid questions about your bedroom habits or how you can eat so much and don’t gain weight.”

Steve chuckled and nodded his agreement. “I suppose it could be worse.”

“It could always be worse; Tony could have been here, hamming it up for the photographers,” Skye agreed.

“That’s why I brought you three,” Pepper said from her corner as she typed away rapidly, coordinating with the Avenger PR agents who were back at the tower. “Steve’s pretty much unsmearable, Sam’s got the ‘average American’ side, and Skye… she paused. “No offense, but even if reporters found out about your past no one would want to go after you for it except for maybe Fox News. Your story’s too ‘tragic’.”

Skye nodded. She understood it. The kidnapping by SHIELD/HYDRA, the murder - if Cal was right - or attempted murder - if Gordon’s version proved true - of her mother, the childhood in foster care, the homelessness… it wasn’t a pretty story and not one that many would have the balls to criticize. “It’s fine, I get it. Plus, they don’t know I was involved with SHIELD when HYDRA came out of hiding. Wanda, Pietro, and I are non-affiliated with SHIELD from the public’s perspective.”

“And technically speaking, Sam is only affiliated with the dismantling of the agency; his military record isn’t public, but he is listed as having served and is part of the VA,” Pepper agreed, nodding. “You three essentially have the best PR standing. Natasha, Clint and Maria will always have the ‘stain’ of their previous affiliation with SHIELD. Tony… well, he’s Tony. And Bruce has the enmity of at least one if not several highly placed military personnel.”

“Which means we’re stuck doing most of the public events. Even when Wanda and Pietro are able to join us,” Steve said with a resigned sigh.

“Basically. Sorry, but that’s how it works,” Pepper said, patting his hand sympathetically.

“I suppose we’ll manage,” Skye said, trying to smile.
“I was going to wait to ask, but a reporter approached me at the Vanity Fair party about you doing an interview.”

“I don’t know…” Skye said slowly.

“It’s going to come out eventually, you know,” Pepper pointed out. “You weren’t raised in a box. Eventually one of your foster siblings are going to recognize you and sell their version of things to the press. It’s better if we release the story in a controlled manner that we can use.”

“Alright,” Skye agreed reluctantly. “But I don’t want to be alone. I would appreciate your help, and maybe Darcy’s. She’s good at this public spin thing too.”

Pepper nodded agreement. “You’ll be fine, and of course we’ll help you prepare.”

Skye managed to get through the interview a few days later. Pepper brought her a copy of the article the following morning over breakfast, and they agreed that it could go to print. A few days later, a box arrived at the Tower with a dozen copies of the issue containing the article. Skye had it scanned and sent copies to Coulson, May, Trip and FitzSimmons so they wouldn’t find out about it accidentally.

Life continued as normal for a few more days until, one morning, Wanda woke up as Skye was getting dressed for her morning run.

“Shh, it’s early,” Skye soothed her in a whisper. “Go back to sleep.”

But Wanda shook her head. “No, not today.” She got up and pulled on a pair of Skye’s track pants and her own t-shirt and trainers. Skye blinked at her, surprise. “I do not know what it is… but it is important that I go with you today.”

Skye took in the firm belief in Wanda’s eyes and nodded. “Alright. Let’s go, love.”

They were only two miles into the run when Skye spotted Gordon sitting on a bench and waiting for her. “Hello, Skye,” Gordon greeted when Skye stopped in her tracks.

“Gordon?” she asked hesitantly.

“Have you had time to consider my offer?” Gordon asked. “Will you come home?”

Skye took a deep breath and tried to be as diplomatic as possible. “I’m willing to visit,” she said, “My soulmates and I discussed it and I’d like to have the chance to get to know my mother. But it can’t be permanent. I have responsibilities here. Plus… I want Wanda to come with me.” Skye nodded towards her soulmate. “She’s one of my soulmates. Wanda, this is Gordon.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Wanda said, extending her hand.

Gordon didn’t take it. He stared at Skye for a moment. “Our people… don’t like outsiders. They don’t trust them. In our experience, they tend to disagree with us.”

Skye shifted and put her hands in her pockets. “Wanda’s different. She may not be Inhuman, though we really have no way to know. But Wanda has powers, and I’m not going without her.” When Gordon seemed to still hesitate, Skye sighed and let a hint of her emotion show in her eyes. “My soulmates are the family I had to make for myself. Please don’t make me choose between them and meeting my mother.”

Catching on to what Skye was doing, Wanda stroked her fingers lightly through her soulmate’s hair
and smiled fondly at her. “It is alright, my Skye,” she said gently. “Meeting your mother will not diminish our family. Only make it grow.” Her free hand found one of Skye’s and their fingers twined gently together. Presenting the picture of loving soulmates who couldn’t bear to be parted, however briefly.

“Very well,” Gordon capitulated. Though he had no eyes, Wanda could feel his attention intently upon her. “From one person with gifts to another, I hope you will keep our secrets to yourself and do not come with any intent to betray us to the outside world.”

Wanda lifted her chin, her expression resolute. “I wish no harm upon any culture or peoples. Nor would I ever want to hurt my soulmate by betraying her, even by association or extension.”

“We came with two others that we need to say goodbye to,” Skye said. “If we just disappeared, the Avengers would track us down. I’ve been kidnapped twice before, once by Cal so they’re a bit protective.”

“I understand,” Gordon said, inclining his head.

“Skye?” Steve’s voice came behind them. “What’s up?”

“Gordon came back to take me to my mother,” she said. Steve nodded. He hadn’t been happy when they had decided to give Skye the chance to investigate and, if possible, get to know her. Skye was fairly sure that without her GPS chip (that they weren’t going to tell the Inhumans about) they wouldn’t have let her go.

“How long will you be gone?” Steve asked.

“It’s going to depend on how things go,” Skye said. “I’ll try to get back in touch as soon as I can. Gordon, I know there’s no phones or internet there, but is there anyway to get me to a payphone or something?”

“Something could be arranged,” Gordon said.

“What’s going on?” Sam said, coming up.

“I’m going to meet my mother,” Skye said.

Sam nodded. “You okay?” he asked.

“I’m okay,” she said hugging him. “Don’t worry, I’ll be back before you know it.”

“You better, girl. The Avengers aren’t the same without you,” Sam said.

“Awwww,” Skye said, hugging Sam. “I’m gonna miss you too! Tell Maria and Nat I’ll talk to them when I can.”

“Tell Pietro that I will return when Skye does,” Wanda said.

“You got it,” Sam agreed, giving Wanda a hug too.

“Be safe, both of you,” Steve said. “Take care of each other.”

“Always,” Skye vowed with a small smile. “Try to keep everyone else out of trouble.”

Steve snorted. “I can try.”
“You two need to get back and pack, then?” Sam asked curiously.

“All will be taken care of,” Gordon said mysteriously. He stepped closer to both Skye and Wanda, placed a hand on each of their shoulders in a partial embrace, and in a flash of blue light they were gone.

“Woah!” Skye exclaimed when they blinked out of New York and appeared… somewhere else. It was much, much later in the day; it had been approaching 5:30am in New York. Wherever they were, it appeared to be late afternoon. Maybe after 3, if Skye had to guess. They’d jumped something like halfway around the world, give or take a couple of timezones.

Which made sense if her parents had been living in China when she was a baby…

“Where are we?” Wanda asked, looking around at the gorgeous scenery.

“Welcome to Lai Shi,” Gordon said, gesturing to the grand views around them. But both women noticed that he didn’t actually answer them. “Please, feel free to take a moment and enjoy the view.”

They did so, taking in the definitely Oriental architecture, the carefully planted trees and shrubs, and the occasional rock garden. Definitely very Zen. They also spent a few moments on the breathtaking mountainscape in the background of the village.


Gordon just gave them a smile. “There are very few who know the exact location of Lai Shi. You’ll forgive me if I don’t disclose it just now. Come, we should get you checked in with medical.”


“It’s a requirement for all Inhumans who go through Terrigenesis,” Gordon said.

“That was months ago though,” Skye said. “I don’t need it, I promise.”

“The amount of time since your change doesn’t alter the requirement,” Gordon tried in a gentle tone. “We want to be certain there are no lingering effects.”

Skye frowned. “You’re starting to sound like the scientists who wanted to study Captain America instead of allowing him to help with the War,” she said, her tone clearly indicating her distrust. “I thought I was here to meet my mother, not be a test subject for curious doctors.”

Gordon immediately backpedaled, clearly not having expected that sort of accusation. “Then we will postpone the visit until after you see your mother. Perhaps she can convince you that we really do mean no harm. You’re one of us, Daisy. We have no desire to harm you in any way.”

“You keep saying that, and while I’ll admit that I’ve never met anyone with powers like yours… that doesn’t necessarily mean we’re alike…” She sighed. “If my mother’s really here, I’d like to meet her, please. I’ll try to reserve judgment until then.”

Gordon begrudgingly led them to a cabin. “Wait here,” he said. Skye and Wanda entered the cabin. It was well-furnished and seemed pretty cozy. The bed was just a queen, way smaller than Skye was used to after three years living with Nat and Maria.

“Good thing Nat and Maria did not come with us,” Wanda said with a grin.
Skye laughed. “Good thing they won’t mind us having a little fun one-on-one while we’re here. Only a queen… we’re going to have to snuggle close.” She winked, and Wanda laughed as well.

“As long as you are comfortable. I am unsure of how you feel about your mother possibly… what’s the phrase that that Tony uses? Walking in?”

Skye smiled and stepped forward, kissing Wanda hard. Wanda kissed her back, lacing her fingers through her hair.

“Ahem,” Gordon’s voice came, interrupting them.

Skye took her time easing out of the kiss, telling Wanda both physically and via the bond that she could care less what other people thought as long as they were happy. After a moment, though, the two young women parted and turned towards the door. Wanda blushed slightly at Gordon’s expression, a combination of amused and annoyed.

The woman beside him, in contrast, bore a cool and composed expression. She was beautiful, despite the scarring that made something of a patchwork of her face; she didn’t look old enough to be Skye’s mother, but Skye knew that could be deceptive. May didn’t look her age, either.

“Ladies,” Gordon said with a hint of irony in his tone. “May I introduce to you Jiaying, chief of our Elders and Daisy’s mother.”

Skye blinked when Jiaying smiled and approached slowly. “My baby girl. You’ve grown so lovely, Daisy,” she said in a soft, warm tone.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” Skye replied, though she offered a smile. “I don’t recognize the name ‘Daisy.’ I’ve gone by Skye for more than ten years, now.”

“Skye,” Jiaying said with a nod of acceptance. “You will, in return, forgive me if it takes some time to adjust to it. I have never called you anything else, except for the nickname you had as a baby.”

“Are you so sure I’m your daughter?”

“One of your soulmarks mentions the Black Widow, does it not?” Jiaying asked. “The other says something about taking a long time to find you. I presume that you found both of your soulmates while associating with others among the Avengers?”

Skye nodded slowly. “Sort of, yeah. It’s kind of a long story, though.”

“I look forward to hearing it,” Jiaying said genially. “I want to hear all about you.”

Skye smiled easily, but internally knew that there were some things that she wouldn’t say or couldn’t say. This was her biological mother and she wanted to get to know her, but Skye knew her family was back home in New York. “And I you,” Skye said. “I’m hoping you’re not as crazy as Cal.”

Jiaying smiled back. “Gordon said that my husband kidnapped you and forced you through Terrigenesis. I apologize for that. Those who go through Terrigenesis go through a careful selection process and years of preparation prior it.”

“So Cal bypassed the line?” Skye asked curiously.

“It certainly seems so,” Jiaying said nodding. “But my point is more to the effect that after every transformation, we want to ensure that the process completed correctly. That’s why Gordon was requesting that we have someone here who is familiar with Inhuman biology check you over. Given
the length of time since your transformation, I doubt we need to be as thorough as we’d usually be.”

Skye thought hard about the request. It wasn’t totally unreasonable to have someone check her over, but she still couldn’t help but be a little nervous about it. “Can Wanda come with me?” Skye asked curiously.

Jiaying nodded slowly, “I suppose that can be allowed,” she said. “Are you hungry? I understand there is quite the time difference. It’s not yet supper time, here, but I can organize a meal for you if you’d like.”

Skye glanced at Wanda and nodded. “We’re missing breakfast currently, but if dinner will be soon, just enough of something to tide us over would be great.”

“Wonderful,” Jiaying smiled. “I will take care of that while Lincoln looks you over. And then we can talk while you both snack.”

“That sounds nice,” Skye agreed.

Jiaying walked with them to another building containing the Inhumans’ medical facility, chatting idly about the history of the settlement and its layout; she pointed out the hall which contained communal cooking and dining facilities, as most of the guest houses didn’t have their own kitchens. She indicated a few training areas, where those new to their gifts could practice control, and the meeting hall where the Elders could meet, or some kept records of their people.

Wanda and Skye were quietly impressed; clearly this place had been here for a very long time. Everything had the feel of longevity, of permanence. As if things were the way they always had been. And yet, walking into the medical building showed that some things did change. As they headed inside, Skye caught glimpses of a couple of very modern computers as well as some high end medical scanners.

Which made sense if they didn’t have easy access to a hospital. Sure, Gordon could take a person to a hospital anywhere, but that presumed he wasn’t the one hurt. Or that he was around when an accident happened.

A rather handsome young man with short blond hair and bright eyes emerged from one of the side rooms and smiled brightly at the three women waiting near the desk. “Hi, I’m Lincoln,” he introduced himself in a friendly manner.

“This is my daughter, Dai… Skye, and her soulmate, Wanda,” Jiaying introduced them. “Skye’s transformation happened several months ago, and she seems stable, but I would like you to check her over, please.”

Lincoln nodded, and Wanda could tell that though it was phrased as a request, Jiaying’s words were clearly instruction rather than inquiry. “Of course,” Lincoln said. “Please, come this way. I can bring them to you when we’re done?” he added, looking to Jiaying.

“Yes, thank you,” Jiaying replied. She smiled again and slipped out of the building quietly as Skye and Wanda followed Lincoln.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Skye and Wanda in Lai Shi.

Chapter Notes

As always, we want to thank all of our faithful readers, commenters and reviewers. Your support helps make stories like this happen!
Chapter 39

Once Jiaying was out of earshot, Lincoln looked at Skye again as they walked. “You know, the elders don’t like us to talk about it, but there were rumors someone transformed in the old Kree city that hasn’t been used in generations,” Lincoln said curiously. “Was that you?”

Skye raised her eyebrows. “Uh, I guess?” she said. “You mean, there’s another way?”

Lincoln blinked, as if he hadn’t anticipated the question. “Of course. Our people have been doing this for hundreds, maybe thousands, of years. We have protocols, lessons, things like that. There hasn’t been a transformation in a Kree temple in dozens of generations.”

“Well, I didn’t exactly get a choice. I was kidnapped, woke up underground in some sort of creepy alien city, just in time to see someone else put an object on a pedestal that glowed,” Skye snapped back, annoyed by his tone that seemed to assume she should know these things.

“Well, I’m sorry,” Lincoln said, holding his hands up in conciliatory fashion. “I just thought… if you’re Jiaying’s daughter, you should know these things.”

“Sorry,” Skye said softly. “I grew up in an orphanage, believing that my parents were dead.”

“I didn’t grow up here,” Wanda said softly, putting an arm around her soulmate. “He could not have known.”

“I know,” Skye sighed. “I’m sorry.”

Lincoln nodded acceptance and kept silent for the next few minutes while he hooked Skye up to a scanner. When he did speak again, he started explaining what the scan was for. “Your entire body chemistry changes during Terrigenesis. In most people, until that chemistry levels out it can be very difficult to control whatever powers they gained. It has been long enough that yours should have leveled out on its own, but it’s better to be sure.”

“How do you help people normally?” Wanda asked curiously.

Lincoln glanced at her, then shrugged. “We use special acupuncture needles and particular meridian points to reharmonize the body’s centers. Once the transformation is stabilized, the imbalances correct themselves in a fairly short time.” Wanda nodded and simply watched as Lincoln started the scan. Lincoln met Skye’s eyes, clearly making the choice to ask rather than assume. “May I take a blood sample? DNA sequencing is still a new enough technology that we like to check every sample possible to see if all the changes to Inhumans are common or if there are differences.”

Skye hesitated a moment, then nodded. “Alright. Do you think it might be possible for me to have a copy of some earlier sequencing results? I have a friend following a similar line of study, except he only has me as an Inhuman. He’s studying other people with powers or enhancements though.”

“I would have to get approval from the Elders,” he said finally. “We have very deliberately kept all studies internal to the community…”

Skye nodded, deciding not to push the question for the moment. “So, you’re the community’s doctor?”

“More or less,” Lincoln agreed. “I haven’t quite finished my doctorate, but I don’t have much more to do.”
“Where do you go to school?” Skye asked as she watched him prep and take the blood sample. As they waited for the scanner, she peppered him with light questions about himself and his life, learning that very few Inhumans actually lived at Lai Shi. Most of them lived and worked out in the wider world, like Lincoln and his schooling. The few who did live here mostly had physical changes that would make them far too easily noticeable among normal humans.

“Can I ask you what your powers are?” Lincoln asked once he found a pause in Skye’s questions.

Skye spotted an empty beaker across the room and reached out her hand. She made the glass vibrate just enough so it made a strong clear tone for a few moments, then she let it go.

“You make things shake?” Lincoln asked.

“I can manipulate the natural vibration of molecules in matter, anything in the universe,” Skye corrected. “I can feel it all.”

“That seems…” Lincoln started, then trailed off.

“Totally awesome?” Skye suggested.

“Very cool,” Wanda agreed.

“Like too much for one person,” Lincoln said.

“It’s a lot to handle,” Skye agreed. “I’ve learned to tune out a lot of it, but there’s this sort of constant humming under my skin. But I won’t let it control me, so I control it.”

Lincoln looked at her and nodded, then looked back at her again sharply. Looked from Skye to Wanda and back, his jaw dropping. “Holy shit! You’re Quake, the new Avenger!” Skye chuckled and Wanda nodded solemnly. Lincoln looked at Wanda more closely and actually went pale. “And you’re the Scarlet Witch. Geez…” He ran his hands through his hair, attempting to calm himself down.

“I take it Gordon didn’t mention finding me with Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson, then,” Skye said dryly. Lincoln shook his head. “Figures.”

“I… wow. I had no idea, really.” Lincoln jumped a bit as the scanner beeped and he focused on the results for a few minutes. “Well, this says your system is clear. You’re fully stable. But, then, I suppose you’d have to be. I read in the news that all the new Avengers have their powers fully under control, by the group’s standards. If you have enough control for that, your transition has to have leveled out.”

Lincoln was still staring at her. “What?” Skye asked.

“I hear you threw fifty HYDRA guys out of some trees while on a mission,” Lincoln said. “Is that true?”

Skye shrugged. “I wasn’t exactly keeping count. Yes, I shook a bunch of trees and knocked HYDRA soldiers out of them. They were shooting at us, guarding a base conducting experiments on people they’d kidnapped from the surrounding area. Yes, I can do things like toss people into walls. But I try very hard not to kill anyone if I can help it.”

“And there are many more things she can do with her powers,” Wanda added with a smile. “We do, in fact, work quite well together. Our powers compliment nicely sometimes.”
Lincoln nodded. “No one has ever been quite clear on what your power is.”

“That is because my power is not easily defined,” Wanda said with a shrug. “The simplest description is that I manipulate chaos in the way Skye manipulates vibration. But it is difficult to describe.”

“That’s a new one,” Lincoln agreed after a moment. “I’ve read up on a lot of the powers Inhumans have had over the years, but chaos… that’s a powerful concept.”

“It’s powerful in practice too,” Skye quipped. “It’s taken some getting used to, but I think I’ve finally adjusted to the idea of being one of the Avenger’s heavy hitters.”

“I don’t know I’ve ever met an inhuman that’s as powerful as Jiaying. To meet two who are both soulmates…” Lincoln seemed torn between awe and worry.

“If we ever bring the Avengers by,” Skye quipped, “you’ll see we’re just one of the crowd.” Skye knew that she wasn’t; even with the Avengers she was viewed as the baby sister, daughter, or one of the ‘younger’ soulmates. None of the Avengers had ever doubted that she could take care of herself, but they always worked the extra mile to remind her that she didn’t need to. Certainly not if ‘taking care of herself’ meant being homeless for the better part of a decade, though the van really had been by choice.

Her mother’s power was clearly some kind of advanced healing, but Skye didn’t ask specifics. She got the impression that it was sort of rude to ask about someone’s powers to a third party.

“Whether or not you’re just your run-of-the-mill superhero,” Lincoln said as he detached the sensors from her body. “It looks like you’re good to go. Easiest transitioner gig I’ve ever had.”

“Transitioner gig?” Skye asked curiously.

“Usually when one of us goes through Terrigenesis, a transitioner is assigned to see them through the initial phases of coping with the change,” Lincoln clarified. “While I do most of the medical side of things here, there’s also a matter of the initial determination of a person’s new power and either coordinating their learning with a mentor who has a similar power or has ideas about teaching control.”

“So no one is ever left alone to deal with their power,” Wanda mused thoughtfully. “It sounds like a good system.” She regarded Lincoln calmly. “May I ask what your power is, please?”

“Sure,” Lincoln answered with a shrug. “I manipulate electricity. Everything from static shock to directed energy.” He held his palms together and drew them apart, tiny little sparks darting from one hand to the other.

“That does not sound any safer than what Skye does, just different in scope,” Wanda observed. Lincoln smiled. “And like Skye’s power, mine also doesn’t have to be all dangerous or violent.” He held out his hands to the two women; with a glance at each other, they each took one. They each felt a tingle go up their arms and along their bodies, and gasped in surprise as they rose off the ground, though it seemed as though the electricity was supporting them rather than the ground.

“Wow. That’s very cool,” Skye said with a grin as he set them both back down again.

“I also recharge batteries,” Lincoln said with a grin.

“Good to know, ‘cause Gordon didn’t give us a chance to pack the chargers for our phones. Or, you
know, clothes worth meeting anybody in,” Skye quipped. Both women were still wearing their running sweats.

“I can ask around, if you’d like; we might be able to find something a little less gym-wear for you,” Lincoln offered.

“That might be nice,” Wanda said with a nod. “Though we have already briefly met with your mother, Skye, I’m afraid we may not have made the best impression…”

“Give me a few minutes to see what I can find,” Lincoln said lightly. “Neither of you is terribly tall, so we should hopefully find something. There’s a shower just across the hall if you’d like to wash up a bit. Towels in the cabinet.”

With that, he left them to their own devices. Skye decided that a bit of a wash might be a good idea, and they shared a quick - very quick - shower, just to rinse off the sweat of their aborted run. When they emerged, wrapped in robes they’d also found in the cabinet, they found two sets of clothes laid out in the exam room. Skirts with elastic waistbands and Chinese style blouses; the skirts fit well enough, but the blouses had obviously been made for someone with a more generous bustline than Skye’s.

Whomever Lincoln had borrowed the clothes from had included a small compact with multicolored eyeshadows and a couple shades of blush. Wanda had found a lip gloss in her pants pocket, and shortly thereafter the women felt a little better prepared to meet the rest of the Inhuman community.

When they emerged, Lincoln whistled at them appreciatively, with a cheerful wink to let them know he didn’t mean anything by it. “You two are going to break many hearts by being together instead of available,” he said with a teasing grin.

“Thank you,” Wanda said politely.

Skye laughed. “You're barking up the wrong tree there, and not just because she’s my soulmate.”

Lincoln stared at Skye blankly for a moment. “This is true,” Wanda admitted. “Men are more Skye’s department, but it is also true that neither of us would stray from each other.”

“Fair enough,” Lincoln said. “I see all types at the hospital. I’m not one to judge. Nobody here will.”

Wanda helped Skye off the table. “We appreciate that,” Skye said. “Not that we… It’s always nice to know you’re accepted for something that fate decided.”

Lincoln nodded. “Soulmates here aren’t totally unheard of since this community goes back generations, but it’s rare to see an Inhuman’s soulmate here, so you might get some stares at dinner.”

“Speaking of food,” Skye said easily. “We should go meet up with, uh, my mother. She said that she’d get us a snack since we missed breakfast in New York coming here.”

“I can show you to her office,” Lincoln said.

Jiaying was waiting for them with drinks and a platter of cheese and crackers. “Please, sit down,” Jiaying said. “I know you’re probably expecting something a little more along the lines of breakfast, but since we’re a couple hours away from dinner, this was all I managed to find.”

Skye was fairly sure there was more to it than that, but she let it slide, both her and Wanda sitting down in the chairs opposite to Jiaying. “I’m sure this will be fine,” Wanda said kindly.
Once they had settled down, Jiaying picked up her glass of water. “So tell me about yourself? Where were you raised? What has your life been like?”

“Well, I was raised in foster care,” Skye said carefully as they began to eat. “I mean, it wasn’t that great of a childhood but it led me to my first soulmate a few years ago, shortly after New York was invaded. After that I joined SHIELD. The real SHIELD not the SHIELD that was just a cover for HYDRA.”

Jiaying bristled. “SHIELD?”

Skye immediately stiffened. “Yes, SHIELD. They rescued me from whatever slaughtered our village in Hunan Province. They kept me moving so whatever or whoever it was that was behind it would never find me. They kept me, your daughter, safe.”

“SHIELD’s the one who attacked us in the first place,” Jiaying argued. “They’re the ones who brought me to Werner Reinhardt in the first place.”

The name sounded familiar to Skye. “He was HYDRA,” Wanda said softly. “The Avengers… he was killed a few months ago.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that SHIELD is the same as HYDRA and always has been. They stand for the very reason our people are forced to hide, Skye. All they care about is kidnapping us and using us by whatever means they see fit.”

Skye held up both her hands. “I’m not saying you’re wrong about HYDRA, or that HYDRA wasn’t hidden within SHIELD, possibly since it’s inception, but there are parts of SHIELD - people within SHIELD who were and are fighting against everything HYDRA stands for.”

Jiaying scoffed. “That’s just part of the pack of lies they feed to anyone who will listen,” she said.

Skye nodded. She realized she couldn’t convince her mother in just one day of the truth. “I can understand that point of view,” she said. “I suppose we’ll have to agree to disagree on that point though. Anyway, friends of mine taught me how to defend myself, I went on a few missions, and when HYDRA came out of hiding, my friends who were Avengers took me in.” Wanda shot her a feeling of incredulity through the bond. It was a severely over-simplified version of events, but Skye wasn’t particularly interested in them going over her getting shot or kidnapped right when she just met her mother. If Cal was any standard as to how her parents would react to some of those events, Skye wasn’t particularly interested in telling her mother about them right away.

Jiaying seemed to let it go as well. Perhaps she’d come to the same conclusion, that neither would change the other’s mind in a day. “And you have remained with the Avengers since your transformation?” she asked.

“Yes.” Though it wasn’t quite that simple. “While no one has powers like mine, some of them are really quite brilliant. They helped me to work out ways to control my power and to practice with it, to help me be comfortable with having it. We actually made it rather fun, sometimes; I can play chimes and some stringed instruments without my hands. Pepper wants to get me a harp to practice with, because I love the way it sounds.”

Jiaying smiled, though there was a hint of strain to it. Perhaps it was hard for her to hear that Skye had found people to care about, who cared about her. But if this really was her mother, shouldn’t she be happy to know that her daughter had found a place to be happy and safe? “That sounds similar to what we would have done here. Gordon tells me that your vibrational manipulation is really quite powerful.”
Skye blinked. “How does he even know?”

“His transformation gave him senses to compensate for the one he lost,” she said matter-of-factly. “Among those is a connection to other Inhumans. He can get a sense of their location and of their powers to some degree. Though we have other methods we’ve used in the past to determine the extent of people’s powers, his input has simplified the process greatly.”

“Then the powers a person gains are entirely random?” Wanda asked curiously.

Jiaying shot her a look with just a hint of a frown. But she answered when Skye’s expression reflected Wanda’s curiosity. “We don’t have any way to predict what powers a person will receive if they are judged capable of handling them, no. But we believe that the powers given are the abilities that person will need in their lives. That there is a spiritual or faith-guided influence in our destinies, call it what you will.”

“Fate binds us,” Wanda said softly. “To those we will need, and to those we will love the most. It influences our decisions so we make the right choices. It is no wonder that it would know which powers would be used in the right circumstances by the right people for the good of all.”

Skye watched Jiaying react with mild surprise to Wanda’s quiet assertion, but she just smiled and nodded as she laced her fingers with Wanda’s. “I have my soulmates for a reason, because we need each other. I have my powers for a reason, as does Wanda. We don’t think it was an accident that our powers mesh as readily as we do in the rest of our lives. So believing that destiny guides the powers given to people isn’t a difficult concept for us.”

“No, I suppose it wouldn’t be,” Jiaying agreed. “Very few of our people have soulmates, though, and some come from cultures where they would prefer to believe in free will over predestination.”

“Fate doesn’t preclude free will. Just that the choices people make are shaped by their pasts and guides into their future,” Wanda said with a shrug. “But some people will have different perspectives, of course.”

“Fate pointed me towards my soulmates,” Skye said. “But all it gave me was their first words. I chose to be in the relationships it brought me.”

“If you met your first soulmate after the attack on New York, you have been with them for several years now,” Jiaying observed.

Skye nodded. “I have. And it hasn’t been all rainbows and sunshine, but no relationship ever is. I’m happy, we’re all happy. And that’s what really matters.”

They continued to chat about their lives until the dinner bell sounded. Skye felt like she was back at the summer camps they made all foster kids go to every year. Jiaying excused herself to sit with the other elders and Lincoln quickly collected them the second he saw her and Wanda at the door of the mess hall.

He led them to where he was sitting with some others. “Skye and Wanda, this is Alisha, Lori, and Shane,” Lincoln said, pointing to each person as he introduced them.

“So you’re Skye,” Alisha said with a kind smile. “Welcome to Afterlife.”

“Thanks,” Skye said. “You’ve got some nice digs, for the middle of nowhere.”

“It’s not bad,” Alisha said with a smile. “Can I get you something? We’re having Stir Fry tonight.”
“I’m sure we can get it,” Skye said.

“It’s no trouble,” Alisha said. Skye’s eyes widened as Alisha duplicated into three different people. The original stayed where she was while the other two got up and went over to a table at the front of the hall that was full of food.

Lincoln cracked a smile. “Despite what the elders tell us about constraint, we all like to spread our wings once in a while, metaphorically, of course. No one’s been able to really fly in a couple of generations, though a couple of us can hover.”

“Still working on propulsion control, but getting into the air isn’t hard,” Skye said idly as she accepted a glass of water from Wanda, who had a pitcher in front of her on the table. “Thanks, love.” Wide eyes from around the table greeted her when she looked up.

“You can fly?” Shane asked incredulously.

Skye wobbled her hand. “Kinda. It’s iffy, but I’ll get it eventually.” Alisha’s duplicates returned with plates full of food as well as a large pot of tea for the table and extra mugs, and Wanda murmured her thanks while Skye explained. “I was curious and started experimenting once I had some measure of control on my own. Spilled the beans to my friends when I fell out of a tree during a snowball fight and didn’t want to hit the ground hard.”

“Wow,” Lori said with a smile. “That’s kinda cool. What else can you do?”

“Lots of things, really. The thing about manipulating vibration is that everything moves, at the molecular level if nothing else,” Skye replied. She looked at the pitcher of water on the table and, a moment later, small pieces of ice formed in the water. She stopped, not wanting to freeze the whole pitcher, but it made her point.

“Holy crap,” Alisha said, wide-eyed. “So you could effect… physically anything. In theory, of course.”

“In theory,” Skye agreed. “Some things are much harder than others, and some things depend on circumstances. It’s harder to melt ice into water if the ambient temperature is below freezing, for example.”

“And metal would be harder to deal with than something where the molecules move easily, like air,” Shane said thoughtfully.

Skye nodded. “What about you guys? I’ve seen the duplication power, which is totally awesome, by the way. What about everyone else?”

“I can levitate,” Shane said. “Lori can manipulate fire.”

“Are you here full-time?” Skye asked, digging into the meal in front of her.

“We are,” Shane said. “Those of us who are full-time tend to stick together.”

“Where do the others live, if not here?” Wanda asked.

“Wherever they want,” Lincoln answered. “For some, it depends on their job. Or their family.”

“Does everyone decide for themselves?” Skye asked next.

“ Mostly,” Alisha spoke up. “The Elders mostly tend to stay here or live nearby. A few people, like
Gordon, have physical changes that make it more difficult to live elsewhere. They’re not usually
forbidden from doing so, but I can’t remember the last time someone needed to be. Most accept the
advice of the Elders when it comes down to it.”

“Since you’re Jiaying’s daughter, the Elders might try to convince you to stay,” Lincoln said.

“Her daughter?” Lori asked. “Really?”

“Yup,” Skye said. “Biologically, anyway. I grew up in several places, mostly in New York.”

“Biologically?” Alisha raised an eyebrow skeptically. “You don’t see her as your mother?”

“I met her about two hours ago,” Skye said lightly. “Until very recently, I believed my parents were
dead. So no, I don’t. At least, not yet,” she hedged a little, sensing that outright denial would be met
with anger and disbelief. “I won’t say that couldn’t change… family is very important to me. But it
takes more than an act of biology to be a parent.”

Shane nodded. “I get that.”

Alisha looked at him sharply. “You do?” she asked in shock.

Shane shrugged. “I was in the system too, before they found me. Family’s a touchy subject for those
of us who were used as paychecks.”

“Then the American foster system leaves a great deal to be desired,” Wanda added dryly. “Those of you
who managed to survive it deserve nothing but respect for your strength of character.”

Shane blushed a little and Skye smiled at Wanda. Lori spoke up, deflecting the tension with a change
of topic. “Well, if you do stay, you’ll get to enjoy the wide range of foods we have here. Our people
come from all over, so the people who run the kitchen pull recipes from everyone’s cultures.”

“That’s cool,” Skye agreed. “I’m a decent cook; I’ve had some lessons with a longtime friend of my
other soulmates’. She’s an American midwest farm girl, and food is a big part of family for her. So
she feeds anyone who happens to be visiting, and she’s great at it.” Skye watched her phrasing
carefully; it seemed that the Inhumans in general didn’t know about her third soulmark, and she
wasn’t going to let that tidbit out if she didn’t have to.

“Oh, that’s right, Jiaying said her baby had two soulmarks,” Alisha recalled. “So you have another
soulmate? Do you know them?”

“We do, yes,” Skye replied, answering without being specific. “But we got the feeling that non-
Inhumans were not terribly welcome here, so we decided we wouldn’t all come. Wanda and I were
due for a bit of a getaway, anyway.”

“You don’t all stay together?” Lincoln asked.

“We do now. We didn’t always,” Skye said, that being a bit of clarification she didn’t mind. “Like
any relationship, building something good with a soulmate takes work. The bond drew us together; it
was up to us to make something stable out of it.”

“You know, that somehow never winds up in the stories about soulmates,” Lori said with a smile.
“They all make it sound like you meet your soulmate and it’s happily ever after.”

Skye laughed. “If only. I mean, people aren’t soulmates if they’re not compatible. Every soul bond,
whether between two people or more than two, binds people with outlooks or experiences in
common but also some differences. In our bond, none of us had what most people would consider a normal childhood with two parents, a sibling or two and a dog. But we all grew up differently from each other, too.” Skye paused and smiled. “Which I’m glad of, because I honestly wouldn’t wish my childhood on anyone.”

Shane nodded. “That makes a lot of sense. Real life rarely reflects the romanticized view of things; soulmates are no different from everything else in that.”

Lori stared at Wanda and Skye for a moment. “Wait…” she said. “You’re not your average Inhuman, are you? I’ve seen you somewhere before.”

“Been watching the news lately, Lori?” Lincoln asked teasingly.

“I don’t watch TV, Lincoln, you know that,” Lori said.

“That’s right, you like reading the blogs,” Lincoln said with huge grin.

“You guys have Internet access up here?” Skye asked eagerly.

“It’s slow, dial-up, but yes,” Lori said, though she still studied Skye and Wanda with a small frown.

“Oh, good. I was hoping I’d be able to email back home while we’re here. You know how people can worry when you vanish from the park on your morning run,” she quipped lightly, keeping her tone amused.

Lincoln frowned. “Gordon usually has more tact than that. Though I’ll grant you that when he finds our people, it usually because their powers have gotten them into trouble somewhere…”

Wanda smiled reassuringly. “She is teasing. We were there with Steve and Sam, who will tell those who need to know where we are.”

The names seemed to be what finally clicked things into place for Lori. Her eyes went hugely wide and her jaw dropped. Shane leaned in to lightly close her mouth with fingers under her chin, but she still stared at Skye and Wanda. “Oh my god! Oh my god, you’re them! You’re so not a normal Inhuman!”

“Not following you, hon,” Alisha said with an expression of amused tolerance.

“Lish, she’s Quake! Which makes Wanda the Scarlet Witch!” Lori said.

“Who?” Alisha asked curiously.

“Man, Alisha, you need to get out more,” Shane said.

“I don’t need to get out more,” Alisha said defensively. “Everything I ever need is right here.”

“Tell me you’ve heard of the Avengers, at least,” Lori said.

“Yeah, I guess,” Alisha said, shrugging her shoulders.

“Skye and Wanda are Avengers!” Lori said excitedly.

Alisha looked at them for confirmation, and Skye nodded. “We don’t normally announce it or anything, but yeah. We’re part of the team. Still relatively new, though, so I don’t blame you for not recognizing us right away. I’m kind of glad you didn’t, really.”
“Why?” Shane asked.

“Because people who only see the Avengers do not always stop to think that we are just people who use our gifts for the protection of others,” Wanda explained. “We are Avengers, but that is not everything that we are.”

“We get that everyone needs heros,” Skye said softly. “And in general, we’re fine with that. But we’re people first, and it’s nice to get to know other people who see us as people and not our alternate identities. People who want to get to know us, and not just post a selfie with a superhero or tell their friends on the Internet about how they met an Avenger.”

“I think we can all understand that,” Lincoln spoke up. “We’ve all at some point or another hidden or kept our powers to ourselves rather than be exposed to the expectations - or fears - of other people.”

Skye nodded. “That’s one of the reasons most of us live in one of Tony’s buildings. So we have a home, a safe place where we can just be ourselves with people who all feel the same way.”

“You live with Tony Stark?” Lori squeaked.

Wanda chuckled. “Only sort of. We all have private apartments in his building. We do have a common area where we can socialize if we wish, but we also have our own space.”

“That’s so cool,” Lori said. But she looked calmer than when she’d first figured out their identities. Skye hoped that meant what they were saying about wanting to be people first was sinking in.

“Eh, I dunno,” Skye said with a flippant grin. “Half the team are fitness nuts; Steve runs thirteen miles in the morning while I run my six or seven. I’ve learned hand-to-hand combat, tai chi, yoga, ballet, firearms, archery… and that was before I ever had powers.”

The group laughed and then Alisha changed the subject, clearly the least interested in the lives of the Avengers. But Skye thought Lori would have more questions later.

She might even be willing to answer some of them.

Talk turned to training techniques and schedules. Apparently, Alisha was extremely skilled at hand-to-hand combat. Alisha actually gave her an impressed look when Skye began to question her on specific fighting styles that were used by the members of Lai Shi.

“I’d love to spar a few rounds,” Skye said as she polished off her meal. “Do you know of any good running paths around here?”

“You weren’t kidding about the running thing,” Shane said, laughing.

“It’s a great start to my day,” Skye said. “I don’t know what I’d do if I couldn’t start the day with a run.”

“I, however, won’t be running every morning,” Wanda said. “I only run when I need to. Or when Steve makes me.”

“I’m with you,” Lori said.

“She’s not kidding,” Shane said. “She’d sleep in until noon if I let her.” The group laughed.
When the Elders disappeared after dinner was over, Skye assumed that meant they wouldn’t see her mother again until morning. So when Lori and Shane offered them a full tour of Lai Shi, Skye glanced at Wanda before accepting with a smile.

“We were told a little bit when we first arrived, but it would be great to be able to really look around,” Skye said with a smile.

“And it will be good to know what is where so we do not get lost,” Wanda added.

“We’d be happy to,” Lori said.

“Come on,” Shane said. “We met and married here. We know all the good make-out spots.”

Lori laughed. “Come on, this place isn’t all that bad. It’s got great sunrises and sunsets on some of the paths.”

It was almost like a double-date, which made Skye miss Maria and Nat. They were too far from New
York and she couldn’t get anything from Nat and Maria. She knew she wouldn’t unless something was dire, given the last time that they shared feelings over long distances.

“We should show you the rec room. We have X-Box One. I’m the best Halo player here.”

“Correction,” Skye said. “You were the best Halo player here.”

“Oh God,” Lori said. “There’s two of them.”

“You have no idea,” Wanda said. “There are tower tournaments every week back home.”

“Yeah? Who’s the best at Halo?” Shane asked.

“That would be Nat,” Skye said. “She’s crazy good at all video games. It’s a little scary.”

“Really? I thought Stark would have been the best,” Shane said.

“Tony’s more hardware than software,” Skye said. “And really, Tony’s sometimes a giant man-child. He has ALL the toys, but that doesn’t mean he actually plays them either often or well.”

Wanda giggled, both because Skye was manipulating Tony’s playboy rich-guy image and because Tony’s pout at Skye’s commentary, should he hear it, would only prove her point. Skye was probably one of the few people who could say something like that, though, and really get away with it.

“Yeah, what other toys does he have?” Shane asked. Skye was getting the feeling they were going to get along very well.

“Oh, you known, the usual man-child toys. Laser tag, every gaming system on the planet, movie room with nearly a theatre-sized screen… I think he owns more movies than Netflix, too.” Skye grinned when Shane goggled. “Most of us adopt a ‘work hard, play hard’ mentality,” Skye continued. “We’re training or working about ten to twelve hours a day, five to six days a week. When we’re not doing that, we normally enjoy competition that isn’t preparing for life or death situations or global catastrophe.”

“I know you were spotted recently, but have you been an Avenger for long?” Shane asked.

“Officially, no,” Skye said truthfully. “But I’ve been an honorary member of the group since New York - oh… wow.”

Shane and Lori had led Skye and Wanda up on a high mountain path. “This is the highest point of Lai Shi,” Lori explained. “Best sunsets and sunrises I’ve ever seen.”

“People don’t come up here very often, so it’s a good spot if you ever feel the urge to be alone,” Shane said.

“I shall remember that,” Wanda said. “Not that I imagine that is as necessary as it is in New York sometimes.”

“Yeah. Best we can do there sometimes is lock the doors and turn off our cell phones,” Skye added, staring at the landscape with a look of wonder. She’d seldom seen such vistas, having grown up mostly in large cities. Even views at the farm, beautiful as they could be, had nothing on the vast mountainscape spread out before her. “This is so gorgeous…” Wanda tucked herself into Skye’s side, Skye’s arm sliding naturally around her waist. Lori and Shane snuggled together similarly, both enjoying the view and their new friends’ enjoyment of it.
“Anyway, we should get you back to your cabin so you can settle in,” Lori said. “I’m sure your - Jiaying has a long day planned for you, evaluating the extent of your control.”

They started back. “How’d you do it?” Shane asked suddenly. “Most of us take years to master their powers.”

Skye considered her answer. “My power is triggered by emotion, just like Dr. Banner - the Hulk. He taught me a lot about not trying to control my emotions but embracing them to control it. Plus Thor’s powers deal a lot with the elements of the environment around him. I trained with both of them for a few weeks before I started getting the hang of things.”

Lori and Shane both stared at her. “Man,” Lori said. “And I thought my trainer was cool.”

“He or she probably was, or is,” Wanda said softly. “Skye received help from the people around her at the time. It more a reflection of circumstances than potential dictating who received training from whom.”

“Don’t mind us,” Shane said lightly. “We’re only a little envious. Though in all honesty, I’d rather skip the super cool trainers if you only get those by being transformed without preparation. Most of our people have years of that before ever going through the mists.”

“The mists?” Wanda asked curiously.

“Oh, that’s just our expression for it,” Lori explained readily. “We don’t use the Diviners, we have crystals that our ancestors made using the crystals inside the old Diviners. When they break, a mist emerges, and that’s what triggers the change. Our mentors are allowed to stay with us through it because the mist does nothing to one already changed.”

After being dropped off at their cabin, Skye and Wanda saw that clothing had been provided for the two of them as well as toiletries and other essentials.

“Should we even try to sleep?” Skye asked rather rhetorically. It was getting late, but their body clocks were still on New York time.

“We should make an effort to reach out to Maria and Nat first,” Wanda said, nodding. “Maybe then some Tai Chi will calm our minds enough that we will be tired enough to go to sleep.”

“Somehow I doubt that’ll work. They provided phone chargers for us, right?”

“Yes, but there’s no service here,” Wanda said.

Skye pulled out her phone and looked at it thoughtfully for a moment. It was one of Tony’s “special models,” basically meaning that it could do a LOT of things that normal phones couldn’t. Including connect to JARVIS, if she could hit the right connections. She might be able to hit one of the SI satellites from here if it came to it… but she wasn’t sure if she should, just yet. It might be better to let her mother think they were playing along, trapped somewhere they knew not where and without any way to contact home.

Kinda reminded her of being kidnapped, actually, except that they had agreed to come.

She wondered if there was something nefarious in this. Cut her off from everyone she relied on, get her to trust Jiaying… it wouldn’t have been the first time someone tried that with her, but she had lived through far too much to see it for anything but what it was.

And she had Wanda to keep her grounded, as well as their connection to Nat and Maria. Speaking of
which…

Skye settled onto the bed, propped up on the headboard with the pillows. She held her arms out to Wanda, who came and settled in, snuggled close. They closed their eyes and concentrated on their soulbond, feeling it strengthen between them. Then they reached out for their other half, so far away. Normally the distance would be prohibitive, but they hoped that with two of them on each end it would work.

It took mental work, but they managed to get some impressions, like a TV running on rabbit ears that wasn’t tuned well, so they got more static than actual bond, but it was there. Skye couldn’t help but remember the last time she had contacted her soulmates from such a great distance. She couldn’t really remember much, but knew she had managed to force her terror and pain through the bond which had been enough for Maria and Nat to get her. Since the Inhumans couldn’t find the microchip pinging her GPS, there was at least that option if the situation were to become desperate. Skye was hoping that she would never need it though.

Skye sighed softly. “It’s too far,” she murmured to Wanda.

“I could try something?” Wanda suggested. Skye nodded, trusting her soulmate implicitly.

Wanda’s power glowed red around her hand as she reached up to touch Skye’s temple. Channeling her power into it, Wanda strengthened the connection for just a few seconds; long enough for all four to share the impression of Skye and Wanda safe for now, and that Nat and Maria had their location - just in case it became necessary to find them.

The connection faltered again, but what they’d managed was enough. Wanda let the power wisp away harmlessly and they just snuggled close for a few more minutes, enjoying the closeness and their bond for a little longer. Skye was so glad she wasn’t here alone, and in addition they could hope that Wanda would sleep soundly when they did manage to get some rest.

They slept little the first night, and it took a few days for them to adjust to the time zone, but largely, Skye was enjoying her time in Lai Shi. Shane and Lori were great, and Lincoln was nice enough to introduce them to everyone.

Skye spent a good deal of her time going through her powers and her control over them in front of Jiaying and the other Elders. Gordon had provided a couple of string instruments from who knows where and Skye demonstrated her fine control by playing a few songs on a guitar. The other Elders had seemed genuinely impressed. Jiaying seemed disappointed, but Wanda pointed out that this was yet another thing that Jiaying had not been allowed to teach her daughter.

“She never even got to see you walk,” Wanda pointed out later. “Never got to hear your first word. It’s understandable for her to be unhappy that she is unable to teach you even this because others were available to help you first.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Skye admitted. “I mean, just think… if I’d grown up here, I might have had powers a lot sooner. But they might have been different; I probably would be a different person if I’d grown up here instead of in foster care.”

Wanda smiled, knowing that Skye wasn’t discounting everything she’d been through or how they’d been brought together. Simply thinking through the repercussions of her life being different. “I would still love you,” she said simply, and Skye kissed her softly.

“I know. I love you too.”
Later that afternoon, Lincoln invited Skye and Wanda to join him, Alisha, Shane and Lori in the rec room after dinner. They planned to pool their music collections and relax, have a drink or two, maybe play or dance a little. Skye was a little disappointed that she didn’t have her collection on hand, but it wasn’t the end of the world. “Do you play an instrument?” Lincoln asked them.

“Um… not by hand,” Skye said with a wry laugh. “But a bit, yeah.”

“I like to sing,” Wanda offered. “And Skye is quite good at it, if we can convince her to join in.” Skye blushed but didn’t deny it.

“Maybe some Rock Band later?” Shane suggested. “After we play some Halo Capture the Flag?”

“Lincoln isn’t a big fan of the shooter games,” Lori whispered to Skye and Wanda as they watched the blond man pout a little. “He’d rather listen to music and get people dancing.”

“I like music,” Wanda whispered back. “Maybe we can distract him while Skye and Shane shoot at each other?”

Wanda, Lori, and Lincoln ended up playing Cards Against Humanity at one end of the rec room with a few others while Shane and Skye drew a crowd as they battled each other for much more than a couple of flags. Really, the two of them were trying to determine who was better at Halo. Skye was winning, but not by much.

After a couple of hours, Shane and Skye switched to Rock Band and the others joined them. Skye was given the excuse not to sing since enough of those who lived in Lai Shi wanted to participate that they were rotating out band members between songs.

At long last, Wanda convinced her to sing one song. By the first chorus, the crowd was clapping along, impressed by Skye’s voice. They all applauded when she finished, Skye blushing bright red and ducking her head.

“That was great, Skye!” Alisha enthused. “You should do another one!”

Skye shook her head. “No, no, it’s fine. It’s someone else’s turn. No one else has gone twice in a row.” Skye handed off the mic to the next person and went to get herself another bottle of water.

“You do not like to sing,” Wanda said observantly. “You never told us why.”

Skye shrugged. “Growing up, the only songs I ever got to sing were stuffy old hymns,” she said softly. “They always made me do the solos, even though I had horrible stage fright when I was younger. As I grew up, I got over it, but singing in public… never my thing.”

“I can understand that,” Wanda said supportively. “We are all allowed to like and dislike what we want. You should not feel pressured to do something just because you have a talent for it. I for example am fairly good at painting, but I do not always like showing my work to others, even you or Pietro.”

“You paint? Where?” Skye asked.

“Pepper set me up a small studio when I asked,” Wanda explained, ducking her head. “I knew she would not push or be nosy about it. It is where I go sometimes when I just wish to be alone.”

Skye nodded. “Well, if you do ever decide you want to share, I’d love to see it. But I understand if you’d rather not.” She’d learned long ago with Maria and Nat that sometimes they each just needed their own space, something that wasn’t shared - or at least wasn’t shared without express permission.
She was glad that Wanda had one, too.

The next morning, mindful of what Wanda had told her could be influencing Jiaying’s behavior, Skye sought out her mother. A cool look melted into a small smile when Jiaying saw her at the door. “Dai… Skye. Please, come in. Is there some sort of problem?”

Skye offered her a small smile. “No, no problems. I’m sure you must be busy, but I was hoping you could spare some time to talk?”

“For you, always. What’s on your mind?”

“Well, I know I haven’t needed the kind of help most Inhumans do when they come here. But there is something I’d hoped you’d be willing to help me with.” Jiaying smiled and nodded, so Skye continued. “I would like to know more about our family, please? Do I have aunts and uncles, cousins, grandparents? There has never been anyone who could tell me about them before…”

“Oh, angel,” Jiaying said in a soft voice, her eyes going gentle. “Of course I can.” She poured them each a cup of tea from the pot on her side table and sat back in her chair. Skye sat across from her and listened as, for the next hour, Skye heard story after story about her mother’s parents, about growing up in China, about relatives she’d never met. Jiaying’s parents were no longer alive, nor were her aunts and uncles, but Jiaying had been part of a large family and several of her siblings had large families of their own.

Though many of their family had not survived through the various wars of the modern era, they did still have some extended family in various parts of China. Not all of them had inherited the Inhuman genes, though, and so not all of them were aware of Lai Shi. Fortunately, her father’s wish that children continue to be tested carried on down the generations and she was allowed access to the family’s information freely.

“Can I ask…” Skye said when Jiaying hit a lull in her speech. “Cal said you died…”

Jiaying stiffened. “I… my power is advanced healing. Much like Captain America, I can recover from things other people would not. I was kidnapped and… and experimented on,” she said in an icy tone. “In a SHIELD facility; the markings were all over the building when I was dragged through it. It was… it was horrible, and thankfully I do not remember it all. I may be capable of healing, but I cannot stave off unconsciousness if my body is overwhelmed.”

Skye nodded, accepting that. “I understand that,” Skye agreed. “When we were taking down HYDRA bases, some of their people looked at me as if I were a thing and not a person. They were experimenting on people, too, trying to give them powers. We arrested all the soldiers and scientists and freed all the captives.”

“Is that what Sokovia was?” Jiaying asked sharply.

Skye nodded. “Yes. They’d kidnapped a lot of people there; we knew about it because that’s where Wanda and her brother escaped from. They got their powers from one of these experiments.” She carefully did not add that they’d volunteered; they’d been tricked into believing that HYDRA would help them and Sokovia.

“SHIELD may have started because of the SSR, but they were easily corrupted by HYDRA,” Jiaying said with some bite to her tone. “SHIELD and HYDRA… they’re one and the same.”

Skye shook her head in protest. “No, they’re not. While it’s true that HYDRA infiltrated SHIELD to an extreme degree, there were always people in SHIELD who believed their purpose was to protect
others. I know several of them, we fought together against them when HYDRA came out of the shadows!”

Jiaying’s lips thinned, and Skye held her tongue for once as she studied her mother. Clearly her mother had a deep-seated hatred of SHIELD for the harm she had suffered; she wasn’t going to listen to anyone trying to tell her she was wrong. But Skye knew that what happened had to have been HYDRA. SHIELD, her SHIELD wouldn’t have ever allowed such a thing.

“Perhaps the people you know are good people,” Jiaying said finally. “But the organization has been corrupt for a long time, and as a whole you cannot trust them. I’m not even sure you can really trust the Avengers. They were created by SHIELD; who knows what might be working behind the scenes there.”

“Oh, no, wait just a minute. No. Just no,” Skye exclaimed, frowning deeply. “Yes, SHIELD created the Avengers to some degree. They were the brainchild of the former Director. But SHIELD had very little control over what they did; they actually came together as a team during the Invasion of New York because there was literally no one else there to stop it. Some of them worked with SHIELD for a while, because it seemed like the best avenue to protect our world and its peoples. But when HYDRA came out, all the Avengers broke away. Steve, Natasha, Sam… they fought hard to stop Project Insight. To keep people safe.”

“They may have broken away, but the influences still remain,” Jiaying said. “HYDRA’s tendrils still remain wrapped around the Avengers and I will not sit by and watch my daughter suffer the same fate I did.”

Skye blinked and shook her head. “You won’t have to. They’d never do that. And even if there were a rogue element that would try to get into the Avengers, my soulmates would never allow anyone to harm me. And it’s not like I’m that easily brought down. The best spies in the world taught me how to fight, and my powers make it so that I can literally blow people away.”

“Anyone can be taken by surprise,” Jiaying countered. “Friends can be tricked, or drugged…”

“I can’t live in fear of something that might happen, mom,” Skye said, unaware in that moment that she’d used the word ‘mom’ for Jiaying. “And I’m not going to be locked away in some tower to make sure that nothing ever happens. If there’s one thing I’ve learned in this life, it’s that you have to take the bad with the good. Sure I’ve had some bad experiences, but my life with the Avengers… it’s really, really good.”

“You have no idea how evil HYDRA is,” Jiaying said angrily. “You have no idea what lengths they’ll go to get what they want.”

Skye sighed and looked at her mother sadly. “I do. So do Steve and the others. But I’d rather die tomorrow fighting HYDRA than live a hundred years locked away not able to help people. I know that can take some time to understand but…”

Jiaying’s lips thinned in anger, but she didn’t say anything for several long minutes. The silence was awkward, but Skye waited it out. “Why is it so important to you, to be able to help people? Humans fear what they do not understand, and history has proven that they seldom understand or accept people with powers that make them different, stronger. Is it not enough to keep our people safe, to ensure that all Inhumans have a haven where they can live their lives as they see fit?”

Skye sighed. “But there are people with powers who are not Inhumans. There are people who are persecuted just for being different, whether they have powers or not. We need to make the world safe for everyone, not just for a select few. That’s why it’s important to me to help people in general and
not just a single group of them.” She offered a small smile. “The Inhumans have you to keep them safe. It looks like you’ve done an amazing job. But there are still other people that need help, and that’s part of what my team and I do. For all the kids who are like I was once, and don’t have anyone else to look out for them.”

Skye was a little sad that she got nowhere in convincing her mother that the Avengers weren’t evil HYDRA plants bent on getting to Skye somehow, but she couldn’t imagine losing a child and then being tortured nearly to death by HYDRA, so she was willing to give her mother some slack.

After parting ways, Skye found Lori and Shane in the rec room. Shane was playing the latest Madden NFL game while Lori sat and knitted, though Skye couldn’t exactly tell what it was at that stage. The whole room had an air of domesticity that gave Skye the impression that this was a common occurrence.

Lori looked up from her knitting and smiled when she saw Skye. “Hey Skye, what’s shakin’?”

Skye made the split-second decision to not share the conversation she just had with her mother. “You two look cozy,” she said instead. “Reminds me of home. Mind if I join you?”

“Pull up a chair,” Lori agreed with another smile. “I suppose you’re missing your home, huh?”

“A little,” Skye agreed as she settled into an armchair. “Evenings in the Tower are mostly family time. Sometimes in one big group, sometimes in smaller ones like this. The whole group can be a lot to take, so sometimes I’ll just sit and watch movies with Steve and Bucky. After New York, Steve had a lot of catching up to do, so I made him a list of best movies by decade; he’s using the same list to get Bucky caught up to the modern, now, too.”

Lori listened raptly, her fingers moving by habit more than attention. Even Shane was distracted from his game, the selection menu up and blinking for his attention but he was more interested in listening to her. “What else can you tell us?” he asked.

Skye sat back with a smile, thinking; both she and Wanda had good feelings about these two. Maybe she could help them to see how her team was also her family; they were already positively predisposed towards the Avengers anyway. So she told them about last Christmas, when the Avengers came to her work to be sure that she and her boss wouldn’t be spending the entire holiday working. She didn’t mention Laura and the kids, but she did describe all the planning she put into making sure they had enough food to make a real at-home Christmas feast despite being stuck on base. Decorating the lounge for Christmas, surprising everyone with the huge pile of gifts.

Lori smiled and nodded as she explained her dinner preparations, knowing first-hand how much work it took to make a holiday meal for even a small family let alone such a large one. Shane grinned at Skye’s description of her boss’s amused tolerance of her inclination to spoil her soulmates, even though they had shown up in part to spoil her instead.

“Can I ask…” Lori started. “How was it? After your terrigenesis?”

Skye considered the question carefully. “It was… complicated. Wanda had just found me and she refused to leave me alone. She gave me all the love and support I needed despite the fact that we had just met. But there was a faction of the group that I worked for that was afraid of what powers I had gained. A friend even spoke of extermination… that’s when my Avenger friends showed up. When it was clear that it was semi-dangerous for me to be there, my friends took me away. We spent weeks in a remote location, and Thor and Bruce, or the Hulk, taught me how to control it.”
“I was scared, sure, my powers can be destructive and I didn’t want to hurt anyone. But not a single member of the Avengers ever gave me any doubt that they loved me just as much after I changed. I guess I felt loved and accepted and... “ she paused, pushing down the tears welling up in her, remembering her dad’s reaction. “Cherished… I felt cherished.”

Both Lori and Shane stared at Skye; Lori had tears in her eyes, reflecting Skye’s. “I’m sure that’s pretty common here,” Skye said roughly, blinking away the tears.

“Not really,” Shane said softly.

“The way Lai Shi is structured...” Lori explained. “Most of our family members don’t get chosen to go through terrigenesis. A lot of times the members who aren’t chosen are jealous of the ones that are. Even the Inhumans still in contact with their families... very few of us are met with such feelings after we go through the process.”

“I have three sisters,” Shane said. “Lori and I see them every year at Christmas. It’s taken us a long time to get back to having a relationship. When I first was processed, they barely emailed me.”

“Is that why you have transitioners and mentors?” Skye asked quietly. “So that you have someone to turn to after your change?” Lori nodded and sighed softly, remembering. “That’s... I’m sorry, guys,” Skye continued. “I didn’t mean to bring back bad memories.”

“Oh, our transitioners were great,” Shane said quickly. “And since his change, Lincoln is amazing with people first learning to adapt to their powers. He’s very understanding; he has a sort of empathy that isn’t a power but just...”

“It’s what led him to medical school to begin with,” Lori clarified. “Lincoln just has that gentle side of him that makes him want to help people in need.”

Skye smiled. “I can see that about him. I’m not sorry that I didn’t need the help by the time I got here, but if I had needed it... he would have been a great help, I’m sure.”

“Besides, if it hadn’t happened this way, I never would have gotten to know Lori,” Shane said, weaving his fingers between Lori’s. “I never would have married her, and she’s the best thing that ever happened to me. I wouldn’t trade this for anything. We may not be marked soulmates, but I’ve always thought Lori was like my soulmate anyway.”

Skye smiled and nodded. “You don’t need soulmarks to be perfect together, I really believe that. I think soulmarks are more to bring together people who need a specific kind of support, who need those bonds to survive what Fate intends to throw at them. They’re rare because most people don’t need a specific person or people to be what they need.”

“Lincoln mentioned...” Lori said carefully. “Lincoln mentioned that you have bullet wound scars that his scans picked up.”

Skye sighed. “That was a time that I needed both of my soulmates. I was badly shot and through our mental bond they were able to help me hold on until they could get help. I’m probably alive because they were there to support me.”

“I’m glad you are,” Lori said. “Because of them I got to meet you.”

“Well this got nice and morbid,” Shane snarked. “Skye, want to try to beat me at Madden? We can play multi-player.”

“Sure!” Skye said, grabbing the second controller. Lori smiled indulgently and picked her knitting
back up. She just listened as Shane reset the game, the two of them posturing at each other over their prowess at various games.

Shane beat Skye at the first game, and she immediately challenged him to best two out of three. She won the second one and they’d started on a third before anyone else found them. “Hey, guys,” Lincoln greeted the group with a smile.

“Hey,” Shane and Skye chorused, caught up in their game.


“Anyone want something to drink?” Lincoln asked, heading for the rec room’s fridge before sitting down.

“Water would be great,” Skye spoke up, proving her ability to split her attention.

“Same for me,” Lori agreed. Lincoln came back with four bottles of water and set one conveniently beside Shane even though he hadn’t answered.

“Thanks, Lincoln,” Skye said as she twisted the top off of hers quickly.


Lori snickered and shook her head. “You know I don’t play these things, Lincoln. Feel free.”

“Damn,” Shane said a few minutes later when “Player 2 Wins!” flashed across the screen. “You’re destroying my reputation, Skye,” he complained, though he smiled to let her know he wasn’t really angry.

“Come on, honey,” Lori said soothingly, though her tone was playful. “I can kiss your hurts better.” Shane leaned down and Lori obligingly kissed him, not letting go until Skye wolf-whistled at them.

“Get a room, you two!” she joked as Lincoln picked up Shane’s abandoned controller.

“Don’t mind if we do,” Shane said as he pulled Lori to her feet. She set her knitting aside and the two left the rec room to the gamers.

Skye and Lincoln traded a glance, then broke into laughter at their friends.

Lincoln hit start on the controller and they began another game. They settled into an easy silence as they played. Lincoln was the first to break it.

“You’re really okay with going back?” Lincoln asked. “Being a superhero? Possibly sacrificing yourself for people who are afraid of you? People who would kill you if they could?”

“You talked to my mother,” Skye said, punching the buttons harder.

“She doesn’t want you risking yourself unnecessarily,” Lincoln said back.

“It’s not like I’m doing it alone,” Skye said. “I have a team. Friends. Soulmates.”

“We’re Inhuman,” Lincoln responded. “We have to protect each other from the people who fear us.”

“You know, someone I look up to a lot once said, ‘man can accomplish anything when he realizes he’s a part of something bigger,’” Skye said, quoting Fury. “He said it a lot actually, to inspire SHIELD agents to fight to shield everyone from attacks like what happened in New York.”
“Well, they did a hell of a job,” Lincoln said dryly. “For generations, Inhumans have had to hide from the rest of the world. We shield ourselves from the world.”

“That was one person’s solution to a fear that the rest of the population might kill us,” Skye said. “But what if there are others?”

“I don’t understand,” Lincoln said as he sacked her QB on a blitz. “What other solution could there be?”

“I don’t know, but in my experience, nobody has 100% of the solution to a large problem. Often the people who think that they do…” Skye trailed off, thinking about Miles and Ward, her case worker when she was a child… everyone who had ever told her they’d fix a problem on their own. “They tend to let you down.” She paused the game, turning to look at Lincoln with a serious expression. “Nobody has all the answers, nobody can be right all the time. But if a hundred people got together with open minds and cooperation, and each person came up with 1% of the solution… they might just get the job done, and do it better than the single person would alone. It’s an amazing thing, Lincoln. Pieces solving a puzzle. No one knowing for sure what the picture looks like, but every one of them a part of the solution.”

“That sounds like a great theory, but I doubt it would ever work in practice,” Lincoln said doubtfully.

Skye shrugged. “It’s how the Avengers work. Steve calls audibles during missions because he’s got the experience and he’s actually really good at it, but he’s only our leader when that’s the need of the moment. We all bring something to the table. We all bring part of the solution. Before I joined them, during New York, they learned the hard way that they had work as a team to get the job done.”

“But the Avengers were, what… six people, back then?” Lincoln asked dubiously.

Skye nodded. “As far as the main team, yes. That number has nearly doubled since then, and we have a couple of other team members who monitor our missions from base and help with logistics and tactical planning as well as being fully capable in the field if the situation calls for it.”

“That’s a far cry from a hundred people, though. A dozen people, maybe two dozen at most? It’s a lot easier to form a consensus in a small group,” Lincoln pointed out.

“True, but consensus is the point,” Skye agreed. “Before I was an Avenger, I was a hacker, and then I sometimes worked with forty or fifty people on a problem. We each had different viewpoints as well as different specialties in a lot of cases. But when we found a solution, it worked. Sometimes we had to show that it would work to convince a few people, but the different input made the solutions better, stronger. More flexible, more accessible to more people.” Lincoln still seemed unconvinced, so Skye tried a different tactic.

“You’re studying to be a doctor, right?” she asked. Lincoln nodded, but looked confused. “You didn’t learn to be a doctor from just one other person, right? You took classes with different teachers, interned with a hospital that provided you with a variety of experiences to benefit from?”

“Yes, but…”

Skye didn’t wait for him to protest. “Now think about medical research. A couple of specialists working together, maybe, trying to solve the problem of a persistent disease, of why some cancer is resistant to chemotherapy. But when they don’t have all the answers, they don’t reach out. They don’t call a nuclear physicist, or a radiation specialist. They don’t want to share their work. But what if they did? What if someone studying physics hit on a possible application that could cure cancer, but wasn’t taken seriously because they weren’t a medical doctor? Wouldn’t that be a terrible
“I never thought of that,” Lincoln said.

“Not many people think about the fact that it requires more than one specialty to solve a problem like cancer. Physicists, mathematicians, biologists, chemists, and doctors all work together. *Thousands* of people working together to solve one of the greatest problems of our generation.”

Lincoln nodded thoughtfully, but didn’t reply immediately. Skye was willing to give him the time he needed to process the information. After a few moments, Skye picked up her controller again and gestured towards the tv. Lincoln nodded and she unpaused the game. They played in silence until the game’s half-time before Lincoln spoke again.

“I’m not sure if I agree with the Avengers’ way of doing things,” he said quietly. “But I’ll give some thought to whether or not they and the Inhumans are entirely incompatible.”

Skye smiled gratefully. “I’m glad. Can I give you one other little tidbit to think about?” Lincoln nodded. “Family isn’t necessarily who you were born to or who shares blood with you. Sometimes family is the one you make, because no matter where life takes you they will always give you a safe haven when you need one. I can see how the Inhumans would think of each other that way, particularly since I’ve been told that not everyone with the gene is allowed to transform. The Avengers are mine, powers or not. My soulmates, my brothers, the people who will always have my back no matter what else happens.”

Lincoln considered Skye carefully. “You know, Skye, Jiaying and the Inhumans took me in when I had no one else…”

Skye nodded, understanding. “And the Avengers took *me* in when I was in a similar situation. The Inhumans are your family. The Avengers are mine. Look, I’m not saying that hiding from the world isn’t the solution here, but don’t you owe it to yourselves to consider other options?”

“She’s right,” Lori spoke up; she and Shane had returned while they were talking and had chosen to remain quiet until this moment. “We stay here in Lai Shi, hiding from the world. Not even considering the other possibilities.”

Shane nodded. “It’s something to think about,” Shane said. “Something we all need to consider.”
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Skye gets to call home, and then things get intense.

A few days later, Skye prevailed upon Gordon to take her someplace where she could call home. He refused to take both her and Wanda, though; his reason was that it was too likely for her to be noticed. Given that they appeared in a large city in China, if the signs were anything to go by, Skye had to admit that Wanda would have stood out more than Skye herself did. Still, part of her wondered if they thought they needed Wanda’s presence to be sure Skye would return.

Gordon left her alone to make her call, saying that he had to pick up a few things while they were out and he would meet her back in the alley they’d arrived at in twenty minutes. Skye pulled out her cell phone and called Natasha while meandering around like a college student on holiday. “Hey, love,” she said in Mandarin, hoping to avoid listeners by not using an obviously foreign language.

“Skye!” Natasha exclaimed happily. “We weren’t expecting to hear from you today.”

“Well, I managed to convince the boss to give me a little time to call home,” she said, knowing Natasha would understand. They chatted for fifteen minutes or so, with Natasha giving Skye updates on the team as well as news from SHIELD.

“I’ve gotta go soon,” Skye said when they wrapped up the important bits. “But we miss you, and we hope you’re doing alright.”

“We miss you too, but we know what you’re doing is important,” Natasha assured her. “Take care, and call us if you need anything.”

“Promise,” Skye agreed. “Love you.”
“Love you too.”

When she returned to the meeting point, Gordon whisked her back to Lai Shi.

That night, after Wanda and Skye were cuddled together in post-coital bliss when Skye finally started talking about what she had been thinking about for the last several days. “I want to go home,” Skye said softly. “I miss them. I’m tired of… always watching what I say around here. I’m tired of all these people who have drunk the Lai Shi kool aid and think it’s so perfect here, that they don’t want to fight. I want them to fight.”

“Even those who have been given the greatest gifts do not always have the bravery to use them to aid others,” Wanda said softly. “I did not, until I found you. You made me brave.”

Skye blushed. “How can I make them brave?”

“I have seen… they will need you some day,” Wanda said. “Need you to show them a better way. Show them how to be heroes. They will need a leader who understands, one day. But until then… you must let them find their own reasons to be brave.”

“Do you think they know the things Thor told us? About the Kree?” Skye asked Wanda even more quietly.

“I don’t know. You said that Thor seemed very surprised by the stone,” Wanda said.

Skye sighed. “The Asgardians weren’t really aware that any of the Kree Terrigenesis experiments had succeeded, let alone that it continued into subsequent generations. The Monolith… no one knows what it does, only that it reacted more obviously to me than to anyone.”

“I did not like the sound of it,” Wanda said softly. “From its description from Thor, it sounded like it wished to consume you.”

“So you’ve said,” Skye said fondly. All three of her soulmates had voiced equal dislike for the Monolith. She suspected that had more to do with the thing’s response to her than anything else about it.

“And I shall keep saying it, if only to remind you to keep your distance,” Wanda retorted, though her smile was loving.

“And I’ve told you, I intend to,” Skye replied, laughing at her soulmate’s vehemence. “I’m fine with Fitz and Bruce trying to study it as long as it stays in its case, but I don’t think it’s something I can help with even if I were so inclined. Which I’m not.”

Wanda turned her head so Skye could see her. “I am glad you came here,” she said. “It is good you got to meet your mother and father. Your questions are answered. It no longer weighs on you.”

Skye sighed and buried her face in Wanda’s hair. “Yeah, I guess so. I mean, I hate that HYDRA did this, but I’m glad for SHIELD… I’m glad Agent Avery loved me enough to sacrifice herself so that I could live.”

“We are all so very grateful for that,” Wanda said. “All of us Avengers. We would not be the same people without you. I know you have heard this before, but you have made us a family, Skye.”

Skye smiled. “Yeah, well… most of us are orphans anyway. Or at least thought they were. It begs the question though - was I supposed to go through all of this? Is that what the Fates set out for me when they gave me my marks?”
“If you are asking if I would have loved you any less had you grown up in Lai Shi rather than New York, the answer is of course not,” Wanda said with confidence. “But if you are asking me if the Fates planned for all of this to happen, not even my visions show me the answer to that.”

Skye shrugged. “I’m not entirely sure I believe things are entirely pre-destined. Fate gives us choices and opportunities, sure, but we don’t always have to take them. Though I’ll grant you that I think anyone willing to choose against trying to build something with their soulmate would have to be pretty crazy… so maybe some things are just meant to be.”

“We should talk to Gordon and Jiaying about putting a return date on this visit. I mean, I know it’s only been a little over a week, but I can always come back, and I don’t want to be away from everyone else for too long.”

“Perhaps in the morning,” Wanda said sleepily. “I miss them as well. Perhaps in another week?”

“I like that plan,” Skye said, tucking Wanda’s head under her chin as they snuggled close. “Sleep well, and sweet dreams.”

Skye wasn’t particularly looking forward to having that conversation with Jiaying and Gordon. But they couldn’t stay in Lai Shi indefinitely, and she very much missed Maria and Nat. They had a home and work to get back to. And while the Inhumans may not ever understand it, they didn’t actually need to. As long as they didn’t get involved, it didn’t matter if they got it. It wouldn’t be the first time that people didn’t understand what she did or why.

Skye noted to herself that her prediction was correct when she met with Jiaying and Gordon the next morning. “I’m not saying we’d leave now,” Skye said softly. “And I’m not saying I’d never visit, but I do have things to take care of and responsibilities.”

Both Jiaying and Gordon looked uncomfortable. “And we completely understand that, Skye,” Jiaying said silkily. “But there are those among the other elders who are concerned that you would share the location of Lai Shi or details of its location and people with your Avenger friends or even your soulmates.”

“You realize that I don’t actually know where we are, right?” Skye asked with a shrug. “I can’t reveal a location I haven’t identified.” She sighed. “They’re right, I might talk about my friends here when I get home… just like I talk about my team here. They’re my friends, too, and we do share a lot. But I can refrain from giving names or where people live, if that would help.” She shrugged again, not knowing what else might make them feel better.

“What are you sure you want to leave?” Gordon asked. “These are your people. Your family. It seemed like you were starting to fit in here.”

Skye sighed. “I grew up so many places that I tend to fit in no matter where I go. The Orphanage, the Avengers, SHIELD… but most of them seem to have an expiration date on how long I can live there before people start to dislike me.” Or try to kill me, Skye thought, thinking of SHIELD. “I’d rather stay with the Avengers and not… wear out my welcome here, as it were.”

Jiaying frowned. “You couldn’t do that,” she said in protest. “This is still your home, even if you didn’t grow up here. Several Inhumans didn’t, but they belong here just as surely as you do.”

Skye held up a hand. “I’m not saying I don’t believe that you mean it. I’m just… it’s all too good to be true, you know? I need some time.”

Gordon spoke up again before Jiaying could continue to argue. “Give us a little more time, then. Say,
maybe another week. If you still want to go back, I will return you and Wanda to New York.”

With a small, sad smile and a nod, Skye accepted. “Alright. Another week. In that time, there is something I need you to think about.” Jiaying nodded, indicating that Skye should continue. “My soulmates… they’re not Inhuman. If I were to stay, what about them? Would they be welcome here too?”

“Has Wanda felt unwelcome?” Jiaying asked, deflecting the question.

“From some people, but not from everyone. But she at least has a power,” Skye explained. “But…”

“But your other soulmate is base human,” Gordon finished for her. Skye nodded and watched Gordon and Jiaying exchange a glance - which was weird, considering Gordon’s lack of eyes. “We will discuss it.”

“Good. Thank you. I’ll talk to Wanda and let her know we’ll be here another week at least,” Skye agreed.

The week passed easily. Predictably, Lori and Shane seemed to understand why Wanda and Skye were leaving, without needing an explanation.

“Guess Lai Shi can’t measure up to Stark Tower, huh?” Shane said one night with a forgiving grin. “Maybe Gordon would let us come by some time.”

“You’ll always be welcome at the tower,” Wanda said easily.

“I’ll visit Lai Shi every once in a while too,” Skye said, hugging Shane. “I have to if I’m going to make sure you remember someone can kick your ass at Halo.”

“You’d better,” Lori said, hugging Wanda. “I still need to teach you how to crochet, Wanda. I don’t welch on my promises.”

“We will both return,” Wanda said with a serene smile, a sure sign, Skye had come to recognize, that it was a vision that Wanda had had.

“When do you leave?” Lori asked.

“Gordon said he’d take us back after lunch, day after tomorrow,” Skye said.

“Gives me lots of time to try to win back my Halo title,” Shane said.

Lori laughed. “Come on, Wanda, let’s leave them to it. I’m sure some of the others can help me give you your first lesson.”

Skye and Shane played a few Halo tournaments before Skye realized that no one had entered the rec room, which was odd, since normally people came in and out at all hours to books from the community bookshelf, games from the game chest, or to play video games or watch movies.

“Shane?” Skye asked. “Where is everyone?”

“What?” Shane asked. “Oh. Maybe at a meeting or something.”

“Shouldn’t we go see?” Skye asked.

“Nah, they’ll come get us if they need us,” Shane noted.
Skye narrowed her eyes at Shane. There was something that he wasn’t telling her. Shane wasn’t a particularly good liar. “I’m going to go check on Lori and Wanda,” Skye said, reaching out and finding that she couldn’t feel Wanda close by.

“Wait,” Shane said, standing. “You can’t.”

Skye froze. “Shane, what’s going on?” she demanded, starting to panic.

“I’m not supposed to tell you. Your mother -” Shane stopped talking.

Skye shoved him against the wall. “What’s going on?” she growled.

“I’m not supposed to say anything! You’re too close to the situation,” Shane protested, wide-eyed.

Skye pushed him further against the wall. “I’m an Avenger. Before that I was an Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. I don’t need my powers to end you. Talk.”

“Jiaying has a plan to make it so that we don’t have to be afraid of the rest of the world any more. She says the only way is to activate all Inhumans and…”

“… she wants to kill everyone who isn’t?” Skye asked quietly and dangerously.

“Our families should be safe… most of them are Inhumans anyway,” Shane responded weakly.

Skye’s eyes narrowed. “But mine aren’t. My team, the people who took me in when I was alone. My soulmates. All of them.”

“Wanda would be safe. She’s…”

“She’s with them?” Skye blinked, startled.

“Jiaying was going to talk to her. To get her to see reason,” Shane explained. “She said that your soulmates wouldn’t be affected by the…”

“Genocide,” Skye spat. “You’re talking about killing billions of people. Do you know who talks like that? HYDRA.”

Shane flinched. “I know it sounds extreme…”

“Men have said that to me before,” Skye said. “Men who have killed for money or power or fear. Do you honestly think you’re the first group who’s right? Can killing that many people - innocent people - ever be justified?”

“She says it’s the only way to be completely safe. We’ve been hunted, experimented upon, even killed… just for being different!”

“So were the Jews in World War 2,” Skye said quietly. “By the millions, killed for different beliefs… by a leader who taught his people to think of themselves as a superior race. How is this any different?”

Shane wilted, realizing she was right. “They’re on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific. A SHIELD ship. They… have an artifact that can kill Inhumans. According to our histories, it was designed as a way to ‘erase mistakes’ in the Terrigenesis experiments. We believe it can kill any of us or all of us if used properly.”

“Shit,” Skye swore softly. “I know where they are. Shane, you know we can’t let her do this. We
can’t know she’s planning to wipe out the entire human race and not fight back. You don’t have to come with me if you don’t want to… but you can’t stop me.”

“I…” Shane hesitated. “I’ll go with you. But how…”?

“Leave that to me.” Skye pulled out her phone and ran the program to ping the nearest SI satellite. In a matter of minutes she had a connection to JARVIS.

“Yes, Miss Stark, what can I do for you?” JARVIS asked. Shane’s eyes went wide and his jaw dropped but he didn’t say anything.

“Scramble the Avengers, JARVIS. We have a major situation. And I need an airlift outta here - for two, please - if I’m going to help.”

“The alert has been sounded,” JARVIS replied immediately. “Do you have a situation report for me to relay?”

“Scratch that,” Tony’s voice broke into the connection. “Skye, sweetheart, you’re being broadcast to everyone’s comms. What’s going on?”

So Skye detailed as much of the situation as she could, answering questions when asked. She managed to prod Shane over his surprise to provide information she didn’t have, though he didn’t know a lot more than he’d already told her.

Her family promised to get her as quickly as possible, and she asked them to bring one of her tac suits and a spare vest for Shane - one of the adjustable ones.

“Guys, we’re getting a call from Coulson,” Maria spoke up over the line.

“Patch him in,” Skye and Steve said at the same time. She heard Tony chuckling in the background. “If they’re on the Iliad, this is going to affect SHIELD too,” Skye went on.

“Got it,” Maria agreed. “Coulson, I’ve patched you into the team’s comm line. What’s going on?”

“We’re receiving a distress call from the Iliad,” Coulson said promptly.

“It’s a trap,” Skye said in a flat tone. “A couple of insane but powerful Inhumans believe that the only way to keep the Inhuman population safe is to transform as many as possible - and we already know what Terrigen does normal humans exposed to it.” Everyone remembered Hartley for a moment, and Coulson sighed.

“What do we do?”

“Well, they’re targeting the Iliad due to the Monolith you have there,” Skye explained. “Inhuman history says it’s an artifact designed to kill Inhumans. The people who’ve gone after it believe you intend to use it on them.”

“And if it were in HYDRA hands, I could see how they might feel that way,” Coulson said in a low voice. “But it’s not, and we don’t intend to harm anyone if we can avoid it.”

“I know, DC,” Skye said, her tone gentling. “Look, we’re already scrambling our team to get there. Wanda’s with them; I think she’s planning to stop them herself if she can, but she’s too far away for me to reach easily right now.”

“Understood. Do you want backup?” Coulson asked.
“I think we can handle it,” Steve began, but Natasha cut him off.

“Aircraft carriers are big ships, and there aren’t enough of us to cover everything at once,” she said. “Hulk’s going to be confined to the deck, and our flyers will only be helpful if the Inhumans have pilots who can get the Quinjets in the air. Unless they’re all in a single location and not spread around the ship, we’re going to need to be able to split into more teams than we’ll really have with just ourselves.”

“And to be honest, I don’t think we should underestimate Jiaying,” Skye said. “Steve, is Thor here? I think Jiaying might be after the monolith and something tells me we could use some Asgardian backup.”

“He was off-world this morning, but we’ve contacted Heimdall to get him to get here as soon as possible,” Steve said stiffly. “Skye…”

“If the words ‘stay behind’ so much as leave that mouth, Steven Rogers, you’ll be sittin’ funny for a week. They have Wanda and you wouldn’t hesitate if it were Sharon.”

Bucky laughed over the coms. “Told you, Punk. You two are different people with identical souls. If I hadn’t known better, I would have said Sarah had raised you both. Guess I can count my blessings, though, or else I’da had two of you to keep from getting killed fighting bullies in 1942.”

“We’re sending Sam to come pick you up,” Steve said. “I think I speak for everyone by saying that we all want to come…”

“No worries,” Skye said. “I get it.”

“At least you do,” Tony grumbled.

The line went dead, like it had gone on mute. Skye rolled her eyes. “I’m not in danger, Dad. Jiaying took most of the inhumans with significant powers with her.” Shane’s eyes bugged out, but it was something Tony needed to hear. “If I do get into trouble, I’ll just levitate myself to the nearest mountain and sit there until Sam gets here.”

“You’d better, young lady,” Tony groused.

“Goodbye, Dad,” Skye said in a long-suffering tone.

“See you soon,” Steve said. “Be careful.”

“You too,” Skye said. She didn’t address Shane staring at her until she hung up the phone. “Tony’s not my biological father, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“But… that f-first person called you M-Miss Stark,” Shane stammered out. “And then y-you called Tony Stark ‘Dad’…”

She sighed. “It’s a long story, but Tony adopted me. Legally, I mean. He wanted to make sure I was taken care of, after being an orphan for so long. And though I have my soulmates… it’s really pretty cool to have family I can’t be taken away from, you know?”

Shane blinked at her dumbly for a moment as he took in what she was saying. Then slowly, tentatively, he smiled. “Yeah. I think I get that.”

“I never mentioned it because I never wanted Jiaying to think I loved her any less because I found a family on my own,” Skye continued softly. “I don’t think she’ll understand.”
“Probably not,” Shane agreed in a low tone. “Honestly, I don’t think anyone from outside the system will ever really understand just how badly every orphan wants to be adopted - even as an adult. But… yeah, I get it. I’m glad you found a family for yourself, Skye. Even if part of me wishes it could have been here, among us.”

Skye hugged Shane tightly. “We can still be family, Shane. We’re both Inhuman, and there’s a bond in that, too. I’m not immune to it; I just can’t sacrifice billions of people to the misguided idea that if only Inhumans are left we’ll all be safer.”

“I know. I know. You’re right. And that’s why I’m going to help,” Shane assured her as he hugged back. “Come on, there’s a clearing nearby big enough for a plane. We don’t have a runway, though.”

“Don’t need one. The jets are all VTOL.”

“Awesome.”

“They might take a few hours though. Dad’s jets are good, but they’re still back in New York.” Skye sighed. “They haven’t been gone that long, and it will take them time to subdue the ship’s crew…”

“If they already have the distress call going, they’ve likely got control of the ship,” Shane said with a shake of his head.

“Damn.” Skye took a deep, calming breath. “You’re right. But if they’re waiting for SHIELD to respond to their signal, hopefully they won’t make another move before anyone gets there.”

Shane nodded his agreement and they lapsed into silence.

“For the record,” Skye said. “I don’t think most people would want to kill Inhumans. They’ve seen me and Wanda and are getting used to us. The idea that there are a community of us might take some getting used to, but I think it’d be okay.”

“I… I suppose if anyone would be in a position to know, it would be you,” Shane allowed after a moment’s thought. “You’re out there, you have to deal with people’s reactions to what you can do.”

He looked thoughtful after he stopped, and Skye let it go for a moment before asking, “What’s on your mind? Spit it out.” She grinned when he blinked at her.

“I guess… it really registered after hearing you talk to them that the Avengers are your family. Not just because Stark adopted you or anything,” he ventured slowly.

Skye’s expression softened and she nodded. “They’re amazing, Shane. I really love them a lot; if I had to spend sixteen years in the system and another eight wandering around on my own in order to find them… it was worth everything, to have found them in the end.”

“I’m… a little envious,” he admitted. “I mean, I know finding your soulmates catalyzed a lot of that, from what you’ve said, but…”

“But I’ve been amazingly lucky. I know,” Skye agreed. “Well, helping us with the others will definitely help put you in their good books,” she offered with a smile. “And it’s my home too; I’d be happy to have you and Lori up for a visit sometime.”

“Thanks, Skye.”

“Can I ask…?” Skye started. She took a deep breath while Shane waited patiently for her. “Did you
know about me, before I went through terrigenesis? Did anyone ever…?”

“There were stories,” Shane said softly. “Gossip mostly. About how SHIELD stole you and your mother away. About how Jiaying came back a changed person. About how you never came back at all. You were something of a legend. Honestly, the fact that SHIELD has something that could destroy us… a lot of inhumans might be going along with Jiaying because… you’re worth protecting.”

Skye’s eyes went wide. “You… you mean they believe her, that HYDRA and SHIELD are the same. But Shane, they’re not! My old team, the ones who took me in when they thought I had nothing but potential - even though they had no idea that I even had soulmates - they’re good people. They’re people who very deeply believe in SHIELD’s mission to protect the people of our world. All of them! Not Americans or Russians or Germans or South Africans, not Humans or Inhumans or Asgardians, but all people. Our whole world.”

“Hey, hey, I believe you,” Shane said, sorry to have upset her. “We’ll get there as fast as we can. We’ll help.”

“I know. I just… Wanda was there for me, after the terrigenesis. She refused to be separated from me… she reminded me that I was still human. I don’t know if I can ever repay that, but the idea that she’s with Jiaying right now…”

“I get it. I feel the same way about Lori, now. For Lincoln and all our friends too. If Jiaying is leading our people to war for the wrong reasons… things could end badly.”

They lapsed into silence, both preoccupied with their own worries. After a couple of hours, Shane and Skye went to the clearing and waited for Sam. They didn’t have much longer to wait, since he landed about fifteen minutes later.

“Hey girl,” Sam said as he immediately started take-off procedures once Skye and Shane entered. “You and Steve still trying to figure out who can cause more trouble?” He looked around and stiffened. “Who’s this?” he asked.

“This is Shane,” Skye said, strapping into one of the jump seats, indicating that Shane should do so as well. “He’s on our side.”

Sam gave him a once over before going back to take-off procedure. “Good,” he said slowly.

“We don’t really have time to get into everything. Let’s just say that several of the Inhumans see me as the lost child they thought they’d never find again and are willing to go to extremes to protect me… and my mother refuses to believe that SHIELD and HYDRA are different,” Skye said with a sigh. “Shane and I would rather try to convince the others that she’s wrong, rather than see anyone get hurt. If it’s even possible. But we can’t not try.”

Sam nodded. “I understand. We’re less than an hour away; the Iliad was parked out in the middle of the Pacific.”

“What for?” Skye asked, surprised.

“At a guess… so they could experiment on the Monolith without putting populated areas at risk?”

“Hmm,” Skye said. “Was Maria able to send you any insights into where SHIELD got this thing from after Thor and I checked it out?”

Sam nodded, handing over a tablet once take-off was finished. “She gave me this. It’s all the
Skye took it and whistled low. The data behind the Kree stone had been back-burnered and forgotten, but now she read with gusto. “So it was NASA’s before it was SHIELD’s and they were doing tests on it. Jesus, some of this math.” She looked up sharply, staring out at the expanse of open water below them.

Sam looked at her worriedly. “What?”

“It’s a tesseract,” she breathed.

Sam whirled around. “WHAT? I thought the tesseract was taken back to Asgard with Thor. And it glowed blue.”

Skye shook her head. “A tesseract isn’t a thing so much as a mathematical notion in astrophysics. It’s basically the concept that a straight line isn’t always the fastest path.”

Sam nodded. “I remember you, Tony, and Bruce talking about the possibility that others existed but I didn’t think you’d mean this.”

Skye raked a hand through her hair. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. Astrophysics is much more Dr. Foster’s area of expertise rather than mine, and the fact that it reacts to Kree DNA means that there’s some kind of biomechanical activation connected to it that I’m sure Bruce is going to have a field day with, but based on the readings that NASA took by sending objects through and waiting a decade to get the readings… it’s kind of incredible.”

“How far away is the other end of it?” Sam asked curiously.

Skye bit her lip. “Assuming that this tesseract only goes through space and not time, a little less than 60 trillion miles. I can see why no one ever destroyed this thing. We’re talking about legitimate proof that one could bend the space-time continuum.”

Shane was staring at her. “You’re family isn’t the only thing you left out when you told us about yourself, was it.”

“She has an IQ of about a billion,” Sam said.

“172,” Skye corrected. “Oh, and I have three soulmates, not two.”

“Man, your life is cooler than mine,” Shane said.

“You have more degrees than I do from school, I guarantee you,” Skye said, though she chuckled at his expression. “I dropped out when I was 16. Got my GED, but never went back to formal education. I audited some classes, but never got a degree.”

“But… why?”

Skye shrugged, still reading the reports. “SHIELDs protocols to keep me safe from HYDRA kept me moving around, so no one caught on that my bad grades were because I was a genius. I didn’t even find out until they tested me when I took the SHIELD entrance exams. I even took a class from Bruce back before he was also the Hulk, but I never believed him when he said I was gifted.”

“That must have been good to hear then,” Shane said supportively.

“It was,” Skye said. “It was the first time I felt that maybe people had been wrong about me for so
“Bruce enjoys his claim of being the first to see her brilliance and her potential,” Sam chimed in. “If Skye decided she wanted to apply to a college, any school anywhere, Bruce would support her. Letters of recommendation, documentation of her past projects, anything she needed.”

Skye knew Sam was distracting them from the length of the flight, so she didn’t object. Whatever passed the time would be helpful. So they discussed some of the projects Skye had helped with over the past few years, and Shane was almost in awe. Finally, Sam announced that they were only about ten minutes away.

“Time to gear up,” Skye agreed. She first dug out the tac vest she’d requested for Shane. “I don’t know how much this will help against people’s powers, but I’d rather you had some sort of protection. It’s the best I could come up with on short notice.”

Shane took the vest hesitantly. “Thanks.” Skye helped him into it, fastening the clips and buckles with professional swiftness. Then she waved him forward to join Sam so she could change. Someone had thought to pack her gauntlets and her standard combat attire, which was a lot more comfortable and familiar to Skye than the clothing that was provided on Lai Shi. She happily stripped herself of the flowy garments she was wearing that day in favor of the black pants and long black kevlar-lined shirt that she was more used to. Finally she tied her hair back.

“What’s our ETA?” she asked Sam, coming near the cockpit. She could see the Illiad in the distance.

“Couple more minutes,” Sam said. “JARVIS, we clear for a landing?”

“Indeed, sir,” JARVIS answered, causing Shane to jump slightly.

Suddenly, Skye wanted nothing else but to be home in the tower with Maria, Nat, and Wanda, all curled up with sushi and a comedy. She wasn’t entirely sure what was going to happen next, but she couldn’t help but feel a wave of dread come over her body.
Chapter 42

Landing on the Illiad was the easy part. Skye passed a comms unit to Shane and showed him how to put it in, then put hers in.

“We’re here,” Skye said. “And I brought a friendly with me.”

“Good,” Nat said, grunting with exertion. “We could use the help.”

“Just try not to hurt them to badly,” Skye said softly, stepping out onto the deck of the Illiad. “Most of them are pretty sheltered and believe Jiaying’s crazy ramblings about how SHIELD and the Avengers are HYDRA, or at least HYDRA influenced.”

“Clearly she’s never met Capsicle,” her Dad said. “Man doesn’t have a HYDRA bone in his body.”

Skye nodded to Shane. Lori would be the easiest to convince. “Is anyone fighting a woman who can control fire?” Shane asked through the comms.

“That would be me,” Tony said, hissing. “Is that what she can do? Because I was under the impression that she was just asking for an Alicia Keys theme song.”

“That’s Lori. She’s my wife. Do you have any way of getting a message to her?”

“Go, whoever you are, you’re on speakerphone,” Tony said.

“Lor, it’s Shane. This is wrong, what’s happening here. These are the Avengers. They’re good. Remember what you said about all that bad press after New York? About how no one on the right side of history will ever get thanked for saving the world, only…”

“...criticized for the way they did it.” Lori could be heard through the comms.

“Don’t you want the chance to save the world, Lor?” Shane asked softly.
There was dead silence, then Tony came through crystal clear. “Please tell me they’re all going to be that easy?”

“Unfortunately, they’re all going to get harder from here,” Skye said. “Shane, go find Tony and Lori. Who needs a heavy hitter?”

“I’m fighting about six of the same person at once,” Nat said, her voice strained. “I could use some backup.”

“On my way,” Skye said, using their bond as an odd sort of GPS to go two decks below to where Nat was fighting Alisha.

“Down!” Skye shouted when she burst into the room. Nat didn’t need to be told twice. She hit the deck while Skye let loose a shockwave powerful enough that the real Alisha stumbled and struck her head on an I-beam, her duplicates disappearing when she lost concentration. Natasha quickly got up and knocked the woman out before she could recover.

“The second one is down,” Steve called out through the comms.

“We’ve got number three,” Natasha reported for herself and Skye.

“Four and five,” Pietro said.

“No one likes a show-off, Speedy,” Tony chimed in with his usual undercurrent of amusement. Hearing her father’s voice calmed Skye down enough for her to collect herself.

“Has anyone heard from Bucky lately?” Steve asked, only a slight amount of worry in his voice.

Bucky couldn’t help but recognize the similarities between Skye and her mother. She and the eyeless Inhuman who had first approached Skye stood tensely a few feet away, since Bucky stood between them and their target.

“I understand,” he said softly. He tried not to get lost in the pain of the memories of being HYDRA’s slave, remembering that Andrew always said that it helped to talk about it. “What HYDRA did to you…”

“You understand nothing,” Jiaying said calmly. “You haven’t lived through that kind of torture… that pain.”

Bucky raised his metal arm. “I wasn’t always like this,” he said. “Before World War 2, I was the kind of guy that you probably think I am. Then HYDRA captured me… they stripped me of anything they didn’t need. Tortured me for seventy years. I know a thing or two about the difference between HYDRA and SHIELD. I know how it feels to be one of their experiments, as if I were less than a person in their eyes…”

The animosity in Jiaying’s eyes softened slightly for a moment, before she hardened herself again. “Then you should join with us, as Wanda has.” She was clearly unaware that Wanda wasn’t really working with her, but Bucky kept his expression neutral. “I am not so heartless as to condemn those who have been victimized as we have been, but you can’t deny that SHIELD has treated those with powers badly. Can you say that they’ve treated you well?”

Bucky shrugged. “By some people, I have been, yes. By others, not as much. But any organization is made up of individuals, and not everyone will behave in the same way. But the Avengers… they’re a much smaller, tighter group. They’ve been universally accepting of me, even… even the
ones I harmed when HYDRA had control of my mind and my actions.” He offered her a small smile. “A lot of that was Skye’s doing. You should be proud of her; she’s an amazing woman. Open and accepting and full of love, despite the difficulties life has handed her over the years.”

“Daisy is also willful and does not understand how tragic and terrible this world has become,” Jiaying refuted. “I will go to any lengths necessary to protect her and our people. When she is older and has learned to heed the logic of her elders, she will understand.”

“Your daughter’s one of wisest people I know,” Bucky said, his voice on edge. “She knows exactly how terrible people can be, but she still looks for the best in people. She still looks for the best in you despite what you’re doing.” Bucky knew he’d said the wrong thing when Jiaying’s eyes hardened again. A flick of her fingers and the eyeless man vanished in a crackle of blue light; Bucky immediately sensed a presence behind him and ducked a blow, his metal arm lashing out in response.

Bucky thought he might be in trouble, but he’d turned his comms off in the hope that he could end this before it got bad. He was fast and strong, but he wasn’t sure how to fight a man who could disappear and reappear at will. Bucky found himself alone for a moment at one point before hearing footsteps behind him. He whirled around but paused when he saw Agent May in the doorway. He beckoned her in. “Teleporter’s been flittering in and out,” he informed her. “Watch your back. Or mine, if you prefer. He’s fast.” Bucky knew from Skye that May had been her mentor and taught her a lot of hand-to-hand combat. The woman didn’t carry a weapon, either. Bucky had no problems trusting her at his back, knowing that Skye would in a heartbeat.

May nodded and moved quickly to Bucky’s side, only inches of space between her back and his as she turned to assess the room. As they fought the teleporter, Bucky was impressed by May’s skills. He could see where Skye got her foundation.

“I remember you,” the teleporter said to May after a few minutes. “You were there that night.”

May tried to deliver a roundhouse kick but the teleporter disappeared and reappeared in front of Bucky.

“What are you talking about?” May growled.

“2008, in Manama,” the Teleporter said as Bucky took another swing at him and he disappeared again.

Bucky was shocked to see May’s entire demeanor change. Her usual aspect was cool, controlled and somewhat distant; in contrast to the way her body language just about froze, her usual demeanor was almost warm and open. Her eyes were bleak for just a moment before she slammed a lid on her emotions.

Gordon reappeared at some distance from both of them when he returned. He cocked his head, clearly studying May in whatever way it was that he perceived them. When May flung herself in his direction, he blinked out and reappeared across the room again. “You are different, though. You were hurt, maybe? By Katya?”

When May stood still, glaring daggers at the teleporter, Bucky spoke up. “Who’s Katya?”

Grief crossed Gordon’s face, then resignation. “Katya was a child who should never have been allowed through the mists. She was too unstable; the power she gained fractured her mind. And she used it to harm a great many people.” His gaze found May again, though how he knew where the man looked Bucky was unsure. “You were there. The one who stopped her?”
Bucky knew from May’s face that May had had to kill Katya. A child. May didn’t answer, but Bucky didn’t need her to. “I don’t want to talk out of turn, but she doesn’t seem like she really wants to talk about it,” Bucky pointed out. On the surface, May looked angry, but Bucky recognized the the hurt, grief, sorrow, and fear layered in May’s expression. The fear of oneself that Bucky saw, rarely, on Nat and Skye and Bruce. A fear that Bucky understood very personally.

However, Gordon’s expression turned rueful. “I am sorry that you had to go through that. She and her mother broke many rules of our people, the first of which being that we would not have allowed her transformation. We meant to deal with them ourselves, but your… people… found them first.”

“This plan to transform everyone possible could cause more like her,” May stated, her voice chilly. “I have no intention of letting that happen. Even if I wouldn’t have to be there to deal with the fallout again.”

Gordon froze. “You raise a good point. We aren’t prepared for that kind of fall-out.”

“You’re talking about mass-genocide, and you’re concerned that you might have a few people go bad on the other side?” Bucky asked incredulously. “Skye said a mass transformation will condemn literally millions of people to death.”

It was Gordon’s turn to frown. “Jiaying assures me that’s not the outcome. She believes the Inhuman gene has spread far enough over the centuries that a majority of the population will transform.”

May’s expression hardened as she shook her head. “We’ve seen more people harmed by this than changed,” she stated.

“And if Jiaying were correct, wouldn’t we have seen more people changed by accidental exposure?” Bucky added.

“She has been alive far longer than any other Inhuman. I trust her to have done the research,” Gordon said, though his expression seemed somewhat disturbed.

“She’s also convinced that SHIELD and HYDRA are the same, and that the only way to make us safe is by killing everyone else,” spoke a new voice; everyone turned to see a young, blonde man walk into the room.

“Lincoln, it’s not safe,” Gordon said, holding up a hand to keep the young man back.

“They won’t hurt us,” Lincoln said confidently, and Bucky caught sight of the earpiece in his ear. May seemed unsurprised to see him, and Bucky belatedly turned his comms back on, to at least listen to the chatter. “Gordon, we have to stop this. They showed me the data; releasing terrigen on the population will kill over three quarters of the people.”

Gordon looked between the various group members, clearly torn before sighing in resignation. “We don’t have much time,” he noted.

Skye and Nat were running, following the bond as they went to track down Wanda. Wanda was vulnerable the moment someone figured out she wasn’t actually trying to help them, and there were a number of Inhumans whose powers were unknown to the team. That made them potentially dangerous, though there was hope that Wanda’s powers would let her see any threats coming.

Suddenly, there was a great deal of pain that rippled through the bond, causing both Nat and Skye to momentarily pause and grip the wall. “No,” Skye whispered. They burst into the room and Skye saw her mother, holding each side of Wanda’s face. Wanda was gray. Literally. Some instinct deep down
told Skye that her soulmate was dying. She could feel Wanda’s words on her skin flickering. Skye didn’t even pause to think, simply reacting to the threat to her soulmate. Remembering one of Thor’s more advanced lessons, she pulled Wanda away as gently as possible while she shoved with her other hand to get Jiaying away from Wanda. Wanda skidded into Nat’s waiting arms and the two of them collapsed onto the floor of the ship.

Jiaying flew across the room, hitting the wall with a sickening crunch before she herself crumpled to the floor. Jiaying didn’t move. Horror flooded Skye’s senses as she ripped back her power, staring at Jiaying’s still form. She felt lightheaded. Her chest ached. She hadn’t just… had she? She was vaguely aware that Nat was saying something to her, but she couldn’t make sense of the words. The pain in her chest was overwhelming. Her vision grayed and the room tilted. Then the darkness came.

Natasha was alternating between screaming, panicked, into her comm for backup and trying to get Skye to respond when she fainted. She crawled over to Skye. She knew Skye was still alive through the bond, but not much past that. Wanda was panting heavily, not in very good shape herself, so Nat could do nothing but sit with her mates, waiting for help to arrive and doing her best to support them through the bond. Faintly, given the distance, she could feel Maria trying to do the same.

In a flash of blue light, May and Bucky arrived with the man with no eyes. Nat stiffened, ready to defend Skye and Wanda.

“He’s on our side,” Bucky said simply. “This is Gordon.” He then looked around, turning pale as he assessed the situation. Bucky knelt down to check Skye’s pulse, seeing that Natasha held Wanda carefully. May knelt next to him, stroking her former trainee’s hair.

Gordon made a beeline for Wanda, who was still pretty gray. “I think she’ll be alright, but she should be checked out by one of our medics,” he said after checking her over.

“What happened?” Nat said. “We came in and Jiaying was touching her… it felt like Wanda was dying.”

“She probably was,” Gordon said. “Jiaying’s power is to drain life-force from others to use it herself. It’s how she has lived as long as she has.”

“She wished for me to touch the Kree Stone,” Wanda said softly, speaking for the first time. “I refused…”

Nat pulled Wanda closer to her, mostly reminding herself that Wanda was still with them. “Skye pulled Wanda towards us and shoved Jiaying into a wall. I’m fairly sure she’s dead.”

The implication sank in for all of them of what Skye had been forced to do.

“I think it’s likely for the best that she’s gone,” Bucky said at last in a low voice. “She wasn’t sane; I suspect HYDRA is at fault for that. Whatever they did to her.” He sighed and shifted Skye so she was half on his lap, cradled against his chest. “Skye’s going to take it hard, though. But her pulse is steady, and she doesn’t appear hurt physically.”

“This is my fault,” Gordon said sadly. “Jiaying lost touch with reality and I did not see it. I should have seen it.”

“You believed in her goal of protecting your people,” Wanda said gently, finally getting her breath back as she recovered. “And she seemed reasonable, not unhinged outwardly. It was difficult to see. You should not blame yourself too much.”

Steve and Tony burst through the door before anyone else could speak up. A moment later, Lincoln,
Shane and Lori arrived from another direction. Coulson, Weaver, Trip and Bobbi were right behind them, looking grim. “Is everyone alright?” Coulson asked before anything else.

“More or less,” Natasha replied. She looked at Gordon. “Can you tell your people to stand down? We don’t want to hurt anyone, but…”

“Of course. I will gather everyone on the main deck,” Gordon offered.

“Good. We’ll meet you there,” Coulson agreed. Gordon nodded and vanished with another flash of light, taking Shane, Lori and Lincoln with him. “Skye?” Coulson asked softly as he took in the situation.

“Unconscious, but her vitals are stable,” May said, tucking Skye into Bucky’s grasp and the both of them standing easily. “Shocked, though; she’s going to need help coping.”

“She’ll have it,” Natasha, Wanda and Trip said simultaneously. Steve and Tony nodded immediately afterwards. Then Steve was distracted as his comm chirped and he stepped out into the hall to answer it.

“We’ll hold on debrief until we talk to the Inhumans, then,” Coulson said. “We should go up and meet them. You want to take Skye to your jet or to medical?”

“There’s nothing wrong with her a doctor can fix, as far as we can see,” Natasha said.

Steve returned to the room, looking concerned. “Sharon’s on the line. Maria’s in a state. You want to talk to her?”

“I will,” Wanda spoke up softly.

“JARVIS, patch Sharon over to Wanda please,” Steve said into the comm. “We’ll let you talk while we round up everyone else.” Wanda nodded and the others filed out of the room, Bucky carrying Skye carefully, Nat and May flanking him.

“Sharon?” Wanda spoke a moment later when the line connected.

“Wanda,” Maria’s voice came over the line instead, sounding strained and worried. “I felt… God, it was awful. Are you alright?”

“Tired and worn. But I will be fine with some rest,” Wanda assured her in a soothing tone.

Maria’s deep sigh resonated through the line. “Good. That’s good. And… Skye?”

“Skye has had a bad shock. She… in saving my life, she killed her mother. I think it was accidental, but she fainted. She will be fine, but…”

“But she’s going to need us. She’ll blame herself, because of course she will,” Maria agreed. “We’ll get her through it, love.”

“We will,” Wanda said with assurance. “She will not be alone, and our whole family will take care of her if she needs it.”

“Skye’s strong, and she has a lot of people who love her. She won’t face this alone,” Maria said. “You guys about done there, then?”

“We need to speak with the remaining Inhumans, but I believe hostilities are at an end. I should join the others, though,” Wanda sighed.
“Okay. I’ll be on the main comms with everyone else in a few minutes. I just…”

“I understand. Talk to you soon.” Wanda well understood the need to make sure everything was alright after the emotions that had surged through the bond.

When Wanda stepped into the hall, she was surprised to see Bucky and Trip headed back in her direction with Skye. “What’s wrong?”

“We’re taking her to medical. Look at her arm,” Trip said softly. “I noticed it as we headed upstairs.” Skye’s right hand and wrist were turning a mottled purple, bruises standing out vividly on her pale golden skin and disappearing into her sleeve.

“She needs a scan,” Bucky added. “Clearly something more is wrong than her just fainting.”

“I am going with you,” Wanda asserted, falling into step with Trip as they resumed their trek down the hall.

“Don’t you need to join your team?” Trip asked, though his tone indicated that he wasn’t really arguing with her.

“Natasha will keep me informed; I trust them to do what is best. But one of us needs to stay with Skye,” Wanda asserted.

“Hadn’t planned on leavin’ her alone, doll,” Bucky said with a cheeky grin, trying to lighten the situation just a bit. “But you’re welcome to join us.” Trip chuckled but Wanda just nodded.

The three of them formed a strange honor guard for their unconscious friend, none of them willing to leave her side. When they reached Bruce, they found him working with Lincoln to tend to some minor injuries for people on both sides of the skirmish. Bruce stopped treating a burn when he spotted Bucky stoically carrying Skye’s limp form.

For a second, the three of them saw Bruce turn ever so slightly green and froze in their tracks. Wanda rushed forward and grabbed Bruce’s hand. “It is okay,” Wanda reassured him. “She is injured, but we believe she is alright.”

“We have a stretcher in the back of our Quinjet,” Bruce said. “Can you get it?”

Trip took off and quickly returned with the stretcher. “Lay her down on it,” Bruce said. He produced scissors and proceeded to cut off the arm of Skye’s combat gear. Everyone hissed at the site of the purple mottled skin that ran the length of her arm.

“Lincoln, I need you to come look at this,” Bruce called over to the inhuman who was talking quietly to Alisha, who had a bandage on her head.

Lincoln came over and knelt over Skye. “Her power must have recoiled on herself,” Lincoln said contemplatively, doing a physical check of Skye’s body for any other obvious injuries. “It happens to us sometimes when we overdo it. We should do an X-Ray and an EKG if you have the tools.”

Bruce stared at Lincoln, startled. “An EKG? Are you sure?” he asked, knowing what Lincoln would be testing for.

Lincoln nodded. “I just want to be sure it didn’t happen,” Lincoln said.

“Be sure what did not happen?” Wanda asked, reaching for patience but clearly concerned by the scrutiny Skye was receiving.
Lincoln looked at Wanda seriously. “You know that Skye can affect just about anything with her powers, right?” he asked and Wanda nodded. “If Skye’s powers recoiled into her own body, she could have affected more than just the surface. She could have disrupted her own breathing or possibly her heartbeat.”

“But Bucky said her heartbeat was stable!” Wanda protested.

Bucky frowned as well. “It was when I checked. How long was she down before I got there?”

“I do not know,” Wanda admitted. “I do not think it was long, but I was still… recovering…”

Lincoln eyed her, his concern ratcheting up a notch. “Recovering from what?”

“Jiaying was in the process of draining Wanda when Skye and Natasha arrived,” Gordon replied, having appeared just in time to hear Lincoln’s question. “I was going to tell you that she needs to be checked as well.”

“I’m not sure we have the equipment here,” Lincoln replied with a sigh. “But I’ll do what I can.”

Gordon nodded, his face tilted downward as if he were looking at Skye. He gently brushed a strand of hair off her forehead. “How is she?”

“We were about to find out,” Bruce spoke up. “We don’t have a full scanner, but there is a portable EKG with the emergency defibrillator. Or we can get Tony down here and see what JARVIS can spot.”

“Ideally, I’d take her back to Lai Shi,” Lincoln said. “We have everything we need there, and… someone who possibly could help, if our concerns aren’t unfounded.”

“If you would be willing to allow us and our soulmates to go with her, I think that would be possible,” Wanda said lightly. “Though someone would need to get Maria from New York. And I do not think you could stop the rest of our teams from following in their planes.”

“But…” Lincoln began, but Gordon shook his head and the younger man cut himself off.

“If we are to become friends or allies, we would eventually share the location with you anyway,” Gordon said. “If it is acceptable, I can take Skye, Lincoln and Dr. Banner, come back for yourself and Natasha, and then take someone back for your Maria… though Maria will take longer.”

“Why?” Trip was curious, and Gordon gave him a small smile.

“Because part of my gift allows me to sense the location of any Inhuman in the world,” Gordon explained. “I can appear next to any one of them that I wish. But we don’t have anyone in New York, so I will have to go to a place I am familiar with and walk from there.”

“Go get Skye the help she needs,” Bucky said decisively. “We’ll go talk to the others and you can pick up Wanda and Natasha when you come back. Everyone else can pile into the planes; there are several on the ship, if we don’t have enough room in the ones we came with.”

Gordon nodded and gestured Bruce and Lincoln closer. A moment later, they were gone in a flash of blue.
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the Iliad.

Chapter Notes

The chapter you've been waiting for... What just happened? ;)

Many thanks, as always, to our faithful commenters/reviewers/reposters and people who support our story in various ways. We love you!
This seemed like a good chapter for a reprise of this pic. Thanks again to Mockingbirdquake for the manip!

Chapter 43
Maria was in an absolute panic. She hadn’t liked staying behind while the others went off to rescue her soulmate, but everyone had agreed that this was a major combat situation since they didn’t know what they’d be walking into. Shortly after the report that they had arrived, she had felt Wanda’s mark start to flicker, then she felt a wave of pain and horror from Skye that was impressive considering the distance.

Maria immediately dashed towards the supply room, fully intending on taking a jet to the Illiad. Hunter had to physically restrain her when he caught up.

“Maria? Maria!” Hunter said. “Maria, what’s wrong?”

“Wanda…” Maria gasped. “Skye…”

Hunter stiffened. “Are they alive?” he asked. Maria was too out of it to answer. “Maria, are they alive?”

After several long moments, Maria nodded and everyone sighed in relief. “We need to find out what happened,” Kara said. “JARVIS patched me through to Wanda and Skye’s private channels on their comms, but they aren’t answering. Should I try Nat?”

Sharon shook her head, going over to the computer and typing in her own code. “Steve will know,” she said. “If he doesn’t pick up, I say we all pile in the Quinjet and go get answers ourselves.”

Everybody agreed and waited to see if Steve would pick up. Sharon did manage to get through to him, but he didn’t have a whole lot of news. He relayed what Natasha had been able to tell them, and Maria wilted in Hunter’s grasp when she heard that Skye had just managed to help Wanda before more serious damage could happen. Hunter just accepted the fact that the tough-as-nails former assistant director of SHIELD was near to tears in his arms, offering her the comfort anyone would need upon hearing they’d nearly lost a soulmate.

Maria left the line on speaker when Steve patched them over to Wanda, though everyone else stayed respectfully silent while the two women spoke. Everyone began to relax a little when the call ended, and they switched back over to the main comms channel to continue monitoring what was happening.

The tension notched back up when they heard Bucky speak up over the line. He explained Bruce and Lincoln’s concerns about Skye, and quickly outlined the plan to get everyone to the Inhumans’ town. Hunter swore vividly.

“Should we get on a jet ourselves?” he asked after he finished.

“Gordon’s going to come get Maria; someone will need to let him into the building, unless he brings Natasha or Wanda with him,” Bucky explained. “If you can’t convince him to pop you all over to China, then yeah, get on the jet. But he’ll bring Maria at a bare minimum. I dunno how wearing his power is, whether or not he’d bring everyone else.”

“Noted,” Sharon said briskly. “I assume you folk will be flying, given your closer proximity?”

“That’s the plan for the moment,” Bucky agreed.

Thankfully, it wasn’t long before Gordon arrived. He presented himself at the elevator with a code phrase they recognized and Maria instructed JARVIS to allow him up. Every person in the control room was a former agent, so none of them were particularly worried about allowing a relative unknown access.
“Maria, I presume?” Gordon asked, his face tilted in Maria’s direction despite having no eyes.

“That’s me. But if it’s not too much to ask, we’d all like to go with you,” Maria responded.

Gordon just nodded. “I rather expected you might. She seems to have that effect on people.”

“We’re all ready if you are,” Hunter spoke up.

“I will have to take two trips; long distances are not a problem but it’s always more taxing to involve more people,” Gordon explained. The others nodded.

A few minutes later, both groups arrived in the mountains. Gordon led the group to the dining hall.

“The doctors have asked that everyone wait out here; there just isn’t room for so many people in our medical facility and they take their patients’ privacy very seriously. They’ve promised to send word as soon as they know anything.”

“Thank you,” Sharon said with a small smile. “We’ll try to be good guests and not be too impatient.”

It was pretty crowded. All the Avengers, several Inhumans, and Coulson and May were milling around, waiting for news on Skye and Wanda. Not even Nat had been allowed inside. They found her in a corner, looking very much like she was about to cry.

“Nat,” Maria said softly.

Natasha looked up and raced to her. “Maria! I couldn’t… she looked so small… I couldn’t get to her Maria. I’m so sorry…”

Maria wrapped her arms around her soulmate and supported Nat as she cried quietly. “It wasn’t your fault,” Maria said softly. “We’re okay. We’re all okay.”

Bruce then suddenly opened the door. “Maria? Nat? You can come in now. We’re asking the rest of you to wait a moment.”

Maria and Nat didn’t need to be told twice and rushed in after Bruce. Wanda looked tired, but was sitting in a chair next to Skye’s bed, holding the hand that wasn’t heavily braced from her shoulder to the end of her fingers. Skye looked absolutely exhausted. She was hooked up to two different IVs, had an oxygen mask over her mouth and nose, and was still hooked up to electrical leads that were attached to her chest.

Maria sucked in a breath when she saw Skye. She understood what Natasha meant. Kidnapped, wounded, stalked, and having her life turned upside-down more than once in the last couple of years, Skye had always looked like a fighter. Even after she was coherent enough to answer questions after being shot by Quinn, she’d regained the determined look on her face, insisting she was fine. This was the first time Skye looked broken since the Guest House.

Bruce sat on a stool and indicated that Maria and Nat should sit in the other two chairs by Skye’s bed. Maria sat by Skye’s head on her bad side and kissed her temple, stroking her hair. Skye leaned into Maria’s touch, but it worried Maria that she didn’t move to remove the oxygen mask.

Lincoln cleared his throat, drawing everyone’s “So first, Wanda is fine. She’ll be tired for a few days, but there was no lasting damage from Jiaying’s attack.” Maria smiled across the bed as Nat nearly pulled Wanda into her lap. Skye squeezed her hand and smiled briefly.

“Skye’s case is a little more complicated. In her panic, we believe that Skye’s power turned on herself after she attacked Jiaying. She has over forty microfractures in her left arm from her fingers to her clavicle and…” Bruce paused, looking worriedly at Skye. “And it appears it triggered a minor
heart attack. The theory is that the quake stopped her heart for a moment and she may have stopped breathing.”

Natasha’s and Maria’s gazes snapped back to Bruce in shock. Wanda squeezed Skye’s hand. “She can be moved, so we’re taking her back to the Tower as soon as possible. As much as we appreciate Lincoln’s skills, I think everyone would feel more at ease if there was a hospital nearby.”

“Understandable,” Lincoln said, nodding. “We have a lot to discuss as a people in the coming days, regardless. It’s probably best that we do so among ourselves, no offense intended.”

Before anyone could reply, they were interrupted by a light tap at the door. “Come in,” Natasha said, though she watched the door warily. Everyone was taken aback when a very old Chinese man opened the door and stepped inside. “Who are you?” she demanded.

The man bowed formally to them, which Lincoln and Bruce responded to more out of habit than anything. “I am called Ling,” the man introduced himself in accented English. “The children told me their friend was injured, and I came to offer my assistance.”

Skye was already half-asleep and in no state to make a decision, but Natasha and Maria were more wary. However, Wanda spoke up before her soulmates could demand answers. “We would appreciate any help you can give her.”

“Grandfather, are you up for this? We believe her powers backlashed, affecting her heart and perhaps her lungs,” Lincoln explained respectfully. He seemed surprised to see the old man.

“Would someone please explain what’s going on?” Maria asked, her tone sharp.

“Grandfather Ling is a healer,” Lincoln explained. “He usually only offers his help to life threatening wounds, because it drains his strength to heal another person.”

Ling waved off the concern. “Not permanently, youngling, only that I need to sleep and eat more than usual for a few days. But this is a special case. Change is coming to Lai Shi, and I believe we are overdue. I also believe that as the last of her family line, Jiaying’s daughter will have an impact on what we become. To do this, she must be well. Therefore, my help is needed.”

“Is there risk to you, to heal her?” Bruce asked gently. “She will recover in time; it may not be worth a risk, if there is one.”

“Whether or not there is a risk, it is my choice to make, young man,” Ling said firmly.

“He will not harm her,” Wanda said in a tone of calm assurance. “And he will be weak but capable of contributing to the change if he so desires when he is done here.”

“Just so,” Ling agreed with a small smile. Wanda nudged Natasha until they joined Maria on the far side of the bed, leaving space for Ling to reach Skye.

Skye’s eyes popped open for a moment as his hand settled on her chest, over her heart, but she relaxed almost immediately as she felt a sensation of warmth beneath his hand. “Hush, granddaughter; all will be well,” he soothed her in Mandarin.

Ling stood, touching Skye gently, for several long minutes. The silence wasn’t awkward, though, as everyone watched to see what would happen. Bruce split his attention between Skye and the monitors they still had connected to her; her heart rate was steady and her blood pressure slowed somewhat. As they watched, the lines of pain on her face smoothed away and the hint of strain to her breathing eased.
Finally, Ling lifted his hand and stepped back; he wobbled a bit on his feet, but Lincoln was at his side to steady him immediately. At the same time, Skye took a deep breath and her eyes opened slowly. No one stopped her when she lifted her hands to remove the oxygen mask; the bruises on her arms were still dark, but they showed signs of beginning to fade around the edges.

“Thank you, grandfather,” Skye said in Mandarin as soon as she was able to speak. Her voice was still weary, heavy with many emotions, but her body at least seemed to be doing better.

Ling smiled, though the expression showed his weariness. “You are welcome, granddaughter. If you will excuse me, I will seek my own rest now.”

“Thank you,” Bruce said when it seemed that Skye’s soulmates were still speechless. Skye didn’t speak further, just turned her cheek into pillow and the hand Maria still had there. The moment Ling left, Tony and Steve came bursting in. Both tensed at the sight of Skye, her eyes closed.

“Is she alright?” Tony asked in a rush. “What can I do to help?”

The tidal wave of grief over Jiaying that Skye had been barely holding at bay overwhelmed her. Her dad cared for her in the way that parents were meant to care about their children - the way that Cal and Jiaying hadn’t. Every expression of distaste or displeasure that had crossed Jiaying’s face when Skye had mentioned anything about the outside world in the last few weeks flashed in fast-forward in Skye’s overtired mind. It almost would have been better if Jiaying had tried to kill her rather than Wanda. With Jiaying almost killing her soulmate, it felt like Jiaying was yet another person who was obsessed with controlling her life.

It registered to her eventually that every inch of her was being cradled. She felt love and support pouring through the bond. She heard Maria explaining everything to someone in a low tone as she stroked Skye’s hair, but she couldn’t make out the words. She dozed off, only waking up again when she felt herself being moved.

She was cradled in someone’s strong arms, and the sensation felt familiar. Steve, perhaps, but she couldn’t be bothered to look and see. She was too tired, too heartsore, and it just wasn’t worth the effort. Not even for her family.

“You get better, Skye,” she heard Steve’s voice say softly in her ear. So she’d been right, then. “I’ll be home after we sort things out with the Inhumans. I wish I could go with you now, but… someone needs to stay and help out, here.” Skye didn’t speak or even open her eyes, but she turned her cheek into his shoulder for a moment. She understood; it was important. “But I’ll be here if you need me,” Steve went on in a low monologue. “I promise. Just call.”

“I’m not leaving her like this,” Skye heard May’s voice next, the desperation in it seeming foreign to Skye.

“May, I could really use you…” Coulson said.

“I can’t, Phil, not after… not after last time,” May was saying. “I need to see that she’s going to be alright for myself.”

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” Bucky was saying somewhere by Skye’s feet. Skye wondered what had happened on the Illiad that had caused Bucky to gain feelings of such loyalty towards May.

The next moment she felt the engines beneath her as they were suddenly in mid-flight. “Come back to us,” she heard May telling her softly. “You’ve got a world of people who love you.” Skye wanted to answer, but it hurt too much to muster up a response. This was the end of her lifelong search for

her biological family. This was all she got - a few weeks before she was forced to kill her own mother for the sake of her soulmate. She wondered if the other Avengers would hate her for becoming a murderer. Or what her soulmates would think once they found out the truth. A corrupted soul. Like Ward. Like Raina. They should hate her. She hated herself. She didn’t know that her heart could hurt this much. Hurt for who Cal and Jiaying should have been. They had broken. Like May had broken. She wondered, idly, if it had been them who had murdered the entire village trying to go after her. Had they killed the SHIELD agents? Been the reason why she had spent her entire childhood rootless with so many assuming she was stupid?

The voices around her faded in and out as Skye drifted, lost within herself. She had very little sense of time passing, though she did notice that she was moved again. Not Steve this time, though, and it took her a moment to remember that Steve had stayed behind. She didn’t feel like she was in any danger, though; not that she would have cared if she had been.

“I don’t know how to help her,” Natasha’s voice penetrated her haze at one point. “This is way worse than I ever was.”

“She is shutting us out. I do not think she can even feel the soulbond right now,” Wanda replied. “But we must still be here for her. She will not stay like this forever.”

“We hope, anyway,” Tony said grimly.

More time passed, though Skye had no concept of how much. She wasn’t sure if she slept or not, because she kept seeing the same things: Wanda’s life being drained, Jiaying’s lifeless body, the sickening crunch in the moment her mother hit the wall too hard. She occasionally heard the beep of a monitor and suspected she was in the Avengers’ medical area.

All of a sudden, she felt something different. A gentle touch, a hand in her hair. This time it was May’s voice again. “I know you’re in there, Skye,” she said softly. Skye didn’t sense any other presences; maybe they were alone. But opening her eyes seemed like too much work. “I know it hurts. I know you think you’ve done something horrible. And you did, but it was an accident. You were scared, your soulmate was dying. So you reacted, exactly the way we’ve taught you; you ended the threat. And now you feel horrible because of it. I know, because I’ve been there. Let me tell you a story. A true story.”

Skye heard May pause, felt her settle in more comfortably. Skye’s head rested on May’s lap and May’s fingers returned to her hair, stroking soothingly. And May began to speak, her voice low and rough with remembered pain, as she shared the true story of Bahrain. Of exactly what happened, and how she had felt about it. That Gordon had told her that the entire incident was because of an Inhuman child who should never have been allowed to have powers.

May spoke of the self-loathing, that she’d failed her fellow agents. That she’d had no choice but to kill, first the girl’s mother and then the girl herself; if she hadn’t, it wouldn’t have ended with her death. How it broke her. How her marriage ended, because she couldn’t let anyone in, especially not Andrew.

“But you’re stronger than I am in some ways, Skye,” May went on after a moment to collect herself. “You’ve always been so open, so accepting. You have so many people that love you, people that you’ve never hidden your true self from. You don’t have to start now. I know it’s not easy. I know it never will be. But you can come back from this, Skye. You can heal, and I can too.”

Skye felt for May, but she couldn’t help but see it differently. Jiaying was only dead because she hadn’t been in control of her powers. She had overdone it. It was her fault. It was like Ward had said. She was a monster. “‘Ma monster,’” she managed to force out, still unable to open her eyes. The
sound was foreign to her. Raspy. She hoped that May understood her message, because she didn’t think she could say anything else.

May’s hand stilled for a moment as she took in Skye’s words, but it resumed again after a moment. “I’m sure you believe that. But trust me when I say that you’re not. If you were a monster, Tùzř, you would not care that people might think you are. Monsters don’t care who they hurt to achieve their goals. That’s why I know you’re not one. You can’t be.”

Skye wondered why May was calling her a rabbit. That made her wonder other things, like how much time had passed since the Iliad. She tentatively opened her eyes a crack, then closed them, flinching back at the assault of light that hit her.

She tried again and it was easier for her eyes to adjust to the dim light. Without moving her head, she was able to see out the window and saw that it was late. Most of the lights in the offices around the Tower were off, though Skye could still see the lights of Broadway and Time Square.

“Hey,” May said softly, brushing Skye’s cheek with a finger as she looked around. May’s attention was focused on Skye and she read a few of the questions in her protégé’s eyes. “It’s about 1am, and it has been a few days since we brought you back to New York.”

Skye looked around the room and saw that it was empty. Of course it was, she realized. May wouldn’t share the story of Bahrain if it wasn’t. She wondered where everyone was. She tried her best to remember May’s words and believe that there was an explanation for everyone not being there, but she couldn’t help but wonder…

“I sent everyone to go get some sleep, though Barnes is napping right outside the door,” May explained without needing to be asked. “They’ve all been adamant about not leaving you alone, but your soulmates in particular haven’t slept much since we got here. I threatened to have them all sedated if they didn’t go sleep, so they finally gave in. Check your bond if you’d like; they’re not far.”

Skye moved her head ever so slightly and felt the pull of something that was up her nose. She heard a rapid beeping sound as she was suddenly all too aware of how many wires and tubes she was connected to. She wanted… she wanted… honestly she didn’t know what she wanted, but it wasn’t this. May was stroking her hair, trying to calm her down when Bruce came in, all business.

He smiled warmly when he saw Skye’s eyes were open. “Nice to see you back with us, Skye,” he said softly. “I’m going to give you something to calm you down a little, and then I’ll explain what’s going on.”

Bucky came bursting into the room, slightly panicked at the sound of the alarm he had heard as Bruce turned it off. Bruce injected something into Skye’s IV and suddenly the panic left her completely. May waved her free hand at Bucky and he relaxed upon seeing the signal that all was well.

Once the beeping returned to its original beat, Bruce found a chair to sit down on next to Skye’s bed. “That’s better,” Bruce said with a slightly tense smile. “I’m sure you have a lot of questions, but let me see if I can answer some of them before you try to talk, alright?” Skye nodded slightly, so Bruce told her about her injuries, including the extent to which the Inhuman healer had repaired or accelerated the healing of her body. He explained the decision to bring her home, and that Steve and Sharon had stayed with Coulson to resolve the incident with the Inhumans.

Skye glanced up at May, and the older woman smiled just slightly. “I insisted. You needed me more than Phil at that moment in time.”
“And, perhaps not surprisingly, Maria and Natasha actually listen to her some of the time, so her presence has been welcome as far as I’m concerned,” Bruce added with a small smile. Skye huffed out a breath in what might have been amusement, but it never touched her eyes. “Since then, you’ve been more or less catatonic, Skye,” Bruce continued more seriously. “Your soulmates say you’ve been too lost in your own thoughts to respond to anyone, which is part of why you’re here. We needed to keep your body healthy while your mind struggled.”

Skye didn’t know what to say. She brought a hand up to her nose where she felt an oxygen NPO under her nose and another tube going up one of the nasal passages. She gave Bruce a questioning look, though her eyes held signs of fatigue again.

“We want to make sure your oxygen levels are kept up while you recover. The NG tube stays in place until you’re back to eating regular meals,” Bruce explained. Skye nodded sleepily. Despite herself, she was falling back asleep due to the drug Bruce had given her. “We can talk more after you’ve rested.”

Skye looked up and saw May looking back at her, frowning worriedly, and stroking Skye’s hair. She wanted to ask May what was bothering her, but the pull of sleep was too strong.

The next time she woke up, Skye noticed it was easier to open her eyes. The second thing she noticed was that she was starving and something smelled amazing. She opened her eyes and struggled to sit up. She suddenly felt surprise come through her soulbond as Nat turned around and what she saw confirmed what she had felt. Skye was awake.

“Hey,” Natasha said softly, gliding over to the side of the bed and helping adjust it so Skye was sitting more upright. “How are you feeling?”

Skye shrugged, still not really feeling like talking. She looked longingly at breakfast laid out on the table, though, and tried to let Nat feel her hunger through the soulbond.

“It’s alright. You don’t have to talk,” Tony spoke up from the table. “Hey, JARVIS, ask Bruce if Skye’s allowed to have breakfast.” He sent Skye a smile and added, “It’s great to see you awake, sweetheart. You scared the hell out of us.”

“Tony!” Maria hissed reprovingly as Skye looked down at her hands, her expression betraying her guilt and shame.

“Don’t listen to him, Skye,” Natasha told her, cupping her cheek with a gentle hand. “We know we can’t begin to understand what you’ve been through. Just know that we love you and we’re here if you need us, yeah?”

Skye bit her lip and nodded tentatively.

“Doctor Banner agrees that Skye may have breakfast, but she should start light and eat slowly,” JARVIS said after a moment.

Wanda made Skye a plate and brought it over; Skye noticed that she was quiet and looked tired, but chose not to think too hard about it for the moment. It was more than she could handle. Natasha slid the bed tray into place and Skye just inhaled the wonderful aroma of eggs, toast and tea. There were IVs and tubes connected to her right arm, which Skye also noticed was covered in mostly-healed bruises. So she picked up the fork in her left hand and slowly tried to feed herself.

It was messy, but her soulmates allowed her to feed herself since she wasn’t indicating she wanted help. It took longer than usual, but she managed. After she was done with breakfast, she began to
wonder when she would be allowed to leave the medical area for their apartment. Given the fact that she was catatonic for three days, she figured that she’d be in here for a little while longer and she was almost positive that she’d be seeing Andrew sooner rather than later.

After she ate, she felt a lot better, but she desperately wanted a shower. She hadn’t had one in three days and the showers at Lai Shi had lacked the pressure that Skye had grown accustomed to at the tower.

“You up for a walk this morning?” Nat asked. Skye nodded enthusiastically, though her soulmates noted that her expression didn’t light up the way it usually would. “Alright. Let’s call Bruce and see if he’s okay with disconnecting some of this. He said you’re mostly healthy, physically?” Skye nodded again; aside from feeling filthy she didn’t hurt much or anything. Nothing worth complaining about at any rate. “JARVIS? If Bruce isn’t on his way, can you get him?”

“Doctor Banner will be there shortly,” JARVIS confirmed.

“JARVIS tells me you feel up to walking around,” Bruce said with a reassuring smile. Skye nodded and Bruce nodded. “Okay then, let’s get you unhooked from all this. How do you feel about down the hall and back?”

Skye gave Bruce a look. Surely he knew she could go further than that. She was Quake, for god’s sake.

She refused to let Nat help her out of bed, and didn’t understand why Nat stood right next to her until Skye’s knees buckled. Nat caught her instantly and bore her weight. Tony chuckled softly at Skye’s look of confusion and Bruce shook his head lightly. “You’ve been immobile for three days, Skye. Your body has some adjustments to make. Take it slow,” Bruce advised.

Bruce wheeled an IV pole to the side that Nat wasn’t on. “Ready?” he asked her.

Skye nodded. Then very slowly took a step. It amazed her how much effort it took to take a step. By the time she had gone to the end of the hall and back, she was shocked that she was ready for a nap. In some ways, she grateful for the exhaustion because she didn’t have to think about why she was in this state.

After her nap, she had lunch with Maria, May and Bucky. May and Bucky thought they were being subtle, the way they were looking at each other, but Skye totally caught on. Skye thought they’d make a good couple. Both of them had darkness in their pasts, but both were working through it. And May couldn’t use age as an excuse because, though she was physically older, Bucky was chronologically much older.

During lunch, Bucky kept giving Skye looks throughout the meal that honestly made Skye uncomfortable. Towards the end of the meal, Bucky slipped his hand into Skye’s. “You need to talk to someone about this… rather than just let it stew.”

Skye looked at Bucky. Unsure of how to tell Bucky that she wasn’t ready to say anything to anyone. “Maybe…” Maria said slowly “Maybe that’s not the worst idea in the world.” Skye couldn’t help but look at Maria, just a little bit hurt. She was fine. She just needed a little time to adjust. “Please understand it from our point of view, Skye,” Maria said softly. “You… you just dropped. And we couldn’t feel you at all through the bond. For three days, we couldn’t feel you at all, and we can still feel you fighting it.”

Shoulders slumped, Skye sighed softly. She didn’t want to burden her soulmates with more of her problems. They’d supported her through so much already, she didn’t want to add more to it.
Objectively, she knew she would want them to let her help if they had problems… but Maria was pretty well adjusted, Natasha seldom wanted or needed help, and Wanda’s traumas were somewhat more limited in scope. In short, Skye felt she was the only one who was such a mess, and she didn’t want her soulmates to have to deal with it.

“Maybe you and I could take another walk?” Maria suggested. “Then you could take a nap and we’ll see where we are?” Skye shook her head. More than anything, she still really wanted a shower. And Maria could help her, so she wouldn’t be alone; she knew Bruce wouldn’t be happy with Skye alone in a shower, but with help… Skye caught Maria’s eye and then looked pointedly towards the bathroom. “You need help to the bathroom, Skye?” Maria asked, a little puzzled when Skye shook her head again.

“I think she wants a shower,” Bucky spoke up. “You know how she can be, and she didn’t get one after the last mission…”

“Probably not a good idea. You’re not supposed to shower with an IV line,” Maria pointed out.

Skye was surprised when May came to her aid. “But if she had us to help her, she could take a short bath,” May suggested.

“She’s probably still too tired for more than a short thing anyway,” Bucky added, grinning when Skye made a face at him. “Truth hurts, doll. But if that’s what you’d like, I’ll leave you ladies to it.”

Skye nodded appreciatively and Maria gave in with a sigh. “Alright. I’ll go get the water running. Bucky, if you can get here there for us, I’d appreciate it. You’ll get your exercise in getting out and dry, Skye,” Maria pointed out when Skye rolled her eyes at the idea of being carried.

Bucky didn’t give her a chance to argue, just scooped her up and took Skye and her IV stand into the bathroom. He set Skye down on the counter, kissed her forehead gently, and let himself out of the room.

The bath was heavenly. May washed Skye’s hair for her, and Maria took care of the rest of her body. It didn’t take long, but she felt loads better when they hauled her to her feet and supported her as she stepped out of the tub. Her legs were shaky and she was ready for that nap by the time they got her into clean nightclothes. Despite her previous objections, she allowed Maria to carry her to bed. She was asleep before her head hit her pillow.
Chapter 44

Chapter by LadyWinterlight

Chapter Summary

Skye's continued healing.

Chapter Notes

We hope everyone had a wonderful holiday of choice! We're still on vacation today, so we're posting early rather than late (I'll be at a movie during our usual posting time - whoops!).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Chapter 44

Andrew was sitting in the chair next to her when she woke up again, a book in his lap. She stretched and sat up, smiling tightly at Andrew in greeting. “Hey Skye, good to see you awake again,” Andrew said.

Skye swallowed, noticing she was thankfully free of the NG tube and the heart monitor, though she still had the IV and her oxygen line. She knew why he was there, but she still wasn’t ready to talk about it. It was too much, too soon. Finally she just nodded, giving him another small smile in return and hoping he would understand.

Andrew set his book aside, studying her quietly for a moment. Skye allowed it, knowing that he was assessing rather than judging. She even met his eyes for a moment, though she hadn’t maintained eye contact with much of anyone for long since she’d woken up.

“You look better than I expected for someone unconscious for a few days,” he said conversationally. Skye blinked, having expected questions rather than commentary. But she and Andrew had been on the way to becoming friends as well as doctor/patient, and she rather expected he understood her better than most. Andrew knew more about her childhood than anyone. It wasn’t that she had told Andrew more than she had told her soulmates, but as a psychologist, Andrew had more experience with the foster system and could draw conclusions from things that she skirted around since she still couldn’t talk about them directly. Through their weekly sessions, Skye had learned that Andrew could understand her in a way that only Matt had ever understood her.

“Did you have a good time in China? I understand you were there for a few weeks before anything difficult happened.”

Skye nodded tentatively. She really had enjoyed getting to know the Inhumans. Lincoln was a sweet guy, always worried about others’ well being. He would make a great doctor when he finished his licensing. And she had gotten really tight with Shane and Lori; she hoped they weren’t too angry with her over what happened…

“I’m glad,” he said, interrupting her thoughts. “I’ve always thought travel was a great way to experience new things and meet new people. Not that you’ve ever had problems making friends, wherever you end up going. Do you think you’ll go back?”

Skye nodded uncertainly. She thought she remembered someone saying something about her returning after the attack, though to be honest the whole thing was rather blurry; but she wasn’t sure that the Inhumans would want her after… that thing that she didn’t want to think about.

She blinked, returning her attention to Andrew when she realized he’d said something and she missed it. She gestured at him, head tilted questioningly and her expression one of apology. “No, don’t apologize,” he said with an understanding smile. “You’ve had a lot happening lately, and it can be hard to deal with that. I heard you didn’t have a lot of computer access there. That had to be tough.”

Skye’s nod was more certain this time. She’d played a lot of video games with Shane, but they’d been almost entirely off the grid. It was hard, because she didn’t really know what to do with herself without her programs to fiddle with and her projects to keep her occupied. She shied away from remembering that she’d been able to get access when she needed it, though.

Andrew studied her quietly for a few moments, then nodded to himself. “You know, when they told me you wouldn’t speak I had a hard time believing it. You may not always talk about what’s on your
mind, but you’re usually fairly gregarious.” Skye tilted her head, though she knew that he was right. When they’d first started talking it had taken him a bit to get her to talk about anything important, but she wasn’t usually averse to talking in general.

“Do you know why you can’t talk right now, Skye?” he asked gently. “They tell me there’s nothing physically wrong with your voice.”

Shrugging, Skye looked away. She just couldn’t. It would just be… wrong. Weird. Even about unrelated topics, she just couldn’t find her voice. She could still communicate to a degree, but it wasn’t the same thing.

“Did it happen on the Iliad, do you think?” Andrew said gently.

Skye bit her lip. She liked Andrew. She trusted Andrew. Still, she closed her eyes, as if she could physically block out the memories. Then she nodded, slowly.

She heard Andrew shift so that he was sitting on the end of her bed, facing her. “Breathe, Skye. You’re safe and you’re home.” After a moment, she was able to regain control of her breathing. “Okay, I think we learned a couple of things, there. First, I think we’re on to something, but let’s not do that again. If we do, your soulmates might kill me and I like all my limbs where they are.”

Skye couldn’t help but laugh quietly at Andrew’s joke. Andrew smiled as well. “It’s good to hear that sound,” Andrew said. “I hear Tony’s getting Nathan’s hot dogs for everyone to celebrate your homecoming.”

Skye couldn’t help but perk up at the thought of food, especially Nathan’s. Maria had been teaching her about the idiosyncrasies of being a foodie, but like her Dad, Skye still enjoyed the classics.

“Skye?” Andrew asked gently. “Are you not talking because of what happened with your mother?”

Skye blanched, giving Andrew a glimpse of grief-stricken eyes before she looked down at her hands. Her fingers curled into fists as she fought to keep her breathing - among other things - under control; she hadn’t often lost control of her power since her intensive training but now she could feel it strongly buzzing, just beneath the surface, as she fought the impulse to push away anything that upset her. Andrew remained quiet while she struggled, his presence a point of calm in the storm of her own emotions. Finally she managed to push it all back again, and she nodded without looking up - even though she knew her reaction was probably answer enough.

“Good,” Andrew said gently. “It might not seem like it, but you made huge progress with that.”

Skye could feel all three of her soulmates’ worry practically screaming at her through the bond. She tried her best to reassure them that she was okay, even if she was still feeling a little off-kilter from Andrew’s questions. Finally she nodded again, accepting his assessment.

“I’m glad you agree,” Andrew said with a smile. “We can talk about it again next time. I have one more question for you to think about, but you don’t have to answer it today. You okay with that?” Skye looked apprehensive, but nodded again. “Good. It’s this: do you feel guilty because you have a family that loves you, entirely separate from the family you might have had if you’d never ended up in foster care?”

Skye tilted her head slightly; she hadn’t ever really thought about it in that light. Finding her biological parents, ignoring all other issues, would have simply added to the people she considered family. She wouldn’t have wanted to have to choose, and she knew her Dad and the others wouldn’t make her make that choice. So did she feel guilty over that in itself? She wasn’t quite sure.
“Just think about it,” Andrew said. “That’s all I want for now. And it’s a little lighter subject for your mind, hmm? Thinking about the people you know love you.”

Skye gave him another small smile and nodded just a bit. Thinking about her Dad, about Steve and Clint and Laura, about the kids, about her soulmates... it did help her to feel a little lighter inside. She might not want to burden them with her troubles, but it was nice to just think about how many people cared.

Andrew stood up and opened the door. Wanda, Maria, and Nat were all at the door, sitting nervously and waiting to be granted access. “I told you that she’d be okay,” Andrew said. “See? She’s fine.”

Skye nodded in confirmation, trying to send her apologies for worrying her mates through the bond. The three women relaxed after a moment, nodding. “We thought we’d see if you’re up to dinner in the common area? If so, we can take you upstairs and settle you on a couch for a while,” Maria said, getting a hold of herself the quickest. Skye nodded again, looking forward to being surrounded by everyone. And hot dogs.

“You look happy about that idea,” Natasha observed. “I suppose Andrew told you what Tony ordered?” Skye nodded again. “Bruce should be down any minute to see if we can disconnect you from everything.”

Skye smiled further, reaching a hand to scratch at her IV site. It felt weird and it itched. “Don’t do that,” Nat admonished, pulling Skye’s hand away. Skye made a face but obeyed reluctantly, until Natasha twined their fingers together, and then it became easier.

“I think I’ll excuse myself, now,” Andrew said genially.

“Are you staying for dinner?” Maria asked.

“I’ll be here for the next few days,” Andrew said. “Just in case I’m needed.”

“You’re always welcome around here Andrew,” Maria said warmly. Skye smiled and nodded in agreement.

After Bruce released Skye from her medical monitors, Skye allowed Nat and Maria to help her to the common floor while keeping the rolled eyes to a minimum. Despite the assistance, she was still pretty tired when she got to the dining room table that they all ate communal meals at. She frowned a little when she saw Steve’s and Sharon’s empty places, remembering they had volunteered to stay at Lai Shi.

Tony immediately grabbed her and sat her between him and Clint, maybe sensing that the quad needed a break from each other, though in reality it was probably Pepper’s doing. Her soulmates visibly relaxed at the sight of Skye smiling and answering yes or no questions from the other Avengers. The others were careful not to ask her anything that would require her to respond vocally, which she appreciated; it took some of the pressure off her. They behaved as if they knew she’d find her voice when she was ready, which made her wonder a bit if Andrew had said something to them.

Skye felt strange emotions coming from Wanda, but Wanda was currently talking at the other end of the table with Pietro and Sam, so she couldn’t ask about it without drawing too much attention.

Skye felt surprisingly content for the evening, full of food and surrounded by love that she felt both through the bond and just by the looks everyone gave her. And she loved them, too. She had certainly missed the familial camaraderie around the dinner table while she was in Lai Shi. She had a moment of guilt when she realized it, but decided it was better to just go with it. It was clearly
helping everyone else relax and unwind, and that was more important to her than anything.

Eventually, Skye could feel herself getting tired. She leaned her head on her hand, propping herself up on the dinner table while she let the others talk around her. “I think it’s time for you to go to bed,” cameBruce’s voice.

Skye cracked her eyes open and looked up blearily at Bruce. She hadn’t realized that she had fallen asleep. She blushed, then blinked away the sleep and nodded, Starting to get up, Bruce immediately took her arm and helped her up.

“Can we take her to our room?” Maria asked forcefully. “She’s not on any monitors, she’s taking fluids and solid foods, and her breathing’s not labored.”

Bruce hesitated before nodding. All four soulmates let their joy bleed through the bond. Skye was beyond ready to sleep in her own bed again after everything. She let herself be helped back to their room and collapsed into her spot on their bed without bothering to undress.

When she woke up again, someone was screaming. It took her a moment to realize that it was Wanda and not her own voice she was hearing. Skye bolted upright to see Natasha cradling a sobbing Wanda, murmuring to her in Russian.

“This happens every night,” Maria said in a whisper from where she was sitting next to Skye. “Andrew says they’re night terrors from…” Skye nodded, understanding and realizing that she and Wanda had equally been traumatized by the events on the Iliad. “She doesn’t remember what scares her so bad after one of these.” Maria pulled Skye into her lap in comfort to them both, which Skye had no objection to. Skye sent as much love and comfort through the bond as she could towards Wanda.


“Ask her,” Nat prodded.

Wanda reached out to Skye, Maria and Natasha scooting closer together to make contact easier. Skye let Wanda take her hand, squeezing gently. “I want to help you, Skye,” Wanda said softly, her voice still edged with tears. “I could not help you before, but I wanted to… can I try now, please?”

Skye gave her a quizzical look, but nodded slowly. She wasn’t quite sure what Wanda was asking to do, but if it would make her feel better… Skye would do or allow almost anything. It became clear when Wanda lifted a hand, her fingers tinged with red light, to touch Skye’s temple. She heard Wanda’s voice, sort of on the edges of her perception, whispering to her. Soothing her guilt, her grief, her fear. Skye closed her eyes and let it wash over her, trying hard not to fight the sensation of her soulmate’s power.

Whatever she was doing, however it was being accomplished, Wanda’s power lulled Skye into relaxation. Skye’s body began to feel heavy and she blinked her eyes open long enough to smile sleepily at her soulmates. Seconds after her eyes closed again, Skye was deeply asleep.

With a long breath, Wanda finally let her hand fall away from Skye. She leaned limply against Natasha for a moment, just breathing deeply. “Try to sleep again, then,” Natasha said as Maria tucked Skye back into bed. Natasha helped settle Wanda beside Skye, herself and Maria bracketing their two more vulnerable soulmates. “We’ll be
Skye woke up alone with the sun shining through the windows. “Good Morning Miss Stark,” JARVIS said. “It is currently 11:43 in the morning and it is 62°F outside. Sir has requested that I notify everyone when you awaken. Is there something you’d like for breakfast?”

Skye noticed the keys of a keyboard appeared on the side table so she could type her answer. Skye smiled. There was a reason why she loved JARVIS. She considered her options before requesting a fruit and yogurt parfait and a large coffee. She then got up, took a shower on her own, which felt amazing, and dressed. JARVIS alerted her when her food arrived and that someone was at the door. Skye opened the door and was surprised to see Andrew standing there with her parfait and coffee.

“When you didn’t show up for your morning session, I was concerned, but Maria explained about last night. Everyone else is at the Warehouse,” Andrew said with a smile. Skye nodded and stepped back to let him in. She gestured him towards the couch as she took her coffee from him first. She took a long drink and sighed contentedly, then took her parfait as well and settled in across from him.

“Maria said that you four had a rough night?” Andrew began after letting her take a few bites. Skye nodded slowly. “I spoke to Wanda for a bit before they left, and she’ll be alright. Like you, she needs a little time.”

Skye nodded again, watching him contemplatively. “I’m glad,” she whispered, surprising herself as much as Andrew.

“Skye?” he asked, recovering quickly.

“I… I want her to be okay,” she clarified, her voice halting but there.

“And you?” he pushed gently.

Skye looked down at her breakfast, taking a few more bites without responding. When she looked up again she had tears in her eyes. Andrew waited patiently, knowing she was standing on the edge of a big step; she could retreat back into silence or she could finally start to talk about what happened.

“I want to be okay. But I don’t think I can…” Skye finally spoke again, the tears beginning to spill silently down her cheeks.

“Why not, Skye?” he asked in the gentlest tone she’d ever heard from him.

“Because… because I’m a horrible monster…”

Andrew took the cup of yogurt from her hands and set it on the coffee table, moving to her side a moment later. He pulled her in close and just held her as she began to sob. Her breath hitched spasmodically, and the words began to pour out with her tears.

“I killed her. I killed my own mother. I abused my powers and took a life and she died hating me, for not being what she wanted me to be and…” The words rushed out, and Andrew just waited her out, letting her ramble and repeat and whatever else she needed to get it out of her system.

Whatever Wanda had done had opened the floodgates, and Skye heard the whole story of their trip to China spill out for Andrew in a semi-coherent fashion. She spoke of how she and Jiaying had butted heads, how clearly disappointed her mother had been that Skye had beliefs of her own that didn’t fit into the Inhuman worldview, how they’d argued over SHIELD and HYDRA and humans and Inhumans.
She told him about finding out that the Inhumans were attacking the Iliad, and how she’d both called in her family as backup and how she’d rushed to get involved. Her voice faltered and her body shook as she got to the part where she felt Wanda dying, getting there and seeing her mother’s hands cradling her soulmate’s face, and Wanda’s presence flickering in and out. Reacting, overreacting, slamming her mother into a wall and the sickening crunch of bones breaking on impact…

She felt the tears stream down her cheeks as she told Andrew. “I killed someone,” she repeated, the words finally reaching her brain. “God, I killed my own mother.” With that she found she couldn’t say anything else on the subject because she was crying too hard. It felt good though. Cathartic. Like a drain that had been uncorked.

Andrew pulled away from her. “I’m not going to sugar-coat this. It’s gonna suck for a really long time, but I’m here for you. Every step of the way. But the fact that you can tell me about it is miles above what most people in your situation could do. There’s no shame in feelings. Even negative feelings. Because the fact that you’re feeling those feelings is everything that matters.”

Skye nodded and wiped her eyes with her shirt sleeve before Andrew handed her a tissue. She wasn’t okay, but she was taking steps. And eventually, it would get better. She hoped.

Skye spent three hours in session with Andrew. They talked about Shane and Lori and the others and how she felt like they would hate her for using her powers against another Inhuman. Andrew helped her break down the situation, so that she could see for herself the difference between Jiaying deliberately using her power to take a life and Skye accidentally doing so. It didn’t change Skye’s emotional reaction, but it was a start.

She also confessed that she was worried about what her team thought of it all. Killing was wrong, and most of them tried to avoid it if they could. Andrew gently reminded her that she wasn’t the first agent to kill in defense of a teammate, nor would she be the last. Her issues were compounded because not only was it her first time being responsible for someone’s death but also it was the death of a person she cared about - or at least wanted to.

“Bucky told me he tried to talk her down, convince her to stop the attack,” Andrew told her in a low voice. “Talk to him about it, when you can. Ask him what happened. It may help you cope, knowing that someone tried asking her to back off and she refused.”

Skye nodded shakily and they moved on to other topics. At the end of the session, Andrew suggested Skye work on something familiar to her. She went up to the common floor and started coding. She didn’t even hear JARVIS when he told her the Avengers were returning. So when she heard the elevator opening, she looked up in surprise.

The second she spotted Wanda, she set down her computer and rushed to greet her. Wanda hugged her in greeting. “Thank you,” Skye whispered into Wanda’s ear.

Wanda released her hold on Skye and stepped back, eyes wide. “You… it worked?” A wide smile grew on her lips. “You… “ Speechless, Wanda drew Skye into a deep kiss.


Nat crushed Skye to her chest, holding her tightly, and then cut off Skye’s babble with a kiss. “I love you too,” she whispered back when they finally parted. She gave Skye a smile and then kissed her again.
Maria came up behind her. “You okay?” she asked.

“I’m getting there,” Skye said honestly, hugging Maria tightly in turn.

“It’s so good to hear your voice again,” Maria said, her eyes tearing up.

“What’s going on?” Tony asked.

“Just catching them up on my day, Dad,” Skye said with an easy smile. “Nothing special.” It was a little interesting to watch Tony’s face morph from shock to joy to pride in one go. He scooped her up out of the middle of her cluster of soulmates and spun her around in a circle.

“Skye’s got her voice back!” he crowed jubilantly. As if anyone else could still be in the dark, after the little scene she’d already caused. “I’m happy to hear it, sweetheart.”

So Skye had to submit to being passed around, hugged and made much of by everyone. It was more than a little embarrassing, but she endured it because it also reminded her of all the love in the room. It helped underscore Andrew’s point, that no one here was holding what happened against her or at least not in any overt way.

Despite Tony’s desire to celebrate, Skye and her soulmates decided to take the evening to themselves. After the first comedy, Skye thought about talking to her soulmates about the things that Andrew had said. Maria picked up on Skye’s hesitation. “Skye?” Maria asked.

“I know… I can feel it through the bond,” Skye said. “I just need to hear you say it…” She didn’t mean to, but her feelings about her killing her mother and her doubts about whether her soulmates would leave her bled through the bond.

“Oh Skye,” Maria said, gathering Skye into her lap. “No, of course not. I’m sorry, but you’re stuck with us.”

“It’s the four of us together,” Natasha said, putting hands on Skye’s and Wanda’s shoulders. “Now and always.”

“Together we could conquer the world,” Wanda said, leaning against Skye and Maria and completing the circle.

Maria couldn’t help but feel a little sad for Skye. She knew that Skye loved them, but that sometimes the influences of childhood were too hard to break away from. Not for the first time did Maria wish that she had met Skye when she was young, before the world had nearly broken her. She couldn’t help but remember how Skye had looked, showing up at their doorstep three years ago, automatically assuming that even her soulmates wouldn’t want her. She didn’t have to guess on Skye’s thoughts regarding the death of Jiaying.

Maria stroked a finger over Skye’s engagement earring. “This means something to me Skye. As long as you’ll have me, I’ll always be there for you, no matter what. You didn’t want to kill Jiaying. We know that. And even if you did, we’d understand. She was killing Wanda. She was killing a part of our soulbond.”

As they watched the second movie, Andrew’s question from the previous day ran around in her head. She thought about what her life had become because of HYDRA. Her parents had lost their sanity. She had been a victim of the foster system. No one had cared for her until she was an adult. But this… she wouldn’t trade this for the world. The guilt hit her. Wasn’t this what she wanted from the beginning? What she should want? Her parents? Her family? She had taught herself how to hack to find her parents. When had that become not so important? When had she lost sight of what she
was looking for? Skye fell asleep mid-movie, feeling safe and warm and accepted, but also feeling guilty about the fact that she felt safe and warm and accepted.

Skye woke up at quarter to five the next morning, her body clock having righted itself. Immediately, she got out of bed, deciding that she wanted to go run. Wanda barely shifted. If she had had a nightmare last night, Skye hadn’t woken up. Maria groaned, rolled over, then went back asleep.

Natasha however got up and walked towards their closet with Skye. “Do you think you’ll be okay if you run?” Natasha asked. Nothing in Natasha’s tone suggested that she was questioning Skye, just making sure.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Skye said nodding, starting her warm-up stretches. “I need to run. I need...”

“To get back to normal?” Natasha asked with an understanding smile. “Mind if I tag along?” she added, dressing quickly and starting her own stretches.

“I never object to your company,” Skye answered with a small smile.

They met Sam, Bucky and, surprisingly, May in the Tower lobby. The walk to the park served as the rest of their warm-up, and as soon as they hit the path through the park they all started to run. Bucky actually held himself back for the first several laps, jogging while the others ran.

“You don’t have to stay with the group,” Skye teased him, knowing that Bucky usually ran with Steve, and they did about twice the distance on average.

“Feels weird without Stevie,” Bucky admitted, ducking his head. “Besides, I like the company here.”

Skye followed his gaze to where he was looking at May. “I can see you do,” Skye said with a smile. “You gonna ask her out?”

“I don’t... I’m not sure if...”

“Ask her to hang out as a friend then. You haven’t seen that much of the city. Maybe she’d be willing to show you some of it?”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea...”

Skye smiled a bit. “Hey, some of the best relationships are friendships. It’s not the 40s anymore; you can be friends with women and it doesn’t have to mean anything more than that unless you decide you want it to,” she teased gently. “It never hurts to have friends who understand you, who you enjoy spending time with. It’s okay to enjoy that, Bucky. You know how close Steve and I are, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” he admitted in a low voice. “You’re good for him, doll. I mean, so is Sharon, but in a different way.”

“We’re good for each other,” Skye corrected gently. “Relationships always go two ways. Steve has done just as much for me as I’ve done for him.” Bucky scoffed. “I’m serious. Steve was probably the first person I trusted apart from Nat and Maria. Before Tony or Clint.”

“Because he’s Captain America?” Bucky asked.

Her cheeks colored slightly. She looked around; they’d pulled a bit ahead of the rest of the group while they were talking. “I’ll tell you, but you have to swear to me you won’t breathe a word of it to him,” she said seriously.
Bucky nodded, “Of course,” he agreed.

“HewasmyPatronSaint,” Skye said in a rush.

Bucky’s face lit up. “Can you repeat that?”

Skye went red. “I was an orphan at St. Agnes’ any time I wasn’t at a foster home, so I had to go through catechesis and first communion and confirmation… Steve was my Patron Saint when I was confirmed.”

“Back up,” Bucky said, clearing finding the whole thing hilarious. “Steve’s a Saint? Does he know?”

“No, and you’re not going to tell him,” Skye said forcefully.

“I’m so gonna tell him…” Bucky teased.

“Hey, it’s not like I knew he was going to come back from the dead. And I was seven!”

“Did you pray to him?” Bucky continued teasing.

“Shut up,” Skye groused.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, look! We got to end on a lighter note! Again, happy holidays to all and we hope you enjoyed the chapter!
Chapter 45

Thankfully, Steve and Sharon were still at Lai Shi, so Bucky didn’t say anything to the others. Skye was happy to pile into the Quinjet after breakfast, ready to get some work done after three days unconscious and another two doing nothing. Not to mention the fact that there weren’t too many people in Lai Shi who could spar at her level and her mother had kept her away from powered fighting, now for obvious reasons. Skye was definitely ready for a challenge.

Skye was paired with May, who had come along for a workout. Skye couldn’t tell if May was really coming because she wanted to make sure that Skye was really alright or if May had a thing for Bucky. Skye considered grilling her former SO on the matter. She decided against it, concentrating on sparring.

“You’re quiet,” May said between punches.

“I guess I’ve got a lot on my mind,” Skye said.
“Understandable,” May replied. “Different, but not bad.” She softened the comment with a hint of a smile.

They sparred for a few more minutes before Skye sighed and asked, “Does it ever get easier? Will I stop seeing… that… every time I close my eyes for a minute?”

May didn’t answer for a long moment as they moved around the mats. “It will get easier. You won’t ever stop seeing it; if you do, then you’ve buried it. But you’ll learn to accept what happened and move on.”

Skye contemplated May’s words for the rest of the bout. More than ever before, she appreciated her mentor’s quiet wisdom. It wasn’t until they took a break, water bottles in hand, that she offered May a smile. “Thanks.”

“Skye…” May hesitated, then rested a hand on her shoulder. “I don’t want you to go through what I did. I didn’t think anyone would understand, when I was in your place. I didn’t want you to be that kind of alone.”

Skye leaned in and hugged May tightly, surprising the older woman slightly. “I appreciate it. I know you’re here. Thank you.”

“Of course.”

Skye was bone tired by the end of the day when she trudged into her session with Andrew. She knew Bucky had a session just after lunch and she was due for one just before they were scheduled to leave.

Andrew didn’t say anything, obviously letting Skye take the lead. “You were right,” Skye said abruptly. “I talked to my soulmates… they still love me. They’re not leaving me… The Avengers are still on my side. Even May’s on my side. I’m not alone any more.” Skye took a breath. She felt like crying in relief, but she felt like she had cried too much in the last few days. “I don’t have to fight alone any more,” she admitted. It was something that Andrew had been working on with her well before Lai Shi. It was something that her soulmates had been working on with her. To make her truly believe that she wasn’t alone. And she finally got it. She finally understood what family meant. No one would be going anywhere. They had her back.

It didn’t feel like much. She still felt extremely guilty for what she did. She still had the abandonment issues, the mommy issues and the daddy issues, the issues that came from the things the nuns said to her about her marks, the issues that came from growing up in Hell’s Kitchen. But despite all that… Andrew was smiling at her broadly.

“Good for you. Now, the sooner you can make that the automatic reaction instead of the doubt, the happier you’ll be,” he said in his calm, confident manner.

Skye opened her mouth before she lost her nerve. “I want to go to Lai Shi,” she blurted out. “I want to be a part of these meetings that are taking place. They’re my family too.” Andrew hesitated, looking like he wished he had a reason to say no. “You guys have seen me every day. The last they saw me, I was being loaded on a Quinjet.”

She could see Andrew’s will cave. “You want me to talk to your soulmates?” he asked.

Skye shook her head. “I can, at dinner, but I suspect that they’re going to ask you your opinion. And I just wanted to know that you’d have my back.”

“I will, on one condition,” Andrew finally agreed. Skye tilted her head slightly, inviting him to
elaborate. “I will back up your desire to go, on the condition that I go with you and whomever else you invite,” he said.

Skye considered that. “You’re concerned that I might react badly once I get there?”

“Among other things,” Andrew said with a nod. “We’re not done here yet, young lady. I’m sure you know that as well as I do.”

Skye ducked her head and nodded. “It probably would be a good idea to have someone objective there for me if I need it,” she conceded. “Alright, you and I and whomever else. Probably my soulmates. Maybe Dad. I don’t think we want to overwhelm them with the entire team, though I know at least a couple of people who want to meet the Avengers…”

“Whatever you think is best,” Andrew said with a smile. “You’re the one who knows them, after all.”

“Well, some of the Elders may not like it. But… I don’t think my family is going to let me go without them.”

“Likely true.” Andrew nodded again. “So, that’s out of the way. Shall we get down to business?” Skye sunk deeper into the couch and nodded. She still needed this. But it was helping, she knew that too.

“I’m going back to Lai Shi tomorrow,” Skye announced over dinner that evening.

Instantly, pretty much every member of the her family objected to her words. So many objections were tossed her way that Skye simply crossed her arms and waited for the furor to die down.

“What reason could you possibly have to want to go back there?” Tony demanded.

“Like it or not, they are akin to me. Being Inhuman is like… like a cultural or almost tribal identity,” Skye began, hoping they would understand. “I have connections to them, like it or not. And whatever else we may have experienced with them, I was building friendships while we were there. I don’t want to lose that, just because my… my parents went bonkers.” Tony pouted at her, and Skye grinned. “Biological parents. Though I’m not entirely sure you don’t fit in that category too, Dad,” she teased.

“That isn’t the ‘I’m not crazy pout’,” Pepper noted. “That’s his ‘I don’t want you to go’ pout.”

“Do you want to come along?” Skye asked.

Tony’s face changed from the pout to one of shock. “You’d really bring me along?” Tony asked.

“I kind of figured that most of you would want to,” Skye said with a tired shrug. “We can’t exactly all go, and Andrew’s taking one of those spots. Nat, Maria, and Wanda are taking three more. With Steve and Sharon already there, I don’t want to completely overwhelm the community. They’re not used to strangers, and you have to admit… we’re pretty strange.”

Tony chuckled and nodded. “If you’re going, I’d love to go. We can introduce them to the full team another time.”

Skye sighed and nodded again. There were still frowns on the faces around her, but she just held up her hand to forestall more complaints. “This is something I need to do. I have to go back; my friends need to know I’m alright, because the last time they saw me I was being loaded onto a quinjet,
unconscious. The people that sided with… with Jiaying… I need to know if they blame me or not. We need to know if we can work with them in the future.” She chewed her lower lip for a moment. “I have to do this. I know you don’t like it, but… if I don’t, it’s going to be hanging over my head for a long time.”

Bucky was the first to nod in understanding. “You can’t move forward until you’ve accepted and resolved the past. Do what you need to, doll. I know you’ll call if you need the rest of us.”

Wanda and Natasha also nodded, content in knowing she intended for their whole quad to go this time. No waiting at home this time. Maria came to the same conclusion a moment later and sighed, knowing this wasn’t the time to argue with Skye over what she needed to do.

That left the rest of the group. “Can’t say I like it, love, but if it’s really what you need to do…” Hunter spoke up, though he glanced at Andrew as he trailed off. Andrew nodded, indicating his support of Skye’s idea. “Then just keep us posted, okay?” Hunter requested. “Insist on keeping your cell working; I know Stark can swing it if need be.”

“I will,” Skye agreed. “We won’t let them cut us off anymore.”

“Three satellites follow me wherever I am on Earth anyway,” Tony said.

“Really? You only need three?” Clint said sarcastically.

“One for JARVIS, one for SI, one for backup,” Tony said with an obvious tone. Skye was rather proud that he’d left the “duh” off the end.

“Oh, makes total sense,” Clint said, rolling his eyes. “You have too much money.”

“You realize that I’m the reason why you still have a pension, right?” Tony said.

“It’s a perfectly fine amount of money,” Clint said, correctly. “So you were saying you need three satellites?”

“Dad,” Skye said after a moment. “I don’t want Lai Shi’s coordinates on SI’s mainframe. I’m not worried about us or JARVIS, but the Inhumans do take their security and privacy seriously. SI is a target for a lot of hackers, just because it has your name on it, and…”

Tony frowned but nodded. “I think we can arrange that. I can let it lag a bit and JARVIS can relay to it if need be.”

“So what’s it like?” Clint asked.

“Lai Shi?” Skye asked.

“It’s quiet,” Wanda said. “Reminds me a little of back home. Not everyone has computer access, people find better things to do. They actually look at what’s in front of them, except what’s on the screen.”

“No arts, no culture, no Broadway,” Skye continued. “It was nice to visit, but I’d never be able to live there.”

“Thank God. I’m not ready for you to move out and get your own place yet,” Tony said.

“And I love you, but I’d rather not move to Lai Shi,” Maria said. “I like my cell phone signal.”

“The views are pretty stellar,” Skye said. “The running path was great to run at sunrise.”
“I look forward to it,” Natasha said with a smile, swiping Skye’s bangs behind her ear.

“I’ll show you around. It really is nice, at least to visit,” Skye admitted.

Wanda, Skye knew, was already on her side. Since Wanda knew a good number of the inhumans, she understood the need to let them know she was okay.

Maria and Natasha were more reserved. “Is she ready?” Maria asked Andrew tentatively.

Andrew nodded. “I think it would be good for her. Therapeutic. I think it would be good to get closure.” Maria nodded.

“When are you leaving?” Bruce asked.

“Tomorrow, I think,” Skye said, glancing around. “No point in putting it off. And no, we don’t need someone to fly us there,” she forestalled Clint, who was one of the better pilots of the group. “Maria does just fine, thank you. It’s not like we’re going to be flying into battle, anyway. Lai Shi is remote, but it’s not that bad.”

“I’d better go get things ready, then,” Pepper said, finishing her meal and heading towards the elevator. “Goodness knows what you’ll end up with if I let Tony pack.”

Tony pouted, but Skye just grinned.

They lost a day, flying to Lai Shi. Skye spent most of her time trying to deal with her nervous energy by practicing her hacking skills on a dummy server she had set up to practice on. It wasn’t much, but it was better than Tony playing Minesweeper or Maria doing SI busy work that Pepper had sent her that morning. May was coming along with them to Lai Shi to meet back up with SHIELD.

There was a crowd of people waiting for them when they landed. Skye wasn’t sure what to expect when she stepped off the plane, but she hadn’t expected Lori to step forward in a rush and embrace her. “Skye, I’m so sorry,” Lori said tearfully in a rush. “We thought… and Jiaying… and the stone… Captain Rogers explained everything. God, Skye, I’m so, so sorry.”

Suddenly, the stress that Skye hadn’t realized she’d been feeling about what the Inhuman population was feeling towards her was gone. She hugged Lori back. “I get it,” Skye said with a nod. “Jiaying seemed sane. I can imagine that if I’d grown up here, I would have been convinced too.” She couldn’t say it was okay. It wasn’t, and probably never would be. But everyone who had been involved would also have to come to terms with what they’d nearly done, and Skye knew people like Lori would be beating themselves up over it for a long time. She didn’t need to add to it.

Shane was next to Lori, and as soon as his wife released Skye, he was pulling her in for a hug. “I’m so sorry, Skye. Sorry you had to go through that. But I’m glad you and Wanda are both okay,” he murmured to her.

“We’re fine,” Skye assured him gently. “I’m sorry we weren’t in touch sooner. It has been… a very rough few days.”

Shane pulled back and looked into her eyes, his expression showing that he understood just how vast an understatement that was. “If you need anything…” Skye shook her head as he trailed off and just offered him a small smile. He nodded in return and released her to the attention of the rest of the group.

“I wanted to introduce you two to some people,” Skye said shyly. “You know Wanda, but this is
Maria and Natasha, our other soulmates.”

Lori and Shane both whipped their heads around back to Skye in shock. “But… you said…”

“I was born with Maria’s and Nat’s marks,” Skye explained softly, tears welling up in her eyes. “Wanda’s ten months younger than me. I… I didn’t mean to lie, we’ve just seen in the past that people aren’t always as trustworthy as they’ve first appeared, so we’re cautious with information like this.”

“No one here can fault you for protecting your mates,” Gordon said, coming up to her and placing a hand on her shoulder. “Everyone at Lai Shi understands the need to protect your loved ones.”

Skye looked down at the ground for a moment and nodded. “I did lie to you about… what I mean is…” she looked up, glancing at Tony. “This is my adoptive father, Tony Stark,” she said finally.

Tony stepped forward with a conflicted look on his face. Finally he stuck his hand out. Gordon took it and they shook hands, though somewhat stiffly. Lori was staring at her, looking a little wounded, but Lincoln was nodding. “It makes sense.”

Everyone looked at Lincoln in surprise. Lincoln shrugged. “A lot of us know how it feels to be without parents. It’s not the same as having a soulmate or a spouse. To not have a place you know you’ll always be welcome in… Skye never acted that way when she was here. Plus, it makes sense she was adopted by Stark. She acts like… well like a saner version of him.”

“Hey!” Tony objected, “I’m sane.”

“I think most people who know you would question you on that claim, Tony,” Steve said, coming up to them. He made a beeline to Skye and hugged her tightly, picking her up in the process. “I’m glad to see you’re okay.”

Skye nodded and hugged Steve back, not protesting being lifted into the air. “I’m okay,” she agreed. “Physically, I’m perfectly fine.”

“Hmm,” he hummed in acceptance, understanding both what she didn’t say and that she didn’t want to discuss it at the moment.

When Steve set her down, Skye decided she’d better finish introductions before anything else. “So, you’ve met Natasha, Maria and Tony. Also with us are Agent Melinda May, from SHIELD’s team and also one of my mentors, and Dr. Andrew Garner.”

Gordon shook each person’s hand, then stiffened when he made contact with Andrew. “You…” he said.

Andrew looked at Gordon warily. “I’m sorry. Have you met me before?”

“No, but I can sense you. The real you.”

All of the other Inhumans apart from Skye all made murmurs of surprise. “What? What does that mean?” Skye asked looking at the others.

“Gordon can track us, all Inhumans,” Lori said. “But there are so many of us he has to know who to look for. So he can identify who’s Inhuman and who isn’t. It looks like your Dr. Garner is one of us.”

“Inhuman?” Andrew said, an edge of worry in his voice.
Gordon smiled. “Don’t worry, it’s not a cult. You don’t have to join if you don’t want to.”

Skye glanced at the others, still trying to process the fact that Andrew was Inhuman herself. May’s face was blank, a sure sign that she was feeling something, but she didn’t feel it safe to show it.

“Do you know…?” Andrew began, but then stopped; Skye thought he wasn’t entirely sure he actually wanted to know.

But Gordon shook his head. “No one knows how another will change when they go through the mists. It is why we typically spend a great deal of time teaching those chosen to accept themselves and whatever may come to them. Change is often frightening, but it doesn’t have to be overwhelmingly so.”

“We do believe that every change happens for a reason, though,” Lincoln spoke up. “That behind every power, there’s a need or a purpose. They aren’t just random. There are a few that tend to recur from generation to generation, one of which is the ability to feel or sense the potential for change in others. Though sometimes it manifests differently.”

“I’m not entirely sure what to say,” Andrew said, raising his eyebrows.

“We all process it differently,” Gordon said evenly. “Sparky over here threw a truly impressive number of things while calling me crazy in a wide range of languages.”

Skye smirked at Lincoln. “You work at a hospital, you get called a lot of things,” Lincoln said with a shrug. “I pick up on it. Besides, Gordon was the one who slapped the elder who told him about this whole place.”

Skye couldn’t quite imagine that, though she did try. Wanda apparently could, though, and she giggled softly. Gordon glanced at her, smiling ruefully. “We’ve all had our adjustments to make,” was all the elder Inhuman said, his tone calm though with a trace of amusement.

“I’m sure you all are hungry other than mission Quinjet food,” Steve quipped. “An early breakfast has been prepared for us. Shall we?”

“It’s tomorrow, right?” Tony said, tapping away on his tablet. “I hate flying across the dateline,” he grumbled.

Skye couldn’t help but agree, hating the jet lag. She spent most of that day in meetings with the Elders, Steve, and Coulson. Skye was relieved that none of the Inhumans blamed her for what happened; several even apologized to her, saying that she never should have been put into the position where what she’d done was necessary. They would watch their people more carefully in the future, though hopefully there would never again be someone so badly traumatized by a group like HYDRA.

When they finally broke for dinner, Skye was exhausted. She desperately desired sleep or at least a nap. As the Inhumans left the room, Coulson turned to Skye. “You look….,” Coulson said. “You look good.”

Skye stood up, gathering up her tablet. “No lasting damage,” Skye said softly.

Coulson clearly caught on to what Skye was talking about. “No, I mean… I mean of course you look good after what happened. I just meant that we haven’t see you much since you got your powers and… you look happy.”

Skye nodded and smiled. “I am happy. I’ve told you before, AC, they’re not the Avengers to me.
Just my family.” She paused, running a hand over her engagement earring. “I’m… we’re engaged,” she said softly.

Coulson’s face changed to absolute wonder. “Oh Skye, congratulations,” he said. “I’m so happy you found your family. Even though it’s not with us.”

“AC…” Skye said slowly.

“No, it’s okay that we’re not,” Coulson said, “Just because you’re not family doesn’t mean we don’t love you any less. But family shouldn’t be complicated, and between Gonzalez and Calderon and…”

“The fact that I had to lie to everyone for two years so I could watch your back?” Skye supplied lightly. “It was worth it to me, AC. And just because other people suck doesn’t mean I care about you any less,” she added in a softer tone.

“Ditto,” Coulson said.

Skye snorted. “No one says ‘ditto’ any more,” Skye said, laughing. “Even Steve knows that.”

“She’s been quite adamant to bring me into the new era. Save me,” Steve deadpanned.

Coulson laughed. “I think I’m smart enough to think twice before going up against Skye. Especially when it comes to her taste in music.”

“Come on,” Steve said, still grinning. “Let’s grab some grub.”

Skye ran into an unexpected face outside of the mess hall that made her stop in her tracks. Jemma stood near the doorway, looking extremely nervous and sad. Steve, who had been the most outspoken against Jemma after Skye’s terrigenesis, stiffened considerably.

“Skye…” Jemma said slowly. “I was… I was hoping we could talk.”

“I think you’ve said plenty,” Steve said darkly, frowning.

Skye put a hand on Steve’s arm. “Steve, it’s okay,” she said. “Why don’t you go on ahead? You know my soulmates will know in a heartbeat if I need anything,” she assured him softly.

Steve frowned at her, then sighed. He pulled her in for a tight hug, which she returned readily. “Just remember how much we all love you, alright? And don’t feel like you can’t just walk away if you need to.”

“I promise,” Skye agreed as she released him. She waited patiently as Steve reluctantly entered the building, leaving Skye alone with Jemma for the first time in… she didn’t even know how long.

Skye stood there for a long time, waiting for Jemma to say something. When it looked like Jemma wasn’t going to say anything after all, Skye turned to go inside. “Wait,” Jemma sid in a rush. “I’m sorry.”

Skye turned back and looked at Jemma. “Not to sound harsh or anything, but why are you sorry?” she asked, trying to keep her tone light. “You already apologized for what you said the night I went through terrigenesis. For what you said before about my IQ.”

“Everyone blames me…” Jemma said softly. “For why you didn’t come back. Because of what I said in front of the Avengers. Fitz barely talks to me anymore. Coulson and May… they don’t see me the same way.”
Skye crossed her arms against the biting mountain wind and looked down at her feet. “It was never about that. You said that in the heat of the moment when tensions were high and Real SHIELD had just come out of hiding. I could understand why you said it.”

Jemma stared at her. “Then why…”

“Most of the time I was at SHIELD, I was undercover, away from my soulmates in order to watch Coulson’s back. To make sure you and Fitz, and Ward and the others weren’t there to hurt Coulson or worse. I knew going into the mission that I could burn the relationships I made when I came out and told the truth, and I’d make the same decision if I had to do it all over again.”

“I don’t know if I understand that….” Jemma said slowly.

Skye sighed, looked down, and shifted her weight uncomfortably. “Jemma, I love you, but… you’ll never understand what it means to grow up alone. To have no one in this world looking out for you. I was in foster care for fifteen years. People promised me love and support and a home, then pulled the rug out from under me and sent me back to the orphanage. Other people used me for the paycheck the government sent them. Over and over again, I was somebody’s afterthought. Then I lived on the street for another decade. A homeless person. A good portion of that, I had the van, but while it was mine and I loved it... it was never home in the way that everyone wants a home. Should have a home. What I told Ward during the early days on the bus was true. Having something and losing it hurts way more than never having it at all.”

“I just… sometimes I can’t help but…” Jemma stammered, grasping to try to explain. “Didn’t it feel like we were a family?”

“I… don’t use that word lightly,” Skye said softly. “Not when I know what family is now. Family doesn’t turn on each other when times get hard. Doesn’t refuse to listen because of their own personal hurts. The Avengers have arguments all the time. You should see when Steve and Tony disagree on a subject. But at the end of the day we’re all at the same dinner table, because at the end of the day we know we’ll always love each other no matter what.”

Jemma was looking at the ground herself, crying. “I-I… I’m sorry. Skye, I’m so sorry.”

Skye sighed softly, what was left of her anger dissipating in the face of Jemma’s contrition. She recalled the assessment she and her soulmates had made of Jemma, reminding herself that Jemma had never before had occasion to learn this lesson. The reason shouldn’t be allowed to become an excuse, but if she took the lesson to heart…

“I can’t say it’s alright, Jemma,” she said finally. “The way I’ve seen you treat people isn’t okay. But… I’ve had time to put it behind me. So what I can offer is a chance. A chance to try to change.” She smiled sadly, traces of the old fondness in her expression. “We were close once; you knew everything about me that wasn’t classified. And it was me, it just wasn’t everything. If you really want to try…”

“I do!” Jemma exclaimed, looking up at Skye with pleading eyes. “You… I miss you, Skye,” she added in a softer tone. “I don’t want to be the reason you don’t come back…”

“I may not ever return to SHIELD,” Skye said as gently as she could. “It wasn’t about you, really. It was about RealSHIELD, about Gonzalez hating and fearing me - and my powers. Only wanting me when he thought I could be an asset, and even then caring more about what I could do than about me personally. My soulmates are Avengers and the Avengers are my family, and they only want what’s best for me. They want me to be me. And yes, they’re overbearing and overprotective and personally, if I were you, I wouldn’t be alone in the same room with Steve for a while but…”
“I… I understand,” Jemma said, sniffling. “But if you ever want to come back…”

“I’m sure SHIELD and the Avengers will continue to work together,” Skye said with a small smile.

“I will… I will try to be a better friend,” Jemma promised. “I don’t… don’t think it will be easy,” she added, though Skye noticed that she was clearly trying to be aware of what she said - and how she said it. It was a start. “But… you’re worth it, Skye.”

Skye smiled tremulously. “You know… I still haven’t heard that phrase enough to take it for granted. My soulmates… my family, they try. But…”

Jemma flung herself at Skye, holding tightly, and Skye raised her arms to return the hug. It was the same sort of desperate hug she’d given Jemma when Jemma had jumped out of the plane to save everyone from the virus, or the relieved hug she’d gotten after Coulson rescued her from Ward.

“I’m really happy that you’re okay,” Jemma said. “And I’m really sorry about what happened.”

Skye did her best not to think about it. “Thank you,” she managed stiffly. “Come on. I’m starving.”
Chapter 46

Chapter by LadyWinterlight

Chapter Summary

More meetings. Because SHIELD and the Avengers aren't really done arguing yet.

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to those who stuck with us through the holidays. For those who got too busy - no worries, we'd love to hear from you now!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Throw in some SHIELD Agents, a few Inhumans... ;) But my maniping skills aren't up to it.
Skye opened the door and her face lit up as she simultaneously bolted forward towards the woman standing with her family. “Skye!” Laura cried as Skye hurtled into her arms.

“What are you doing here?” Skye gushed happily.

“Clint picked me up after he dropped you off. He said you needed me,” Laura said, brushing Skye’s hair back with a motherly hand. Aware of the fact that both SHIELD and the Inhumans were watching, Skye blushed furiously. Skye opened her mouth. “Don’t tell me you didn’t. I always know when one of my family members needs me.” The words Laura said were factually true, but the tone spoke to the unspoken relationship that remained between Laura and Skye. Laura had seen that Skye needed someone to mother her and it was a natural role that Laura could fill for her. It was a role Laura filled for Nat and even Maria a little. Since Skye was the only one with cooking skills, and basic skills prior to when Laura had gotten a hold of her, Laura had gotten it in her head that they needed taking care of.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Skye whispered as Laura held her close. “Did… did Clint tell you..?”

Laura nodded, and Skye breathed a sigh of relief. She wasn’t sure she could find the words to tell Laura, who mothered her relentlessly, that she was guilty of killing her actual mother. She knew Laura would listen if she wanted to talk about it… but she didn’t think she was up for it yet.

“Come on,” Laura said after a few minutes. “You should eat something. I heard that your meeting ran a little long, and you know perfectly well that you need energy to fuel your powers.”

“I know, and I am hungry,” Skye assured her. “We were just heading in for food, I promise.” She headed for the food, taking a plate. Laura followed her, though she bypassed the meal; the time difference hadn’t hit her yet and she wasn’t hungry. “Where are the kids?” she asked in a soft voice.

“With Pepper,” Laura replied easily. “They thought it would be fun to have a sleepover with her while Clint and I are here.”

Skye chuckled and nodded, just imagining them getting into the movie collection and game systems. “She’ll do fine. I wouldn’t have left the kids with Tony, but Pepper’s great.”

Laura laughed, shaking her head. “Can’t disagree with you, hon. But they’ll be fine.”

“So, have you met everybody yet?” Skye asked as she loaded up her plate, then paused to look around the mess hall and figure out where to sit. There were some rather interestingly integrated groups scattered around the room, which amused Skye to no end. Shane, Lori, Fitz, Mack, Hunter and Tony occupied one end of a long table while Gordon, Coulson, Bruce and Maria took the other end. There was space in the middle, if others wanted to join one group or another. Lincoln sat with Bobbi, Trip, Steve and Sharon. Alisha and May sat across from one another, and Skye guessed they were discussing martial arts from the way Alisha’s hands kept moving in abbreviated strikes.

Apparentely the team had either decided that she was being too cautious about overwhelming the Inhumans, or else someone had invited them to bring more of the team. They only lacked a handful of people at this point, though she supposed someone had needed to stay home to mind things.

Clint, Nat and Wanda occupied another table, and Laura headed for them without a second thought. Skye just shrugged and followed her; that was company she’d never object to. A couple of times through the meal, Skye felt eyes on her. She looked around and caught Mack watching her once or
twice. He looked away quickly the first time, but the second time he offered her a small smile. Skye was a little startled; though they hadn’t fought, he hadn’t been exactly friendly after all her revelations. Still, she smiled back before returning her attention to the conversation.

Most people were calling it a day as the dining hall began to empty. The group that arrived with Skye had put in a very long day. But when she saw Mack lingering at his table, reading in between occasional glances at her, Skye paused. She was exhausted, not only from the long day but from the accompanying emotional ups and downs. She met Mack’s eyes, and his expression turned concerned as he took in her current state.

“Breakfast tomorrow?” he asked her in a low voice, one that wouldn’t carry beyond her - though the room was mostly empty.

“I… yeah,” she agreed, just as quietly. “See you then.”

Mack nodded his acceptance and returned his attention to his book, letting Skye slip away without a hassle.

“You look tired,” Natasha said coming up beside her. “Did you get a nap in today?”

Skye groaned, leaning her head against Natasha’s shoulder. “We barely stopped for lunch,” Skye said. “The Inhumans are concerned about the Kree stone, but certain factions of SHIELD don’t want to give it up. If we start going in for round two tomorrow I might need to call in Thor.”

“It might not be a bad idea, anyway,” Natasha said thoughtfully, guiding Skye towards the building they’d been given for their visit. “If we do end up destroying it, we already know you can’t do it alone.”

Skye remembered her last attempt at vibrating the monolith and shuddered; Natasha was right, she couldn’t do it herself. It might require her help, but just her with the stone… that was a headache she didn’t even want to consider.

Literally.

When they got to their guest room, Wanda handed Skye her nightgown without fanfare. “We are all very tired. We should sleep. More talk tomorrow; I’m sure there will be plenty to go around,” she said in her calm, assured tone.

Skye quickly changed for bed and went to wash up. The four piled together in their usual muddle, content with the peace and love that built between them. It soothed them all into an easy sleep, and despite concerns that returning to Lai Shi would give Skye’s nightmares more impetus, she slept soundly and peacefully.

After her run the next morning, Mack stopped her on the way to the mess hall and offered her a plate of food.

Skye smiled. “Come on, I know just the place,” she said. Mack nodded and followed her to one of the scenic overlooks, out of sight of the main village. It wasn’t the truly private one - she’d leave that for Shane and Lori, or whatever other couples made use of it. But it was a bit of a trek, and Skye was definitely glad she kept in shape.

She gestured to one of the benches when Mack joined her and settled onto the other herself, taking a few minutes to start eating. “I… wow,” Mack said after a moment to take in the scenery. “It’s beautiful out here.”
Skye nodded, swallowing before speaking. “I’m told they bring the newly changed with more volatile powers out here to practice control where they can’t hurt much of anything.” She paused to let that sink in for a moment.

“Under different circumstances, you could have been one of them,” Mack commented, his voice low as he settled in across from her. Skye bit her lip tightly and nodded. “Look, Skye…” he began, then hesitated. Skye smiled sadly, realizing that the nickname that had once been hers was gone. “I know I’ve been a pretty lousy friend. And I wanted to apologize. I should have trusted what I knew of you personally rather than what I’d been told. And I’m afraid I’ve had some bad experiences with undercover agents, which didn’t help. I’m sorry.”

Taking a deep breath, Skye considered her response for a moment. “We all had a rough time during the HYDRA reveal. People we thought we could trust turned out to be on the other side. For me, it was my SO. For Coulson it was people like Garrett and Sitwell. For Steve it was Rumlow and Rollins and the guys in the STRIKE team he worked with. I may not like it, but I do understand.”

Mack shook his head. “That doesn’t make it right. We’d all been through that. Just that we had - or thought we had - such good reasons to doubt Coulson, to doubt his version of SHIELD. Especially with what the GH drugs did to him…”

“You guys also didn’t know how many people were watching him,” Skye pointed out. “It wasn’t exactly your fault. You couldn’t have, but it wasn’t just Fury and May looking out for any side-effects. It was also Maria, the Avengers, and me. Nobody’s infallible, Mack. Any second in this line of work any of us could be compromised. It’s a risk we take to protect the world.”

“You’re right. We didn’t have all the information. We shouldn’t have moved without it. Coulson got Gonzalez to admit that he got most of his intel on you from Victoria Hand. She really had it out for you, huh?”

Skye sighed. “Part of my mission was to keep tabs on everyone on the Bus and I grew to really care for them. I used my Level 9 Comms access to check on the extraction of Ward and Fitz from a mission. When I saw there wasn’t any, I pretended that I hacked in to get the intel.”

Mack laughed dryly. “I bet Vic loved that.”

“I think from that point on she hated anything I did,” Skye said, smiling wryly.

“So your cover pissed off Vic, she ranted to Izzy, who reported it as fact to Gonzalez… damn, Tremors,” Mack said, rubbing his chin.

Skye couldn’t help but smile at the new nickname; for her, it signaled Mack’s acceptance of her, powers and all. “I guess I’m better at underselling myself than I thought I was. I lived with Fitz and Simmons for two years and they had no idea the skillsets I was hiding.”

Mack smiled easily. “I have to say, I had a feeling that you were smarter than your average High School drop-out. I just didn’t know how smart, or that you were aware.”

“I wasn’t, until my soulmates,” Skye admitted in a low voice. “Well, Bruce always told me I could do great things, but I wasn’t in a position to do anything about it… or a mindset to believe it, at the time.” She sighed softly. “It was actually taking the SHIELD entrance exams that helped convince me. I kinda blew through them all in a day, and was taken aback by the general shock that I could do so…”

“I heard your scores were damned impressive, too,” Mack agreed. “What you did had never been
done before, and I suspect it will be a long time before anyone does it again… if ever.”

She smiled and shrugged a bit. “It may happen. We have to get SHIELD back into a position where we can take on students and train them in an academy setting before we worry about it, though.”

“True enough,” Mack said, nodding. “So…” he began with a grin, “does Stark let you play with his cars?”

Skye just laughed.

The meeting that morning was in regards to the Monolith. The Inhumans had demanded its destruction, which everyone except for Gonzalez had come around to believing it was an acceptable plan, but the actual plan of destroying it was another matter entirely.

“… I mean, Thor and I could probably do it,” Skye said when Coulson asked her what she thought. “I’m not concerned about how to destroy it so much as when.”

Coulson furrowed his brow and everyone looked at her sharply. “What do you mean?” he asked her.

“I looked over everything about the Monolith that got sent out during the data dump and checked a couple of my contacts on the DarkNet and found a few other things,” Skye said. “Don’t worry, I didn’t tell them anything classified. Based on the calculations that were measured by a team of astrophysicists at NASA, this looks like a tesseract.”

“I thought the Tesseract was that blue cube from the early days of HYDRA,” May said slowly.

Skye shook her head. “A tesseract, not the Tesseract,” she explained. Jemma and Fitz looked at each other, then excitedly started scanning the documents Skye had provided them all at the start of the meeting, murmuring to each other. “A tesseract is just a mathematical theory - a way to bend the space-time continuum.”

“You’re saying that the monolith is proof that tesseracts are real?” Weaver asked. Skye nodded. “… if not for the danger, that would be very tempting to study.”

“NASA sent at least one team through back in 2001,” Skye said. “I know it’s been a long time, but I think we owe it to them to find the other end of the tesseract and bring any survivors home.”

“But going through could be suicide,” Gonzalez said scathingly. “You just said no one should go near it.”

Skye nodded. “Luckily, we know someone who can track down the other end of the tesseract without needing to go through,” she said, looking at Thor.

Thor, who had been silent for the entire meeting, nodded. “Indeed, Heimdall will be able to locate the other end of the tesseract and if it is within a realm that he can see, he will be able to locate any survivors. It may take some time for him to do so, but you have my word it will be done.”

“I do think that we should wait for the results of his search before we actually try to destroy the thing,” Skye continued. “We know it’s going to take a lot of power - myself, Thor, maybe some other help too - to destroy it. Since a tesseract has been mostly theory up to this point, we have zero way of predicting what will happen when it goes. It could blow up. It could cause explosions on both ends. It could just shatter. It could direct that energy into whatever makes up the pathway between the two ends. We just don’t know. And I don’t want to take the risk of hurting whomever’s on the other end, because staying near the point of origin would have been the logical option if the
astronauts were expecting a retrieval team.”

“Would they still be expecting a team after nearly fifteen years?” Weaver asked.

Coulson shrugged. “Maybe not. But Skye’s right; we shouldn’t take that risk. Maybe they’ve given up. Maybe they’re dead. But maybe they’re holding on to hope that they haven’t been forgotten. We owe them the benefit of the doubt.”

“What if we could open the gateway and send something else through?” Fitz suggested. “Like, a message, or a tracking device or something? Would that help find the other end without risking anyone else?”

Skye looked to Thor to answer the question. He was more familiar with how Heimdall’s power functioned. “A message would only assist if there were someone on the other end to receive it and trust it. If a person were to repeatedly call to Heimdall, that would attract his attention more quickly.”

“But would a person on the other end actually respond to it?” Jemma asked. She blushed a little. “If I received a random message, telling me to yell aloud to an old Norse figure… I would think that either someone was playing a joke on me or that I’d finally gone mad after fifteen years on another world…”

“Simmons is right,” Weaver said. “Particularly to a scientist who has no idea that we’ve regained contact with Asgard, it seems implausible at best.”

“They might decide to try it anyway, figuring that they’ve got nothing left to lose after fifteen years,” Fitz pointed out.

“This may all be a moot point,” Gonzalez returned. “We don’t know how to make it open in any sort of stable way.”

Tony stood up and moved to look at the data over Fitz’s shoulder. “It could be…” he mused, skimming the details quickly. “It could be that it hasn’t ever been stable. Maybe that swirling liquid state is the way it opens. If the Kree were using it as a way to get rid of their failures, and I see no real reason to doubt the Inhumans’ history, they wouldn’t care if it were stable or not. Just toss ‘em in, who cares what it looks like or whether or not they get to the other end.”

“That… is a very Kree sort of attitude,” Thor agreed grimly.

“My only question is, will Heimdall be able to distinguish between people we would want to bring back and people… we shouldn’t,” May said cautiously. “Regardless of how they got there, they’ve been on an alien planet for over a decade. We don’t know what or who they could have come in contact with. Loki got that staff he used when he tried to take over Earth from somewhere.”

The Avengers all looked between one another. Clint glanced at Coulson with a microexpression of guilt. Skye made a note to hug him later. “That… might need some further investigation,” Steve said. “We obtained the staff a while ago, but it didn’t occur to us to locate its origins.”

“I’m fairly sure Loki brought it with him,” Maria spoke up, glancing at Clint for confirmation. Clint nodded, not enjoying the memory but able to deal.

“Then I would imagine searching for its origins would fall to me, again,” Thor sighed.

“I’d help if I could,” Skye replied with a sympathetic smile. “Though I’m not sure I’d be welcome there.”
Thor’s expression turned rueful. “Opinions of Midgardians are changing, but slowly. And my Father does not think particularly well of Midgardians in any case. Though I do appreciate the sentiment, Lady Skye.”

She shrugged and smiled in reply. “If you think of a way we can help, just let us know.”

“I shall,” Thor promised. “Perhaps I may obtain permission to bring copies of some of our records here for you to peruse.” Then he paused. “If we determine that you can read them, at least.”

“Ooh, new language,” Skye enthused, and her soulmates laughed. “Do you know how long it could take for Heimdall to track down the end of the tesseract?”

Thor smiled. “Heimdall’s attention is called any time his name is invoked. He likely has already started his search. It will take some time to search all the stars in all the realms, so it may be some weeks, but it should not take long.”

“That should give us some time to read through this a little more,” Tony said, tapping the files on the table. “Formulate some better theories about what might happen when we destroy this thing. Figure out if it’s safe to try where it is or whatever, or if we need to take it to Antarctica to avoid fallout.”

“Maybe you could give us a better look at the staff in the meantime as well,” Gonzalez suggested.

“For what purpose?” Steve asked warily.

“We’re all fairly curious how it works,” Weaver said. “If what Loki did is preventable, wouldn’t it be fair to say SHIELD should know about it? If we had had the intel, New York may have never happened.”

Thor frowned. “The scepter contains an ancient artifact called the Mind Stone. None has been able to resist the power of it, or any of the six Stones, since their creation. The only defense is to guard these artifacts closely, so as to prevent them from falling into the hands of one who would use them for ill. Fortunately, few can wield them, either. They are too powerful for most, and will destroy the user as readily as not.”

“That sounds…” Fitz started.

“... dangerous,” Jemma said nervously.

“Yeah,” Skye said. “It’s not on Earth any more anyway, which I can’t say I’m too upset about. The mind stone was loud .”

“You could feel the vibrations?” Jemma asked curiously.

“Well, yeah,” Skye said. “I can feel vibrations in everything. The more powerful, the louder the… well, kind of a sound, only not quite. Thor’s hammer sings . The mountain outside rumbles in a low bass, and Steve’s shield almost whistles. Vibranium feels weird, really. There are some things I have to work harder to ignore than to sense, though most solid objects aren’t so bad.”

Fitz’s eyes lit up and Skye bit back a grin, wondering how many questions she’d have to answer later. Fortunately, Coulson shot Fitz a look and the engineer held his tongue. “You said the scepter isn’t on Earth anymore?” Coulson asked instead.

“We returned it to Asgard,” Steve said with a shrug. “HYDRA was using it to try to give people powers. Mostly, they just died. Badly. We didn’t think it needed to stay here, where the next group of power-hungry scientists could abuse it again.”
“I think this is a conversation for another time,” Skye said carefully. “One between the Avengers and SHIELD.”

“Agreed,” Gordon said. “We’re fully comfortable trusting the Avengers on global events. Their track record so far has been impeccable. Shall we move on?” Skye let out a breath of relief as everyone moved on to other topics. She hoped with time and practice, this would get easier. May gave her a flicker of a smile.

Chapter End Notes

Well, we're getting close to wrapping this up in case you couldn't tell. Realistically, we think we have four more chapters and an epilogue. But 50 chapters is kind of crazy, all things considered. If this story were a novel, it would probably actually be about three books worth of text.
Chapter 47

Chapter by LadyWinterlight

Chapter Summary

Decisions get made.

Chapter Notes

Well, we're officially into the new year... and about two weeks from the end of the story. All good things must come to an end... and honestly, it's an amazing feeling seeing a 50-chapter epic reach its conclusion.

As always, many many thanks to our supporters - both old and new. We hope you continue to enjoy the story as we wind down.
Chapter 47

When they broke for lunch, Skye gathered her papers and was surprised when she looked up to find Fitz right next to her. “Hey Fitz. You headed to lunch?”

“Yeah, Skye, I just… I wanted to ask you something,” Fitz said, clearly nervous.

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Do you think… could you… think you could introduce me to Pietro?” Fitz asked, ears going pink.

It took Skye a moment to connect the dots. “As in…” she started.

“I was hoping to ask him out on a date,” Fitz said bashfully.

“Who are you and what have you done to Fitz?” Skye said, smiling.

Fitz went bright red. “I mighta had a pint… or six… with Mack an’ Hunter las’ night,” he said, his
“They’re puttin’ me up t’ this…”

“But you like him,” Skye said. “It’s okay if you do. He isn’t marked and he’s single, as far as I know. I’d be happy to introduce you.”

Fitz smiled tentatively. “Thanks. Ye’re a good friend, Skye,” he managed, his accent still notably thick.

She smiled back. “You’ve been an awesome friend to me, especially over the last six months or so. I’m just returning the favor, and it’s not even a big one.” She got up, her papers in one hand; her other arm she linked with Fitz’s, which made him grin. “Come on. We need to eat. And I have a brother-by-soulbond to introduce you to.”

Fitz stuttered and stammered for a moment as she tugged him along towards the dining hall.

“Pietro,” Skye called. Pietro looked up from talking to Wanda, Mack and Hunter. “This is Fitz. Fitz was probably my best friend when I was undercover at SHIELD. Fitz, this is Pietro, one of the Avengers and Wanda’s brother.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Pietro practically purred.

Fitz stammered for several seconds before blurting out, “You can break the sound barrier!”

Pietro grinned wider. “This is true. I can.”

“I was hoping to see your gear,” Fitz said in a rush.

Pietro laughed. “Skye told me about you. The engineer. How about this, let us go play a game of Halo. If you win, you can see my equipment.”

“And if you win?” Fitz asked.

“I get a kiss,” Pietro said. Fitz went scarlet. Skye grinned, but managed not to laugh. She kissed both guys on the cheek and went to go take Pietro’s spot by Wanda and Hunter, leaving Fitz and Pietro alone.

“You set up Fitz with Pietro, huh love?” Hunter asked. “Gotta say, I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Fitz likes Pietro,” Skye said with a shrug. “I was just doing him a solid. Besides, I heard you and Mack were the ones that put him up to it?”

“We dared him,” Hunter said. “I didn’t think he’d do it.”

“Fitz isn’t usually the type to ask people out.” Mack said. “He told me once he had feelings for Simmons for about a decade and he never did anything about it. He doesn’t anymore… and unfortunately that has a lot to do with the things she’s said to you. They’re still friends, it’s just not the same.”

“I never meant to come between them,” Skye said with a sigh. “They were always in each other’s pockets, back on the Bus. I thought it was cute. If not for my soulmates, I might even have been envious of how close they were.”

“It wasn’t you gettin’ between them, love,” Hunter said soothingly. “Fitz isn’t the sort for judgement and intolerance; I think he saw a side of Simmons that he couldn’t handle readily when she turned against you. But it was his choice to make.”
“He is a sweet man,” Wanda spoke up with a small smile. “I think he and Pietro would be good for each other. My brother has a good heart, he just does not show it easily.”

“Well, I think now that they’ve taken matters into their own hands, we should leave them to it,” Skye said pointedly, glancing at Hunter. “I rather suspect it’ll go slowly, if at all. But they should be allowed to grow at their own pace.”

“Hey, hey, I’m not gonna get involved,” Hunter protested.

“Yeah? You wanna talk about what’s going on between you and Kara?” Skye teased.

Hunter blushed. “We’re just friends,” he said.

“Uh huh,” Skye said with a smile. “You and I are friends. If you ever looked at me like the way you look at Kara, Nat would beat your ass.”

Mack raised an eyebrow as Hunter choked on his coffee, sputtering, while Skye and Wanda laughed together. Hunter began to protest, but Skye waved him off. “It’s fine. About the only people likely to have an issue with it are Gonzalez and maybe Bobbi. The Avengers don’t have fraternization rules, and none of us will give a shit if you two get involved. As long as you’re honest with us about whether or not it will compromise you to be in the field together, as far as we’re concerned you guys get to live your own lives and make your own choices.”

Mack’s smile held a hint of sadness, and Skye began to wonder if Bobbi really did hold out hope that she and Hunter could get back together after the lies regarding Real SHIELD. Personally, Skye doubted it. They might be able to go back to being friends, if Bobbi accepted that what she did was something that Hunter couldn’t get over. She’d lied to him about too much, too many times.

“I need food,” Skye said. “What’s for lunch today?”

“Stir-fried vegetables, grilled fish and rice,” Wanda told her. “Are you tired, my heart? I can get you something…”

Skye smiled and waved off her soulmate’s solicitous fussing. “I’m fine. Tired of all these meetings, is more like it.”

Wanda’s eyes raked over Skye before she nodded. “You get food. I will get you some tea.” She pushed herself up from the table and headed for the side bar where beverages were available. Skye chuckled to herself as she got up and obediently headed for the food.

“They always like that?” Mack asked Hunter with a raised eyebrow.

“Usually, yeah,” Hunter confirmed. “Maria mentioned once that Skye takes care of everyone but herself, and she’s not altogether wrong. They all do their best to take care of Skye, so she’s not neglecting herself while she looks after others.”

“Hmm,” Mack hummed thoughtfully. “They’re that good together, then?”

“I’ve never seen a tighter bond, particularly in multiples,” Hunter replied firmly. “Maybe it’s because they’re a quad - trios sometimes have a hard time finding balance, from what I’ve seen.”

Mack nodded. “It could be. Could be that they’re just that tightly knit, too. They all have strengths that balance each other’s weaknesses.”

“Don’t let Romanov catch you saying she has weaknesses. The Black Widow supposedly doesn’t
have them,” Hunter said, his tone half serious and half amused.

Mack chuckled and nodded. “You got it, buddy.”

Several days later, SHIELD, the Inhumans and the Avengers had come to a basic agreement. The Index that SHIELD was so proud of would be revamped, the information on it highly restricted and not all held on a single server or in a single location. In return, the Inhumans would respond to all requests from SHIELD to determine if threats were Inhuman in nature and, if so, to police their own. The Avengers could and would be called in if necessary.

During the discussions of superhuman threats and solutions, Skye’s mind began to churn with a new idea. She worked on it in the evenings and spent time in meetings when someone - mostly Gonzalez - was protesting changes that weren’t further restrictions, fine tuning her idea and brainstorming ways to make it work. There were a lot of powered Inhumans around Lai Shi that could certainly help out with the world’s problems, Inhumans in their own communities, getting the public used to the idea of their existence by helping out.

There were grumblings in the Global community, Skye knew from talking with Tony, about possibly creating some kind of international law regarding people with powers. It wasn’t a popular idea, in large part because of what the Avengers had been doing, but a few extreme members of governments in first world nations were starting to make noise. Skye figured the only way to head them off at the pass was expose the public to the idea of powered people in a controlled manner. People only feared what they didn’t understand, after all. Despite her best efforts though, she couldn’t help but feel like there was some piece of the puzzle she was missing, staring her straight in the face.

Late in the afternoon eight days after their initial discussion of the Monolith, Thor was summoned back to Asgard. Skye and Steve went to see him off; he returned a few hours later, and not alone.

“Welcome back, Thor,” Skye said, having been the first to sense the changes wrought by the Bifrost and so the first to get to the landing site.

“I thank you, Lady Skye,” Thor replied, giving her a regal nod of his head; Skye smothered her amusement at seeing him stuck in formal mode and simply returned the gesture. Thor gestured to the other man, dark haired and scruffy with much worn and patched clothing that looked like the remnants of a uniform or maybe a flight suit. “This is Sir William Daniels, the sole survivor of the mission through the Kree Monolith.”

“Welcome back home, Mr. Daniels,” Coulson said as he, Steve, Lincoln and Jemma joined the group. “This is Lincoln Campbell and Jemma Simmons, our medics. Would you be willing to let them give you a look over? You’ve been gone a long time.”

“I… yeah,” he agreed, looking more than a little shocked still.

“Come with us, Mr. Daniels,” Jemma said in a soft, encouraging tone. “We’ll set you right. Are you hungry?”

“Will, please,” he said, letting her guide him towards the edge of the field. “And yeah, food… familiar food, sounds amazing.”

“Would you like a hand?” Laura asked, approaching in a very open and harmless way. “My name is Laura; I’m not a medic, but my husband is an agent so I’m kind of used to this sort of thing.”
Will gave her a look, but then shook her hand tentatively. “Nice to meet you, ma’am,” Will said weakly.

“Just Laura is fine,” she assured him as she and Jemma flanked the former astronaut, leading him towards the medical building.

“Just him, then?” Coulson asked Thor, who nodded.

“He must be very strong to have survived,” Thor stated as they began to follow the others back to the village. “There is some great evil lurking on that world. We did not encounter it in the brief time I was there, but Heimdall sensed - and I agreed - that whatever it is, it should not be allowed off that world.”

“Then I suppose you won’t be opposed to helping us destroy the artifact?” Coulson asked.

“Indeed.”

“We’re working out a plan, but it’s looking like you and me. And possibly Wanda,” Skye said, tucking her arm into Thor’s, who shifted automatically to accommodate her. It was only a short walk back to the village, where most of their team waited.

“I would be happy to offer my aid, my heart,” Wanda said, intertwining an arm with Skye’s free one. “Remember, the last time you encountered the stone it did not treat you kindly.”

Jemma looked over her shoulder at Skye in concern. “Skye?” she asked.

Skye rolled her eyes. “I might have fainted a little bit, but that was by myself. I’ll have Thor helping me out.”

Jemma tutted. “You don’t faint ‘a little bit,’ Skye,” Jemma ranted. “There isn’t a scale for level of fainting. If this stone caused you to faint…”

“The vibrational frequency necessary to affect the Monolith had an adverse affect on Lady Skye’s Inhuman physiology,” Thor attempted to clarify, though there was a touch of humor in his tone that Skye picked up on. “But she was fine after some rest.”

“I may be able to buffer you somewhat,” Wanda offered. “If it spares you even a small amount of pain, I am willing to try.”

“We can stand by with medical aid if needed,” Lincoln added, frowning. “Everything we know about this device says that it’s extremely dangerous to Inhumans; I think we’d all feel better if you had help standing by, Skye.”

“And if you find yourself reaching your limits, it’s okay to tap out,” Tony added. “If we need to, we’ll find an alternative. There’s always another way.” He gave Steve a look.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Look, I said I was sorry,” Steve groaned. “Why can’t you just let this go?”

“And let you off the hook?” Tony asked with a shit-eating grin. “Never.”

“What?” Coulson asked, curious.

Skye groaned this time. “It’s a long-standing thing between Tony and Steve, dating back to just before New York. Something about an argument between them about laying down on a wire versus cutting it.”
“I got the nuke out of Manhattan, and I defeated all those Chitauri in one shot,” Tony said gleefully. “There’s always a work-around.”

Skye and Steve exchanged a glance, but mutually decided that neither would point out that Tony had nearly died doing it. In the end, it hadn’t been as different as Tony claimed.

“In any case, I agree that I will stop if I have to,” Skye returned the discussion to the pertinent topic. “But I really do want that thing dusted, so I’m willing to take the risk. At least I don’t have to get close to it to affect it; I wouldn’t want anyone - human, Inhuman or otherwise - within six feet of that thing.”

Perhaps it would be wisest to bring a small representative group from both SHIELD and the Inhumans and take the stone to where there are not quite so many people,” Gordon suggested.

“That’s going to be our best bet,” Skye said nodding. “I don’t want to risk anyone I don’t have to.”

Thor was giving her an odd look, but he said nothing, so she let it slide until later. “What about my island?” Tony suggested. “No one’s there unless I’m planning on being there. And a lot of the time it’s just me, Pep, and JARVIS.”

“Where is it?” Skye asked curiously.

“Just a couple hundred miles off the coast where the Malibu house is,” Tony said.

“We still don’t know for certain what will happen when you destroy it,” Fitz said with a frown. “If it causes some kind of implosion, it could severely damage the island…”

Tony shrugged, though he made a face at the idea. “Better than anywhere even minimally populated, then, yeah? I mean, it would suck, and I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t blow up my island. But if it can’t be helped…”

“Could always take it somewhere completely isolated, like Antarctica,” Lincoln suggested.

Tony shook his head. “If we do it on the ice cap, there could be environmental fall out if we break something. We might as well do it somewhere we can control to a certain extent. Tony Stark’s private island exploding might be news, but it’s not really new news. I’ve done that already. It’s practically expected. I haven’t blown anything up lately.”

“AC, how long would it take for the Iliad to get there?” Skye asked.

“Hmmm, a day if we were rushing it. Two if we didn’t want to be noticed by anyone, I think,” Coulson said.

“Then it’s decided,” Skye said, nodding. “In two days, a representative body of the Avengers, SHIELD, and the Inhumans will be brought to Tony’s Island to witness Thor, Wanda, and I destroy the Monolith.”

Thor shot Skye another appraising look, then glanced at Steve; the Captain nodded in reply and they shared a small smile. The others were nodding along with Skye, as she continued to speak. “Gordon, if I get there to give you a place to orient on, can you bring the others to the island?”

Gordon nodded. “Certainly. If you like, I could take you to Malibu first. It would be a short flight from there to the island, save you some time.”

“Dad?” Skye asked, turning to Tony with a raised eyebrow.
“Of course I can get you there, whether from here or from Malibu. Malibu’s probably faster, though,” Tony mused.

“Would you be willing to take me and my people to the Iliad?” Coulson asked Gordon. “That way we can get it moving and we’ll be polite guests who don’t overstay their welcome, for a change. I’m sure someone can come back for the jet afterwards.”

“Of course, though you would be welcome to stay,” Gordon demurred politely.

“Sir, if it’s alright, I would like to stay and help prep medical supplies,” Jemma spoke up. “I could meet you at the island with Skye’s group…”

Coulson glanced at Skye and then Gordon, who both nodded. “Alright, Simmons. We can work with that.”

Once Coulson and most of the SHIELD agents on Lai Shi left for the Iliad - with the exceptions of Jemma, May and Fitz, who wanted to stay near Skye a little longer - Wanda and Skye cornered Pietro about Fitz the first chance they had to catch him alone.

“So,” Skye said.

“Yes?” Pietro asked.

“We want to know who won,” Skye prompted.

“I do not kiss and tell,” Pietro said.

“So there was a kiss,” Jemma said. “Leo Fitz is like my brother. You hurt him and you answer to me.”

Skye raised an eyebrow at that, wondering for the first time what had been going on at SHIELD while she was gone. Jemma seemed a lot tougher these days.

Pietro smiled. “I have no intention of hurting Leo. Right now we are… just enjoying each other. I hope that fate has put us in the right circumstances for it to go somewhere, but I do not know.”

After talking with Pietro, she and Wanda took their family on a tour of Lai Shi. A lot of the younger Inhumans, particularly those connected with the outside world, hung around them in awe of seeing Tony and Steve up close. Older Inhumans treated Steve with a degree of reverence that the younger Inhumans had a hard time achieving.

While they were touring the grounds, Skye started talking quietly with certain members of the population about the possibility of returning home and helping out their communities. Local superheroes helping with smaller problems while the Avengers helped on a Global scale with some way to coordinate everything. She kept it to herself, but the idea popped into her head that if she could track down Mike Peterson, perhaps he would be interested in her idea too. She knew he wanted a way to make amends, to be worthy of his son again… and this could do it for him.

Though she knew what her family would say about it, she had also started thinking about the possibility of helping Matt out with Hell’s Kitchen once in awhile. A lot of people didn’t necessarily trust Matt because of the branding against him that Fisk had done, and Matt was burning himself out trying to prove himself by night and be a lawyer by day. If people saw the Daredevil of Hell’s Kitchen being assisted by Quake, maybe they wouldn’t be so quick to distrust him.

Powered humans were popping up more and more frequently. It was already all over social media.
Skye’s brain grabbed on to the tendrils of an idea and pulled. Social media… if there was an app for that… Like a modern age Bat Signal, for so much more than Batman. Superheroes could sign up to answer calls, people could use it to report crimes that were too big for the police to take on or crimes in neighborhoods the police simply wouldn’t go into.

“You’ve got that look on your face,” Fitz noted quietly. “The way you used to look on the Bus when you were trying to work out a problem.”

“I think I just figured out a way to mobilize every powered person on Earth,” Skye said softly.

“Wait, what?” Tony said, leaning in.

Skye held up her phone. “I want to create an App that’s like the Bat Signal. When people are in trouble, they can call their local version of Captain America or Daredevil or whomever to help out.”

“Daredevil?” Jemma chimed in, her voice harsh with protest. “But he’s a killer! He’s murdered police officers!”

“No, he’s not!” Skye refuted, her eyes flashing as she defended her friend. “Those cops were working for Wilson Fisk and the other people who have been terrorizing my home. The police in Hell’s Kitchen have been as corrupt as the day is long since before I was alive. Daredevil is a hero.”

“Who would you get to participate?” Steve asked, diverting the topic back to Skye’s plan and looking thoughtful over the idea.

“Anyone with powers who wants to help make the world better,” Skye said immediately. “I know not all of the Inhumans live here in Lai Shi; some of them are interested and would be willing to help out in their communities. Especially in places where the police are on the take or the justice system keeps putting criminals back on the streets. Places where people don’t feel safe.”

“And you think that people will be more inclined to trust a local superhero?” May asked, eyebrow raised.

“I do, yeah. I’ve been doing a lot of surfing the ‘net, partially because we keep tabs on stories about the Avengers. Especially if we’re the ones spearheading this idea, communities will trust the people we trust,” Skye said, her eyes lighting up as she got involved in sharing her idea. “We can’t solve the world’s problems with just the Avengers, no matter how big we get. We’re just percentages of a solution.”

“I think Skye is right,” Laura spoke up, having a different point of view than most of the other agents and powered people. “Integrating Inhumans and other people with powers into their communities as a source of help would go a long way towards having people accept them. They’d be an asset rather than a threat, like police officers or fire fighters. I mean, cops carry around guns but they aren’t considered a threat by most people. This could be much the same.”

“There have been some bigwigs in several nations making noise about tagging superhumans,” Tony mused. “Something like this could cut them off at the knees. If the populace likes and wants the powered people in their communities, the government would have riots on their hands if they tried to take those people away.”

“It would give some legitimacy to what these heroes are trying to do in their neighborhoods,” Natasha noted. “Some people call them vigilantes because they think they’re only going after people they have personal vendettas against. Giving the general population the power to call for help not only empowers the superhero, but the community that surrounds them.” When Skye saw Nat’s eyes,
she was shocked to see tears in them. “I should very much like to see the Russian people be given power for once.”

“Just think how much better Sokovia could be, too, if they had someone they could trust for help…” Wanda agreed softly, her eyes also shining.

“There are many nations that could benefit from our help,” Lincoln said softly.

“What about areas where there aren’t any superheroes living?” Gordon asked. “The world is a big place.”

Skye frowned. “We can’t help in places where we aren’t, and we can’t honestly force anyone to move to a new country just so there’s a powered person nearby.”

“But we can station SHIELD agents in other nations,” May pointed out.

“Unless I’m wrong, you already have agents in other nations,” Laura added dryly. May just shrugged, and Laura didn’t push. She knew better.

“You could keep us in the loop, and we can help in places where you aren’t,” Fitz suggested.

“In an emergency, I could take Inhumans to those areas,” Gordon offered after a moment of consideration. “I couldn’t do it every time, but…”

“That would be awesome,” Skye agreed cheerfully.

“I could set up a server to run the App’s back end and route the calls,” Tony said. “We could also monitor it via the Avengers’ systems and be prepared to give backup if the situation escalates.”

“I want to talk to M-my friend Daredevil first,” Skye said. “It’s one thing for Inhumans with little fighting experience to agree to it, or for us to talk project design, but he’s been on the streets for a while and can tell me if this would be practical. Plus he operates out of one of the rougher parts of New York where See No Evil is practically the law of the land. If this would hurt a superhero or if this could blow up in our faces, I wouldn’t want to do it.”

“Tis a fair idea, Lady Skye,” Thor said, nodding. “Let us destroy the Kree stone and then we can return to New York so you may speak with the Devil of Dare.” Skye and Wanda traded a glance and then burst into giggles at the reversal of Daredevil, but everyone else nodded.

“The ship should arrive tomorrow, so everyone should be sure to have a good night’s sleep and a good breakfast,” May said, glancing around at the younger agents in particular.

“Yes, ma’am.” “Yes, Agent May.” “Yes, mom.” The answers chorused around, but several people blinked at Skye until she realized what she said.

She’d never called May ‘mom’ before. Honestly, she’d never really called anyone mom, and had really only started to use the name for Jiaying because she’d seemed to expect it. Laura was really the closest thing to one Skye had ever had, but Laura mothered everyone indiscriminately. Skye opened her mouth to backtrack, when May just smiled at her.

“Don’t you and your soulmates stay up too late, baby girl,” May said with a brief grin before walking away and leaving a bunch of shocked agents behind her.

“Even if you are her mother, I had custody first!” Tony called after her. Skye blinked at her dad, then looked after May again. Then her eyes found Laura’s; Laura shook her head and smiled softly at
Skye, relaxing her fears before they’d fully formed. Laura understood; Laura always understood.

“I love you,” Laura mouthed to Skye.

“Love you too,” Skye returned silently. All was well in her world.

“Awww, Skye,” Jemma cooed sweetly, gaining everyone’s attention. “That was adorable!”

Skye blushed. “Oh, hush. It just kinda… slipped out.”

Gordon smiled sadly, then turned and walked away without another word. Skye was a little surprised, but no one stopped him from leaving.

“I always thought May had a soft spot for ya,” Fitz chuckled.

“She totally went all mother hen on you back when Ward was your SO, now that I think about it,” Jemma said.

“Ward?” Lincoln asked.

Skye made a face. “Hydra bastard who was a mole on our team, back when we first became a team. I was undercover and pretending to want to be an agent, so he was assigned to train me. And did a lousy fucking job. Fortunately, I was already better than that. May took it upon herself to give me some guidance after an assessment of what Ward was teaching me, and then she pretty much took over after Hydra was outed and she knew the truth anyway.”

“The Allfather was most harsh in his punishment against Ward,” Thor grumbled, nodding. “I believe the loss of his own mate, my mother, prompted him to decisive action against one who would keep another from their bonded ones.”

“Let’s not revisit the topic of Ward,” Nat said dangerously. “It’s not exactly a happy topic for most of us.” Skye saw that most of the Avengers were looking a lot angrier than the Inhumans had seen them. She knew Jemma had seen them angrier, but they were past all that. It was forgiven, if not forgotten.

“Sorry I asked,” Lincoln said, backing down immediately. Skye shot him a sympathetic look, and he gave her a small smile in return.

“Now mind your mother, Skye, and off to bed with you,” Fitz teased. Skye took a playful swipe at him, clearly intended to miss though he ducked anyway. They shared a laugh before Wanda looped her arm through Skye’s and the quad headed for their room as the rest of the group broke up for the evening.
Dealing with the Monolith
Chapter 48

After breakfast the next day, they received a call from Coulson that the Iliad would arrive in just under an hour. Gordon obligingly took Skye and Tony to Malibu, and Tony proceeded to fly the pair of them to his island. Once they were there, Gordon began bringing small groups to join them; the ship arrived sometime during the process.

It took some doing, craning the Monolith from the ship to the island, but thankfully between the Iliad’s gear and Tony’s tech they managed to get it done. They settled it into an open space, as far from the house as they could manage, and then paused to make sure the plan was settled in everyone’s minds.

Gordon, Shane, Lori and Lincoln were there for the Inhumans. They stood on the very edge of the clearing, as far away from the Monolith as they could manage and still be able to see. Jemma was stationed near them, medical gear at the ready just in case. Near her stood Will, who had asked to come see the destruction of the object that took him away and left him alone for so long.

The other Avengers also stood by, both to keep an eye on their teammates and also to be on hand in case whatever the evil was on the other side tried to get through while the portal was open. They weren’t sure if it would end up opening or not, but they saw no reason to take risks unnecessarily.

“Everyone ready?” Skye called out. Thor nodded at her and Wanda smiled as the rest of their team fell into watchful guard stances. Skye raised her hands and directed her power at the Monolith, seeking the frequency of vibration that would shatter it. A heartbeat later, Thor raised Mjolnir to the sky and channeled lightning at the stone through his other hand.

Skye moaned as the pain in her head grew steadily; a heartbeat later she felt Wanda’s hands at her temples and saw the red glow in her peripheral vision. The pain eased off somewhat, though it wasn’t gone entirely; she held on grimly, watching as the stone’s matter shifted and swirled.

“It’s working!” Fitz called out, his DWARFs circling so he could monitor the stone. Tony, likewise, still had his suit on so he and JARVIS could keep track of things - and so that if the stone did shatter
explosively, he could try to shield as many people as possible.

“Can’t take much more,” Skye whispered, and Wanda relayed.

“Skye can’t handle much more!” Wanda called out. “We need to finish this, now!”

Skye redoubled her efforts, her power shaking the ground around them a bit in waves emanating from the Monolith. Then, with a mighty roar, Thor swung his hammer down onto the device. The stone shattered, exploding in tiny shards from the blow; Tony used his repulsors to shield the people he could, while Steve used his shield to protect a couple of others.

Fortunately, most people had the instincts or reflexes to duck. Bits of black rock-like substance were everywhere, and most people were covered with dust, but relatively unharmed.

Skye collapsed in Wanda’s arms at the same moment the stone blew. There was a trickle of blood coming from her nose and she held her hands to her head in an effort to stop the blinding headache. Wanda caught her soulmate as best she could, lowering them both to the ground in a controlled fall more than anything else. Pietro zipped over faster than anyone else could react and helped cushion his sisters.

“You two okay?” Maria asked, shaking dust and debris from her hair.

“I am well,” Wanda said.

“I am well,” Wanda said.

“I’m fine,” Skye said, standing up once Wanda and Pietro had. Everyone gasped. “What? I mean, I’ve got a little headache but…” Jemma seemed to be subconsciously wiping at the sides of her nose, though she didn’t get ash on her much at all. Skye mimicked the action. Her hand hit something wet. She saw blood when she drew her hand away. “Guess I’m glad I don’t have to do that again,” she joked.

Jemma seemed to come to her senses and came over. “Sit back down before you fall over, Skye,” Jemma demanded. “I swear, trouble follows you like a dog with a bone.”

“I’m fine,” Skye said, though she obeyed at Wanda’s quiet urging. “This happened before. I just need some food and some sleep and I’ll be good as new.”

“Skye, this might be news to you, but the general population considers that someone bleeding from their eyes isn’t ‘fine’,” Jemma chastised.

“Maybe you should listen to the good Doctor,” Laura said, her expression mixed with amusement and concern.

“You should all get checked over,” Tony said. “Even you, Point Break.”

Skye groaned. She had been planning on a nice hot bath and a nap with her soulmates, but it didn’t look like that was going to be a reality any time soon. “Fine,” she conceded, closing her eyes again. Wanda stroked her hair gently and Pietro helped Skye shift into a more comfortable position on the ground. She cooperated patiently as Jemma checked her over, though she winced sharply when Jemma flashed a penlight in her eyes. Her head was absolutely killing her, and the lights made it worse.

“You’re ridiculously sensitive right now, aren’t you?” Jemma asked, moderating her tone to just above a whisper.

“Yeah,” Skye breathed, trying not to wince again.
“Well, it doesn’t look like you’ve done any permanent damage, though I’d like a MRI and CAT done just to check,” Jemma said, voice still low. “I think we’re going to have to put you under deeply, though, or the scanners might make you worse.”

“Do what you have to,” Skye said with a sigh. “Just, bed big enough for my soulmates when you’re done, please.”

“Deal,” Jemma agreed, glad Skye wasn’t fighting her for once. She must really be in a lot of pain.

Skye shut her eyes, trusting her family to watch over the proceedings. She thought she heard Jemma talking to Gordon, but everyone was keeping their voices low. She felt Maria pick her up, love pouring through the bond with just a hint of worry around the edges. She felt the pinch of the needle going in, then the cold, dark feeling of sedation.

Hours later, Skye woke to a dark room and the sounds of her soulmates’ deep breathing surrounding her. Her head still ached, though not as badly as before, and she was content to stay where she was for the moment.

“Hey,” Nat whispered, and Skye felt a shift half-beneath her. She realized that she was laying on Nat’s chest, and Nat was half-reclined against the headboard, which meant Maria and Wanda were flanking them. Nat was the lightest sleeper, anyway, and Skye wasn’t surprised to have woken her just by waking and taking stock of her surroundings.

“Hey,” she whispered back. “Everyone okay?”

“Better than you,” was the calm reply. “Go back to sleep, love. Let your body finish healing.” Skye sighed and snuggled in closer, letting the feel of Nat’s fingers in her hair soothe her back to sleep.

When she woke again, she felt a lot better. The headache was down to a dull, nagging sort of thing, and her body didn’t hurt too badly at all. Taking stock, she realized that Maria was gone but she still had Wanda and Nat on either side of her. Nat blinked sleepily up at her as Skye crawled out of bed, but Skye smiled and kissed her forehead. “Go back to sleep, love. I know you were awake most of the night.”

Nat murmured a sleepy, “I love you,” and snuggled closer to Wanda, eyes closing again.

Skye took a quick shower, got into clean clothes, and went to find food. She was starving; her power took a lot out of her when she pushed the limits like she had yesterday. Arriving in the dining hall, she looked around quickly as she went to find food. She was a little surprised to see Jemma tucked into a quiet corner with Will, the guy they’d rescued from the other end of the portal. But Will had seemed pretty jumpy since they brought him back, so she decided she’d better leave them alone.

She piled a plate high with food; eggs, pancakes, bacon, fruit, a couple of pastries… whatever she could fit. When she sat down with May, Maria, Clint and Laura, May looked at her plate with a skeptical expression.

“Seriously, Skye?” May asked.

Skye grinned and stuffed her face, letting Maria speak for her. “Skye’s power takes a huge toll on her energy reserves,” Maria explained. “According to Bruce, she needs the calories and carbs to keep her energy levels up, especially after something like yesterday.”

May sighed, but gave Skye a small smile. They both understood that Skye would totally use that as permission to eat all the junk food she wanted.
Skye swallowed audibly. “I still only consume about half of what Steve or Bucky or Thor eat.”

“And yet the last all-you-can-eat buffet you guys dragged me to, you got us kicked out of and banned for life,” Hunter teased.

“That was kind of fun…” Steve said with a mischievous grin.

“Wait… Captain America is a troublemaker?” Tony said mockingly. “Be still my beating heart.”

“You have a heart?” Hunter, Skye, and Steve all mocked back in unison. The Avengers all dissolved into laughter.

Coulson looked like something was very wrong with his world, watching the scene before him. “Bucky’s been telling us stories about the trouble Steve used to get into,” Skye explained between mouthfuls. “The stuff the history books left out.”

“Mostly because it was far too inappropriate or gross,” Tony said.

Steve blushed. “It wasn’t that gross…”

“Uh, the words ‘pigeon stew’ tell a different story my friend,” Tony shot back. “Turns out Cap wasn’t nearly as button down as I thought. He should tell you about the time he and Bucky -” Steve covered Tony’s mouth so only muffled the words emerged.

Skye glanced at Fitz and saw him trying to stifle laughter, though she and the other Avengers were still laughing on and off. Mack and May both looked amused, and Coulson still looked minorly shell shocked.

“But… but… Steve Rogers was cannonized! Saint Steve!” Coulson protested.

“I was what?” Steve asked, wide-eyed.

“You mean you never told him?” Coulson asked Skye. “Wasn’t he your Patron Saint?”

Skye cursed, loudly. “Coulson, did you have to tell him?”

Steve reddened. “I was your Patron Saint?”

“Yes, and you were never supposed to find out,” Skye said. She glanced at her Dad, who looked like a lifetime of Christmases had come all at once. “You had been believed dead for years. It’s not like I expected to grow up and become best friends with you.”

“I’d forgotten about that,” Fitz mused. “Isn’t he, like, patron saint of lost causes and the underdog or something?”

“Officially he’s the Patron Saint of Lost Causes, America, and Brooklyn,” Skye said. “Kids at the orphanage unofficially called him the Patron Saint of the Underdog.”

“And he was your Patron Saint?” Hunter cooed. “That’s adorable. So perfect for you, darlin’.”

Skye didn’t think she could blush any redder and she took a playful swing at Hunter, who ducked, laughing at her.

“Might be the one time the nuns did me a favor,” Skye grumbled. “All the kids wanted Saint Steve, but I was the one in my class who got him.”
“Captain Boy Scout was my daughter’s Patron Saint at the orphanage!” Tony crowed, cackling gleefully. “Oh, that’s too rich! Wait ’til I tell Rhodey! And Pepper!”

“You know what was weird?” Skye asked quietly. “I used to pray when I was a kid that God would send you back and save me. And then you did come back and save me. More than once.”

Everyone got really quiet and Steve went over and wrapped his arms around Skye. “While there’s life in my bones, I promise Skye, I’ll always come save you.”

Skye leaned against his chest and smiled. “I know. I’ll always come for you, too. Promise.” The one thing she’d always wanted was a place to call home, permanently, and people who wanted her there. Steve had been among the first people outside of her soulmates to offer her that, and she would always be grateful for it.


The flash of a camera caught their attention and Skye looked over to see Fitz grinning at her. “I’ll send it to you; you can put it next to your Saint Steve card, ‘cause I know you still have it.”

“Thanks,” Skye said. She looked mischievously at Coulson. “Bucky Barnes is going to kill you. Just thought you should know.”


“He wanted to see the look on Steve’s face when I finally told him about the whole Sainthood thing…”

“Oh God, Bucky knows?” Steve groaned. “He’s never gonna let me live this down.”

“Don’t take his name in vain,” Tony said in a sing-song voice. “After all, you’re a Saint. You have to set an example.”

“That’s it,” Steve said with a grin. “Chill time. You’re going in the pool.” He picked Tony up bodily and started running for the outdoor pool. Skye laughed as she listened to Tony squawk, then the sound of a splash. She went and got a second helping of pretty much everything.

“I love teaching Steve slang,” was Skye’s only comment, and Sharon grinned at her.

“Wait, you’re telling me that that’s really Steve Rogers over there?” Will asked, dumbstruck.

“Of course. I told you we found him in an ice cap,” Jemma said.

Will blushed. “I thought you were kidding. But seriously… Steve Rogers?”

“And Bucky Barnes,” Skye chimed in. “Though he’s back in New York right now.”

Will looked dumbstruck and eventually just nodded, accepting for the moment that the world was far stranger than when he left it. Steve walked back in at that moment, and Skye shot him a look. “Steve, maybe you want to go chat with Will for a bit, if he’s willing? I think you two might have a lot in common, having to adjust to how much the world changed while you were MIA…”

Steve’s expression softened and he nodded. “Of course.” He picked up his coffee cup, his meal being gone already, and moved to the table in the corner. “May I join you?” he asked in a low voice.

“Please do,” Will managed to say, scooting his chair over to make room for Steve. Jemma just smiled and shifted over so she could join the main conversation while the two men spoke quietly.
Fitz got Skye another cup of coffee and settled down near her, in Steve’s empty spot. “What’s it like, being a superhero living with a bunch of other superheroes?” he asked curiously.

“Honestly?” Skye responded, laughing a little. “We mostly ignore the superheroes thing when we’re not training. When we’re home, we’re just a bunch of people. It has kinda been a roller coaster; lots of ups and downs, but we get through it all together, you know?”

“It sounds great,” Fitz replied with a smile. “I’m glad you’re happy, Skye.”

“We all are,” Jemma said warmly, nursing a cup of tea. “I’m glad you destroyed that monolith though.” She shuddered. “I would not have liked to get accidentally sucked into that thing. Will said the other planet was… horrible. The sun never shone, the sound of the environment was not something humans are designed to hear, and there was something hunting him.”

“Definitely a disturbing thought, but everyone’s safe here and there were no other humans left on that world, so it’s alright now,” Coulson finally spoke, recovering from his shock over Steve. Or at least attempting to reconcile what he thought he knew with what he’d seen.

“I want to see if there’s anything in the Inhumans’ records about it,” Skye said thoughtfully.

“But we destroyed the portal?” Thor commented curiously.

“Well, yeah, but that doesn’t mean that there aren’t other ways onto or off of that world,” Skye replied with a shrug. “Whatever it is, it may not stay trapped there forever. I’m not saying it’s urgent, just that if we can find records about it or even just record what we know… it could help later, because shit happens.”

“You are taking the long view,” Thor said, his tone warm with approval. “I do not think Asgard will have any information on it, but I will ask Heimdall to check in on that world from time to time and relay anything he learns.”

“That would be great,” Skye agreed. She turned her gaze to meet Jemma’s. “Do you think you and Will can put together a report of whatever he knows? No rush, but it might help him to talk about it anyway.”

“I’ll ask him,” Jemma responded softly.

Skye nodded. “Thank you.” She returned her attention to her breakfast for a bit, as conversations began to buzz around her again. She sighed softly to herself, just happy to have most of the people she cared about in one place. And not bickering, for once.

After breakfast, the Avengers decided to pack up and head home. The situation with the Inhumans had been worked out to everyone’s satisfaction, and Gordon was more than willing to allow Skye to borrow the Inhumans’ records - especially since she offered to convert them all to electronic format while she studied them.

Gonzalez had returned to SHIELD with the rest of the Council, minus Skye’s old team, so no one was around to complain that SHIELD and the Avengers had unfinished business. The issue of the Mind Stone in Loki’s scepter was moot, as far as Coulson was concerned; it had been returned to Asgard, and it was unlikely it would be returned to allow SHIELD to study it. Fitz and Simmons might be a little disappointed, but they wouldn’t press the issue. If the consensus was that the artifact was too dangerous to be kept on Earth, they would trust the Avengers’ judgement.

Skye was itching to get started on her new program, but she really did need to talk to Matt first. So she sent him an email, asking him if they could meet when he had some free time.
He emailed back that he had some free time, but wanted her to meet someone who worked a lot. He said he’d be happy to bring her to where she worked, but he figured Skye wouldn’t want to be so conspicuous.

Skye didn’t, and besides, it could be a long conversation. So Skye met Matt very late one night at his apartment in Hell’s Kitchen. None of her family had been happy with it, but Skye had appeased them by taking a panic button given the late hour and the neighborhood she’d be in.

“Hey, Skye.” Matt greeted warmly. He was dressed in his street clothes and his tall, white cane. “Come in.”

“Uh, Matt,” Skye said slowly. “You know that I know you might not be able to see, but you’re far more perceptive than you let people believe.”

“It’s all part of the cover, Skye. After all, you’re far more dangerous than you appear to be too,” Matt said, leaning the cane against a wall. Skye had shared the story of how she had gained her powers with Matt one night over beers at the Tower. He had been impressed.

“Now, how can I help you?”

Skye began explaining her idea for the Bat Signal. Matt made a few notes, agreeing that he’d help out however he could, though he couldn’t actually see so he’d need a way to hear the notifications that came through.

“But if you really want an outside opinion on this, you’re gonna want to talk to a friend of mine,” Matt said. “If she’s on-schedule, she got home about ten minutes ago. We should go over so we can talk to her.”

“She? And you can’t call over?”

“She’s… not exactly talking to me anymore,” Matt said.

“Let me guess,” Skye said. “You were an idiot again?” Matt was quiet as he locked the door. “Matt?”

“Okay, yes. I was an idiot again,” he admitted. Skye grinned. “You can stop grinning, Skye.”

“You couldn’t see that I was smiling,” Skye objected.

“I didn’t have to see, Skye. I’ve known you for way too long,” Matt said.

They walked over, then up to a third-floor apartment and Matt knocked on the door. An extremely attractive hispanic woman, whom Skye would be very tempted to ask out if she weren’t already happily committed, opened the door, looking very angry. “I thought I told you never to come here ever again.”

They spat at Matt.

“Easy, he’s just here on my behalf,” Skye said before it got far enough that Skye would feel the need to intervene.

The woman whirled around and looked at Skye, then went back to Matt. “Now you’re referring me to people?” She froze then looked back at Skye.

“Hey,” Skye said.

“Holy shit, you’re an Avenger,” she said. Skye grinned widely. “You’re that chick who can make the Earth shake.”
“Yeah, I’m Skye,” she said.

“Claire,” Claire said slowly, still stunned. “And you need my… sorry, but for once neither one of you seem injured.”

“I asked him to bring me here. Matt said that you might know other superheroes in New York?”

“I do, but they’re pretty different from him,” Claire said, indicating Matt.

“You mean not a dumbass?” Skye asked curiously.

Claire actually smiled. “Among other things. You can come in, if you’d like, but Matt has to go home.”


Matt huffed and shook his head, his version of rolling his own eyes, then left.

Claire closed the door after him. “So how do you know Matt?” Claire asked.

“We sort of grew up together,” Skye said. “I’m actually from Hell’s Kitchen. How’d you meet?”

“I actually pulled him out of a dumpster,” Claire said. “I’m a nurse, or at least I was.”

“Sounds like typical Matt,” Skye said with a grin.

“So he’s still the same guy you grew up with?” Claire asked, surprised.

“Our favorite nun at the orphanage used to like to say that Matt Murdock did the perfect impression of the Scarecrow.”

Claire laughed at that. “Sounds exactly like Matt. But obviously you didn’t come here to talk about Matt.”

Skye nodded. “Among other things, I’m a programmer, and certain events in the last few weeks gave me an idea to develop an app that would connect superheroes with people who need heroes. Like… the Bat Signal, but on a global scale. I know what Matt’s answer would be, but before I started coding, I wanted to know if this was practical. What I mean is… would other people go for it? And not just my friends?”

Claire got up, grabbed two beers out of the fridge and passed one to Skye before collapsing onto the couch with a heavy sigh. “I admit that I know a few superheroes in New York. Some of them want to be left alone right now, but… it’s not out of the realm of possibility that it could be useful. Especially in neighborhoods like this one. Even if the cops weren’t on the take, not too many people trust the cops here. They have a history of being unhelpful or just don’t show up. Do you really think there are enough superheroes for coverage?”

“Maybe not at first, but think about the people you know,” Skye said.

“And that’s just around here. Fair point,” Claire said. “So what now?” she asked.

“Now I start programming,” Skye said. She pulled out a business card with her Avengers email and the team phone number that routed through to JARVIS. “If you think of anything, let me know. Though I usually answer my email faster, but if there’s an emergency you can use the phone number to literally call in the Cavalry.”
Claire looked dumbstruck at the card. “Is this seriously the phone number to the Avengers?”

“Sell that to anyone and we’ll change it and you won’t get another, but yeah. Can I ask you a personal question?” Skye asked.

“Sure,” Claire said.

“Was there a reason you stopped being a nurse?” Skye asked.

Claire chugged the rest of her beer before answering. “I saw a guy come back from the dead helping Matt, and the hospital covered it up. I wouldn’t play that game so I quit and they blacklisted me from every hospital in the city.”

Skye frowned. “You want to be a nurse again?”

“I don’t know,” Claire admitted. “I’m gonna go home to Harlem for a bit. Why?”

“Because I know a really impressive place that can’t be blacklisted,” Skye said with a wide grin.

“Really?” Claire said. “Where?”

Chapter 49

Once they settled back in at the Tower, life returned more or less to normal for the family. Laura and the kids stayed for a couple more days before heading back home. Clint went with her, both because it was a busy time at the farm and because the kids would be starting school again soon and he wanted some time with them while they were still on vacation.

A few days before they left, when everyone was around, Skye and Steve walked down the street to their favorite bakery. The family had decided that since their birthdays had passed quietly while they were all working in Lai Shi, they would just have to celebrate now that everyone was home. So the birthday kids, as Tony called them, had been sent to pick out a cake - since it was too short notice to order one special.

They ultimately decided on two cakes: a chocolate fudge cake with raspberry filling and an almond pound cake with Irish Cream frosting. Both cakes were quarter-sheet size, estimating 24 servings each, which Skye knew would both be gone by the end of the party. “God bless super human
“metabolisms,” Skye said cheekily as they carried their cake boxes back to the Tower.

“Why’s that?” Steve asked, amused.

“Because I fully intend to eat my fair share of these cakes, and I don’t really want to have to do extra workouts for a week to burn off the calories,” she replied with a grin.

Steve laughed and nodded his agreement. “Works for me.”

Overall, the party was pretty low-key. No media sensations, no big announcements. Just dinner and an evening together with the Tower’s residents, plus Sharon and Kara; the two former Agents had an apartment together nearby, both for safety and because they figured they may as well enjoy the bachelorette lifestyle for a few more months until the wedding. Skye had been - briefly - tempted to join them, just for the fun of having a Numbered Agents apartment hangout. It was an entertaining idea; she did occasionally go there to hang out with them anyway, and their Numbered Agent lunches happened every week that at least two of them were in town.

“Feels weird to have a party where people aren’t falling down drunk or blowing shit up,” Tony commented to Skye with a laugh.

“Welcome to family life?” she responded, laughing with him. Then she sobered. “Do you miss it?” she asked softly.

“No, not really,” he answered honestly, tugging her in for a gentle hug. “I mean, yeah, it’s a little strange. But… we have a good time, without needing to be smashed to deal with each other. And I think that’s a good thing.”

She smiled. “Yeah. Yeah, I think so too.”

Later in the evening, after the cakes had been cut and pieces handed around, Hunter pulled out a huge set of Cards Against Humanity. The group laughed themselves silly over the combinations of things that could happen in a group of over a dozen adults, including several geniuses with well known abilities to think outside the proverbial box. Skye won, having learned very quickly that handing Jane anything vaguely scientific and giving Tony the most random card imaginable usually worked out well. It was a good night, and the first time they’d been able to relax and just be for an evening. Steve, however, seemed to submit a couple things that made even Tony blush, though Bucky simply shrugged and asked the group what they thought they did for three solid years during the War.

As the weeks passed by, the group returned to their routine of training and work. Skye spent a fair bit of her work time studying the records from Lai Shi. She quickly found the family trees detailing a great many of the Inhuman lines, as well as several divergences where the community had lost track of individuals for a period of time. There were at least a handful of potential genetic carrier lines that diverged from the World Wars and other major conflicts; it seemed that soldiers would be soldiers, even Inhuman ones. A couple of children born from casual liaisons during World War 2 had been tracked, but it wasn’t hard to see how they’d lost track of just how far the Inhuman genes had spread.

And that was just in the modern era.

The records spanned centuries, perhaps even millennia. Skye had recruited Darcy, and eventually several of the Warehouse’s admin personnel, to very carefully turn pages on old books for Jarvis to scan; though well-preserved, several of them were too fragile for much handling, and it would be considerably easier to crunch the data electronically anyway. Skye left Darcy in charge of overseeing that portion of the project. It turned out that several of the people in the labs were both fluent and
literate in Mandarin, which was a boon because that meant Skye didn’t have to play translator while they prioritized their documents.

They made a few changes to the Tower, as well. Claire did contact Skye after a couple of weeks, asking if the job offer was still open. After briefing her team, the group welcomed Claire into the Tower’s infirmary; Dr. Cho was still based at the Warehouse, and she was certainly available in an emergency, but this way Bruce didn’t have to play medic for all the little injuries that happened at the Tower or during training.

Skye also quietly made sure that Claire had access to the tools and supplies she would need in case any of her other friends needed her help. They even set up a “back door” access to her office; a code-access-only elevator ran directly from the parking garage to the hallway outside the infirmary, a code that was only known to Skye, Claire and the people Claire gave it to. The Avengers had their own codes, should they ever need it. Though JARVIS did track people coming and going, the Avengers agreed that they wouldn’t ask any questions unless it became necessary.

That didn’t stop Maria and Nat from running background checks on the people they could identify, but they did so very quietly and kept the information locked away in JARVIS’s most secure sectors.

In return, Claire agreed to speak to her friends about whether they would be willing to participate in Skye’s ‘bat signal app’ when she got it running. The street level heroes were all a little apprehensive about such things, which Skye found understandable.

So she put together a list of security features that would protect everyone’s identities. She sat down with Claire one afternoon to explain it so Claire could, in turn, explain it to her friends. “Hero-members will have to create an account, and include geographic areas they were willing and able to cover. The program specifically does not GPS-tag the members’ devices,” Skye said, showing her the setup template. “The accounts do not require any real personal information - just their Superhero ID, their general MO, and where they can operate. It also has an option for travel-mode; if they were vacationing but willing to be called on in an emergency, for example. But we’re mostly wanting this for people to be able to stick closer to home.”

“It looks great, Skye,” Claire said, her eyes bright as she caught Skye’s rather infectious enthusiasm. “How does it work for the average person?”

“When a call comes in from a civilian user, the system is set up to prioritize who receives the notice by who’s closest. The member will have to respond to accept or deny the call,” she said; Skye recognized that most of these people had regular jobs as well, and for example Matt couldn’t just walk out of a courtroom to answer a call for help. “If accepted, then a general notice goes out to all members that something is happening and being handled. If denied, the call gets routed to the next nearest member. If there is no response in a period of time, the call also gets forward to the next member.” The timing was still a work in progress; some crimes happened in mere minutes, some took a little longer, and Skye was liberally leaning on Matt’s input as far as the timing was concerned. But she knew Claire didn’t really want to talk about Matt, so Skye didn’t mention it.

“I think this will be an amazing thing, Skye,” Claire said after a moment’s thought. Skye smiled and nodded. “Let’s hope it works out as well as we think.”

Also on Matt’s advice, Skye included a check box on user reports that would indicate whether or not they had also called the police. Not only would it be an interesting metric to track, but it would let the responders know if they would have to deal with the cops at some point during their work. They expected that in some areas, people would do both, and this would give them a heads up.

Skye had also heard rumors of a half-human, half-spider who’d been fighting crime all over
Manhattan. Spiderman, she knew, regularly delivered criminals to the police and while certain officers objected to heroes stopping crimes, most were getting used to the idea.

The program, as it came together, also had accessibility features. It had an option for audible alerts and voice control for the visually impaired; Skye listed it as a user feature, but it was also enabled on the member end for Matt. There was also an option to allow the App to utilize the vibration function and visual notices for the hearing impaired; Skye expected Clint would likely enable that option, as he wouldn’t hear alerts if he didn’t have his aids in.

The entire system would be run via a server at Avengers Tower. Members were able to, with a single button or voice command, escalate a situation and call for help. It also included a scramble alert, which would notify everyone in range - up to and including the Avengers - in case something like Insight ever happened again. This was the only option that tagged a physical location, and only at the moment the alert was signaled so that everyone would know where to go.

Pepper had started an ad campaign when Skye got to final stages and started testing it with Matt. The Ultron App, which would run through a six-month beta test in Manhattan, seemed to be much anticipated. Through Claire, Skye had met with two other superheros, one with super-strength and the other who was literally bulletproof. Both seemed interested in using the app to help their communities.

Skye had managed to track down Spiderman’s email with a few tools that might have been borrowed from the NSA. She sent him a link to the app. She’d gotten a thank you note stuck to the common floor window with some kind of sticky web-substance a few nights later and a new login with the handle “Spiderman” had joined the ranks. He was apparently based in Queens, but his powers gave him the ability to cover so much ground that he was able to also assist in Manhattan, moments away.

The second time Skye emailed Spiderman, she gave him simple instructions for setting up a highly secure email address and told him that if he ever needed someone to talk to, he could email her private account. She didn’t get a response right away, but eventually they struck up a correspondence.

It was fun.

The beta test model of the Ultron App had over a million downloads in the first three days of its release. Skye was shocked when she stared at the numbers; Tony just grinned proudly. He had been completely taken aback when he found out she’d named the App “Ultron” and he’d hugged the stuffing out of her for several long moments.

So far, it seemed to be working. She’d tested the App’s stability as well as the feedback option and the bug report function, because she was sure there would be little things to fix or improve in the final version.

Fortunately, just as they hit the point where Skye needed to step back and see how it was running she gained something else to occupy her. Sharon and Steve’s wedding was only two weeks away.

Kara was mostly on top of helping Sharon keep organized and sane; Skye’s job was to wrangle the guys. She followed up on tux fittings, made sure shoes fit properly, and helped keep Steve calm. Bucky helped where he could, knowing he would be the one keeping Steve company the day of the wedding while the women all spent hours together getting ready.

Skye also helped Bucky coordinate the bachelor party. Steve and Sharon were in agreement that there would be no strippers, and it took exceptional amounts of alcohol to get a super soldier buzzed, but that didn’t mean that the two parties couldn’t still be entertaining. Bucky seemed insistent that
they go to Coney Island, so Tony bought it out for the day. Trip arrived in plenty of time to join them for the festivities, and everyone was glad to pretend work conflicts didn’t exist for the duration.

They all rode the Cyclone and Steve mentioned something about payback to Bucky that none of them understood. They ate Nathan’s Hot Dogs and walked around the minor league Brooklyn Cyclones’ ballpark, which caused a debate that had something to do with the Brooklyn Dodgers that Skye only followed because Mr. Brody was a sixth-generation New Yorker whose grandfather had worked as a bat-boy for the Brooklyn Dodgers as a kid. Since the Brodys had been her favorite foster home, she had tried really hard to learn the things Mr. and Mrs. Brody had enjoyed doing so that they would keep her.

In the evening, the two groups split up for dinner; both had arrangements at highly exclusive clubs where the media was very much not allowed. And on top of that, they had private party rooms where everyone could kick back and be themselves without major concern.

The ladies were in a place that specialized in Asian Fusion, because Sharon loved the food. They were entertained by the hibachi chef and lingered over several courses of seafood and sushi. The room they were in had both the hibachi table and a large lounge space, where they gathered with cocktails after dinner.

Then Kara signaled one of the waitresses, who brought in a large box filled with gifts for Sharon.

“Oh, come on, guys!” Sharon said, laughing. “We already did the wedding shower thing. I didn’t need more gifts!”

“It’s traditional,” Skye grinned.

“And besides, these gifts are of a different sort than the stuff from your shower,” Nat added, smirking. And she was right.

Sharon turned pink, both from blushing and from laughing so hard as she opened her gifts. Sexy lingerie, sexy costumes, and sex toys were the most prominent, though Skye had also found a game called “Spice It Up” which contained two dice. One listed sexual acts, and the other typical rooms in a house.

“So you roll the dice and you have to perform the act from one in the room on the other,” she explained, laughing. They rolled the dice a few times, just to see what it would come up with. They got ‘oral sex’ and ‘kitchen’ and decided that was a good pair.

Kara picked up the room die and looked it over. “You know, this doesn’t say ‘bedroom’ on it at any point,” she commented.

“Well, yeah. That’s boringly normal,” Maria quipped.

“We’d need a custom one for the Tower,” Nat said thoughtfully.

Skye snickered, “Yeah, it would have to say things like ‘the gym floor’ and ‘media room’ and it would be a really good thing if I finished fixing JARVIS’s privacy protocols first.”

“Oh, God, you’d better!” Pepper laughed. “If I have to comfort Tony because he walked in on you four in any combination…”

They all laughed together. “I never thought about what it must be like, living in a building with all the guys,” Kara said after they’d calmed down.
“It’s not so bad,” Maria said with a shrug.

“We have our own floor, basically,” Skye agreed. “Plenty of space to do whatever we want, and no one else comes in unless we allow it.”

“We even have our own rooms, even if we seldom sleep apart,” Wanda added. “It is good for us to each have our own space.”

“I usually use mine if I’m up late coding something,” Skye admitted. “Natasha sleeps so lightly that I can’t sneak in without waking her, even if I use my powers.”

“Your room would be a computer lab, if we let you,” Maria teased fondly.

Skye’s face lit up. “Don’t even think about it,” Natasha warned.

“We’ve really become a family mostly because of the proximity,” Skye said with a smile. “I don’t think we’d be so close if we didn’t all spend those first six months living in Stark Tower together. It was my first.”

“First what?” Sharon asked.

“First home,” Skye answered softly. “First place that really felt like home, and the first home that lasted for more than a few months.”

“And now you have more than one. There’s the Tower, the Bartons’, and possibly you could make a place at Lai Shi if you wanted to,” Natasha reminded her.

“I know,” Skye said with a sigh. “I’ve been told that Jiaying’s house and everything in it is basically mine, now, if I want it. But that’s a thought for another day. It’s Sharon’s night tonight.”

“I don’t mind,” Sharon responded, smiling. “We all spend so much time together, anyway; I’m just happy we’re all out having a good time.”

“It might be nice to have a place our own,” Wanda noted. “Though we never discussed whose name we would take if we were to wed.”

“We could always make one up,” Skye noted. “Or just keep our own, I suppose.”

“There really isn’t a rule that says we all have to share a name,” Maria said with a shrug.

“There are some things we might need to consider, though,” Natasha replied. “I think we need to have this discussion privately…”

“We are all family. Are there questions we would wish to keep private?” Wanda asked curiously.

“Well, having different names could get interesting if we decide we want kids at some point,” Natasha pointed out, willing to discuss it in present company if Skye and Wanda didn’t mind. She glanced at Maria, who nodded. “Maria wouldn’t mind a family, but she doesn’t really want to bear one herself. I cannot…” Natasha looked away for a moment, then braced herself and met both Skye’s and Wanda’s eyes. “But if you two want to have kids, we would enjoy that. Or we could adopt.”

Skye picked up her drink, toying with the little umbrella for a moment before looking up again. “I always kind of wanted a big family,” she said softly. “Being alone growing up… kinda made me want a big house with a bunch of kids.”
Maria scooted over and took Skye’s drink away for a moment as she pulled the younger woman into her lap. She handed the drink back once they were settled. “Nat and I have no objections to a big family, love. If you want to have half a dozen kids, it’s fine with me. We just wouldn’t do the actual carrying a child part.”

“I would help you bear them, if you wish,” Wanda offered, taking Skye’s hand. “I think I would like to have children, someday when we are all ready for it.”

“And we’ll all take care of them,” Natasha agreed as the four clustered close.

“And you absolutely won’t be alone,” Sharon spoke up. “You’ve got a huge family, several of whom love kids.” Wanda smiled up at her and reached out to tug the other woman into their snuggly pile.

“So the kids will need a name, at some point,” Skye noted. “Not that we have to land on something now, it’s just something to consider.”

“While we’re discussing personal lives,” Maria said, changing the subject, “are you and Steve getting a place of your own somewhere? Or are you coming to the Tower for a while?”

“I’m moving to the Tower for the moment, though we’re talking about buying a house,” Sharon replied. “Obviously, we’d have to get out of Manhattan. We were thinking possibly someplace between here and the Warehouse eventually, depending on what I end up doing with the CIA or if I finally cave and let Stark hire me.”

“Brooklyn’s always a possibility,” Skye pointed out. “I mean, it’s different, but it’s home to Steve. And there’s something about raising kids near where you grew up. Not that I’d ever want to raise kids in Hell’s Kitchen.”

“Not unless you could figure out a deal with the Devil,” Nat joked. Skye picked up a balled up napkin and threw it at her playfully.

“How is he, by the way?” Sharon asked. “My friends at the CIA keep trying to figure out who he is.”

“He’s good,” Skye said carefully. “The Ultron App is helping a lot to generate trust for him in the neighborhood. A lot of people believed what Fisk told them about him, even if Fisk turned out to be a scumbag. His… associates… freaked out a little when the two of us first told them about us, but I think the PR Pepper’s been doing has helped a lot. And the fact that this Punisher guy showed up on his whole vendetta thing… I think people are actually happy to know that someone with a penchant for justice rather than payback is just a phone call away.”

“It’s a fine line between vigilantism and picking up where the law leaves off,” Sharon said nodding. “After all, if we did everything strictly by the book, HYDRA’d be in control of the world right now. Steve broke about fifty laws just taking that helicarrier down in the Potomac. So you have plans for more a more widespread release?”

Skye nodded. “We’ll be releasing soon in Los Angeles, Chicago, London, Sydney and Beijing. And some guy named Stephen Strange has been emailing me stuff about Portals that shouldn’t be possible if we’re following the laws of physics. Jane offered to sit in on my meeting with him next week since it gets into the idiosyncrasies of astrophysics, but if it does work, it could take some of the pressure off Gordon, getting people to where they need to be.”

“And Skye got an email from Professor X as well,” Maria said nodding proudly. “Seems like pretty
“We’re talking with them,” Skye said. “We might be layering secondary support for problems that are larger than normal superheros can solve. But, like the rest of us, they just want to be able to live at peace with the rest of the world. If getting involved in our efforts means they have an easier time of that, they’re tentatively interested. But it’s going to take some sorting out.”

“Might help in case some of us want some vacation time at some point,” Natasha pointed out. “After all, when we eventually go on our honeymoon, the Avengers will be down three members.”

“And two of the heaviest hitters,” Sharon agreed.

“So, Sharon. What’s it like to no longer be a free woman?” Skye asked curiously.

“It’s certainly taken long enough,” Sharon said. “I can’t tell you how many times Steve and I thought about eloping.”

“America would kill you,” Skye said, sipping her drink. “I wouldn’t as long as you brought me along.”

“Of course,” Sharon said. “We’d need a witness. You’re Steve’s best friend and it’s felt like you and Kara are the sisters I never had for a very long time. I’m just glad that the news media caught on about us while we were all in Lai Shi.”

“You got to miss most of the media storm, yes,” Maria confirmed. “And thank God for Pepper.”

“I think at this point, we can all drink to that,” Natasha said, and the women collectively raised their glasses.

“‘Hashtag CaptainCarter’ did break the internet,” Skye noted, smiling. “At least for a few hours.”

Chapter End Notes

Of course it did. #CaptainCarter is awesome. :)
Chapter 50

Chapter by LadyWinterlight

Chapter Summary

Sharon & Steve's Wedding. And some other things happen.

Chapter Notes

Vague summary is vague. Yes, of course it's deliberate. Can't tell you the best parts before you read the chapter!

As always, many thanks to everyone who reads and comments. We love to hear from you! The following on this story is amazing, and we're so happy you've come with us this far. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The next afternoon was a flurry of activity. They spent the morning double checking last minute
details. Then Skye and Kara gathered up both their necessities and Sharon’s and the three left for the
church; there was a private room where they could all get dressed, do their makeup and gather up
their flowers. The others split to their respective apartments to get themselves ready, though Bucky
stayed with Steve. Sam also arrived in plenty of time to help Bucky and Trip keep Steve calm,
despite Tony’s continual teasing. The guys would be dropped off at the church half an hour before
the ceremony by one of Tony’s drivers.

Saint Patrick’s was far larger than they needed, but Steve had found it impossible to say no to the
Archbishop who had offered it. Steve also didn’t have the heart to close the doors of the church, so a
fair number of people were in the back, pretending to be praying or in line for confession when in
reality they were watching the wedding. As long as they were quiet and undisruptive, the Avengers
and their guests largely left them be.

There was a very sweet exchange between Peggy and Steve when he had escorted her to her seat.
Peggy, who was having a good day, kissed his cheek and said with a sad smile that she was okay
that she couldn’t be his best girl, but she was glad that he had lived so that he could settle down with
Sharon and have the life they deserved. Skye, of course, hadn’t been there for it, but she heard later
that even Tony had been affected by ‘allergies’.

The ceremony was a bit of a blur, but both of them looked happier than Skye had ever seen them.
After the ceremony, there was time for pictures in the church and Skye found herself seated next to
Peggy while Steve posed with Sharon at the altar.

The older woman raked her with a shrewdly appraising glance, and when she noticed Skye just
smiled at her. “Hello, ma’am. I’m Skye.”

Helped him adjust to modern life.”

Skye nodded. “He had so many people throwing new things at him at once, I thought it might be
helpful to bring him forward in time a little slower. Start from where he left off and ease him into
modern culture with music and movies and whatnot.”

Peggy smiled. “It was a good idea, and Steve always moved at a bit of a slower pace. The man took
three years to kiss me back in ‘45 and only did it then because he was probably going to die. Kept
tripping over himself every time we ran into each other.”

Skye laughed. “By the time I met Steve, he was actually pretty comfortable with me, but I don’t
think he ever saw me as anything more than a friend.”

“So you never looked at him that way?” Peggy asked. Skye went red. “It wouldn’t be bad if you did.
He’s easy on the eyes.”

Skye laughed. “I suppose he is, but he was also my Patron Saint.”

It was Peggy’s turn to laugh. “I was never okay with that. I suppose the crazier side of my mind
never gave up hope that Steve was somehow still alive out there somewhere and I couldn’t help but
think about how much he would hate it. Dum Dum and the others all treated it like some big joke.”

“That’s because it’s hysterical,” Bucky said, coming over to them after the groomsmen finished with
their photos. Sharon stood alone now.

“Hey Aunt Peggy,” Trip said and giving the older woman a kiss.
Peggy scoffed. “You look so grown up Trip. I wish Gabe was here to see you.” Trip nodded his agreement.

Skye grinned. “So I’ve been dying to know, Peggy. Did you really shoot Bucky here down in favor of Steve? Was the look on his face really as priceless as the movies all depict it?”

“Wait, there’s a movie?” Bucky looked flabbergasted, and both Skye and Peggy laughed again.

“Yes, honey, I really did. You see plenty of Barnes’ type when you’re a lady working with the military,” Peggy replied. “The look really was priceless, too, though it was a long time ago and I never really thought to compare it to the films.”

“Good enough for me,” Skye said gleefully.

“Can we go back to the whole movie thing rather than reliving the only time a woman’s ever shot me down?” Bucky asked.

Skye noticed they were calling her up for bridesmaids photos. “I’ll show you my favorite three versions next weekend,” she promised as she got up from her seat. She smiled at Peggy again. “I hope we can talk more later, Peggy. It was awesome to meet you.”

“Lovely to meet you too, honey. Go on, now,” Peggy replied, shooing Skye along to join the pictures.

The rest of the night was equally fun. Peggy went home early, but Skye danced slow dances not only with her soulmates but with Steve, Trip, Tony, and Clint before the night was over.

She also joined in in some of the faster paced dances with the group. By the time they made it back to the tower, Skye was more than happy to fall into bed with her soulmates and re-establish what they meant to her.

Stumbling out of bed and to the common floor the next morning, bleary-eyed with lack of sleep, Skye didn’t miss the way that Pepper eyed her over her tablet. “What?” Skye asked, a little crankily as she reached for the plate that Nat had made her.

“The tabloids might have it,” Pepper said.

Skye was passed a cup of coffee and she took a sip before she processed the story. “Wait. Have what?”

Pepper finished taking a sip of her own before continuing. “So most of the tabloids are running with a picture someone managed to get of you and Peggy Carter with some variation of you two being the women that Steve rejected in favor of Sharon, but…” she trailed off, looking at Nat, Skye, and Maria, who came up behind Skye. “Someone managed to spot your engagement earring and remembered images of Natasha and Wanda wearing ones in the same place, and they put together the three of you might be in a relationship.”

Skye exhaled slowly. “So it might be time to come out with it and admit that we’re a quad?” she asked slowly, wrinkling her nose at the very idea of the questions they would start getting.

“It’s up to the four of you, of course,” Pepper said carefully. “But it’s always better to break a story when we can control the narrative.”

“And it’s only a matter of time before some newspaper starts guessing that one of us is cheating on the others with Maria because we went to lunch or something,” Natasha filled in.
“You okay?” Maria asked Skye carefully.

“No, yeah. It’s just… for one moment I was just in this happy bubble where I had proven myself as an Avenger on my own and no one was trying to kill me and now I guess…” Skye rambled. “I can’t help but feel like people are going to take it and make it something that it isn’t. They’ll be asking all sorts of questions and questioning how I got onto the team in the first place and god knows what’ll happen when Miles gets wind of what really happened after New York.”

“Then the best thing we can do is to spread the news out on our terms,” Pepper said calmly. “Give them facts and only facts before speculation runs rampant and there are too many stories to keep straight. Make the announcement with the entire team backing you up, and make it known absolutely that you four have the full support of the Avengers, of SI, of everyone involved.”

“So like… a sit down interview with someone?” Skye asked suspiciously. “Who could we ask to do it that we could trust not to spin it out of control?”

“Christine Everhart’s usually pretty fair to the Avengers, especially to the female members,” Pepper said.

“It’s true,” Nat noted. “She’s never commented on what we’re wearing in the field or out of it. She’s pretty equal commentating on the boys as much as the girls too. And she’s never commentated on your living here, Skye.”

Skye bit her lip. “True, but she’s pretty harsh on Dad. What if she reacts badly to my being a Stark? I mean, it’s public record. She’s bound to find out.”

Pepper rolled her eyes. “Ms. Everhart dislikes your father because he slept with her to get a good review, then immediately went missing for three months so her editor nixed her scathing review of him.”

Skye raised her eyebrows. “Really?” asked Maria.

Pepper nodded. “She even went as far as scoring his performance and stamina.”

“Oh EW!” Skye said. “That’s disgusting. I don’t need to hear about this.”

Maria rolled her eyes at Skye’s reaction, then nodded. “I think she’d be a good person to talk to. She might not like Tony, but if we approach her properly I think we can get her to understand that Skye doesn’t deserve to be tied to Tony’s mistakes. And Tony really has been better lately.”

“We might be able to bring that into it,” Natasha said thoughtfully. “Make the point that since adopting Skye, Tony really has cleaned up his act.”

“You know if you had told me back before Iron Man was even a thing how well Tony would have taken to fatherhood, I would have given him a baby a very long time ago,” Pepper said, already typing away on her tablet to arrange the meeting. “We shouldn’t wait too long or else the rumors will get out of hand. What are you guys doing on Tuesday?”

“Hopefully New York gets invaded again,” Skye grumbled. At the looks from the others, Skye shrugged. “I spent eight years operating so far under the radar that I literally didn’t exist by choice. The next four has been spent undercover in varying capacity and a mysterious entity known as Quake that no one really knew all that much about except my closest friends and one insane enemy who now resides imprisoned on Asgard. Even before New York, everyone else had some version of a semi-public life. Old habits die hard.”
“Tuesday should be fine,” Maria said. “Though we should probably send a message to Sharon and Steve so they don’t turn on the news to see that we released the story.”

“No more hiding,” Natasha said, resting her hand on Skye’s. Maria and Wanda reached around and added their hands to the stack, all together. “For any of us. We’re together and we’re happy and we’re proud of it.”

“Let them see. Let them talk. We will come out the other side stronger,” Wanda agreed.

“Together,” Maria finished.

“Alright,” Skye said, her smile full of love for her soulmates and their unquestioning support. “Tuesday it is.”

Pepper made the arrangements, and Tuesday came quickly. Mid-morning, to allow Skye her morning run and still have time to clean up. Pepper met them half an hour before the interview to make sure they were all presenting the image they wanted to give the journalist.

Skye really didn’t know how she wanted to present herself, so Natasha took it upon herself to do Skye’s hair and makeup. It was an odd parrot of the day that Natasha, Skye, and Maria had met, the quad preparing for a life-changing event.

Despite Natasha’s and Maria’s reassurances, Skye and Wanda were both a bit tense by the time the interview was scheduled to start. Thankfully Christine Everhart did print media, so they were able to set up on the common floor lounge, the four of them sitting next to one another on the couch when Pepper led Christine in.

“Ladies, this Christine Everhart who’s writing a piece for Vanity Fair,” Pepper said easily.

Christine had clearly been expecting Skye, Nat, and Wanda without Maria, but took Maria’s presence in stride. “Miss Everhart, I’m sure you know of each of them. But just to be sure everyone is entirely clear, please meet Natasha Romanov, Maria Hill, Wanda Maximoff, and Skye Stark.”

Christine’s eyebrows rose nearly off her face. “Stark?” she asked, her voice heavy with irony. “He find out one of his flings produced a kid?”

Skye shook her head, her nerves fading as she spoke up to defend her father. “No, actually. There is no biological relationship between Dad and I. But he adopted me a few years ago, because we both know what it’s like to have no one in the world to belong to.”

Taken aback by Skye’s fierce tone, Christine remained silent for a long moment. Realizing her silence, Christine seemed to come back to herself, switching a record app on on her phone. “What’s that like?” she asked honestly. “To have a father like Tony Stark, infamous playboy?”

Skye smiled. She had anticipated this question. “Honestly, he’s calmed down a lot from his so called ‘glory days’. I’d imagine my experiences of having him for a father is pretty much like every other kid’s experience of their dad. He spends time with me, takes an interest in what I’m interested in,” she gained a small smile without meaning to. “He just loves me. There’s not too many people his age or older who I can say that about.”

“Rough childhood?” Christine asked.

Skye had carefully constructed a story that could be sold to the media that wouldn’t out the Inhumans just yet. “My mother was captured by HYDRA and killed a few months after I was born. During her capture, HYDRA destroyed my village in China and the trauma of the incident drove my father
insane. A SHIELD team was able to extract me, not knowing who was behind the attack and making me the only survivor. They brought me state-side and hid me in the New York foster system to keep me alive. The SHIELD protocol kept me moving, so I was removed from each placement after a period of time passed, even from homes where the people wanted to adopt me.”

Christine seemed honestly stunned by Skye’s story so Wanda took a turn, slipping a hand into Skye’s as she spoke. “All of us here learned quite quickly that there are parts of our stories that we have had to overcome to become Avengers.” Both Skye and Christine recovered a little as Wanda spoke of her childhood in Sokovia and the desperate need being the driving force to ‘joining’ HYDRA’s ranks.

“Wait,” Christine said, leaning forward in interest. “So you joined HYDRA?”

“We did not know who they truly were at the time. They did not say they were HYDRA, they merely said they could help us. Sokovia was in such dire need that many volunteered. However, Pietro and I were the only ones who survived.” Wanda continued with her story. Christine asked some good questions and seemed satisfied with the answers Wanda shared.

“So while it’s wonderful to get to know more about the newest ladies of the Avengers,” Christine began when Wanda’s story was complete, “why did you really ask me here today?”

“Who we each are individually is important,” Skye told her seriously. “But you’re right, that isn’t all of it. We asked you here because we have one more very important piece of information to share, and we want to make sure the story gets told the right way. With the truth, and not with a lot of wild guessing.”

Christine raised an eyebrow, but nodded as Natasha continued, “You’ve always been fair to us in the past, and we hope we can count on you to continue that way with what we’re going to tell you.”

“I believe that everyone deserves a chance for the truth to be heard,” Christine said evenly. “While I may occasionally include my opinions, I try to make it clear which are my opinions only.”

Maria nodded. “And we appreciate that. That’s why we chose you for this announcement.”

“We are soulmates,” Wanda said before Christine could say anything more. “All four of us. All together.”

Wide-eyed and shocked, Christine needed a moment to gather her thoughts. “A Quad? A complete Quad? That… there hasn’t been one of those in over a hundred years!”

“We know. But of the four of us, only Maria was born in a country where soulmarks are recorded by the birthing hospitals,” Natasha clarified. “And as she is the oldest of the four of us, there was nothing to record at the time.”

“That’s amazing!” Christine managed. “Congratulations!”

“Thank you.” Skye smiled. “Ultimately, what we want is for the truth to be shared so that rumors and speculation don’t harm either us or our families and our team. We are Avengers, and we understand that people are interested in our lives. But there are some things that should be allowed to remain personal, and we would appreciate it if the public would show us the same respect that they would want for their own relationships.”

“There were sightings of you at the tower after the Battle of New York. Did you meet your soulmates then?” Christine asked.
“Yes, I was in New York during the battle and our paths crossed shortly afterwards. That’s when I moved into the tower and met the other Avengers. Best decision I’ve ever made,” Skye said with a happy smile, glancing at each of her soulmates.

“And when did you meet them, Wanda?” Christine asked curiously.

“I had a dream, incited by my powers, that led me to Skye at a time when she needed all the help and support she could get,” Wanda said serenely. “I knew that finding her would lead me to the others as well and, of course, there is little most people would not do for their soulmates. So we followed the dream, my brother and I, and arrived as Fate intended.”

“That really is incredible,” Christine said, smiling. “It’s amazing to hear about. I presume this all happened sometime around the New Year? We first saw Quake, the Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver all around the same time as I recall, and that would’ve been a month or so into the year.”

“Early January is when we all finally met, yes,” Maria agreed. “Fortunately, we were able to take some time for ourselves as well as to integrate the new members into the team before an event occurred that brought the Avengers out publicly again.”

Christine ended up spending a few hours with them, asking questions and listening to stories the Quad exchanged. She ended with one final question before she left. “There are going to be a lot of people that may doubt that this is a legitimate soulbond. What would you say to them?”

Skye smiled. “They can think what they like,” she said softly. “My soul wasn’t… It’s commonly said by people with confirmed soulmates that their soulmate completed them, but for me that wasn’t true. I was a whole person when I met each of my soulmates. My soulmates… exponentiate me.”

“I like that,” Wanda said, wrapping her arms around Skye’s body. “Love is not finite. It cannot be simply doubled. As we love more, it expands all the more, and with four of us, there is much more to our love than simply quarter pieces to a puzzle.”

“And it goes beyond us, even,” Natasha added. “When we bonded, the people who were closest to us came together, too. Our families, our friends… have become one large, interconnected group. The Avengers aren’t just a team, we’re a family.”

“There’s no way to know if that would have happened without our soulbond, of course,” Maria continued. “But we do all know that we’re stronger together. Whether that’s our Quad, our team, or our extended families… Love is our acceptance of each other. And that love is what keeps us strong.”

“Because that love is worth protecting,” Skye finished with a smile. “It’s worth fighting for. All love is worth fighting for, and part of what we do as Avengers is protect people’s right to live and love and find their own happiness.”

“All love is worth protecting,” Wanda echoed. “Fate may have bound us, but love sustains us. Love…”

“Love is for family,” Natasha said. “And for friends, and some day maybe for children.”

All four of them traded smiles with each other, and for just a moment Christine glimpsed what it must be like to be part of such a close bond. She saw the love that they surrounded each other with, the looks of devotion and support, and knew that with the kind of protection they offered to the world love would grow.

It was Fate.
The End?

Chapter End Notes

Not quite the end. There will be an epilogue. Nobody panic yet! But really, for us... this seemed like the perfect note on which to wrap up the main narrative. After all, love is exactly what a soulbond is all about.

We hope that people aren’t too disappointed by the wedding scene. Reality is that weddings are a huge pain in the rear to write, and the actual event is mostly kind of dull.
Chapter 51

Chapter by LadyWinterlight

Chapter Summary

The Epilogue.

Chapter Notes

Wrapping things up...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sitting together on the porch. One last manip by LadyWinterlight.

Epilogue

December 25, 2024

Skye Stark-Rhym held on the back porch of the Barton’s farmhouse, watching the horde of kids as the annual family snowball fight deteriorated into a free-for-all combination of tag, dodge-ball and hide and seek. Cooper, Lila and Nate Barton led the pack, being the oldest - though Nate only by a couple of years. They had one more younger sibling, too; Daisy was just barely younger than Skye’s oldest.

The Rhym Quad had seven children; Skye herself had borne four of them, two sets of twins, while Wanda’s first pregnancy had resulted in triplets. The kids all had the family name; Rhym allowed them to combine all four last names into a single moniker for the family - Romanov, Hill, Maximoff and Stark. Wanda had also been surrogate for her brother; Pietro and Fitz had wanted children, too, and Wanda was more than willing to help out her twin. She’d given them twins of their own, a boy...
and a girl, and both Pietro and Fitz had been proud to near bursting. 

Skye always got a little misty every Christmas as she watched their children. She had never quite gotten used to the fact that the lonely, family-less little girl she’d been no longer existed except in the back of her mind. And she knew that if they ever discussed more kids, she was likely going to suggest adopting. Give someone else the gift she had been given, kids in the system who couldn’t see a way out.

Beyond their own rather large family, Thor, Jane and Darcy had five children of their own - a number which hadn’t been seen on Asgard in generations. The ladies had each been gifted an Apple of Idun by the Allfather on their wedding day and thus hadn’t aged, much like Thor. Skye smiled at the memory of Thor’s wedding. Most of the Asgardians spent most of their time staring at the Rhymns Quad rather than their Prince’s trio.

It had been an interesting experience, being not only marveled at but actively revered for the completion and stability of a four-way soulbond. They had all found it very odd, at first, to be asked to bless children or to be approached for relationship advice by beings many, many times their own ages. They’d gotten used to it over time, though, and they were all too practical to let the admiration go to their heads. Unlike Tony, who was puffed up that his adopted daughter was so well-respected on Asgard.

As her mind turned to her father, she reflected on how lucky she really had been in her family. Gaining a home and a father was only the beginning. Tony and Pepper never had children of their own, partly due to their ages and partly because Pepper had been too driven to improve SI to consider kids when her body could have handled it. So Skye remained the Stark Heiress, with her children to follow. There was a provision in the inheritance language that if one of her children wished to head up Stark Industries, they had to at least take on her hyphenated name so that everyone would know that the Starks were still involved. But that was a choice for when they were much older.

Skye didn’t mind her inheritance that much any more anyway. Tony had been sneaky in getting her involved in SI - first with a project or two and then with IT and security, and eventually half the division. It had started out as something to do while she was pregnant and unable to be in the field, either with SHIELD or the Avengers. Though Tony and Pepper were still involved, Skye ran a fair bit of the company at this point and had a pair of assistants herself. She’d devoted a fair bit of the philanthropic funding she had access to now into STEM programs and scholarships, particularly for young women in poorer public schools around the country. Part of the funding was earmarked for orphans, as well, to hopefully give them a shot at a better life as adults than they’d been provided as children.

Tony, Clint, and Bruce were all semi-retired from Avengers. A man named Scott Lang was one of the new Avengers, and Peter sometimes joined them now that he wasn’t so young. Tony had nearly hit the roof when he found out how old Peter Parker, aka Spiderman, really was. They hadn’t required age for heros to sign up in the original release of the Ultron App. Tony had made her add a legally-binding addendum to the program, making the hero who was signing up confirm that they were a legal adult in their country of residence.

The Ultron App was doing well and they had 70% global coverage, with some additional reach thanks in part to Dr. Strange’s portals. Inhumans had been ‘out’ to the public as a named group for a while now and people were finally getting used to the idea that some people had powers that defied the laws of physics. The success of the App and the sheer number of powered people willing to risk themselves for the betterment of their communities had gone a long way towards turning the general populace in favor of the heroes. Eventually power-mongers, politicians and the generally prejudiced
were shut down by public outcry.

Most notably was when former-cop-turned-convict, Luke Cage was re-arrested after saving a whole group of people from a drug lord. Claire had sent Skye an email asking for help because Luke had told her that he had been framed for the initial crime. Between Skye and Steve, they had figured out how he had been framed and exonerated him. The pair of them had been dubbed the ‘Heroes of Harlem’ for a while and it went a long way in helping people to trust superheroes. Sometimes even more than the cops.

Steve and Sharon had started their own family shortly after their wedding and had moved out to a house on the grounds of the Warehouse to avoid the press. The Rhyme had ousted themselves in the interview with Christine after the wedding, intending to head off speculation and rumor. While many were offended by the revelation at first, everyone calmed down when they provided confirmation of their soulmate status. Even the fundamentalist religious types couldn’t fight against a soulbond without being so hypocritical that it undermined their credibility.

Skye smiled to herself when she remembered Steven Colbert’s interview of the four of them for the Late Show. A lot of the late night comics had made quite a few jokes about how the first completed quad in over a hundred years just had to be a group of lesbians, so the look of shock on Colbert’s face when they clarified their various sexual orientations was nearly as satisfying as the look on his face when Skye explained how she had literally gone from coming from nowhere to being a Stark, an Avenger, and a powered individual.

“What about all of those rumors that went around about you and Captain America?” Colbert asked Skye.

“Steve’s my best friend,” Skye said with a smile.

“I’m also told he was more than that when you were a kid,” Colbert pressed.

Skye sighed. “I was raised in a Catholic orphanage,” Skye admitted. “Steve was my patron saint when I was confirmed.”

“What’s going on in that head of yours, girl?” Trip asked. Trip was still a part of SHIELD, but was also family and thus always welcome on the family farm. He had coincidentally met Alisha while on vacation and the pair of them had dated long distance and finally married. It hadn’t been until their wedding reception that they put together how small of a world it really was. Alisha and Trip had had a good laugh over it and were currently operating as liaisons between the Inhumans, the Avengers and SHIELD. They had two kids of their own, both of whom apparently had become unofficial mascots at SHIELD. They were out in the melee somewhere, too.

Skye smiled a little. “It doesn’t get old,” she said softly. “I thought it might but… having a family doesn’t get old.”

Trip smiled softly. “You know, I don’t know if I ever told you, but you never struck me as the orphan type when I first met you, back when the team was on the bus?”

“How so?” Fitz asked from Skye’s other side.

“Yeah,” Skye agreed. “How so?”

Trip shrugged. “The way the team described you, it was like the team was all you had. When we met properly for the first time… HYDRA had come out of the shadows and SHIELD as we knew it was crumbling around us… but you weren’t all that shaken. It didn’t seem like your only support system
was crumbling at your feet. You seemed more grounded and sure-footed than even May and Coulson were.”

Skye blushed and shrugged. “It was the bond, I guess. I knew… no matter what, I knew that I had Maria and Nat. And I was sure that I’d also have the other Avengers. Steve and I were already good friends, though not as close as we are now of course. Bruce had always been fond of me, from back when I was auditing college classes. And Tony had a soft spot for me, because neither of us had the best childhood experiences as well as the common bond of technology.”

Trip nodded. “That makes sense.”

“Do you guys ever regret it?” Skye asked curiously. “Any of it. I mean, what happened after SHIELD fell changed all of our lives.”

“Well, it would have been nice if we hadn’t had a ton of traitors in the organization we all spent most of our adult lives serving,” Trip said thoughtfully. Fitz interrupted before Trip could finish, though, having seen through Skye’s question.

“No, lass, we don’t regret having you in our lives or on our team,” Fitz told her decisively. “You made our team something more than it would have been otherwise, an’ you built something bigger for us all to be a part of - a family.”


Skye smiled, reassured, and thought back to the day she and Trip had really cemented their bond, well before she had children. She and her soulmates had been married for a couple of months and were seriously talking about kids. Skye, Steve and a few others were at the Playground, and after Skye had finished bickering with Gonzalez and some of his ilk about the Ultron App she had sought out Trip.

They played video games until she unwound a bit. “Thanks, Trip,” she said in a low voice when they reached their third VICTORY screen.

“Nah, forget it,” Trip said with his customary bright grin. “What are friends for?”

“Too many things to list in one sitting,” she quipped back with a smile of her own. “But… well…” she hesitated for a long moment, looking around to make sure they were completely alone in the lounge. She had already blocked the audio pickup in the room, though she left the cameras running for security.

“What’s on your mind, girlfriend?” he asked, slinging an arm around her shoulder and tugging her close.

“I have a favor to ask of you,” she began, looking up at him. He nodded for her to continue, so she did. “We… we’ve been talking about having kids,” Skye explained in a soft voice. “And, well… I think I would like you to be the biological father of mine,” she said. Catching the look of shock on his face, she went on in a rush before he could say no. “I’m not asking you to sleep with me or anything; we can do it medically. Probably better that way. And I get it if you’d rather not. I know you’ll be an awesome dad someday, when you want a family of your own, but-”

Trip cut her off by crushing her against his chest in a tight hug. “I’m honored to be asked, Skye. I’d be willing to donate to the cause of you ladies having kids, if you want. But I do have one request.”

“What is it?” Skye hugged him back, though she looked up again as he spoke.
“I’d like to be allowed to be part of the kid’s life. I don’t have to be ‘dad’ if that doesn’t work for you, but…”

“Oh, Trip,” Skye said with a smile. “Of course you’ll be a part of their life. You’re already part of our family, and when they’re old enough to understand the family dynamic we will tell them who their father is. Until then, you’ll still be Uncle Trip.”

“Then as long as you’ll be Auntie Skye, should I have kids for myself, I agree.” Trip grinned at her.

“I promise. And thank you so much!”

Though IVF was often hit or miss, Skye had taken to it beautifully. She was a best case scenario, with a completed and stable soulbond and the balance that brought to her system. Nine months and four days after the first attempt, she’d given birth to her first set of twins. Melissa Phyllis and James Antoine Rhym were dark-complexioned, but Melly had the Asian cast to her eyes and cheekbones, reminiscent of Skye’s birth mother.

These days, she got to watch them play with their siblings, half-siblings and cousins in a loud but happy bunch. Her pair and Trip’s kids were all relatively close in skin tones, being darker than the rest of the bunch but clearly of mixed descent. One of the Triplets had inherited Alisha’s red hair, but all of Skye’s, Wanda’s and the Bartons’ broods were dark haired. Steve and Sharon had all blonde kids, of course, and two of Thor’s had inherited the Asgardian golden hair. None of the rest of the family cared about the mixed up ancestry, though, and all the kids were treated the same regardless of which ones belonged to whom or what their coloring was. Even the young Asgardian royalty were just kids when everyone was together.

Maria came up the steps of the porch breathing hard. “Either I’m getting old or those kids are getting faster,” Maria said, sitting down.

“They have more energy to burn,” Skye said with a smile. “They never have to do any of the work around here.”

“Maybe we should start making them,” Maria said, grinning back. “You having your usual episode of holiday blues?” Maria asked, snuggling close to Skye.

“It’s not blues,” Skye objected. “It just… introspection. I set out looking for my parents. And I wound up finding a family that was bigger than I could have ever hoped for.” Skye still talked to her parents every Christmas, choosing to look at it as talking to their restored souls rather than the broken people she’d met.

“Me too,” Maria said with a soft smile. Skye snuggled into Maria’s arms as they all watched the kids play with Natasha and Wanda. It was fate that bound them together, but it was love and acceptance and hard work that kept them that way. Skye knew that even with all the hardship, she wouldn’t change her life for anything.

Chapter End Notes

LadyWinterlight’s Final Author Note:

Well, that's that. I would like to thank everyone who followed this all the way through
and everyone who joined us along the way. The feedback and support has been amazing, and it definitely played a part in the story's development. Over 240,000 words, written in something like four months. Unbelievable!

This is definitely the longest story I've ever written in the MCU. It even exceeds "For Want Of A Nail" by a good 40,000 words, and I thought that was an epic story to have completed! I've been unbelievably lucky in my coauthors, though, and I will happily admit that without NerdyKat this story would not be nearly as good as it is. It might never have been written at all! Because major canon rewrites take a lot of headspace, both to keep track of the minute details of canon AND to remember what we've changed over time. It definitely helps that we've spent a lot of time betaing for each other's individual stories, and helping each other to brainstorm over plot points. But working together on something like this has helped us to fine-tune that partnership, and I hope you'll see the difference for us both going forward.

Did you have a favorite part? Was there something you absolutely loved or hated? We'd LOVE to hear from you, so please let us know!

NerdyKat's Final Author Note:
Holy COW! When LadyWinterlight first came to me with the prompt that she had been sent, I never imagined my what-if question of "where would you start it?" would take us both on such an adventure. I think mostly the post-Hive angst drove us to give Skye/Daisy the happiest ending that we could, which I think is why we were able to write it so quickly. I echo her sentiment that this is the longest story I've ever written and am truly touched by all the feedback and support for this story. I hope you enjoyed the conclusion.

Please leave your comments and any follow up questions below. Is there any question that we didn't answer?

End Notes

So the end result is that yes, we can write this quad. But it's not going to be a short story wrapped up in a few chapters. No, this is definitely long... #sorrynotsorry

Please let us know what you think!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!